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Parents hope to raise awareness of condition that took daughter's life

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Etoicoke Guardian

When a person takes his or her own life, one would imagine it'd be an unbelievable challenge for their loved ones to function under the weight of the tragedy. In the case of Etobian Mike Menu and Lynn Courey, however, they've managed the courage to fight back against borderline personality disorder (BPD), the condition that took their daughter away.

The pair have teamed up with Mount Sinai hospital in Toronto to form a foundation to raise funds and awareness of BPD in honour of Sasha Menu-Courey. On Sunday, they will hold a memorial celebrating the life of their 20-year-old daughter at the Etobicoke Olympium, where the avid swimmer spent so many hours.

Popular, intelligent, athletic and creative, friends and family describe Sasha as a well-liked college student who had it all. She was attending the University of Missouri on a swimming scholarship, studying psychology with a minor in sociology. According to her father, she often said swimming was her life, noting in her journal that "her first scent was chlorine." Sasha spent more than 25 hours per week training, and had a 4.0 academic average to match.

"She was an avid reader - she read for the whole family," said her mother. Sasha was also a gifted writer who had already been published more than once in a local paper.

This was the Sasha that Lynn and Mike knew when they received a distressed call from her on March 21.

"She said 'mama and papa don't worry, I'm just not feeling good right now. I'm going to go to the hospital and talk to someone,'" her mother recalls.

This was not the first time her parents had seen her hit a low. In May 2007, 15-year-old Sasha was in Montreal for swimming and suffered a series of blows: she got an injury, had problems with a roommate and saw the end of a romantic relationship. The intensity of the circumstances was too much - she took a handful of Tylenol and later called an ambulance for herself. After the failed attempt to take her own life, her parents brought her to a Toronto professional but were not offered tangible help.

"They told us she was too young to be labelled with anything, that it was an adolescent scenario that could be



Photo : Courtesy / Mike Menu
Sasha Menu-Courey, who took her own life in June after receiving a diagnosis of BPD, spent more than 25 hours per week pursuing her passion for swimming. Her parents will hold a celebration service for her Sunday to honour her life and raise awareness of BPD.

About borderline personality disorder

According to CAMH, people with borderline personality disorder have a hard time regulating their emotions. It varies in degrees of severity and intensity, but the tiniest change in a person's environment, such as a perceived look, can set a person on emotional fire. Some of the extreme feelings associated with BPD have been identified and include intense grief, terror, panic, abandonment, betrayal, agony, fury or humiliation.

Community surveys of adults show that the prevalence of BPD is close to one adult in 100 (Paris, 2005). The most recent community survey in the United States found that six per cent struggled with BPD. At this time, there are no accurate rates for Canada (Grant et al., 2008).

About Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT)

According to McLean Hospital, DBT is a cognitive-behavioral treatment for the development of four skill sets: mindfulness, interpersonal effectiveness, emotion regulation and distress tolerance. DBT was developed initially to treat suicidal tendencies in adults with borderline personality disorder, but, it now is being used effectively in adolescents with similar behaviors as well as other co-occurring psychiatric illnesses.



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worked out through therapy," said her father. "Now that we know...we think she should have been diagnosed."

Her parents are convinced that a diagnosis would have allowed them to get her the right type of help.

"[Adolescence] is the time when this disorder appears and affects so many friends, family, people at school. We need to be aware of when it gets intense - it should be a red flag, it shouldn't be 'oh well, it's just a troubled teenager,'" said her father.

The phone call this March came amidst similar circumstances: an injury, a failed relationship and housing problems. This time Sasha was diagnosed with BPD and placed in a campus psychiatric centre for 10 days. She tried to take her life again weeks later.

"We didn't know what was wrong because she called us 10 days before with the will to live, the will to fix herself. Suddenly all she wanted was to die," said her mother.

Her parents tried to bring her home but were warned by CAMH of an eight- to 12-month waiting list. So her parents took matters into their own hands. They found a place for her in a community house at McLean Hospital in Boston. At the cost of \$50,000 a month, her parents began to see improvements as Sasha followed the course of Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT). After two months, her parents could no longer afford the costly treatment and began to speak with Sasha about bringing her home. It proved too much for Sasha, who took an excess of 100 Tylenol and went to sleep. She died later in hospital.

"She was not supposed to die. She had such a bright future," said her mother. "I want her to be remembered as a great kid - social, that always wanted to help out others."

The foundation - the Sasha Menu-Courey fund - will be used to fund DBT treatment for other teens in similar situations. Bracelets will be sold on donation at Sunday's service, and health care professionals from MacLean Hospital will be there to help raise awareness.

Service runs from 5 to 8 p.m. at Etobicoke Olympium, 590 Rathburn Rd., and is open to the public.

Donations can be made to Mount Sinai Hospital Foundation Sasha Menu Courey Fund will at <http://www.mshfoundation.ca/fonds-sashamenucourey> or call the foundation at 416-586-8203, ext. 3936.



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