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Parents of teen lost to BPD encourage students to defeat stigma of mental illness

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Ebode Guardian
by Tamara Shephard

Sasha Menu Courey is smiling in photos with family and friends in her parents' video, Making Waves on Borderline Personality Disorder and Suicide Prevention, set to the soaring Rascal Flatts' ballad, I Won't Let You Go.

Interspersed with family photos are others more disturbing, like one young woman emaciated from an eating disorder, another set to cut herself as messages like "Keep telling until you get help" flashed across the screen while Grade 10 students at Monsignor Percy Johnson Catholic Secondary School watched in rapt attention on Monday during the school's Stop the Stigma of mental health issues week.

"I want to prevent other teenagers and families from going through another similar tragic story," Lynn Courey told a couple hundred students as she shared her daughter's story. "What Sasha and us went through is very preventable. I believe that together we can create a wave of awareness to defeat the stigma surrounding mental illness and make a difference to others."

Courey and husband Mike Menu now spread a message of hope and awareness of Borderline Personality Disorder in high schools across the Greater Toronto Area with talks, titled "Borderline...what? A message of hope."

Sasha Menu Courey took her own life last June. She was 20.

Menu Courey's death came 10 days after her diagnosis of Borderline Personality Disorder or BPD, increasingly known as Emotional Regulation Disorder.

BPD is a pervasive pattern of instability in a person's self-image, characterized by markedly disturbed relationships, mood swings, impulsivity, chronic suicidality and self-harming behaviours, indicates the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) in Toronto.

In Canada, BPD affects about two per cent of the population, CAMH reports.



Photo : Staff photo/TAMARA SHEPHARD
Lynn Courey and husband Mike Menu spoke to raise hope and awareness of Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD), otherwise known as Emotional Regulation Disorder, to Grade 10 Monsignor Percy Johnson students on Monday as part of the school's Stop the Stigma mental health awareness week. The couple's daughter, Sasha, 20, took her own life last June after being diagnosed with BPD. Also pictured are Sasha's close friend, Felixe Cote (right) and Stop the Stigma team students, Angela Alimi (left) and Michael Triolo, student council president.

One in five Canadians will suffer a mental health issue in his or her lifetime, reports the Canadian Mental Health Association.

Mental illness indirectly affects all Canadians at some time through a family member, friend or colleague.

Suicide is the cause of death among 24 per cent of Canadians ages 15 to 24 years old, 16 per cent among 25 to 44 year olds, the association reports.

Help is available from a number of agencies.

Visit the following websites for more information:

www.kidsmentalhealth.ca

www.cmha.ca

www.mooddisorders.on.ca

www.canmat.org

www.fameforfamilies.com

www.familyaware.org

www.nfcares.org

www.dbsalliance.org

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The little-known mental illness presents a further challenge to treat due to too-few treatment facilities, programs and professionals trained in Dialectical Behaviour Therapy, the most effective known BPD treatment, Menu Courey's parents learned in their desperate attempt to save their daughter's life.

The Etobicoke couple launched the Sasha Menu Courey Fund and www.sashbear.org to spread awareness of BPD and hope.

People with BPD are often described in literature as having "no emotional skin" with reactions of hurt, betrayal or abandonment a common response to innocuous comments.

Suicide among people with BPD is all-too common.

"Mental health professionals have historically underestimated the lethality of suicidal behaviour in clients with BPD," CAMH reports. "They may dismiss suicide attempts as willful or manipulative, or as non-deadly calls for help. Statistics, however, tell a different story: about one in 10 people with BPD actually die by suicide - a 60 per cent greater risk of dying by suicide than among the general population."

Menu Courey was a national record-holding swimmer and Olympic hopeful on full scholarship at the University of Missouri. She achieved a 4.0 GPA in her first semester. Friends admired her contagious laughter, her love of fun and excitement and her trademark bear hugs.

But internal storms brewed.

The successive loss of two grandparents, then her best friend to a rare disease, the end of a romantic relationship followed by a shoulder injury that sidelined her from 25-hour weeks of competitive training led to Menu Courey's first suicide attempt in 2007.

Desperate to help their daughter, her parents sent her to a sports psychologist, then individual and family therapy. It didn't help.

The teen made the Canadian swim team. But she became increasingly emotionally erratic and reactive. It strained her relationships, including with her family.

"We were very proud of her. At the same time, we were often walking on eggshells," Courey explained. "We were trying to escape situations where we would trigger mood swings or unpleasant outcomes. We would not invite people to our home. We would not go places where she did not want to go. We weren't asking her to do any chores. We were afraid, at times, she was engaging in risky behaviour."

"I remember telling her one day, 'Sasha, if you would stop hiding things from your family and friends, your life would be so much simpler. I feel as if you have two personalities, two faces. Your life would be so much easier if you would only be one person.'"

A few years later, Menu Courey's final storm hit. The high-achiever suffered a back injury that wouldn't heal, another failed relationship and housing issues. Depression descended. She took her own life.

Stepdad Mike Menu encouraged students to help a loved one or friend who is suffering.

"Notice changes. Don't be a bystander. Be an ally to a person who needs help," Menu said. "Listen without judgment. Validate, validate, validate. It may be that the situation is serious enough that you break the person's confidence and get help for your friend by telling someone. Ask a friend, 'I notice you're very sad today.' Confirm your commitment to them."

Menu spoke to students about mental health stigma, the spectrum of mental wellness and illness, BPD and its treatment, which includes emotional regulation, interpersonal effectiveness and distress tolerance.

Emotional validation of a person with BPD is critically important prior to offering problem-solving suggestions or else "all your ideas are wasted. You're not getting through to them," Menu said.

NFLer Brandon Marshall is one of the first celebrities to publicly acknowledge he has BPD.

"There was a time when people didn't talk about HIV or cancer. (Talking about mental health issues) is another step in how we can grow in our communities. How we can make a difference and not feel judged or be embarrassed," Marshall said in a video Menu played.

"A lack of expression equals depression. A lot of us don't know how to get help. We're embarrassed. It's important to break that stigma. I want to use my story to help others."

Christopher Botero-Artuso, 16, said he would be more apt to ask a friend who appears sad how he or she is feeling after hearing Menu and Courey's presentation.

"It's really sad to hear what happened to Sasha. I had no idea so many people suffered (from mental health issues). I've never really talked about it with my friends. After hearing what happened to Sasha, yes, I'd talk to someone. It doesn't just affect a person's family. It affects everyone."

Stop the Stigma week is a Toronto Catholic school board initiative active in 23 of its 32 high schools in Toronto.

"Mental health affects one in five Canadians and yet, most people are afraid to talk about it," said Stop the Stigma team student, Angela Alimi, 18, wearing a black T-shirt with "Stop the Stigma" on it. "Every time I wear this T-shirt, students stop me and ask, 'what is that?' I'd tell someone who is suffering that there are other people out there suffering, too."

Guidance counselors Antonella Pizzonia and Claudia Girardo are co-ordinators of Monsignor Percy Johnson's Stop the Stigma project.

"We're trying to promote good mental health and to teach students skills," Pizzonia said. "We tell students 'It's OK to have a bad day. It's OK to ask for help. There are people here to support you.' Mental health is like any

other illness. It requires diagnosis and treatment. We need to stop the stigma."

The school has created a "safety net" of emotional support consisting of guidance counselors, youth workers, social workers, a nurse and a psychologist for its teens with mental health challenges, said principal Susan Souter.

Teenagers suffering depression or other mental health issues don't always present with academic difficulties. Some are high achievers, like Menu Courney, Souter said.

"Just like drinking and driving came on our radar years ago, mental health issues are on our radar now, too," she said of issues teens face. "Everybody knows somebody who has some sort of mental health problem. This will be the generation that grows up knowing, 'You can talk about it.'"



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