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Parents promote healthy mind in athletes

Lost daughter to pain of BPD

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Etoicoke Guardian
by Tamara Shephard

Sasha Menu Courey's parents spent Sunday promoting a "healthy mind in a healthy body for great success" at the Etoicoke pool where their elite swimmer daughter had competed for 16 years.

The Sasha Menu Courey Relay Meet is the latest in a series of mental health awareness initiatives for her Etoicoke parents, Lynn Courey and Mike Menu.

The national record-holding swimmer and Olympic hopeful was on full scholarship at the University of Missouri when she took her own life in June 2011. 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. Despite a bright future, the pain associated with her disorder was too great and the medical system failed to save her, according to her parents.

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 in Toronto.

More than 500 swimmers participated in last weekend's 4 X 50 metre relay at the Etoicoke Olympium, in large part to support the couple's charity, sashbear.org, named after their late daughter's love of giving bear hugs.

Mike Menu estimated one in five people in the stands at the relay wore orange, the signature colour of sashbear.org.

Its mission, "Making Waves on BPD" is an effort to raise awareness of BPD and spread hope in the face of the serious mental disorder that centres around an inability to manage emotions effectively.

"Swimming was Sasha's life. We believe it was more than her life — it was her lifeline," Menu said of his daughter. "In January 2011, her life fell apart when her coach said she had to stop swimming to heal a back injury. The endorphins and serotonin from swimming stopped being produced. She had been swimming 25 hours a week. She went into withdrawal symptoms. She had the pressure of keeping her scholarship."

Menu said their daughter would call them at night, pleading, "I really need to go back to swimming."

Menu Courey still holds the ESWIM 11-12 year old short course 50m freestyle record of 27.26 set in 2004.

"After 15 years, swimming was her life," Courey said of Sasha. "When there is a lot of stress or injury in the life of an athlete, we want to make sure their coaches and parents are there to encourage them to seek some help. A few of Sasha's friends have had to stop swimming. They've had a hard time, suffered depression and they don't have BPD."

An athlete's drive and success does not make them immune from stress and difficult times, Menu said.

"We want them to know, 'It's OK. We have this and this support for you,'" he said.

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The couple wish they'd had the skills, primary among them validating a person with BPD's feelings, to help their daughter that they now teach to others.

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

"When Sasha was 12 years old, after a meet I asked her, 'why are you crying?' You won. Be happy,'" Courey recalled. "She said, 'I didn't get my best time.' What I said to her was invalidating. You validate the feeling first, then offer suggestions. Knowing this communication could have saved a lot of crises with Sasha. If these skills had been available to us, it would have made a huge difference."

Dr. Marilyn Korzekwa of St. Joseph's Healthcare in Hamilton gave keynote remarks at last Sunday's relay.

She is currently acting director of the Bridge to Recovery Day Hospital, and is involved in the provision of Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT), the most proven, evidence-based treatment for BPD.

Korzekwa is also actively involved in suicide-prevention programs.

DBT is the first treatment proven to improve BPD within a year, Korzekwa reported.

DBT is an intensive treatment. It requires individual therapy weekly for a year, two hours of group treatment a week, the therapists also have to meet weekly for one to one-and-a-half hours and be available by phone to coach clients through crises, Korzekwa said.

"DBT is successful because it precisely targets the most damaging behaviours and issues in BPD. DBT focuses on suicide prevention and changing suicidal behaviours as its number one goal. DBT pushes for change and at the same time validates the client's emotional pain, this is the core dialectic. It is also successful because therapists are highly trained and work together weekly as a community to help the clients in the program," Korzekwa said.

"Unfortunately, because it is so resource-intensive and takes so long, there are waiting lists in all centres that offer it."

Courey met Korzekwa earlier this year at a meeting to discuss organizing a national network for the education and research about BPD, chiefly to raise awareness: CARE BPD (Canadian Association for Research and Education about BPD)

"The biggest issues with awareness is that lay people rarely know about the disorder whereas it is stigmatized within the medical field. Medical professionals who do know about BPD are afraid to make the diagnosis because they are afraid to give people the label," Korzekwa said in an interview.

"Fortunately, with the advent of DBT, that is changing. I have seen it change in Hamilton in the last decade since St. Joseph's (Hospital) started the DBT program and we have been trying to educate professionals from Niagara to Hagersville from emergency rooms and crisis lines through to addiction services."

Korzekwa wants to see DBT taught in high schools.

Courey and Menu gave their talk, titled "Borderline...what? A message of hope" at Senator O'Connor College School for the second time earlier this week.

American television sports network ESPN filmed the relay and the school talk as part of an Outside the Lines story they're producing on Menu Courey and her legacy.

"One student made a heart out of cue cards we gave them, gave it to me and said, 'Sasha is in our hearts.' If that person only knew we gave Sasha's heart to a heart recipient. It really touched me. I'm going to frame it," Courey said.



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