

PRESENTATION – May 28, 2003 – SAMHSA
2003 Joint National Conference on Mental Health Block Grant
And National Conference on Mental Health Statistics
**Enhancing Recovery Through
Dialogue on Faith and Spirituality**

Sr. Ann Catherine Veierstahler, SCSJA, RN, BSN

Thank you so much for this invitation – I am learning so much!

Sharing my story is the best way to overcome stigma – it puts a name and a face to a person who has mental illness. Two years ago my story was printed in our Milwaukee Journal and went out to over 600,000 homes. I received an overwhelming acceptance and positive response to sharing my story – the hidden story of so many others.

First of all, I would like to mention three things:

1. Mental Illness is **REAL** – 9 years ago I suffered the pain of stomach cancer. For the past 50 years, I suffered the brain pain of my bipolar illness, and illness I had since a child, a pain and suffering just as real as my cancer pain.
2. Mental Illness is **COMMON** – One out of every four or five Americans suffers from some form of severe mental illness like I have – schizophrenia, bipolar, OCD, anxiety, depression.
3. Mental Illness is **TREATABLE** – Because of modern medical science and medications, I am being treated appropriately for my stomach disease (cancer) and my brain disease (bipolar) and I am doing very well. Each month I take my B 12 injection so that my stomach will absorb the food I eat. Each day I take my medications for my rapid cycling bipolar illness so I can focus on the things I need to do to live a health, peace filled life, meaningful life contributing to society and other people in need.

Now let's look at Spirituality and Religion and Mental Illness:

1. Less than 5 years ago, hardly any mental health professional would dare to say **MENTAL ILLNESS AND RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY IN THE SAME BREATH!** Why are we surprised that the clergy and our faith communities may not fully understand and accept persons with mental illness? Have we caused some of the stigma by our past neglect of not realizing Spirituality is important to recovery?

2. In the past our faith communities helped with food, clothing and shelter and may have made persons with mental illness actually dependent on them for these needs. Now, persons with mental illness are reaching out to be accepted in a warm loving community where they can worship and join in all activities of their faith community. In fact, they feel and know this is such an important part of their holistic recovery.

For Example:

A) Sue and I (pictured in the Journal Article) used to go to Gesu for Mass each week – This ritual gave us a sense of focus and hope – and gave us space for peace, quiet and reflection.

B) Our monthly prayer group at Our Lady of Lourdes for persons with a mental illness, health professionals and loved ones has been so successful. Several of us write in a daily Gratitude Journal. All of us Share, Support, and offer Hope to each other.

3. As a registered nurse, I have always looked at all four areas of a persons life to promote healing – the physical, social, mental and spiritual. I cannot comprehend how, for so long, we have not assessed this area of spiritual needs and used our faith communities and spirituality to help in recovery. Now is a wonderful time to begin to use these rich resources.

MY STORY IS ONE THAT HAS MADE MY PARENTS, FAMILY AND COMMUNITY MEMBERS, LIVING AND DECEASED, SAINTS.

(Each of you has a copy of the Milwaukee Journal article.)

As you know, until 2 ½ years ago when I was appropriately diagnosed and treated for my MI, my behavior was quite obnoxious and very unpredictable most of the time. Yes, I had tremendous creative energy that helped me to start the first clinics for the homeless in Milwaukee, initiate programs for Milwaukee's public housing senior residents – programs that are now national models. I was a nursing home administrator, volunteered with the Red Cross on International, National and local disaster assignments and so on.

But there were three main factors, which dramatically helped me to recover – besides having an excellent Dr. who uses a holistic, including a spiritual approach, to treating his patients.

1. **I accepted my mental illness** – this was after years of denial. In the Buddhist tradition, sickness is neither good nor bad – it just is. Accepting our

illness leads to healing, peace and the ability to reach out to others in need of our support.

2. **I finally took responsibility for my behavior** – again, it was very difficult for anyone to understand my erratic and often argumentative and demanding behavior and all my blaming, judgment, criticism, etc.
3. **I now live in the present moment** – I have many regrets for my past such as I wish I would have been diagnosed appropriately much earlier – but I can never go back to my past. My life is now dedicated to sharing my story so that hopefully other people with mental illness like myself will get the help they need – and which is so readily available – so that it will be much easier for them and me to be accepted in faith communities and in communities in general.

In conclusion, I am very excited about the distribution of the Report from the Consumer and Members of Faith-Based and Community Organizations in Dialogue.

In my research, however, I have not been able to find any data collection in the following three areas – areas that are of interest to me:

1. How often do mental health services assess and meet spiritual and religious needs of persons with mental illness?
2. What is the readiness of faith communities to take on the faith issues of persons with mental illness?
3. What is the readiness of persons with mental illness to accept their illness, take responsibility for their behavior and let go of the past so they can be the instruments of healing in faith communities – I believe this must come from those of us who have mental illness to be models of healing and gratitude.

Last year at this time, another friend and I did a Hike It/Bike It journey across the State of Wisconsin to raise awareness about mental illness and to share our stories as one of the greatest ways to overcome the stigma of mental illness. We met thousands of people, including our former Governor, who welcomed us with open arms. I have a photo book of that journey if anyone would like to see it. By the way, now that I am 59, I can hardly believe I made that almost 300-mile journey – my legs ache thinking about it. However, I did do some of the journey on a Harley since it was a Hike It/Bike It! The theme of our journey was **SHARING THE HEALING, SHARING THE HOPE!**

We live in very exciting times regarding the role of faith communities and spirituality in the recovery of persons with mental illness and it is always so exciting for me to be up on the pulpit sharing my story. Let us begin today and even at the conference to open our hearts and lives to people who are struggling – often secretly – with their illness. And remember, when you go back to you faith community, there may be one of us, possibly me, hoping to receive your warm welcome and be part of your sharing and caring community.

Thank you for allowing me to share my story!