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1. What is the mission of StigmaBusters?

NAMI StigmaBusters are a grassroots network of more than 10,000 consumer and family advocates dedicated to the elimination of ignorance, fear, prejudice and discrimination that creates stigma for mental illness. We want to change public attitudes to promote reintegration,

.. "We want to change public attitudes to promote reintegration, community acceptance, understanding, and support..."

community acceptance, understanding, and support. Every month, we publish electronically a newsletter—StigmaBuster Alerts—with targets, case studies, and other updates. Our advocates pursue two basic strategies:

- PROTEST prejudice and stereotypes in the news, entertainment, advertising and other media, which cross all boundaries of geography, race, culture and ethnicity worldwide.
- PRAISE accurate, fair sensitive reporting and depictions that improve public understanding of mental illness.

2. How did StigmaBusters get started?

StigmaBusters started under NAMI's Campaign to End Discrimination (1995-2000). We kept receiving complaints about stigma situations in the media, in product names, or on TV shows that required tailored responses. I was asked to start a program to respond in November 1997, By NAMI's national convention in summer 1998, 650 people had signed up to receive the alerts and volunteer action. That's how it started. The network now extends around the world. Other stigma watch projects now are emerging in other countries. They contact us to share in-

formation and sometimes-coordinate efforts.

3. Why did you get involved?

I have a son who was diagnosed with schizophrenia in the mid-1970s. At that time, there was no NAMI, and only sparse information existed about mental illness. Welcoming the promise of information, support and networking, I was one of the first persons to join NAMI locally and nationally in 1979. I have served in local, state and national leadership roles. I was an initial member of the California Mental Health Planning Council. I also served as NAMI's national vice-president for policy. Recognizing the personal hurt and social harm stigma imposes, especially as a barrier to consumers getting the help they need, I then was proud to accept the challenge of coordinating the NAMI StigmaBusters program.

4. How does the process work?

Is there a team of staffers that work with you?

I work closely with NAMI News Director Bob Carolla and Senior Communications Associate Anne-Marie Chace. Based on set guidelines, we evaluate complaints, prioritize investigations, and decide on strategies in coordination with others in the national office and NAMI's state organizations or local affiliates. Complaints come from individuals on our StigmaBusters email list and from our affiliates. They are our eyes and ears.

We try to focus on high profile, national situations in media that have significant impact on public attitudes: movies, television programs, commercial products, magazine articles, and advertisements. We don't respond to the use of single words like "loony, wacko, nuts, or crazy," unless they specifically describe a person with mental illness or a situation involving mental illness. Then, we contact the offender. Those that dismiss our concerns are included in the Alerts to generate letters, emails, faxes and phone calls in protest. In other cases, praise. For newspaper reporters, editorial writers or television producers, it sometimes entails a risk to approach mental illness from a new or different angle, so it's important to reinforce their efforts as well as educate others. Numbers count in making an impression..

In some cases, we raise protests to higher profiles through news releases, contacting commercial sponsors, or other tactics. With NAMI's new *Campaign for the Mind of America*, the strategy also is shifting to start seeking deeper commitments to change. For offenders, apologies no longer will be enough. We want to convert them into "partners for recovery" by having them correct the balance—through internal policies directed at employees and helping to sponsor antistigma campaigns in the communities they serve. If appropriate, we will consider legal actions and remedies.

I want to emphasize one point also. We aren't advocating censorship. We simply want the truth to be told and recognition that words—or labels—matter. Whenever Stigmabusters protest, they are exercising their own freedom of speech and trying to persuade professionals, a company or an institution to act responsibly. Sometimes that only can be achieved by focusing negative publicity on them, or to put it another way, by shining a bright light of public opinion to expose outrageous, offensive practices.

5. What achievements are you most proud of?

My top three involve different types of media.

- NAMI once melted one of Nestle's product lines: "Tasty Tacky Taffy" bars that were named Psycho Sam, Loony Jerry and Weird Wally: with each name attached to an exaggerated, not very complimentary cartoon face. Nestle tried to defend the names as "rooted in a silly, playful humor" that "amuses children and gives personality to our cartoon characters." It took two Alerts, a letter and public statements from former First Lady Rosalyn Carter, and finally a news release to take our concern seriously. With an apology, they finally repackaged the candy under harmless new names.

- A major battle—in some respects a turning point in the history of our movement—was "Wonderland," the ABC TV series set in a New York City psychiatric hospital that aired briefly in Spring 2000. The story lines included a man with schizophrenia who shot up Times Square, graphic suicide, and patient characters who were used as the butt of jokes. It was a very narrow, distorted picture of consumers. None of the episodes that we previewed included any balance or conveyed a message that treatment works and recovery happens. We launched an intense campaign when it premiered. StigmaBusters flooded the commercial sponsors of the show with messages. We persuaded some ABC stations to stream warnings about the suicide scenes across the television screen. We organized a coalition of 17 other national mental health associations. ABC dropped the show after only two episodes. Low ratings contributed to the victory, but the protest and withdrawal of commercial sponsors made it an easy, quick decision for ABC. Some of the worst episodes we previewed were never shown. The U.S. Surgeon General applauded the decision.

- A third victory involved "Me Myself and Irene," a movie comedy released Summer 2000 starring Jim Carrey as a motorcycle cop with schizophrenia—except that it completely misrepresented the nature of the illness, playing to stereotypes about split personality and violence. Ads for the movie—in newspapers, billboards and buses depicted Carrey with a split head, with the tagline "From gentle to mental." One billboard even was placed across the street from one of the biggest mental health centers in Los Angeles! One

phone call to the movie distributor's vice-president for public relations got that one removed. Stigmabuster messages overflowed and shut down the company executives' email boxes. The advertising campaign quickly was changed. Carrey's split head became whole, with the "gentle to mental" tagline removed and his TV promotional interviews toned down so as not to even mention schizophrenia. The movie was still bad from a stigma perspective, but at least only people who paid the price of admission were exposed to it. Intense media coverage of the protest also helped set the record straight, featuring interviews with NAMI leaders with schizophrenia, like Fred Frese of Ohio and Moe Armstrong of Massachusetts. NAMI showed them the real face of mental illness, based on dignity, and the hope of recovery.

6. Has Stigma Busters changed the playing field in the fight against Stigma or are we just putting out fires that will continue to be started by an insensitive and uneducated society?

Change comes incrementally. We still need a revolution, but we have made progress.

We believe, for example, that the battles over *Wonderland* and *Me, Myself and Irene* helped opened the way—by creating a new environment—for the movies *A Caveman's Valentine* and *A Beautiful Mind* to be made, which for the first time, showed individuals with schizophrenia not only sympathetically, but as heroes. The television show *ER*—which has had a mixed record—ultimately produced a special six-part series with actress Sally Field portraying a very realistic, sympathetic, poignant struggle with bipolar disorder. These kinds of developments in popular culture wield tremendous educational power.

I hope NFL debaters will support NAMI's efforts and sign up to be StigmaBusters themselves. They can do so by visiting the NAMI web site at www.nami.org and scroll down to click on StigmaBusters Alert Listings. For more information, they also can contact me in Los Angeles at smarch@nami.org.

The written interview was completed for the Mental Health News (which has primarily a greater NYC circulation) and published in Fall 2002.)

(Stella March, is coordinator of NAMI's Stigmabuster Program. Stella was one of NAMI's original founders in 1979 and continues to serve as president of NAMI's Los Angeles affiliate. In 2002, the Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health honored Stella as Volunteer of the Year. She is a key NAMI's connection to many movie and television producers.)

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