**ADVOCACY AND MENTAL ILLNESS**

This story first appeared in NAMI VOICE, Spring 2015. It was written by Melody Moezzi: NAMI supporter, writer, activist, attorney, and award – winning author.

I’ve been an activist since I was a kid. At 7, I helped mobilize a demonstration aimed at convincing the ice-cream man to add our neighborhood to his regular route. He did, and after that first sweet taste of success as an activist, I was hooked. By 15, I had started my high school’s Amnesty International chapter and decided to become an international human rights lawyer. Not long after starting law school, however, I learned just how difficult it is to enforce international human rights laws and quickly proceeded to channel my activism into writing.

With the aim of combating the widespread stereotypes and media misrepresentations associated with Islam and Muslims, particularly after 9/11, I wrote my first book, *War on Error: Real Stories of American* *Muslims*. It was published shortly after I graduated from law school.

At the time, I had yet to notice the stark parallels between fighting Islamophobia and fighting sanism. At the time, I saw myself as a member of only one misrepresented and misunderstood minority that is often falsely associated with violence. At the time, I had no idea what bipolar disorder was, let alone that I had it. And at the time, I had no interest in mental health advocacy; it wasn’t even on my radar. Until it was.

A few years later, at 29, I experienced my first acute manic episode and psychotic break. After more than a decade of being misdiagnosed with unipolar depression-and at times given medications that exacerbated my condition-I finally had an accurate diagnosis, not to mention all the stigma that came with it.

Growing up, my parents had always encouraged my activism. They had raised me to be proud of who I am and where I come from. As a result, no matter how politically inconvenient, I have never been ashamed of being Iranian or American or Muslim. Likewise, I have never been ashamed of the pancreatic tumor I once harbored or any of the many hospitalizations that resulted from it.

My psychiatric illness and hospitalizations, however, were different. They were supposed to be secrets. But nothing breeds shame quite like silence, and I wasn’t about to let shame disable me. Moreover, I couldn’t continue to call myself an activist in good conscience and remain silent after experiencing and witnessing the injustices incurred by so many individuals with mental health conditions.

Shortly after being released from the hospital, I found an incredible family of advocates-chief among them were many NAMI members who inspired me by their example to begin writing and speaking openly about having bipolar disorder. After realizing that such support existed and that advocacy would form a large part of my recovery, my parents quickly came around as well. By the time my latest book-a memoir entitled *Haldol and Hyacinths: A Bipolar Life*-was released a couple years ago, they had become my staunchest supporters.

Since breaking my silence, my family of support has expanded dramatically, and I feel privileged and grateful to include NAMI as part of that family.

Note: People with a mental illness and their families can be trained by NAMI Smarts for Advocacy to transform passion and lived experience into their story in a way that moves policymakers to act. Many participants say that NAMI Smarts for Advocacy helped them condense years of living into a brief story with a clear “ask.” For more on NAMI Smarts, visit [www.nami.org/Find-Support/NAMI](http://www.nami.org/Find-Support/NAMI) -Programs/NAMI-Smarts for Advocacy.