**Suicide: How a Perfect Stranger Saved a Life**

This account by Dina Al Qassar, NAMI Communications Intern, was published in the NAMI Advocate, Summer 2014.

A few years ago, he was just a young man battling schizoaffective disorder on his own. Now, at the age of 26, he’s one of England’s biggest advocates for raising Mental Health awareness. Jonny Benjamin’s journey with mental illness started when he was 10 years old and started hearing a voice inside his head.

“I heard the voice of an angel, but I thought it was normal,” said Benjamin.

This continued until the age of 16, and he began to experience depression. A year later, the voice changed; he began to feel suicidal and decided to see a psychologist, but eventually decided to try to work through his problems on his own.

“I decided to manage it on my own. Really, I thought it would pass.” At 18, he went to college in the hopes that it was just a passing phase, but his symptoms kept getting worse. He went to see another doctor and confessed that he was feeling very low and suicidal.

What Benjamin didn’t realize was that the voices were a symptom-so he only mentioned his low moods when speaking to the doctors. “I wasn’t even aware that I was unwell; I never had mental health education in school and thought everyone had voices in their heads. I didn’t know I had schizophrenia.”

Two years later, Benjamin had a massive breakdown and was admitted to a psychiatric hospital, where he was finally diagnosed with schizoaffective disorder. Although finally diagnosed, it was during his treatment that he attempted suicide for the first time.

“I ran away from the hospital and I went to a bridge, but then ‘Mike’ intervened. From that moment on, my life changed.”

When a perfect stranger saw Benjamin, he could tell he was very distressed, and Mike managed to calm Benjamin down. He asked him if he wanted to get coffee, sit down and talk about it.

“At that moment, I felt that there was a light at the end of the tunnel, that maybe I could get better. This total stranger, a young guy like me, was willing to help me and talk it over-maybe it could get better.”

After that night on the bridge, Benjamin went back to the hospital, but he never got a chance to thank Mike. Six years later, Benjamin launched a nationwide campaign called “Finding Mike” to locate the man that helped him that night.

Despite the odds, after a few months Benjamin was finally reunited with the man who saved his life, Neil Laybourn. “I did this campaign in order to inspire people and to show them that there is hope and that it’s okay to have suicidal thoughts and feel unwell. I wanted to show them that there can be a light at the end of the tunnel, that you can overcome these feelings by talking about them.”

Talking about his illness was a challenge for Benjamin at first. After hearing a friend talk about his heart attack and experience with heart disease, he realized that he didn’t feel like he could talk about his mental illness in the same way. But if he wanted to get better, he was going to have to.

He made a video of himself so that he didn’t have to speak to anyone directly at first. He put it online to see whether anyone else had had a similar experience.

“I was surprised by the responses I got to that first video, so I decided to continue making them because I could see that it was helping others as much as it was helping me.”

Creating videos and sharing with others has helped Benjamin significantly throughout his recovery journey, but there are other things that help people as well such as cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), mindfulness and working.

‘Part of my problem is that I didn’t know I had an illness. I thought hearing voices was normal,” Benjamin said. “I want to educate young people in school and make them aware of these issues, so that they can seek the help they need.”

Note: Benjamin’s YouTube Channel is www.youtube.com/user/johnjusthuman.