Mental Illness: A Tribute to My Brother

Michael Breuer, NAMI Montgomery County, tells the story of his brother’s mental illness. Voice, October 26, Issue No. 45

When my older brother, David, was diagnosed with schizophrenia at age 21, it was like an earthquake hit the family. Everything was disrupted and things would never be the same again. While he had some years of improvement, he remained under the grip of his psychosis and was institutionalized at least five times in his lifetime, once for four years in Israel. Like many of those who live with mental illness, his lifetime was shortened because of his condition. He died last October very suddenly in his sleep, at age 60.

Before he got sick, he was vice president of his high school student council. He was admitted to Penn State University, where he excelled. During his junior year, he spent a semester in Europe and visited Israel for the first time; he also traveled to Iceland. During his senior year, he was admitted to George Washington University School in Washington, D.C. In his senior year, he began experiencing psychotic symptoms. He would have been a brilliant attorney.

My parents took sole care of him for 25 years. They monitored his medicine daily and supported anything that would make his life better.. When he was first ill, I remember thinking I was going to make his life better. I was going to fix him. I thought I could get him to realize that his delusions were not real, but you can’t do that - that’s the illness. He was hospitalized a few times and moved with my parents from New Jersey to Pennsylvania when they retired.

By the early 2000’s, when he was in his mid-40s, he was doing a lot better. He hadn’t been hospitalized in 20 years, had managed to complete his Penn State degree, and had held a part-time job for a while. He even recorded a CD of Israeli songs, which he sang with musical accompaniment. He lived in an apartment in State College, PA., by himself, a few miles from my parents.

Even though he was doing better, I don’t believe he was happy. In his relatively newfound health, he decided to answer a calling he’d always had: He wanted to move to Israel. His decision was controversial because our family was afraid he would relapse without the family’s support. However, he researched the country, wrote to the embassy, obtained a doctor’s consent, figured out where he wanted to live and how he’d survive there.

In 2002, he moved to Netanya, Israel, only returning to the United States twice in the first year-and-a-half and never again after 2003. As we feared, he suffered a terrible relapse because he could not adhere to his medication. We asked him to return, but he strongly felt he belonged in Israel.

He was hospitalized in Israel repeatedly and never found an effective medicine to control his psychosis. In the last two years after he was released, we finally managed to build a strong support network, including nurses and a social worker, and he improved. Then we suddenly lost him.

David, despite living with schizophrenia, always cared a lot about other people and had a big heart. He was very aware that others had it worse. He always had a roof over his head. He could give money to poor people on the streets. He didn’t feel sorry for himself. He wanted peace. He wanted to help others.

I miss my brother. I have a picture of him with his arm around me when he was six years old, and I was a baby; he looked proud to be my big brother. When I was having a difficult time with him, I’d look at that picture and remember that if the situation had been reversed, he would have been there for me too.

Note: In honor of his brother, Michael contributes to NAMI, who offers support to patients and families. He also supports neuroscience research and early intervention of psychosis.

He has found HOPE for others in his brother’s life.