

forum

Parents for Children's Mental Health (PCMH), in partnership with The Barrie Examiner, would like to express thanks to all of the municipal, provincial, federal candidates who participated in our recent launch of "From the Inside-The Invisible Disability." This powerful workshop was designed to give the participants valuable insight into the lives of the many children in our community who struggle with mental illness and the daily challenges they face in and outside of the classroom. The candidates were given a photo and commentary opportunity following the workshop, which will be shared in the Examiner in the following weeks.



Dave Hardwick - Ward 9
"This workshop is a must for any parent. There is not enough awareness in our community regarding children's mental health issues."



Peter Silveira - Ward 5
"I believe workshops like this not only increased my viewpoint, but all that participated. It was a great experience."



Paolo Fabrizio - Ward 9
"Mental illness needs to be respected and treated the same way a drug addict or alcoholic gets aid and treatment. We need a better education system for our children's sake."



Harry Ahmed - Mayor
"People should be aware of this and should take all the positive steps to help the kids and overcome these problems. I have three boys and I can imagine how hard it could be."



Rose Romita - Ward 2
"Very informative. Should be done more often so more people can understand and help eliminate the stigma."



James Palmer - Ward 5
"Starting a new family of my own, it is great to know if there is ever the need for support, there is a group any of us can reach out to for that support"



John S. Webb - Ward 8
"For a society who values education, I am surprised by how little society understands at times. I would recommend everyone take 20 minutes and go take a look at www.pcmh.ca."



Lynn Strachan - Ward 2
"Parents for Children's Mental Health is doing a tremendous job about the 'real' effect of mental health for children and youth."



Erich Jacoby Hawkins - Green Party
"It's clear that early and pro-active measures are the best way to reduce future problems, costs, and tragedies."



Rodney Jackson - Ward 3
"Excellent 'real life' experience that will open people's eyes to a serious situation that doesn't get enough attention."



Myrna Clark - NDP
"The question was asked: 'What can we do to better support our children?' Let's put energy and monies into our children, all of our children."



Patrick Hebert - Ward 4
"As a survivor of mental illness, I offer hope to those who are also living with one. Bringing CAMH-level treatment to Barrie is something I believe would further improve access to care in our community."



John Brassard - Ward 7
"The workshop presented tonight is one that I would recommend to anyone wanting to understand what mental illness is and the effects it can present."



Joe Tascona - Mayor
"As a community, we must provide a better understanding and education of persons with mental disorders and work for greater compassion and public resources to better our community."

Political hopefuls schooled in understanding

She doesn't look very happy. We are squeezed into a room, the chairs are uncomfortable and it's hot.



J.T. McVeigh

It sounds like she is telling us something important, but she is talking a mile a minute, the pencils are all gooey, here's your test sheets and what's that noise. There's a buzzing or something in the background.

"The test is timed, start when I say, go," she says.

Questions are flashed onto a screen. Time. Here's the next question. Time. And another.

The faces around start to tighten. Jaws clench. One guy has even tossed the pencil and folded his hands. He's not going to play.

"Okay, we're done, put your pencils down, we're done."

Not many are looking up, those that do look angry.

"I hate that part of the workshop," says Sarah Cannon, executive director of Parents for Children's Mental Health to relieved smiles and laughs.

People turn their chairs around so that they can see, take odd shaped pillows from under them and wipe the Vaseline off of the pencils.

And the noise is gone.

"What you have just experienced for the past five minutes, is what my daughter experiences six hours a day, every day at school."

Cannon's 13-year-old daughter was diagnosed as bi-polar some years back; her husband took his life because he was bi-polar as well.

The workshop she is helping direct is for all of the municipal candidates planning to run in this year's elections in Barrie so that they understand, even just a little, the stigmas, the roadblocks



J.T. McVEIGH The Barrie Examiner

Yolanda Gallo, left, Sarah Cannon and Tanya Alfieri, led a workshop for local political candidates to help them understand the trials and pressures of children with mental health issues. Cannon is executive director for Parents for Children's Mental Health, while Gallo and Alfieri are members of the local chapter.

and the prejudices that face a family with mental health issues.

A similar exercise was held for provincial politicians in early May in Toronto to highlight the severe crisis child and youth health care is facing.

The seating was planned to make it uncomfortable, the cushions added to the discomfort, greasy pencils illustrated what children with heightened sensory stimuli might experience.

And the confusion, the impatience, the feeling of being overwhelmed are just part and parcel of what as many as one in five students in Ontario schools feel everyday in the classroom.

It would be too easy to point fingers at teachers, Cannon acknowledges, after all they are on the front lines. But the problem is systemic, starting with society's perception of what mental health is to how provincial officials manage the problem.

Paralyzing cuts to school boards, elimination of professionals from the classrooms including teaching assistants, education assistance, social workers, sociologists and psychologists, have left teachers and their young charges as sitting ducks.

The candidates look relieved that this was a demonstration

and not an evening full of abuse.

One by one they called out their feelings. 'I was lost', said one, 'I just tossed the pencil down and refused to do the work', said another, while for another it brought back memories of when he was in school and diagnosed.

He was one of the lucky ones getting diagnosed suggests Cannon.

"There isn't enough staff to do evaluations," said Cannon.

"I sat in on a panel in Toronto and a sociologist taking part in the discussion said that she had 17,000 on her case list. That's just criminal," added Cannon.

Other group members in

Barrie call out the number of times their kids have been expelled from a school.

The leader in this competition has a son now at his sixth school.

"No one in the individual schools seems to know how to deal with these kids," says Yolanda Gallo, her son being diagnosed with Obsessive compulsive disorder and ADHD. "One top on that he has been flagged as gifted."

By the end of the program there were more questions than answers.

Candidates listened to more personal tales from the affected families; others just took the time to network.

The evening, however, was a success in one way.

Another layer had been pulled away on the stigma of mental illness.

For the parents and the children it gave them the chance to show that there are no crazy people, just some people, some of the most vulnerable people looking for a little help.

And for the would-be politicians, it was a chance to see that city government isn't just about building permits and rubbery chicken luncheons.

J.T. McVeigh is the Examiner's senior photographer