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A family's fight with mental illness

Raising awareness: Former Supreme Court Justice John Broderick is leading a statewide effort to bring mental illness out of the shadows.

By SHAWNE K. WICKHAM

John Broderick, the former chief justice of the New Hampshire Supreme Court, is leading a new statewide campaign to bring mental illness out of the shadows. "It may well be the most important thing I have ever done," Broderick says. He knows too well the anguish of having a loved one suffer with mental illness — and the power of love to find healing.

Broderick is co-chairman of Change Direction New Hampshire, a campaign launching Monday to raise awareness of five major signs of emotional suffering that could indicate someone needs help. New Hampshire is the first state to launch such an effort, and Broderick hopes it can be a model for the nation, even the world. Fourteen years ago, Broderick's 30-year-old son Christian attacked him with a guitar as he slept. Broderick spent months recovering from his injuries; his son spent three years in state prison.

His son's mental illness had gone undiagnosed for nearly 20 years, he said. "I was the parent and I didn't see it. So he suffered for years," he said. "Then we had that horrible tragedy and he went to prison. ... And I don't know how he survived that." His family has healed, Broderick said. And now father and son are in this fight together. Broderick said his son told him God has given them both a second chance: "You didn't die and I didn't go to jail for life. ... God's put us back together now and we've got to take advantage of that time." Christian, his father says, "is the bravest person I have ever known."

"My son is a really good person. Decent. Smart," he said. "I love him. And he knows that." Change Direction's five signs of emotional suffering are: personality changes; uncharacteristic anger or anxiety; withdrawal or isolation; self-neglect or risky behavior; and hopelessness. Looking back, the signs were there, Broderick said. Christian was around 13 when he began to withdraw and spend more time alone with his artwork. Events such as graduations triggered anxiety. His parents thought it was a phase; their son had always marched to the beat of a different drummer.

Later, when Christian started drinking, they thought his real problem was alcohol. So when some at the Al-Anon meetings they were attending advised them the best thing they could do was throw Christian out of their home and "let him hit bottom," that's what they did. "It was the worst thing we could have done," Broderick said. "Because what happened then, his mental illness just accelerated and he drank more."

They sent him to rehab in Florida and California. On some occasions, Broderick called Manchester police to ask them to take his son into protective custody so he wouldn't harm himself or someone else by driving drunk.

It was “a living nightmare” for the family, but especially for his son, Broderick said. “Whatever we endured, he endured so much more. It’s like having a broken ankle and nobody believes your ankle is broken and they want you to run track.” A psychiatrist at the state prison in Concord would diagnose his son with depression and anxiety disorder; he told the Brodericks Christian had been selfmedicating with alcohol.

And it was in prison that he got the help and medication he needed. “It saved his life,” Broderick said. “I will always be grateful.” “It’s an odd way to find a cure,” he said, adding that jails and prisons “are the largest providers of mental health services in the United States.” After his son was released on parole in 2005, he told his father how good he felt. “Dad, I didn’t know you could feel like this,” he said. “It broke my heart,” Broderick said. What Broderick calls “the tragedy” happened on March 30, 2002. He and his son had argued earlier in the evening about Christian’s drinking, but they had sat up talking for a while after.

“We had a bad day. Tomorrow will be better,” Broderick told his son before going to bed. He has no memory of what happened next, but police learned that Christian had attacked his father as he slept, smashing a guitar over his head. “I think he just snapped,” he said. Broderick only remembers waking up feeling terrible and going into the room where his wife Patricia was. They turned on the light; he was covered in blood. He awoke in the hospital seven days later, unable to speak; his jaw was wired shut. At first his wife told him he had fallen; a day or so later she had to tell him their son was at Valley Street jail. “She started crying and I started crying and I realized in that instant that our lives had changed.”

The first time he saw his son after that was the day Christian pleaded guilty to first-degree assault. He told his father he would never forgive himself. “Christian, we got into this together. We’re going to get out of it together,” he told him. “You don’t quit and I won’t quit.” The first time they visited him at state prison was crushing, he said. “It was all so antiseptic. It was steel on steel. And then you find in that environment somebody you love and you say what are we doing here? How did we get to this place?”

During that visit, Broderick told his son he would leave the Supreme Court if he wanted him to. “I don’t want anything to happen to you,” he told him. “My job is not as important to me as your well-being.”

“I would have stepped down in a heartbeat,” he said. Broderick stayed on the bench and became chief justice while his son was still in state prison. And that’s where he performed his son’s wedding.

His family’s tragedy, Broderick said, made him a wiser judge — and a less judgmental person. “Because I always know there’s a videotape behind the news story, and if you roll the tape back, sometimes you’ll find people like my son; you’ll find parents like my wife and I.” Peter Evers, president and CEO of Riverbend Community Mental Health in Concord, is co-chair of Change Direction NH. He said having someone of Broderick’s stature on the campaign is “invaluable.” Evers said he wants people to think of mental illness as a chronic illness, akin to diabetes. Research has shown that early treatment can prevent more serious problems in

adulthood, he said. One in five people has a diagnosable mental health condition, according to federal data. If you think of it that way, Evers said, "It's pretty normal."

Broderick hopes the message of the Change Direction campaign will reach parents, teachers, co-workers, coaches and friends. He wants posters in every office building, school and courthouse, "wherever people gather." They plan to hold forums on mental health and treatment around the state.

But what Broderick really wants is to "change the culture." He remembers the secrecy that used to surround breast cancer: "The only person who said 'breast' in public was Hugh Hefner." Today, the pink ribbon campaign has brought enormous attention to breast cancer and the fight for a cure. It was the same with AIDS. Now Broderick wants that to happen with mental illness. "I want a color. I want a visibility, and I want a dignity for mental illness that it has never had, a humanity to it, and an understanding."

After Christian was paroled, the family held a church wedding for him. One of the guests was then-Sen. Joe Biden, who had become a family friend. In the reception line, Broderick watched as the future vice president put his hand on his son's shoulder and leaned in to say, "Christian, welcome back. Welcome home." It moved Broderick to tears. And for the next few hours, they celebrated with family and close friends. "I just can't describe how normal it was," he said. "How wonderful it was." What happened to his family has changed him in fundamental ways, Broderick said. "I realize because of my son's journey and our own how human and frail we all are." Mental illness, he said, "is an equal opportunity illness." "It doesn't look at your race, your color, your W2. It can shatter futures. It's a very cruel thing. But it doesn't have to be."