

## The Heart of a Hero!

September 11, 2001, caused massive suffering and major economic and social depression. People everywhere became victims' of painful times like the loss of a job, savings, and their home. A perception of hopelessness permeated the psychosocial dynamic of communities worldwide. Shortly after 9-11, many of us experienced the corporate raping of our hard earned savings, and in the Washington D.C. area, people experienced the added terror of sniper attacks. Misery plagued the media and infected the lives of everyone. Family services organizations could not accommodate all the displaced families who slipped into the path of depression along with the economy. Skilled people were homeless and jobless.

"I'd had a reasonably successful business of ten years. I was a hard working entrepreneur. My clients were big spenders. In the spring of 2001, I invested money in my first home and the expansion of my business. Within six months after 9-11, I'd lost all incoming revenue, spent most my savings, and filed bankruptcy. Overqualified, I was politely turned down for jobs 39 times. After two years of having little to no income my son and I became homeless and lived in a garage."

This person also suffers from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), a mental health condition that spins stress into a potentially dangerous emotional cocktail. In PTSD, the brain's ability to process traumatic events is actually different than people who don't suffer from the disorder. A cyclical neurological pattern produces and releases brain chemicals that feed a loop-like-process which actualizes traumatic events over and over. Emotions grow like wild weeds and can paralyze the human ability to function-at all. Each added stressor reactivates the cycle. Events like 9-11 affect everyone, but some more than others.

People with mental health problems are just like people with heart disease or other chronic problems. They need extra help. Their brain isn't working correctly. You'd be surprised to learn that the person with the PhD who heads the department has bi-polar disorder and compulsive obsessive disorder (OCD). Highly functioning citizens can have mental health problems. They get treatment and they go on living. Proper support, good medical care, and an adequate supply of basic human needs help dramatically. It's called recovery. It works for heart patients and it works for patients with mental health conditions as well.

Mental Health has had a bad rap for a long time. People used to actually believe that someone with a brain problem was "evil". No wonder alcohol became the medicine of choice. It was legal and socially quite glamorous. If you screwed up while under its toxicity you were simply written off as drunk. It was much easier to drink than it was to see a psychologist or psychiatrist. Losing a job due to social persecution was not an economically sound solution.

The sooner we face this reality about depression, anxiety, and other mental health problems, the quicker the speed of the medical learning curve. Brains get damaged. Human beings do overcome obstacles.

“Right before we became homeless my car was repossessed. My brain was racked with anxiety. That afternoon, someone offered us a garage to live in and gave us money. The homeless shelters had a 2 year waiting list. Someone helped me get connected to Loudoun County Mental Health. The therapist provided practical solution oriented support that empowered me to never give up. She believed I would recover. Then one day, I landed a job as Director of Sales and Marketing for a small company. They had no idea that on the morning of the interview, I had to sneak around to find a shower. I was smiling and confident. They hired me on the spot. It took me two months to find a small basement suite to rent and thus began the ascent from gloom to possibility. Dignity was found in that garage and people gave it to me when they looked at me without judgment.”

Friends of Loudoun Mental Health a not-for-profit organization located in Leesburg, Virginia has been helping its community in a public-private partnership with Loudoun County’s Community Services Board. Steadfast support and advocacy has provided direct care to people who suffer with mental health issues. “We do what we can,” says President, Judith D. Hines, “because we care about people.”

People pull together in the most desperate situations. After 9-11 we were knocked down – but once the dust settled we got back up. We stood strong for each other. But remember this; it doesn’t take a crisis to help people. It takes the heart of a hero to get up and help someone who needs you.