

An education on mental health: Nova Scotia residents speak, raise awareness at schools

By Jen Jensen

John Roswell doesn't have fond memories of high school. The Digby, N.S. resident was a top student when young, but became a self-described "bad ass" and finally dropped out in grade 10.

His mom suspected that something wasn't right and took him to a doctor. The diagnosis? Rebellious teenager.

But Roswell's troubles continued well into adulthood, and were punctuated by a suicide attempt and psychosis, including an incident in which he was convinced he was seeing a UFO.

Roswell says it wasn't until he "went completely nuts" at 40 that he was properly diagnosed as having bipolar disorder, which he thinks contributed to his changes when he was a teen. It took several more years after his diagnosis to find a medication to successfully treat his symptoms.

Now 58, Roswell is the Program Coordinator for the Digby Clare Mental Health Volunteers and believes it never should have taken so long to get the diagnosis and treatment he needed.

"The biggest reason we need to combat the stigma towards mental illnesses is so that people will seek and receive the help they need", Roswell says.

Roswell believes the fight needs to begin in schools, which is why he recently coordinated a series of four assemblies of high school students in Digby County and the District of Clare.

In order to raise awareness among students, he brought in guest speakers who have struggled with mental illnesses to tell the students about their experiences.

One of them was 56-year-old Halifax resident Jim Malone. Diagnosed with depression in 1989, Malone only realized recently that he has lived with the illness since childhood.

"I lacked self-esteem and felt unworthy, like I just didn't belong and it made school very difficult," he says.

Like John Roswell, Malone's untreated illness followed him into adulthood. He managed to get married, raise a family and have a successful career as a salesman, but as he explained at the assemblies, his depression began to unravel him.

"It was like putting apples in a wheelbarrow," he says. "The wheelbarrow got heavier and heavier and I could still move it until that last apple went in and the whole thing fell over."

That apple came in the form of a call from his company's human resources department. Asked if he was OK, Malone broke down and cried uncontrollably. He spent the next six months sitting alone in his dark basement, full of self-blame and haunted by phobias that made him too afraid to answer the phone or open an email for fear that something terrible would result.

Malone says it was draining to tell the students about such struggles, but he did it knowing that personal stories have the most impact. He knew he was getting through to them by the kinds of questions the students asked him, such as "What does depression feel like every day?" and "Can I get help and still keep my situation private?"

Simon Dugas, a Grade 12 student at Ecole Secondaire de Clare, was in the audience that day. He says speakers such as Malone definitely changed how he thinks about mental illnesses. "It made me realize these illnesses were actually present in the society that I live in, and I learned that it is not something to be ashamed of."

Dugas adds that this is not a subject that many people talk about and that hiding these illnesses is a problem among today's young people. "The speakers not only raised awareness but they also broke the ice in a sense,



John Roswell and student Simon Dugas discuss a recent school assembly on mental health at Ecole Secondaire de Clare

making youth more comfortable with talking about this subject."

As a result, the 18-year-old says he would now be more likely to seek help for a friend or family member if he suspected they were experiencing a mental illness.

Lynne Theriault, the guidance counselor at Ecole Secondaire de Clare, agrees the presentations took some of the stigma out of mental illness, and hopes the teenagers will take the discussions that began in her auditorium home to their living rooms. "The risk of teen suicide is serious and has to outweigh the stigma. We need to get children talking about these issues with their families, too."

Malone says he was particularly moved by a question that came as he was packing up to leave one auditorium. "A girl came running back in and asked, 'Does it mean you have depression when you can't stop crying?', and she just broke down. The Vice-Principal and I spoke to her for quite some time and I hope we started her on a path to getting the help she deserves."

Malone still struggles with serious depression, but continues to receive therapy and is on a "cocktail of medications", as he calls them. As painful as it is to speak publicly about his challenges, he does it frequently and also facilitates a peer support group. His work saw him nominated last year for an Inspiring Lives Awards, which recognizes people who are living with mental illness while trying to better the lives of others.

The effectiveness of the assemblies, where students hear personal stories from people who have experience with mental illness, is now being evaluated by the Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC). The MHCC's Opening Minds program is a ten year anti-stigma/anti-discrimination initiative that has chosen youth from 12 – 18 years as one of its initial target groups. Opening Minds is examining about 50 programs across the country designed to reduce stigma, with the aim of rolling out the best of them to other communities in Canada.

John Roswell believes had such an assembly been held while he was in school, his own mental illness could have been recognized much sooner.

"I believe we can make a difference in young people's lives in regards to how they can recognize mental illnesses in themselves, their friends or their family. Trying to create a dialogue in communities around mental health so people realize it's OK to start talking about it is a personal mission for me."