FACEing Mental Illness: The Art of Acceptance

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Last May, at the end of a City Commission meeting about funding for a mental health program, one man spoke movingly about the daughter he had adopted from Eastern Europe. She had multiple disabilities that required special medical and educational services, all of which he had readily accessed. Why, he wondered, wasn’t the same level of service available for those with mental illnesses? And why did those individuals not enjoy the same compassion and empathy regularly bestowed on his child?

“Wouldn’t it be amazing,” he added, “if Sarasota could become the gold standard for how we treat individuals with mental illness?”

That moment — that idea — literally took my breath away. More than 20 other community members also spoke that day, ranging from a slight, white, homeless woman, to an African-American minister, to a professional who lost a sibling to suicide. Without my realizing it, a seed was planted.

Sarasota became my home six years ago and many of you have read about my journey with my own son, who has experienced the biases that most individuals with brain disorders do. To imagine a community that would not only refuse to discriminate against the mentally ill, but, recognize their potential contribution and accept and provide for them — that became my vision too.
The honor of being selected as a 2016-2017 fellow in the Carter Center for Mental Health Journalism program this year has given me a chance to try to make that vision a reality. Today we launch “FACEing Mental Illness: The Art of Acceptance,” a collaborative art project aimed at reaching every member of our community. Its goal is to eliminate bias against anyone with a mental health condition; its method is to encourage individuals with mental health challenges to step forward and creatively share their stories with a caring, compassionate community.

Here’s how it works: Anyone who has experienced a mental health issue, of any degree, is invited to create a “self portrait” that creatively explores how they deal with or feel about their illness or how they believe they are seen by others.

**The face of humanity**

Artists can use any visual arts medium and can create work on their own and submit it online, or attend one of several free workshops that will provide art supplies and guidance. Those who are willing will also be interviewed and recorded for stories in the Herald-Tribune, in print and online, over the next five months.

The project will culminate next spring with an exhibition of the artwork and stories, a celebration of the artists, and a presentation by a national mental health advocate. A documentary film tracing the arc of the project and its impact on participants, both artists and volunteers, will be created as a lasting testament to Sarasota’s inclusiveness.

You can register for a workshop, or sign up as an artist, volunteer or donor, on the project website at [www.bitly.com/faceingmental](http://www.bitly.com/faceingmental). The Gulf Coast Community Foundation has stepped up to provide a nonprofit fund that allows charitable contributions to help underwrite project costs. You are also encouraged to join our group Facebook page, “FACEing Mental Illness,” which will keep you abreast of the project’s progress and future development, as well as serve as a friendly forum for any mental health discussions.

Though this is our initial public announcement of the project, efforts have been underway the past month to set the foundation. The response has been positive and overwhelming. Already many local partners — including the Charles and
Margery Barancik Foundation, the Sarasota chapter of the National Alliance for Mental Illness, the Ringling College of Art and Design and the Arts Alliance of Sarasota County — have provided tremendous support, encouragement and resources, for which I am truly grateful.

But the real test of our success will be measured in wide-spread participation, from every corner of our community. I encourage you to join in, in whatever way feels right to you, and to consider taking the courageous stance to share your own story with others. That, I believe, is what will most clearly demonstrate that the face of mental illness — young, old, white, black, rich, poor, successful or struggling — is nothing less than the face of humanity itself.