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Mental illness can be beaten

By STEVE ARNOLD
News Editor

Most Milton residents never have, and never will, see the inside of a hospital psychiatric ward.

Jean has. For five years she wrestled with an illness which first struck in the weeks before her sixteenth Christmas.

She has recovered, thanks to the strength of her family and the help of a drug called Lithium, but the process was not easy.

When she was 16, Jean's world seemed to be coming apart. She was afraid of almost everything.

"I couldn't even go grocery shopping with my mother," she recalled in a recent interview. "I'd be shopping with her and I'd suddenly get all paranoid that people were watching me and that the shelves were going to fall over on me."

"I was acting really strange and my parents just didn't know what to expect from me," she said in describing how her family doctor was consulted and admitted her to Milton District Hospital.

The only bed available then was in the maternity ward—but for her family it was easier to have her there than at home, at least for a short time.

During that, and later stays at the psychiatric ward of Joseph Brant Memorial Hospital in Burlington, she came to terms with the physical problems which caused her mental state.

Her condition was first misunderstood by the professionals who tended her. They were treating a case of paranoid-schizophrenia, but she was suffering from a chemical imbalance which caused a manic-depressive cycle.

Manic-depressive

Simply put, Jean's moods would swing in an unpredictable fashion. She would be "up" for days, with a seemingly inexhaustible supply of energy and then she would crash into a total black depression.

Lithium has helped to control these mood changes, she said.

"With it I've been able to live my own life. I've been secure in my own mind for two years now," she added.

Living in a small town like Milton, she admits, presents some special problems for a person trying to recover from a mental illness.

She was no exception. "The social stigma I had to deal with in Milton was really bad," she said. "When I got out of hospital the first time I went back to high school and the three girls I had been best friends with wouldn't even look at me, let alone talk to me."

"I spent the rest of my high school days as a social outcast and that really hurt a lot but it was something I learned to accept," she added.

Even later, when she dropped out of school and took a job in Milton she was forced to deal with the mixed reactions of those around her.

"There were those who were very understanding, those who knew I had a problem though I'd never talk about it... but there were also those who were actually frightened of me," she said.

"Some of them learned to accept me... but there were always those who the minute they're mad at you will throw in your face something that happened when you were sick."

"I'm not ashamed of my illness. As long

as I take care of myself I know I'll be fine," she said. "I want to be accepted just as an epileptic is accepted because to me they're both the same thing."

Family helped

Although her stays in hospital were important parts of her overall treatment, Jean says it was the help of her family which made the difference in her final recovery.

"I had to be pretty much guided because I couldn't do much of anything for myself," she said. "My family's support is really what made my recovery as quick as it was. It's always best to be with your family."

It was her mother who shouldered the responsibility to keep Jean busy with housework, gardening and anything else she could handle so she wouldn't spend her time simply staring at the wall, lost in her own little world.

For many people, however, the support of a family simply isn't there when they come out of hospital and it is for them, Jean says, a workshop program such as that advocated by the Halton Co-ordinated Work Project would be a great benefit.

"If I had come out of hospital and didn't have anyone there to help support me, I know what I would have done, I'd have gone to bed and slept and ate and watched TV," she said.

"It's far better to go to a workshop than to stay at home by yourself and mope," she added.

Gradual process

"A shelter like this would be great for people who don't have an established group of friends or who don't want people to know they've had a problem," she said.

As her husband has learned to recognize the signs of approaching trouble, Jean hopes others will learn the warning signals as well.

Paranoia "over nothing", unorganized thinking, a drastic change in energy patterns and levels or sleep patterns, sharply falling grades and generally low levels of self esteem are all hints for some parents of problems beyond the normal troubles of adolescence.

With the support of her husband and the drug Lithium Jean is looking forward to a secure and stable future, something to make up for the five years of her life lost to mental illness.

"There's no point in trying to analyze it," she said of her illness. "It's just something that happened to me. Something I had to learn to control."

"I don't look at the person who did all those strange things now as me," she said, stressing the need for self awareness as a vital step in the process of recovery.

"I look at that time as simply a state. I had no control over what I did in that state," she added. "There were times when I knew what I was doing was totally crazy, but there was nothing I could do to control my behavior."

"I have to learn to control the energy that makes me want to yell when I'm mad. I hate that part of me, but it's something I have to learn to control," she said.

Recovery, she said, requires a healthy dose of self awareness by the patient in addition to all the drugs prescribed by medical professionals.

"The patient has to be educated. It's very important that the patient understand what is happening to his body," she said.

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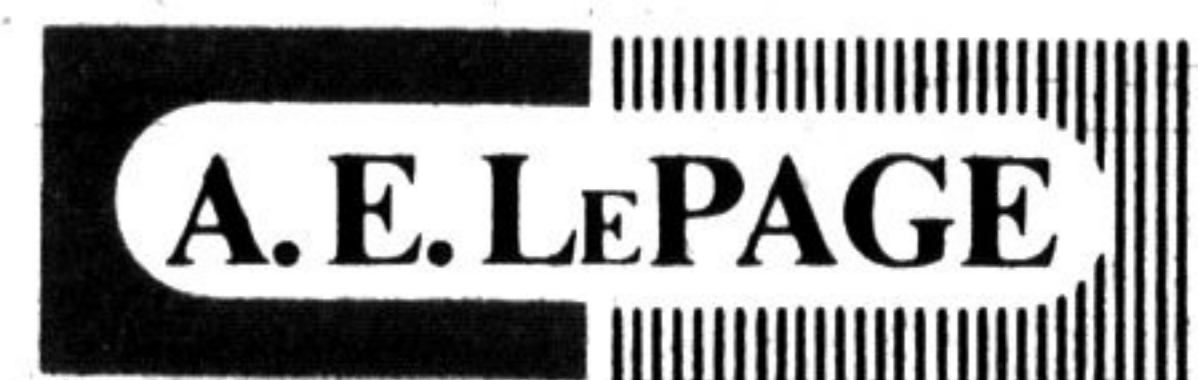
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