



Mental Health Association in Pennsylvania

An Affiliate of Mental Health America

Eliminating Stigma in Mental Health

Pennsylvania House Human Services Committee

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Testimony presented by:

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Good morning. I am Sue Walther, Executive Director of the [Mental Health Association in Pennsylvania \(MHAPA\)](#). MHAPA is a statewide non-profit organization with affiliate membership across the Commonwealth. We strive to achieve the ultimate goal of a just, humane and healthy society in which all people are accorded respect, dignity, choices and the opportunity to achieve their full potential free from stigma and prejudice. I want to thank the Committee for providing this opportunity to take a closer look at stigma and discrimination connected to mental illness. Today, I am sure you will hear much about the stigma and discrimination that exists and the negative impact it has on individuals, their families and communities. I am going to focus on how MHAPA has chosen to move forward in our efforts to eliminate stigma.

MHAPA supports and promotes principles that facilitate the recovery and resiliency of individuals and their families. We recognize that all too often stigma and discrimination are barriers to opportunities—employment, community engagement, housing, healthcare, and education—that support recovery.

Guided by a 1999 U.S. Surgeon General's Report on Mental Health that said "Stigma leads people to avoid socializing, employing, or living near persons who have a mental disorder," for many years, MHAPA worked to eliminate stigma and discrimination by raising awareness about mental illness in our communities. Our messages: Mental illness affects everyone, regardless of race, income levels, employment, age, gender; and people living with mental illness make important contributions to our families and communities. Recovery was part of our message but our emphasis, at the time, was on

breaking down the negative attitudes against mental illness by educating people about it—the facts, figures, and realities. These are powerful—and necessary—conversations to have but over time, things evolve.

Four years ago, a group of individuals with lived experience approached MHAPA with a new message. Inspired by a poem entitled I'm the Evidence, written by Karen Morton of Support the Journey, they suggested we shift our focus from the negative attitudes that work against mental health recovery to focus on people who are the Evidence of recovery and those who support this recovery journey. The poem is about values that support recovery – belief, hope, giving, connectedness, action, example, encouragement and possibility.

The more I listened to their ideas, the more excited I became about the possibilities. A number of studies have highlighted the idea that significant improvement in attitudes about mental illness occurs when people have direct contact with individuals who have lived experiences. More recent efforts include indirect contact such as reading blogs, watching videos – these efforts take the concept of direct contact to a broader audience.

The campaign we were now talking about developing was a way to bring the recovery journey to a broader community—it was time to stop talking about stigma and discrimination and start talking about recovery. We could stop “wagging our fingers” telling people what they were doing wrong and begin highlighting and celebrating the

many living examples of recovery, honoring what people are doing right for themselves, their friends and family and the community.

This marked a monumental change in the way MHAPA approaches our efforts to promote inclusive communities and impact how people think about mental illness.

After a year of planning, [I'm the Evidence / Mental Health \(ITE/MH\) Campaign](#) launched in 2011.

ITE/MH leverages the mental health network of advocates, advocacy organizations, counties, and providers to reach individuals and communities with our messages of hope and recovery. Through this network and community-based events and programs, we've built a growing Ambassador program of individuals and organizations — people in recovery and their individual and community supporters—who have joined the Campaign to honor recovery and provide encouragement and example to others. To date ITE/MH has more than 500 ambassadors.

We ask organizations to implement the Campaign into their everyday work, providing them with a comprehensive toolkit of materials, action ideas, and the ITE/MH presentation to assist with this implementation.

ITE/MH Campaign's [Faces of Mental Health Recovery Public Art Project \(FoMHR\)](#) is also specifically designed to engage community-based organizations—in and out of

behavioral health—in celebrating recovery. We offer the basic framework and empower the organizations to implement the project in their communities, with their constituents. Our campaign has grown and evolved over the past three years, but our core purpose remains the same: to celebrate the uplifting values of the Campaign and the remarkable strides people make every day as they walk the recovery journey or support others on theirs.

With my testimony, I have included the poem written by Karen Morton that provided the initial inspiration. It continues to inspire but now we have ambassadors who inspire me every day. I have included a sampling of our ambassadors – a blog post, pictures and stories. As I look at their pictures, I see friends, work colleagues, mothers, fathers, board members, students, employees, and community leaders. And as I read about their journeys, I feel honored that they shared their story with ITE/MH to help others and to increase understanding in communities across Pennsylvania.

We believe that shining the light on recovery will lead to a day when stigma and discrimination don't exist at all.



I'm **the** Evidence™



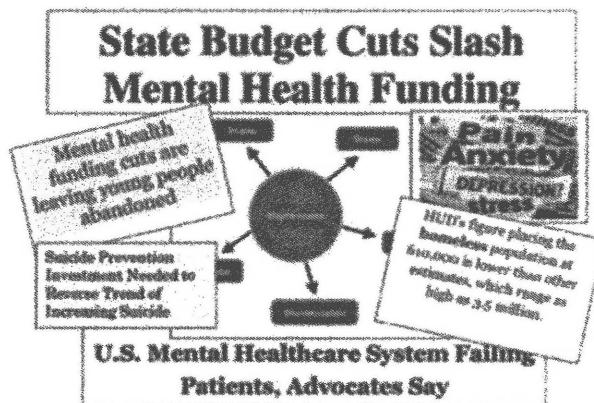
I'm the Evidence
for how belief inspires
how hope transforms and
how giving heals the soul

I'm **the** Evidence
for what can be achieved
how feeling connected can ground
and how there is invaluable worth
in an act of faith

I'm the **Evidence**
for how an example can lead
how far encouragement can take you
and how one step begins
a journey towards endless possibilities

February 19, 2015
Posted by [ITE Campaign](#)
[Blog](#)

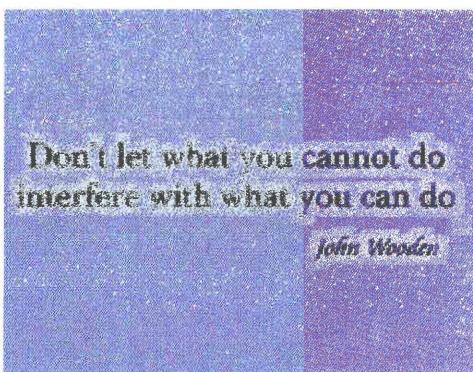
Some days, it is easy to feel despair knowing the facts that too many people are unable or unwilling to access the services and supports they need to take even the first steps on their recovery journey. Not enough safe, decent, affordable homes. Limited resources to help people find and keep a job. The damaging knee jerk headlines and depictions in the media and entertainment of people with mental illness, born out of lack of education and awareness that leads to damaging self-stigma and discrimination. These are facts that are unfortunately very real in our current society. Some days, they seem so overwhelming that there is a helpless feeling that sits in your gut—what can I possibly do to make a difference?



And then there are the facts...

The facts that each one of us can make a difference in the lives of people who are affected by mental illness, by offering hope, giving an opportunity, making a real, human connection with someone, being the example of possibility and encouraging people to not give up. Our actions on these values make a difference—to those on their personal recovery journey, to families and friends who stand by those they love. They bolster the work of tireless advocates, the peers, therapists and others who are dedicated to helping people move from darkness to light.

The fact is, I can make a difference and be the Evidence...and so can you.





Rochelle Varady

Rochelle Varady is a young woman who sees a hopeful future for herself and reflects this hope to the world around her.

Rochelle has been part of the POWER Program at Montgomery County Community College and is currently taking summer courses. She sees the opportunity of a college education not only as the chance to build on her skills in science and writing but to be the first person in her biological family to earn a degree.

Rochelle is the middle child in her birth family of eight siblings. She was adopted at the age of eight. She has worked hard to deal with early life traumas and is thankful to her adoptive mother for being there and helping her and her other siblings.

When she's not working at the movie theater or going to classes, Rochelle enjoys listening to music, writing, drawing, and hanging out with her friends. She feels empowered to deal with her mental illness, and believes her experiences and empathy can make a difference in the lives of others.

Rochelle is the evidence of what can be achieved and how far encouragement can take you.



Chalkley Matlack

Chalkley Matlack is a man of compassion, empathy, fairness, and honesty. He is a man who believes family is first, and that it is a parent's job to love their child.

A father of four children, Chalkley lives his beliefs in his role as a parent and in standing steadfastly by his children through their life challenges. He never gave up on his son Jason throughout his years of difficulties with mental illness and addiction. Chalkley held hope for Jason through the darkest times in his journey and always believed that Jason's path would lead him to safety, happiness, and a return to the family.

Chalkley has been able to reflect on his own life and that of his family of origin, and through this and his experience with Jason and another child with addiction challenges, understands from a deeply personal level the pain of illness and the joy of recovery. He feels better about his life today, knowing that the support and help he's given to his children has been worth the effort.

Chalkley is the evidence of how belief inspires and how hope transforms.



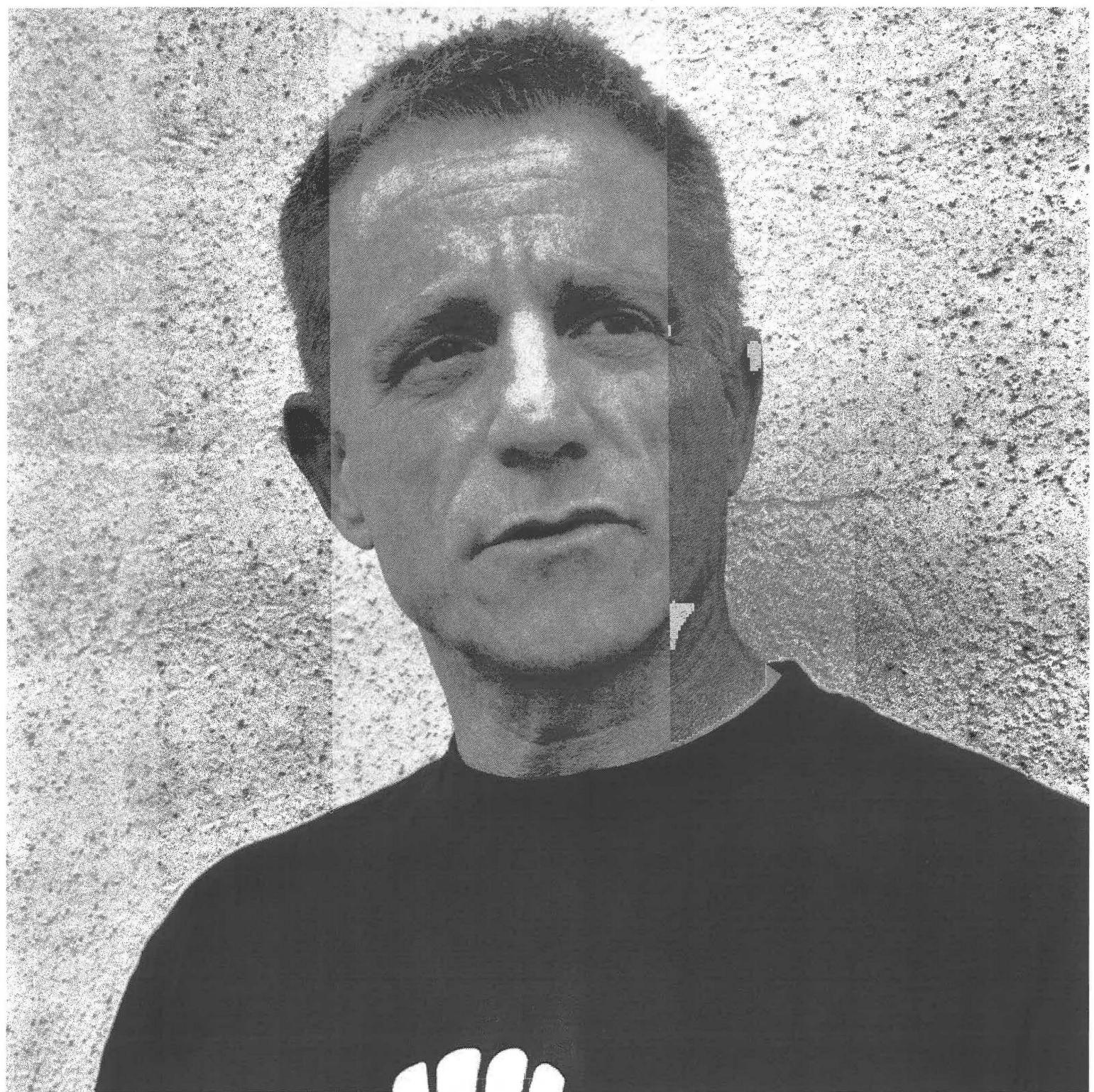
Kelly Davis

Kelly Davis never gives up, on herself or others. Her strong persistence is evidenced in her achievements of graduating with honors from Montgomery County Community College, continuing her education at Chestnut Hill College, and fulfilling the role of full-time mother and caregiver to her elderly mother.

Kelly experienced many years of active addiction and mental illness and numerous failed attempts to achieve recovery. She lived in darkness and fear and felt she was not dying quickly enough. Yet she held onto shreds of strength, perseverance and faith that sustained her. Without a doubt, her ability to overcome was born out of the hope and faith others held for her, and their belief that she could have a life beyond the pain and struggles she lived with. They were the strings of possibility that eventually allowed her to surrender her sense that she didn't need the help of others in her recovery, and to begin the process of change, growth and responsibility.

Kelly now has a passion for life, for learning, and for being a vision of hope to others.

Kelly is the evidence of how belief inspires and how one steps begins the journey towards endless possibilities.



Anthony DeSantis

Anthony DeSantis gives of himself—in his work as the Facilities Manager at Fairview Village Church; to his community as a volunteer for the Red Cross; to the youth he works with at his church; and to others, who like he is, are in recovery.

Anthony understands the importance of living the values that support recovery from a personal perspective. Having faith, connecting with others, and receiving encouragement helped him to see the big picture in his life, versus just living for the next gain.

He is proud to be a witness to others on their recovery journey and strives to be a loyal friend who operates with personal integrity in being the example and offering support.

Anthony is the evidence of how an example can lead and how far encouragement can take you.



Ronn

Ronn works as a Consumer Satisfaction Team Specialist at HopeWorx and is a full-time student at Montgomery County Community College (MCCC) where he was recently named to the Dean's List.

Ronn spent much of his youth feeling alone and defeated. Home was chaotic and he felt like his life was going nowhere. He felt depressed and lacked self-confidence. When he reached adulthood, Ronn began taking classes at MCCC. He then made another important decision, deciding that it was time for him to grow up and live on his own. That was a turning point in his life and his recovery.

Ronn realized that it was important to accept help in achieving his goals. He worked hard to overcome his resistance to getting help—realizing that he couldn't get well on his own—and allowed others to support his journey.

Lack of self-confidence is no longer a driving force in Ronn's life. He loves being creative and sharing his creativity and joy with others—whether it's making them laugh or styling them. His strength and faith led him to seize opportunities open to him, and he is now driven by the goal of offering the same hope and support to others. He is well on his way to achieving his dreams, through his work at HopeWorx and pursuit of a degree in social work.

Ronn is the evidence of how an example can lead.



Sandy Watson

Sandy Watson is a woman full of gratitude for the simple things she enjoys in her retirement after working in the mental health advocacy community...walking in nature with her dog Sophie, watching the seasons change. She is full of gratitude—for the people who have supported her own recovery and worked with her in advocating for quality, compassionate care for others who have a serious mental illness.

Sandy's experience with mental illness is multi-faceted. She is a person in recovery from mental illness and addiction, has family members and friends who have faced like challenges, and has suffered great loss and sadness in her life.

It wasn't until she realized that we can't recover by ourselves and she allowed herself to connect with others that her recovery flourished. She opened herself to receiving hope and encouragement and built relationships that enabled her to embrace recovery. In doing so, she took the steps that led to her inspiring leadership in the Montgomery County and the larger Pennsylvania mental health advocacy communities.

Sandy is the evidence of how feeling connected can ground.



Kathie Mitchell

Kathie Mitchell says that the mental health community in which she works chose her. She was a good choice.

Kathie's involvement with mental health began when a family member began experiencing mental illness. Finding and navigating necessary services and supports was challenging. Kathie, a journalist at that time, dedicated her time to researching what was available and how individuals and their families could access these services and supports. Through this process, she became acutely aware of the need for advocacy. She also came to understand that people needed not only access to quality services but to have their rights honored as well.

Kathie's journey led her to HopeWorx, Inc., where she found a community of like-minded individuals who believed they could make a difference. She currently directs HopeWorx Community Advocates of Montgomery County program.

Kathie is the evidence of how giving heals the soul and how one step begins a journey towards endless possibilities.



February 12, 2015

Pennsylvania Representative Mike Schlossberg, D-Lehigh, came to ITE/MH's attention when he published, in response to Robin Williams' death, an op-ed about his own experiences with depression. At the time, we reached out to Rep. Schlossberg, inviting him to join the Campaign as an Ambassador. He responded immediately and enthusiastically and has been an Ambassador since the fall.

Now in his second term, Rep. Schlossberg, who lives in Allentown, is a strong advocate for better mental health programs and services. We wanted to hear more from him about how his own recovery has inspired his work as an elected official and what factored into the decision to publicly share a very personal story. Below are five questions with Rep. Schlossberg, who is the Evidence of both personal recovery and supporting others.

When Robin Williams died, you wrote a really wonderful, very personal op-ed about your own experience with depression as a college student. Can you briefly share your story with Spotlight On readers and tell us what type of support helped you.

Two days after Robin Williams died, I saw a Facebook status in which someone lamented that Robin Williams must not have had enough faith in Jesus, and that was clearly why he killed himself. That status had me infuriated—I could practically feel the steam coming out of my ears, and as a result, I wrote an op-ed that detailed my 14 year journey with depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation. For me, I've seen a therapist, as needed, during that time period. I've also been on anti-depressants since December 2002.

As a person with lived experience and a policy maker, you can influence and support recovery by being the example and advocating for recovery-oriented policies. In telling your personal story publicly, you were able to address stigma in a unique way. What compelled you to share? As a public official, did you have any hesitations? If so, how did you overcome them?

It was the Facebook status that really set me off. I saw that online and went to bed steaming...the next morning, I woke up around 5am, thought, "The hell with it," and wrote the op-ed. It was online by 6pm the next day. As for hesitations, no, but it was funny...I wrote the op-ed, submitted it, and didn't even blink. Then, when the editors said, "We love it, and we are running it today," I felt like I was going to have a heart attack. The reality of it getting published was the most frightening part. However, I had always wanted to write the article...and, sadly, William's suicide provided me with the opportunity.

How has your personal experience made you more supportive of policies, programs, and services that support mental health recovery?

Because I get it. Too often we, as policy makers, live in a vacuum in which we forget that real people's real lives are impacted by our decisions. When someone discusses depression, anxiety, addiction, I know how real they are, and I can use my personal experience to fight for more funding and better programs.

You are an ITE/MH Ambassador and at a recent event in Allentown also received a surprise ITE/MH Award in recognition of your publicly standing as the Evidence of recovery. What does it mean to you to have received the award?

A great deal! That was a nice surprise. On a purely personal level, I greatly appreciated the acknowledgement. It seemed easy to me at first, but that op-ed wound up being more emotionally difficult than I expected. I really appreciated the acknowledgement, and I hope I can continue.

Tell us a bit about the new PA mental health caucus. As the chair, what can you say about the caucus' priorities and what you hope to achieve?

More than anything else, awareness. We have +30 members now (more than 15% of the House), and I'm hoping to use the caucus to better educate members about the real struggles that people with mental illness face. From there, I hope the caucus members will be more inclined to advocate for mental health related issues.