

Lessons from the 2008 NAMI National Convention

By Ken Grider

The NAMI 2008 convention was about 3 things:

Faith and hope for recovery

Inspiration and achievement

Building Tomorrow

Carla tells me that no one here was able to attend this years convention. That can either put the pressure on me to cover the most important aspects, or, I guess that I could just make up a bunch of stuff and no one will know the difference. Don't worry, I choose the former. Besides, I could not begin to fabricate the tantalizing new scientific discoveries presented and I never imagined that in my lifetime I would see the kind of positive changes happening now for people suffering from mental illnesses and their caregivers.

Here is a brief overview followed by a few workshops.

Breathtaking scientific advances in brain imaging and genetics are already opening new doors for more accurate diagnostic testing for mental illnesses. New genetic discoveries for schizophrenia, in particular, and hopefully others to come, are providing new hope in understanding just how mental illness is transferred biologically. These exciting new discoveries are paving the way for new hope in treating these illnesses. Consumers, caregivers, and the healthcare industry can now hope for much improved treatments for these debilitating diseases. Imagine a doctor who can run a few tests and determine your exact diagnosis and the medications you will need to treat your illness. Imagine the end of years of wrong medicines administered haphazardly by trial and error. Imagine if you will an end to the horrible side effects from medication that isn't working. Imagine doctors who may be able to scientifically determine your illness long before you are suffering any symptoms.

We are sitting on the threshold of new discoveries that will alleviate so much suffering. There are advances coming that we have not even yet dreamed possible.

These bold new scientific discoveries coupled with the exciting new developments in america's judicial system, a topic I will get to shortly, and a more fair, accurate, and compassionate media are all working together. We are long past the dark ages. We are in an exciting age of advancement. NAMI continues to be at the heart of this exciting and bold future.

In 2007 and into 2008, NAMI partnered with PBS for the broadcast of the documentary ***Depression: Out of the Shadows***. NAMI released a landmark report on schizophrenia and publics attitudes, and the real needs of consumers and caregivers. Celebrities and authors have publicly shared stories of recovery.

The news media have investigated *neglect, abuse, and inadequacy* in mental healthcare, spurring legislative reforms. The preparation also has begun for NAMI's second *Grading the States report*, which will continue the movement for change in 2009.

Although the nightly gatherings in the Grand Ballroom were my favorite times, I thoroughly enjoyed the many workshops throughout the day. Though they were too numerous to mention, I will mention six of my favorite.

Workshop 2-D Project Hope: The Dream Team at the Psychiatric Hospital.

Anyone who has ever been hospitalized or had a friend or relative in the hospital might be curious about this workshop. They talked about consumer and family advocates hired at the hospital to create a NAMI culture (the operative word here for me was "hired"). They provided tools for training, evaluating, and establishing a NAMI presence at your local hospital. Helping families navigate the mental healthcare system is one of the topics covered.

Workshop 2-H Crisis Intervention Training for high School and hospital staff.

Having been a teacher for 17 years explains why I asked several questions during this workshop.

The cit program for police officers was adapted for students in a school setting. Teachers, administrators, and security staff are trained to recognize the signs and symptoms of at-risk behaviors, how to cope and intervene to slow things down in a time of crisis.

Workshop 2-J Advances in Mental Wellness Ministry

Having grown up in the church and a father who is a well known theologian, author, and minister probably were the things that made me curious about this workshop.

It was as I thought. Unfortunately, most faith communities are currently misinformed about mental illness, viewing them with societal stigma and prejudice. Imagine being accused by the church of demon possession while you know in your heart of hearts that Jesus is your Lord and Savior and you know that the Holy Spirit resides in your heart and is allowing God to work through you. The church has a long way to go.

Workshop 3-D

Self directed Care: Promoting Choice, Direction, and Control by People in Recovery.

This is a program that encourages the person in recovery to have greater choice and control over the services they receive.

Workshop 3-J Working on the Inside: A view of mental health in the Nation's Prison's and Jails

Never been in jail but this is, in my opinion, the greatest challenge facing advocates for the mentally ill today.

1/3 of persons with mental illnesses are incarcerated.

How does NAMI advocate for them once they are in jail? During this workshop we discussed the conflicts that result in both inappropriate treatment and inappropriate incarceration. We also explored the cultural differences that make communication between mental health professionals and correctional professionals difficult.

Julie Fast, author of *Loving someone with Bipolar Disorder* led a workshop with the same name.

Workshop 2-G

Money follows the person: Staying in the community and living Well

Imagine \$1.75 billion dollars following you around.

Well, not exactly. 63% of medicaid's budget is spent on institutional care. Health and Human Services has allocated \$1.75 billion to the states in a program called Money Follows the Person (MFP). 31 states have been awarded MFP grants. This is the largest demonstration project in the history of Medicaid. This is designed to measure how quickly state programs can effectively help people transitioning back to the community.

Now that's six workshops. Let's move on to a few examples of what was going on during the evening presentations in the Grand Ballroom (the most exciting part for me) and come to a close.

Since the National NAMI awards were given out during the evening presentations I will talk about just 3 of those awards that I thought were the most significant. NAMI's highest honor is the Distinguished Service Award given to recognize exceptional efforts with national significance in improving the lives of people with mental illness and their loved ones. This year, that award was given to Judge Steven Leifman from Florida. Judge Leifman has devoted much of his career to helping thousands of people with MI who are currently locked up in jails and prisons. As a special advisor to the Florida Supreme court, he authored a report entitled, *Mental Health: Transforming Florida's mental Health System*. He spoke to several thousand NAMI conventioners that he had found cost effective methods that reduced the strain of people going through the court system. His innovative and commonsense methods of redistributing monies will bring widespread improvement to the treatment of people with mental illness in the criminal justice system. His methods can and are being implemented in other states.

Under the umbrella of one MEDIA AWARDS category, there were 5 outstanding media awards given out to various organizations. So many times the media will release news of a tragic event and seem to put the whole blame on someone with a mental illness.

These awards were NAMI's way of honoring editors, reporters, and writers who "got it right" in covering mental illness and related issues in 2007. With each award the news story was played for everyone to show how it *should* be done. The audience could see that reporting newstories that involved the MI can be done with *accuracy, balance, and compassion*.

The third award that I thought was most deserved was NAMI's *Rona & Ken*

Purdy Award presented to Jane Pauley, the TV journalist and author of ***Skywriting: My Life in Blue***

Like Judge Liefman who spoke for about 45 minutes, Jane Pauley also spoke during the last night's Convention's closing Banquet. It's always good to have a celebrity on your team. Patty Duke helped diminish stigma and raise awareness a few decades ago. Ms Pauley expressed gratitude for all of those in the trenches fighting the battle. She was extremely excited about the many scientific advances giving more hope for recovery, early diagnosis, and streamlined treatment. She said that it was like she had a telescope and could see in the future what was coming. Science is proving once again to be able to solve man's problems and to make life more worth living.

Thank you EV NAMI for allowing me to attend the 2008 convention.