

# Breaking Through Stigma



*Jumping Off Bridges is definitely not a glossy teen comedy.*

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Robert N. Davison, executive director of Essex County's Mental Health Association, took on the role of MC on March 5th at Bergen Community College's Ciccone Theater. This was a very special evening coordinated by our college's Wellness Center and the Care Plus Foundation. Students, local townspeople, executives, and administrators massed to our theater in order to watch a screening of the award-winning film, *Jumping off Bridges*.

Davison made the event's intentions clear,

"The recovery rate from mental illness is better than physical illnesses such as hypertension, and cancer, but less than half of those suffering seek help...Stigma is the number one barrier to treatment".

The narrative film, written and directed by Kat Candler tackles the stigma involved with mental illness and depression. Centered around four high school friends, it documents their struggle

to deal with the ill. The primary character, Zak, falls into a deep depression after he discovers his mother, Charlotte, dead in the family's garage. Having lost a daughter the mother is depicted throughout the film until her suicide, struggling with post traumatic stress disorder. Her family does not know how to deal with her, and she grows increasingly isolated from the world around her. She stops going to work and seeing friends. Her son mirrors this behavior after her suicide, he stops going to school and starts to care less about his possessions and past interests. His friends, unable to understand grow increasingly distant because of his behavior.

The above mentioned behaviors are serious warning signs. Diane, an audience member and Clinical Coordinator for the children's program of Essex County, outlined the warning signs of suicide: disinterest, isolation, failure to complete daily requirements such as work, chores, and even a sudden burst of happiness can all be warnings.

The event emphasized on, "decreasing

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## Stigma

the stigma of mental illness, recognizing signs, and speaking about it." A person commits suicide every 16 minutes in the United States, which makes this message so important. After showing the affects of such through a film, the stage was given to a panel of speakers comprised of the director, two students, and two faculty members, each of which provided true life examples of how mental illness has affected them.

The first story was told by Vincent, a current student who lost a loved one to mental illness. He explained how in 2003 he carried on a one year relationship with his boyfriend who was Bipolar and Schizophrenic. One night after a long day of work Vincent had a short phone conversation with his

partner. His partner asked;

"Vinny, will you always love me?"

The morning after Vincent was given the news that his lover had committed suicide. Distraught, Vincent fell into a deep depression of his own. Due to a six month malaise that confined him to bed Vincent had lost this job and isolated himself from all responsibilities. It reached a breaking point when his father decided to take action and make his son seek help.

Since that time Vincent has done much to improve his life. He is working again and applying himself to his studies. In addition he has become an advocate and speaker for aiding those suffering from mental illness. He has spoken at Hofstra, N.Y.U., and

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other institutions telling his story.

Vincent was just one of the speakers but each had their own poignant story of loss or illness. The honesty of the speakers, both the group that presented on stage, and those in the audience, were touching and at times heart-wrenching. The event did much to bring awareness to the personal struggles those around us face on a daily basis, which we are more often then not oblivious to. It is easy to think you are alone, or that people live charmed lives, in passing, sharing a bus seat, or standing in line, but all people have their own obstacles, and there are those who will understand. The school wellness center is a place students can go to find a place of understanding or volunteer to help those in need.

