HOPE AND HEALING

MAY IS NATIONAL MENTAL HEALTH AWARENESS MONTH, BUT ONE LOCAL RESOURCE IS FOCUSED ON FIGHTING THE STIGMA AND FINDING HOPE ALL YEAR LONG

WRITER PETE STEVENSON

One in four adults experiences some form of mental illness in a given year. One in 17 lives with a serious mental illness such as schizophrenia, major depression or bipolar disorder. The most reported reason that individuals do not seek treatment is the stigma surrounding mental illness.

Destination Hope Founder and CEO Ben Brafman has been fighting the stigma and trying to improve mental health outcomes for 22 years, starting out as a mental health tech and working his way up to become a program clinical director. “Once I was at the level of clinical director, besides seeing the medical side of mental health, I became more aware of the political and financial side. Having a better understanding of the entire mental health industry, I saw what was lacking for patients and the way patients were being treated,” explains Brafman.

In 2007 Brafman opened up Destination Hope – initially a 12-bed facility with only a men’s program that quickly grew over the years. Today, Destination Hope includes a women’s program, a Mature Adult Program, a wellness center, a training academy for addiction professionals, and the Sylvia Brafman Mental Health Center.

Matt’s story is one of the many patient successes written into the history of Destination Hope. Matt was diagnosed with a panic disorder in 2009. His life soon spiraled out of control with a drug addiction, run-ins with the law, and finally a drug-induced psychosis.

“I thought I was Jesus Christ. I had a full-blown disconnect from reality,” he says. “I was breaking into people’s homes, warning them that the world was coming to an end.” Soon after, Matt woke up in a hospital psych ward, battling renal failure and looking at potential jail time. He was court ordered to Destination
Hope’s Sylvia Brafman Mental Health Center. Matt entered the Dual Diagnosis Program, which focuses on patients with both addiction and mental health issues.

“What I appreciated about Sylvia Brafman Center was that in addition to my drug addiction, they dug deeper to my underlying mental health issues. I was actually diagnosed with a form of PTSD,” Matt says. He has been drug-free going on three years and has his mental health issues under control. He attributes some of his ongoing success to the “Family Nights” at the center, which is when former clients come back to the center to meet and show support for current patients. Today, Matt owns a promotional marketing company that produces promotional products and he has a unique niche, as most of his customers are treatment centers, detox clinics, and mental health centers.

Not everyone is as fortunate as Matt to find the right treatment program. Brafman identified some of the biggest obstacles to treatment for patients: “There are several difficulties finding a good treatment center with professionals well trained in mental illness. First, a patient needs to find out about the providers’ education, license, and area of expertise. Also, you want to find out if the provider has a good working knowledge of the current medications used. There are a ton of resources in Broward County but it almost feels as if it is a secret.

Providers need to do a better job to direct people to the services we have.”

Local services include Mental Health Association of Southeast Florida (www.mhasefl.org), Henderson Behavioral Health (www.hendersonbh.org), and Destination Hope (www.destinationhope.com).

Guardian Behavioral Health Foundation is the nonprofit arm of Destination Hope. The Foundation raises awareness, fights stigma, and helps to provide funds and services.

Reducing the stigma of mental health may be as simple as encouraging people to have a conversation. Whether it’s with a former patient, a family member or a friend, conversation helps to break down barriers and share a burden, something too many people carry alone.

GET INVOLVED

2nd Annual Mental Health Awareness Month Party for a Purpose
May 19
Chima Brazilian Steakhouse
www.guardianbehavioral.org