

On February 22, 2014, the Schizophrenia Society of Ontario (SSO) will bring together a community of like-minded people to promote **Peace of Minds**. Our goal is to draw energy and power to the healing component of yoga in the balance of mental health and physical wellness.

This annual fundraising event is led by leading yoga instructors offering various yoga styles at all skills levels. The event is designed to showcase the proven benefits of the practice to a wide audience of Ontarians of all ages and levels, and raise funds for much needed support.

Our goal for 2014 is to raise \$55,000. Monies raised through the 2014 Peace of Minds Yogathon will support the mission of Schizophrenia Society of Ontario and those living with schizophrenia and psychosis. If you are interested in raising money for SSO, participating in the Yogathon or volunteering, please visit our website or email fundraising@schizophrenia.on.ca

2014 DATES TO REMEMBER

January 22, 2014 — SOUND OFF media launch

February 22, 2014 — 9th Annual Peace of Minds Yogathon

**March 18, 2014 — Meeting of the Minds Educational Forum for Spanish Community
Time: 7-9pm**

May 18-23 — Mental Health Awareness Week

May 24 — National Schizophrenia and Psychosis Awareness Day

**May 24 — Peace of Minds Walk
Locations: Hamilton, Oakville, Guelph, Toronto, Peterborough, Renfrew, Thunder Bay**

**June 26 — Hole Out For Hope
Visit holeoutforhope.com for more info**

For more information on events and dates, please visit schizophrenia.on.ca or call us at 1 (800) 449-6367



LIFT SCHOLARSHIP EVENT

Consistently growing over the last 10 years, the 2013 scholarship program committee was able to award 23 students with almost \$25,000. This is the largest distribution in the program's history.

On October 10, 2013, we held our annual fundraiser for the program. This amazing event was attended by

over 100 people raising over \$35,000. Thank you to all the spectacular performers, speakers, dedicated volunteers and generous sponsors at this year's LIFT event for contributing their time, talent, and hard work in support of our inspiring cause! Through your participation, financial support, and continued interest in SSO, we will be able to reach more families living with the challenges of mental illness. We are all here to help.

If you are interested in raising money for the Scholarship Program, or to consider applying for an award, please visit the scholarship page on our website at www.schizophrenia.on.ca



(l-r) Juana, scholarship recipient, Norm Taveski, SSO Board chair, and James Weber, volunteer.

A REASON TO HOPE

Winter 2014

MONA ABADI: A YOUNG MENTAL HEALTH CHAMPION MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Mona Abadi is passionate about putting mental health on everyone's radar. "I want everyone to understand that in the same way that we have physical health, we all have mental health," she says. "We all get stressed sometimes, we all get sad, we've all been there. That's one of the key things I want to get out there, that mental health is relevant to all of us, and we should all care about this issue."



Mona is part of a new generation of young mental health champions, and has made many valuable contributions to us as vice-chair of SSO's SOUND OFF program. SOUND OFF is a youth-led social initiative meant to get Ontario youth talking and mobilizing on mental health. Too often the voices of youth go unheard when it comes to their mental health concerns, but SOUND OFF is dedicated to breaking the silence and stigma around mental illness to ensure that young people get the supports they need.

"We need to increase our knowledge about mental health. That increased knowledge will lead to reduced stigma, so that people who were suffering before, will feel better about getting treatment, and will also feel like they're better supported in the wider community," she says.

Mona is currently studying psychology at the University of Toronto. She first came to SSO after hearing a presentation by Mary Alberti, SSO's CEO, on the work the organization does with those living with schizophrenia and psychosis. "I was really inspired by what I heard. And after the presentation was done I went up to Mary and told her I was going to volunteer." Mona started out on intake (providing basic counselling services to those who phone through Ask The Expert), and also helped the research department with data analysis. Much of this analysis was from focus groups used to develop SOUND OFF. As SOUND OFF started to become a more comprehensive program, Mona began presenting it at mental health conferences here in Toronto and also in England. **STORY CONTINUED ON PAGE 2**

SCHIZOPHRENIA: A PARENT'S PERSPECTIVE

David and Lesley Skelly are both active and community-minded people. They have raised their 3 children with the same values and empathy. Their home is nestled in among friends, who started out as neighbours. They have always been there to help any one at any time; with home cooked meals, a friendly cup of coffee, even car-pooling the kids for events or school. When their son, Kit, was diagnosed with schizophrenia, David and Lesley didn't understand what it meant. They were scared. They were confused. They felt helpless.

Naturally, Lesley turned to her friends for solace. "This is a really tight-knit community. We do things together and pride ourselves on being close. When a friend of ours had a heart attack, meals were brought to his house. Kit's in the hospital for two weeks. Nobody knocked. It's not an illness that people understand. People just shied away."

They knew they had to do something, but what? David made sure that he was healthy and capable of staying strong, not only for Kit, but also for Lesley and their other two children. He got a therapist of his own, he made more time to run (this became his respite) and he became a tireless advocate for his son and his illness. Lesley did what any mother would do. She fought for her son. She became an information sponge. She tapped into the health care system, and made sure Kit got whatever he needed. Frustration and anger kept her going. Anyone that would listen, got to hear about her son and about schizophrenia. She squashed myths, she injected facts, encouraged hope, and in her own way she became a voice for psychosis.

"For me, it was better to be vocal than to hold it in," Lesley says. **STORY CONTINUED ON PAGE 3**





"Mona" CONT... Mona thoroughly enjoyed the International Conference on Youth Mental Health in Brighton, UK and found it to be both an inspiring and eye-opening experience.

"It was very fascinating to see what was being done around the globe in terms of youth mental health. There were some programs that were really successful. They really managed to get themselves out there, to establish themselves as the go-to place for youth mental health," she said. "I was able to take the lessons I learned and incorporate them into SOUND OFF."

SOUND OFF itself is unique because it's not only collecting the perspectives of youth on mental health in their communities, but encouraging them to take action. This includes becoming involved in SOUND OFF, becoming a part of SSO's Street Teams, and hosting their own awareness-raising events. The perspectives collected from SOUND OFF will also become the foundation for a youth-oriented vision of mental health in Ontario.

"I've had a great experiencing volunteering for SSO and working on SOUND OFF. Many young people feel like they'll never be heard, and that even though there's a lot they want to achieve, they may feel like it's never going to happen," she says. "I think SSO and SOUND OFF are giving people my age the tools they need to go out there and actually make changes."

To donate, learn more about SOUND OFF or volunteer, visit schizophrenia.on.ca

MICHAEL ALZAMORA: VOLUNTEER, ARTIST, RUNNER

Michael Alzamora is an artist, writer, marathon runner, and one of the SSO's most dedicated volunteers. He also lives with schizophrenia. Michael runs and paints not only for the sense of accomplishment these activities give him, but also for the sense of freedom.

"When I paint I'm free; I'm not handicapped when I paint nor when I'm writing. When I'm writing I'm happy. I feel elated when I run, and I feel elated when I paint," Michael says.

As an artist, Michael has developed his own personal style based on painters he admires, such as Keith Haring, Pablo Picasso, Norval Morriseau and Lisa Birke. He uses his paintings as a way of communicating his experiences with schizophrenia. He refers to his style as "flat surrealism" as his paintings "are composed of objects as symbols, juxtaposing each other on one plane to create a true meaning." Michael often uses several familiar images throughout his paintings, creating whole motifs. One of these motifs is called "smoking fish" which features fish with cigarettes in numerous colourful and surreal environments, and are meant to symbolize the experience of the mind being trapped by schizophrenia.

Michael began his journey as a runner when he went to a doctor's appointment and was given some troubling news about his health. "I was told by my doctor that the triglyceride levels in my blood were high. Triglycerides carry fat in the blood. However, I was told if I changed my diet, my blood levels would become stable," he says.

He was determined not only to change his diet, but also exercise, and took up the challenge of becoming a marathon runner. Michael runs with Achilles Canada, which normally serves those living with visible differences, but they took him on as someone living with schizophrenia. He has run several half-marathons and full marathons, and writes about his experiences with running on his website.

He recently participated in the Scotiabank Toronto Waterfront Marathon. Sadly, Michael's mother, Alicia, passed away before he ran the marathon. In a moving tribute on his website, Michael talked about the run as being both a healing exercise and a way to honour his mother's memory.

Reflecting on being involved with organizations like SSO and Achilles Canada, Michael says that what they have in common is ensuring "integration into society because it involves the skills of responsibility, setting goals for yourself, pursuing them, and achieving them." SSO is grateful to have Michael as a volunteer, supporter, and friend.

Visit Michael's website at www3.sympatico.ca/michael.alzamora. Call 1 (800) 449-6367 to volunteer.



BRINGING TOGETHER A MEETING OF THE MINDS



Meeting of the Minds has been one of SSO's most successful initiatives, and has ignited both new conversations and new approaches to mental health within Toronto's Hispanic community.

"It is having a ripple effect. In other organizations, they are doing something, they are getting interested in supporting the Hispanic community," says Tatiana Wyse, an Early Intervention Family Worker at SSO and the one of the key staff members spearheading Meeting of the Minds

Meeting of the Minds is an annual educational event that provides information to the Hispanic community on mental health services that they connect to. It all began when Tatiana started searching for mental health services that were specifically serving the Hispanic community. Seeing that there wasn't much available, Tatiana began to see who would be interested in facilitating a discussion around the Spanish-speaking community and mental health. The Hispanic Development Council was receptive, and that started the whole journey of Meeting of the Minds.

"We all agreed that education and information was badly needed. So the next thing we were did was prepare an educational event," she says. "It became Meeting of the Minds because that's what we were doing: putting our heads together and coming up with ideas."

Although she initially had trouble securing a speaker for the first session in 2012, the lead psychiatrist in Humber River Regional Hospital's early intervention jumped right on board. CAMH also allowed them to have a space for free. The first event was a big success with 90 people attending. This year's event, held in December, had over 122. Everyone is already busily preparing for 2014's Meeting of the Minds session, which takes place on March 18.

"It is a good time for the Spanish community and mental health right now. When we started this adventure, there were not many people aware of schizophrenia or psychosis; not many would talk about it," Tatiana says. "People are not fearful anymore. They're talking about schizophrenia. They're talking about psychosis. And it's not in a negative way."

There are definitely still some gaps. The Hispanic community needs more case workers as well as more psychiatrists and registered nurses that speak Spanish. Furthermore, hospitals needs to start providing families with their own interpreters. However, Meeting of the Minds is definitely having an impact and bringing positive change not just to the Hispanic community, but to the rest of the province as well.

For more information on SSO's early intervention programs, please visit schizophrenia.on.ca

"Parents" CONT... Kit went through medication after medication. Treatment after treatment. Unlike so many others that are affected by psychosis, the treatments were not working for him. In March 2013, Kit took his own life. The illness was just too much to bear. David and Lesley were numb.

The family has pulled together to mourn their loss. There are bad days. And there are good days. They've focused their efforts on raising funds while raising awareness about schizophrenia.

"Fundraising was just a natural. I'm a runner, and I wanted to do something. My running friends were so supportive of that. They said: "Why not do something for Kit?" David was able to corral friends into running in the Chicago Marathon this year. They ran as "Kit's Krew," and raised \$12,000 in donations.

They also love to golf, and joined forces in a fundraising tournament that raised over \$50,000. They had no idea how incredibly generous their friends, and companies they work with, would be. David quietly adds, "We wanted to do something to give back to SSO, and other families. But we had no idea that our family - and Kit - was so important to so many people. That's been comforting and encouraging at the same time." David and Lesley both know that there are many families in Ontario who care for someone living with schizophrenia. They both share some words of advice based on their own experience. "Think about the person and what they're feeling. Gently encourage them to get their own therapy, to get help," David says. "Accept and embrace that new person that you have, and do not be afraid of them," Lesley explains. "You need to deal with the person and not the diagnoses."

For more information or to get help for your family, contact Ask The Expert at 1-(800)-449-6367 or asktheexpert@schizophrenia.on.ca

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