

Eric McKee: A Story of Inspiration

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Eric D. McKee, the new executive director of the National Alliance on Mental Illness of Hancock County, lives the mental health story he teaches others about.

McKee, 54, was diagnosed three decades ago with chronic clinical depression, an illness he later discovered to be highly resistant to all forms of treatment. Traditional therapy, medication and even electro-convulsive therapy – nothing has worked in the long run.

But McKee has made it through, with the help of Kathy, his wife of 33 years, his two grown children, other family and friends. He joined the NAMI Ohio Board of Directors in 2007 and recently was appointed executive director of the Hancock County NAMI affiliate in Findlay. In that role, he not only administers the program, but also uses lessons learned from his own experience to help others.

“I was first diagnosed in college, but I was misdiagnosed with school phobia,” McKee said. “They said I basically needed to go to another school, which I tried but it didn’t work.” He later developed panic attacks and agoraphobia, the fear of open spaces filled with people.

It was some time later that McKee found that his brain built up a tolerance to the cocktail of drugs doctors prescribed for him. While they sometimes worked

for a while, as long as six months, the medications eventually lost effectiveness and the depression returned.

McKee said he managed to earn a bachelor's degree over eight years, and held a number of jobs, including as a paralegal and running a bicycle shop. "I had a hard time holding down a job. I could never tell when depression was going to hit. Depression for me is situational and also chemical. The brain is overcome by negative thoughts."

McKee said he's enthused about his new job with NAMI because he can help others, and he knows those who work with him understand the struggle he continues to battle.

Instead of retreating into the darkness of his depression, McKee has chosen to speak out about it, providing a vibrant, real-life voice for mental illness in Hancock County. He's given more than two dozen speeches so far to school, business and community groups. He finds many people don't understand mental illness despite the fact it effects an estimated one in five people.

"We throw around depression like it's a common cold. People say, 'I've had depression before. Go out and talk a walk. Do your job. You'll get over it.' "

Of course, it isn't that easy.

"People come up to me after I speak and say they appreciate it. They tell me they have depression or their mom or someone in the family does. They say, 'It felt like you were talking to me. I don't have to be alone.' "

“If it gets to one person,” McKee said, “it makes everything worth it.”

McKee said his message to others is, “We are all responsible for each other. We need to move in a path of hope and strength and support. We need to talk. We need to eliminate stigma.”