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Canada

Journey through psychosis, healing & resilience

“It is a surreal experience to watch your child unravel before your very eyes and one that you are not likely to forget.” Shauna McKay-Burke 2012. In 2012, our family went on a journey both profound and horrifying. Our firstborn, Olivia, just 16, experienced a severe and persistent illness, that of psychosis. She was hospitalized on the very floor of which I work, for over 3 months. She was incredibly ill, and we had to watch. Psychosis is defined as a disturbance in reality. Olivia heard voices, or perceptual disturbances as we call them, and they were at her continually, she had no reprieve. It was torture for all of us, but especially for her. Our family very nearly came apart at the seams. I was caught in the cross fire of knowing too much about mental illness and its ramifications, armed only with the love for our daughter. She was absolutely tortured. To make matters worse my husband couldn't comprehend how his little girl could become so quickly debilitated and fragmented, and my other children were too young and too scared to understand what was happening to their sister. In my mind, I was alone, at sea. I had to carry everyone and pray that Olivia would come through this. My child, my marriage and even my career hung in the balance. Close friends and family all had their opinions, and not all was favorable. Olivia was so incredibly ill. We tried over 10 antipsychotics, 5 full med trials, nothing was working, and when I say nothing, I mean nothing. It was hands down the darkest time of my life... this is our journey. Olivia missed 5 months of school, the honor student went to summer school. Most days I could barely rouse her. She slept 17 hours a day from med sedation. I watched in horror, as dreams we all shared for her, now so far away. In the darkest corners of my mind, I told myself at least my child was still alive. I secretly wondered if she would ever recoup. We honestly went to hell and back as a family. To make matters worse, I grew up in a profoundly mentally ill family tree. My grandfather had manic depression/bipolar disorder, and as a young girl I cared for him, but stigma surrounded our family like a cocoon. No one in my family talked about such things. In the bleakest moments of Olivia's illness I realized the fear of mental illness is nothing more than fear itself. If I wanted to get my daughter well, I had to be real and transparent about her illness and speak from the heart. Hiding behind the veil of stigma serves no one, least of all those most afflicted. I'm told that RESILIENCE is defined as an individual's ability to adapt to stress and adversity. Well if that is so, then Olivia is the most resilient person I know. Not only did she graduate from high school, she did so with honors, and on time. She lives now in New Brunswick, and attends The College of Craft & Design, in her 2nd year of Fashion. At 14, she went to France to visit a former classmate; she loved Paris & all its fashion. Her dream is to become a fashion designer and somehow I think she will do just that. Olivia was a lifeguard & swim instructor before she became ill. 4 years ago I would not have dreamed it possible, but she works in both provinces once again in the pool! ' Olivia is the most resilient person that I know. She's spoken over the years on behalf of Mental Health initiatives for Youth. She always wants to give back. She does not fear stigma. Olivia knows firsthand that those with mental illness can recoup their lives with hard work & their resiliency and recover.

Biography

Shauna McKay-Burke is a LPN (Licenced Practical Nurse) with 12 years experience in psychiatry; adult, youth & forensics, as well she has worked in Geriatrics, Rehab, Perioperative, and VON nursing. A graduate of the Douglas College Psychiatric Mental Health Nursing Program. Her passions are Mental Health Nursing, Journalism & most of all her family!

Olivia Burke is a 20 year old Fashion Design Student at the NB College of Craft & Design. She is a former patient of 4 South Mental Health & Addictions Unit, IWK hospital, NS Canada. Her passions are Fashion Design and she dreams of visiting NYC's fashion hub and creating her own fashion line.