

## Mike Skinner: Striking a Chord

by Liesl Barrell

In the early nineties, Mike Skinner had it all. “I was happily married with my wife...my partner of 21 years. We had five great children. I had a nice home and a very successful business—I had the American Dream,” he says. “Then it all came crashing down...”

In 1993, Mike started having flashbacks of the physical and sexual abuse his parents inflicted on him as a child. Reliving these horrors left Mike coping with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression. Within two years he lost his business and his marriage collapsed. “I was hurt and I was angry,” Mike reveals. “But I wanted to channel it into something positive.” As he became involved in the community, Mike realized he was not alone.

“When I was going to drop-in centers, peer support groups, and hospitals, I learned that so many [people with mental illnesses] have a history of trauma or abuse and no-one was addressing it. They were getting lots of pills, but they weren’t getting much help.” In addition to coping with his diagnoses, Mike was surprised by the stigma and discrimination he now faced.

Despite his history as a professional drummer with ’70s hard rock band Train, and 15 years of running his own successful music management business, “when I said I wanted to go back into music, many mental health practitioners told me that I might volunteer in a library someday, [but] I would never work again.” For Mike, who had supported himself since childhood, the idea of losing his livelihood and his passion was doubly devastating.

### Finding his voice

Luckily, there were peers and professionals who supported Mike in his dreams to get back into music. “I can still see

the faces of those who treated me with kindness and compassion,” he says. A drummer all his life, their encouragement helped him pick up a guitar and start writing his own songs to perform.

Gradually, Mike spoke out against the stigma of mental illness and the lifelong trauma of abuse. “I [was] quoted in local newspapers and little cable TV shows,” he remembers. Word of mouth spread and, “next thing I know, people started asking me to talk at conferences.”

After several events, the feedback he received from audience members encouraged Mike to incorporate songs from his three albums into his presentations.

Today, the 55-year-old Manchester, New Hampshire resident makes his living traveling the country as a speaker, performer, and advocate. Mike attends between 16 and 24 conferences a year, but he’s careful to pace himself.

“It’s very emotionally draining,” he

says, “even though it’s work I enjoy doing. It’s one thing to say, ‘I’ve lost two brothers to suicide,’ but when I perform the song ‘Black Rain,’ which is about those dark times, it really hits home.”

In sharing some of these losses, Mike is able to show his audience that hope and determination can win in the end. “There is light at the end of the tunnel,” he says, “and I truly believe that, even when I have dark days I can still somehow say, ‘It’ll be better tomorrow.’”

Mike hopes his perseverance will help him with his next great task: Working on an autobiography. “I’m finally tack-



*“I can still see the faces of those who treated me with kindness and compassion.”*

**“WALK WITH ME” (EXCERPT)  
FROM THE ALBUM**

**TRAIN OF TEARS — By Mike Skinner**  
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I'm not impressed with your titles and degrees  
Compassion and understanding do more for me  
Can you show me, show me your humanity  
Instead of talking down to me  
Can you sit with me, can we talk awhile  
And then I know you could see me smile

ling the fears that have kept me from writing about my life,” he says. “It’s the comments that fuel me. People say, ‘you need to keep doing this.’ And that’s huge for me.”

Mike’s journey of triumph over tragedy inspires his audience members. Tim Blake saw Mike speak in November, 2008 at a peer-support conference in Salisbury, North Carolina and says, “It was spellbinding.” He adds, “Everybody got caught in the moment; it was like we were in a trance.” Later, Tim read the lyrics from Mike’s song “Walk with Me” to his support group. “You could hear a pin drop,” he recalls. “And when I was done, someone said, ‘Wow, could you read that again?’ So I did.” Tim has since started writing songs of his own.

Betty Dahlquist, the executive director of the California Association of Social Rehabilitation Agencies (CASRA) was also moved by Mike’s story, and invited him to be their fall 2008 keynote presenter in Los Angeles. The crowd gave Mike a standing ovation. “He created a place where it was not only safe for people to hear his story,” Betty says, “but for others to find a way to say, ‘that’s me too.’ That’s a magical thing.” She pauses. “And he’s a magical guy.” Betty looks forward to welcoming Mike to speak again in 2010.

Mike often contributes to Kim Cavanagh’s mental health newsletter, *The Pearl*, in which Kim publishes many of her own articles and poetry. A domestic violence and rape crisis advocate in Lowville, New York, Kim is both a trauma survivor and consumer. “My favorite song on his latest album, *Waitin’ for a Train*, is “Joy.” When he sings, ‘There’s joy in knowing that you’re still around.’ I think about other survivors in my life and it’s a big thing to know they’re still here, because we lose so many people to depression and suicide.”

**Reconnecting**

As someone who has made such powerful connections with others, perhaps the most heart-wrenching time for Mike was when he was alienated from his daughters in the wake of his breakdown and the turmoil of divorce. “It’s unfortunate,” he reflects, “and it should never have happened. You don’t get those years back.” Thankfully, time has healed many of those wounds and Mike is back in contact with his older children.

In 2003, his eldest daughter, Alisa, called him for the first time in years to share her joy at becoming a mother. Since then, Mike has become an important part of their lives and he visits at least twice a year. “My daughter, Allison, had to write a book in kindergarten of different things she likes,” says Alisa, “and she drew a picture of her Grandpa Mike... They both light up when they see each other!” Now when Mike is on the road, he sends Allison postcards, keeping alive a tradition he started when his own daughters were young and he was touring with his band.

Fortunately, Mike has renewed his career as a musician, and his advocacy has brought him a new purpose. “I do feel I can help create a change in my little neighborhood,” he says. “If I can reach one person, it does help me feel better at the end of the night.” ⤴

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*“I can help create a change in my little neighborhood.”*

**MIKE’S WELLNESS TIPS:**  
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**Get out there and exercise**

“For many years I would just go off into nature and, fortunately, behind where I live, there’s a beautiful brook. I spend time in the woods and get out when I can. If I’m not walking, I start to feel toxic inside. So exercise is really important for me.”

**Take a mental health break**

“I have a lot of friends who also deal with mental health issues and sometimes when we get together we say, ‘we’re not going to talk about our depression, let’s just have a day or an hour of fun.’”

