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PROMOTING HOPE THROUGH EDUCATION

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Changing the Stigma of Mental Illness

by Michael Skinner

Michael Skinner has addressed the National Press Club in Washington, D.C. on issues involving child exploitation. A portion of the sale of Pirates, a cd album, will be donated to help organizations that address trauma, abuse, and mental health concerns including SASS (Sexual Assault Support Services; Portsmouth, NH) and The Healing Arts Studio, Boston, MA. The guitarist has performed at Manchester's Veteran's Park as part of NAMI Walks, an 11 state nationally co-ordinated walkathon fundraiser for the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill. Skinner was invited by the Million Dads March to perform "Dear Child," a song from Pirates, at the gathering in Washington, D.C.

I am a musician, presenter, advocate, and educator for the issues of mental health, trauma, and abuse. Through this article, I hope to convey my views on this subject so you will have a better understanding of why someone who was content to be only a professional musician also took on the role of advocate and public speaker to educate the general public as well as healthcare providers.

Some major disruptions in my life back in 1993 brought about a huge change for me. I was born in Boston, Massachusetts and lived in Boston, Cambridge and Billerica, Mass. I was the oldest of five children who suffered severe sexual, physical and emotional abuse at the hands of my parents and their perverted friends. For most of my life I kept contained the horrors of my youth. But in 1992 I experienced the beginnings of PTSD (post traumatic stress disorder) and depression set in.

At that time, I was happily married with five children and the proud owner of a very successful business that was involved in music. Life was good, my wife and children were the greatest gifts I could have ever asked for. To own and operate a business that brought us a good lifestyle was more than I ever imagined possible. But it all came to a crashing end in 1993.

The trauma I had experienced as a child came back to haunt me in ways I never felt were possible. The flashbacks, the

depression, the numbness, and the dissociated states I was constantly in brought about profound changes in my life and my family's life. Unable to work, I lost my business, which only helped to fuel and prolong my depression. The first two years were rough on my family as they saw their father and husband go in and out of hospitals, respite service, day treatment programs, and the isolation of containing myself to my bedroom.

It is the treatment I suffered during treatment programs and hospital visits and from reactions and inaction from childhood

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friends that helped perpetuate an already uncomfortable situation. I came to learn first hand the stigma and discrimination attached to the diagnosis "mentally ill." Those two words have negatively affected my life. The mere mention of being "mentally ill" in the court system deprives you of any rights that you once thought you possessed as a citizen of this country. The loss of friends, my subsequent divorce, and alienation of my children resonate deep within my soul.

The mistreatment and the condescending and patronizing manners from supposedly helpful healthcare professionals reinforced my already negative self-image. I have always asked, why did no one help my siblings and me when we were younger? Now I ask, why do professionals who receive degrees and training to help others take out their own unresolved issues on people who are in their most vulnerable state? It is next to impossible to convey the hurt I and so many others have received

from members of the medical community.

This has to end. This patronizing needs to be replaced with compassion, understanding, and the bestowing of dignity upon others. I know how important it has been for me to find medical practitioners who treated me with kindness, humanity, and respect. Positive treatment has gone such a long way to help me through recovery.

This is why I chose to become an advocate for those who can't speak for themselves. It is not the path I originally chose, but it must be done. Through my music, my public speaking, my writings, and advocacy efforts with other like-minded organizations, I hope to help bring an end to the stigma and discrimination practiced upon those labeled mentally ill. We can do this through education and by listening to those who are hurting. Listen, really listen, to their stories and realize that they are unique individuals who have suffered. You will come to marvel at and respect the individual in front of you – an unsung hero of life.

I hope to convey how important it is for all of us to educate ourselves about mental health and try to understand what it means to be labeled mentally ill and the severe, lifetime consequences people suffer and endure who have known sexual, physical, and emotional abuse. With that understanding, we not only help them, but we help ourselves as well. And that is a good thing.

To help in this mission, in February 2002, I established a Website devoted to these issues – www.mskinnermusic.com. It has become a great resource for not only music and the arts for healing, but for links to help in the understanding of mental illness, abuse, and trauma. Please visit and feel free to contact me on your thoughts, comments, and concerns at mikeskinner@comcast.net or 141 English Village Rd. #11, Manchester, NH 03102. To date more than 47,000 people have accessed the site and made use for the music, links and resources therein. □