

“A Leap of Faith” for a Family in Turmoil...

Leads to Help and Support for a Family in Crisis

Throughout their son Brendan's life, the Mahoney-Youngs have faced a number of challenges. With a diagnosis of autism at the age of four, Brendan's developmental disability forced his family to make significant adjustments to accommodate his special needs and the different way in which he experienced the world.

But the difficulty they faced one year ago was clearly the toughest. In the early weeks of 2009, 18-year-old Brendan was growing increasingly agitated. He had difficulty getting back into a familiar routine after the holidays, had become extremely anxious, and was aggressively acting out. Brendan was also refusing to ride the school bus or attend school, two things he had always enjoyed.

“We knew something was wrong,” said his mother, Betsy Mahoney. As time went on, Brendan's parents were feeling desperate and didn't know where to turn.

When they heard about the Developmental Disorders Unit at Spring Harbor Hospital, the Mahoney-Youngs visited the program. When they were told the average length of stay on the unit was 65 to 75 days, they were apprehensive about leaving their son for such a considerable length of time.

“It took a leap of faith to give it a try,” Betsy stated. “The first few days were extremely hard for Brendan - and for us. He was very agitated and it was traumatic to see him there.”

Betsy is quick to credit members of Brendan's treatment team, who helped make the adjustment as easy as possible for the family. “The staff explained it would be a slow process. They started Brendan on new medications very slowly, and we gradually began to witness a change.”

One staff member, Frank Pennisi, developed a special relationship with Brendan through music. A Behavioral Technician, Frank had organized a Starshine Band on the unit, encouraging patients to sing, dance, or play a musical instrument.

“Brendan loves music and he adored Frank,” Betsy

stated. “Their relationship was transformative for Brendan. It had a very calming effect.”

Another member of Brendan's treatment team was Linda “Lindy” Cluff, a teacher who works with Spring Harbor Academy, a private, special-purpose school within the hospital that serves children on the Developmental Disorders Unit.

“From day one, Lindy reassured us that everything was going to be OK,” Betsy said. “We learned to trust and appreciate her very quickly. We were broken when we came in. She was great at shoring us up.”

During the final weeks of Brendan's stay in the hospital, Lindy helped him and his family prepare for the transition back home. Upon Brendan's discharge from the hospital, Lindy helped everyone build a routine and worked with school staff to address Brendan's needs.

One year later, Brendan still experiences some ups and downs and continues to see Dr. Matthew Siegel, a psychiatrist and Medical Director of the Developmental Disorders Program. “Brendan has really benefited from the continuity of care,” Betsy stated. “Dr. Siegel got to know Brendan and speaks to him directly and calmly. It's the personal touch that Dr. Siegel and all the staff at Spring Harbor Hospital give that has made all the difference.”

A Gift of Gratitude

In appreciation of the care Brendan received, the Mahoney-Young family recently made a generous donation to Spring Harbor Hospital. They particularly wanted to honor Lindy Cluff and Frank Pennisi for their care.

“Both Frank and Lindy are exceptional employees who played a big role in Brendan's recovery,” Betsy asserted. “Frank continues to comfort Brendan thanks to the Starshine Band CD he gave him. Brendan listens to Frank and the band almost every morning before he goes to school.”

Brendan's love of music, and his key relationships with caregivers at Spring Harbor Hospital, were strengths that contributed to his recovery.



Out of the Darkness, Into the Light

When Jim lost his job and his marriage fell apart, he couldn't imagine things getting any worse, but they did. The 50-year-old had a major heart attack last fall and soon found himself in the throes of mental illness. "I could feel the depression settling in when I got out of the hospital in August," Jim recalled. "I just closed the blinds and shut myself in. I didn't have the capacity to stop it."

Having never experienced depression before, Jim researched the illness online and explored treatment options in the greater Portland area. Still, he felt powerless and retreated inward even further. He began contemplating suicide. "I was literally at my wit's end," Jim said. "I just wanted to put an end to it all."

Jim began planning his death, even purchasing rope to hang himself. Fortunately, before carrying out his plan, he called a friend and told him how badly he was feeling. The friend, a substance abuse counselor, immediately arranged for Jim to be hospitalized.

Jim spent the following month at Spring Harbor Hospital, where he received intensive psychiatric treatment. As he gradually regained the energy to start a daily exercise routine, he began to feel more like his old self. When he left the hospital in mid-December, Jim said he was "a completely different person" from when he had been admitted.

With the expertise and support of trained professionals, Jim began to live a normal life again. "These folks really care, and they are super at what they do," Jim said. "They were there for me every step of the way."

Today, Jim is back to work. His home is no longer darkened – the blinds are wide open, the sunlight is pouring in. "Depression is a killer, but I was one of the lucky ones. I feel like a phoenix that has risen from the ashes."

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Jim found the strength to make a life-changing call for help.

