

# Our Experience with EASA

**M**y son recently told me that one night while he was trying to sleep, he was thinking how unique he was to have schizophrenia. The National Institute for Mental Health (NIMH) states that 1% of the population of the United States has the disease.<sup>1</sup> My son is right, he is unique, kind, funny, intelligent, musically gifted, and a generous person who happens to have schizophrenia. He has two parents, three older sisters, grandparents, and extended family who love him. The world is a better place because my son is in it. That is what those statistics represent, but seem to hide. While all of these young people are uniquely affected by their illness, for the most part, they all want what everyone universally wants: to be loved and understood by their friends and family; to have meaningful, fulfilling work; and to contribute to the greater good of society. In other words, to seek out and achieve what makes them healthy and happy.

Our son was hospitalized for the first time in January of 2012 for a psychotic episode. There would be many more hospital stays and a few months in jail in the following years. As parents, you try to keep your children safe from all the known dangers you can. No one prepares you for keeping your kid safe from the dangers of his own mind.

To say we were completely unprepared for our son's onset of schizophrenia is a huge understatement. That first full-blown psychosis had us searching the phone book looking for emergency numbers in the wee hours of the morning. We watched helpless as our boy ran around saying he could flip cars over with his mind and fight off aliens coming to get us. We also had to keep



redirecting him away from the knives in the kitchen because he wanted to cut out an evil third eye he insisted he had. No amount of reasoning changed the situation. When I finally called the local free psychiatric clinic listed in the phone book, the person on the other end of the phone said we could bring him in for a free evaluation, if he would come willingly. Then he said the famous words repeated to us many times in the coming years, "If he becomes a danger to himself or others, call 911." What a ludicrous statement, I remember thinking at the time; I am not going to call the police on my sweet son. However, a few hours later, that is exactly what I was doing. We would have to call the police many times, each time heartbreaking, but we could not control the situation on our own.

During that first hospitalization, one of the nurses in the psychiatric center told us about a workshop that Early Assessment and Support Alliance (EASA) was hosting that very weekend. We were desperate for help, and could not wait to get there. We sat at a table with another couple who had a son in the hospital with ours. Right away, we had a connection with others who were in the same horror we were, and desperate for help, direction, and most of all, hope. The psychiatrist at the workshop spoke about mental illness and the brain and described the services EASA offered. A mother spoke about her son and his experiences with psychosis and the help received from EASA. Her son's story had a nice ending, so we were extremely optimistic.



Our son's journey was not to be so easy. He willingly took his medication while it was court-mandated, but refused it as soon as he was no longer on probation. The months became a year of sleepless nights of worry, with him sometimes home, sometimes walking the streets all night or sleeping in a park under a tree. During all this stress and dysfunction EASA staff was always there for our son and for us, trying to connect with our son and assist us in trying to cope with what was happening. When our son was in jail, his EASA caseworker was the first person allowed to see him. This was his turning point; he told her everything and asked for help. We attended Multi-family Group at EASA. Family group is just that, a group for the client, family, and friends of the EASA client that meets twice a month. Family group is designed to help people help themselves by helping others. You talk out your issues and problems from the last two weeks and give each other ideas on what might help. This core of parents, who, like us, needed to feel accepted by others going through the same experiences, became our lifeline. Here, there was no judgment. Here was compassion, understanding, support, and comradery within the hell our lives had become. These lovely parents, and EASA staff leading the group, taught us something about ourselves we did not know: we could endure; we could survive; we could even laugh with each other in the midst of it all. The families came from all walks-of-life, all income levels, with different belief systems, to learn how to help our loved ones, even when they didn't want help. Even now, with our son's time finished in the program, we stay connected to EASA, continuing to go to Multi-family Group and speaking at workshops.

Young people going through the EASA program are enrolled for two years, sometimes with additional vocational support after that time. In those two years, clients have access to caring staff who provide therapy, medication management, help looking for employment, and a website full of great learning material.<sup>2</sup>

Clients can also attend conferences to hear from peers and learn about advances in healing and help for those dealing with a mental illness. The approach to helping those who come through the program's doors is one of compassion and education that works with the individual client, never losing sight of the dignity each of them needs to feel worthwhile and valued. In addition, the entire family can participate in EASA Multi-family Group. The help from the EASA staff is unparalleled. Once a client graduates from the program, there are services available at the local county level, but moving from the individual care of EASA to a one-size-fits-all approach with the local county program can be tough.

Our son has had some difficult hurdles to climb over since his illness manifested itself. Today he is doing well, taking a medication that is working for him, and living in a semi-staffed home the county operates. He and a friend plan to move into an apartment together in the near future. Independence is a viable goal. He still attends Multi-family Group on occasion and speaks at the EASA workshops telling his story, encouraging others that they too can get through this difficult journey, and come out the other side a better, stronger individual. EASA is definitely leading the way to give young people like our son, and their families, hope that their lives can be just as rich and rewarding as anyone's.

## REFERENCES

1. National Institute of Mental Health. (n. d.). *Schizophrenia*. Retrieved from: <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/prevalence/schizophrenia.shtml>
2. Early Assessment and Support Alliance. (2016). [website]. Retrieved from: <http://www.easacommunity.org>

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