



New Wellington Group Aims To Raise Awareness About Mental Illness

Story by Anne Checkosky ■ Photo by Alana Harris

It isn't always easy to tell if a loved one is struggling with mental health issues. And even once depression or anxiety is identified, if you can't find the resources to help your loved one, the consequences can be devastating. Just ask Wellington resident and Ultima Fitness owner Jill Merrell. Last year, her husband, John, committed suicide. "We couldn't find the proper resources soon enough to help him," she said.

Hoping to prevent other families from going through that tragedy, Merrell and her children, Justin, 32, and Jessica, 28, formed the Merrell Family Foundation. Its aim is to raise awareness, spread the message that mental illness is a "real" illness, open a

dialogue and be a community resource.

"We want to help identify and create a resource that is aggregating all of the resources," Jessica Merrell explained.

Last October, the Merrell family, along with a group including members of the mental health field, other individuals affected by the disease, as well as therapists and an attorney, held a focus group to study the issue. They were so encouraged by the support they got for what they wanted to do, they created the foundation.

The family has filed the paperwork and is awaiting nonprofit status, a process that has taken longer than they anticipated — but the delay hasn't

stopped them from making progress gathering information on mental health needs and resources in the community, Merrell said.

"Our ultimate goal is to help the community," said Justin Merrell, owner of the marketing company SoVi Digital, based in West Palm Beach.

He hopes to be able to help brand the foundation using his team at the firm and the resources at his disposal. "Who knows how far we can take this?" he said.

Also bringing national attention to mental health locally, the Mental Health Association of Palm Beach County was recognized June 7 with ►

(Above) Libby Snyder, Veronica Merrell holding Fisher John Merrell, Justin Merrell, Jessica Merrell holding Sophia Isabella Merrell and Jill Merrell.

an award from Mental Health America at its annual conference in Alexandria, Va., for its Be Merge Primary and Behavioral Health Initiative.

Developed by MHA CEO Pam Gionfriddo and her husband, Paul, Be Merge aims to train first responders — primary care physicians, nurses and


nurse practitioners, among others — on how to spot signs of mental illness in their patients during routine exams.

'Over the past year there have been a number of high-profile tragedies that, while terribly unfortunate, have started to open the door to conversation and hopefully legislation addressing mental illness,' Jill Merrell wrote in a May letter to Merrell Family Foundation supporters.

Most people don't go to a mental health expert if they are experiencing symptoms, they go to their primary physician, said Amy Dean, vice president of strategic programming and policy at the Palm Healthcare Foundation, which was the first foundation to fund Be Merge and has continued to support it. Since 2010, Palm Healthcare has given \$125,000 to the program. "It's valuable," Dean said.


And while it's important that healthcare providers be trained on how to identify signs of mental illness, it's not as complex as some might think, Gionfriddo said.

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Be Merge receive is a questionnaire that asks patients to rate their responses to a series of nine questions with “not at all,” “several days,” “more than half the day” and “nearly every day,” Gionfriddo said. The questions range from asking patients if they’ve been feeling down, had trouble falling asleep, were sleeping too much, were tired, or had poor appetites or were overeating. The healthcare provider can then make decisions based on the responses. It might just be a red flag, where a diagnosis would not be made at that time, but it could also lead them to ask more questions, Gionfriddo said.

The healthcare provider could then prescribe medications if necessary, or perhaps refer the patient to a mental health expert. So far, Be Merge has certified 75 healthcare providers, and

Gionfriddo is starting to get inquiries from several states as word gets out about the national award.

Locally, Gionfriddo makes presentations to medical groups, such as the county’s medical society, about Be Merge and is actively recruiting medical students and residents to get training. The training, sponsored by the University of South Florida in addition to the MHA, can be completed online and costs \$99.

In addition, the MHA has just started an infants and children component to Be Merge, which targets pediatricians and others who treat children.

After the Sandy Hook Elementary School massacre in Connecticut last December, it became clear there was a need for this type of program, Gionfriddo explained.

Jill Merrell agreed. “Over the past year there have been a number of high-profile tragedies that, while terribly unfortunate, have started to open the door to conversation and hopefully legislation addressing mental illness,” she wrote in a May letter to Merrell Family Foundation supporters.

She pointed to the great strides that breast cancer and autism have made due to the increased awareness of those disorders and hopes she can help raise awareness of mental illness to that level.

“Nobody else should have to suffer like that,” Merrell said.

For more information about the Mental Health Association of Palm Beach County, call (561) 832-3755 or visit www.mhapbc.org. □

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