

A Cry for Help

Carol Genengels

On May 3, 2002, I called our local mental health crisis line for help with our adult suicidal son, never dreaming what a nightmare it would lead to for our family. I spoke to a county-designated mental health professional (CDMHP) and explained that our son was hearing voices commanding him to drown himself. I explained how John had visited our waterfront home earlier to tell us goodbye. Before we could stop him, he ran outside and entered the bay. The shock of the frigid water caused him to retreat. Fear loomed in John's eyes as he stood dripping wet in our doorway. We begged John to let us take him to the hospital. Instead, he ran to his truck and drove away. A short time later my husband, Ted, drove to our son's apartment and called me to let me know that John was babbling incoherently. I assured him that help was on the way.

The CDMHP went to our son's home and determined that John was indeed psychotic and suicidal. The CDMHP then called the police to transport John to the hospital. Several squad cars surrounded John's apartment, attracting the attention of his neighbors. The police entered John's home and tried to cuff him. Alarmed and bewildered by the situation, John cried, "What did I do? What did I do?" as he fled to his bedroom. The police officer followed in hot pursuit. He then ordered Ted and the CDMHP to go outside. There was a scuffle before another officer used his stun gun on our son's heart and stomach and dragged him off in front of his neighbors.

Afterward, the first police officer

was resting on the front porch steps. Another officer asked him whether he was okay or needed to go to the hospital. He answered that he was not injured. Ted was horrified by the whole scene, yet concerned about the welfare of the officer. He also asked the officer whether he was okay. The officer assured Ted that he was not injured, just winded. He stated that although the situation must be very upsetting to the family, it was all in a day's work to him. He said that probably no charges would be filed because of John's mental state.

Our son spent the next three weeks detained in Kitsap Mental Health Residential Treatment Center before he was released.

By August John was beginning to heal and adjust to new medication. But he was unexpectedly arrested for the May 3 incident and charged with third-degree felony assault of a police officer. Because John had no prior criminal record, the judge released him on his own recognizance. He lived on his own without incident and appeared for his next hearing as scheduled. At this hearing the prosecuting attorney claimed, among other things, that John had a long history of assault, which was not true; was a danger to the community, because he badly injured two police officers, also not true; and was a flight risk. At the same time, he offered John a "deal" to plead guilty to the felony assault charge, and in exchange he would let him go for time served. The judge (a different judge from before) sent our son to jail without bail to await a competency evaluation at Western State Hospital. John spent a month in jail awaiting the evaluation. During that time he suffered terribly in an overcrowded area, sleeping on the drafty floor with 30 other inmates. He became chilled and was denied a sweater or extra blanket. He caught a

bad cold. My husband and I were allowed to visit the jail only once a week to speak to John briefly by telephone through a thick glass.

After two weeks in jail, John had a third hearing; he was led into the courtroom handcuffed and with an ankle chained to a group of other detainees. He was still waiting for a bed at Western State. After hearing the prosecutor's accusations, the judge (yet a different one from prior court appearances) ordered him to stay in jail. We begged that he be released to us, to no avail. John had no behavior problems in jail to warrant the extended order. He was withdrawn and depressed. John would call home crying and tormented by voices and the inability to sleep. One time he was convinced that he was having a heart attack. I called for medical help for him, but my call was ignored. I don't know who cried more—John or his parents.

During this time of anguish, my husband contacted various state political figures. Two responded, Representatives Kathy Haigh and Bill Eickmeyer. Representative Haigh and her assistant, Kim Moores, were very moved by our story and contacted many people to try to help us. But the sad fact is that once a person with mental illness is caught up in the criminal justice system, there is not much that can be done. Eventually Representative Haigh was instrumental in getting John released from jail and back to Kitsap Mental Health Residential Treatment Center. The unit director said that we could visit John that first evening. I barely recognized the wild-eyed, bearded, disheveled man as my son. By now he was severely ill, paranoid, and delusional. He thought his father and I were spirits masquerading as his parents. John received good care at Kitsap Mental Health, but he was so ill

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that he was convinced that the Rapture had taken place, that he was doomed to Hell forever, and that we were all gone.

He then spent two-and-a-half months at Western State Hospital taking competency classes before being returned to jail. In December the original judge released John to his grateful family to await the March 10 trial. John became severely suicidal and feared the trial. He then spent more time in psychiatric units in an effort to save his life. This delayed the trial date again.

The prosecutor would not budge on his stance and threatened to raise the charges to second-degree assault if John did not agree to take the plea bargain. John's attorney told him that second-degree assault could mean ten years in prison. He advised John to go ahead and plead guilty and be released for time served. "You can just get on with your life and all this stress will be behind you," the lawyer said. John just wanted it to all go away and agreed to plead guilty. He was given credit for time served and a

Update on John

Today John lives near us by the ocean, where we moved after retirement. John is no longer suicidal and is in recovery. He helped us found Gray's Harbor's first-ever chapter of the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI). It is growing rapidly. John is a NAMI-trained peer-to-peer counselor. He has ministered to many persons with mental illness in the community and prevented one man from committing suicide. Last summer the NAMI chapter partnered with Behavioral Health Resources to present crisis intervention training to the local police department. John was respectfully interviewed by police officers.

John is a gentle soul who cares for injured animals and really listens to those who confide in him. He now has a healthy perspective on his Christian faith; he runs support groups, paints watercolors, and exercises daily. John agreed to let me tell his story. He takes his meds faithfully and copes in the best way that he can. But the felony still hangs over his head.—*Carol Genengels*

year's probation. Even John's probation officer was disgusted by the way John had been treated. He recognized the severity of John's illness when he counseled him each week. He called him his "poster boy."

Because John is now a "felon," he's been denied housing and jobs. He

cannot continue his out-of-country missionary work fixing cars and translating. This country desperately needs mental health reform where the criminal justice system is concerned. We close mental health wards because of lack of funding and build bigger jails. It is a disgrace.