



THE STIGMA FREE ZONE NEWS OF NJ

Bringing the Mental Health Conversation to New Jersey

We report on an initiative of volunteers, nonprofits, schools, libraries, hospitals, First Responders, and houses of worship working independently or with local government to make NJ free from the stigma of mental illness. Anyone can form a local SFZ Task Force, no permission required. Just pledge to "do something about mental illness."



EFFECTIVELY SCHIZO IS ACTING OUT

By Cynthia Chazen

A group of 4 young, excited NJ residents have banded together to create a comedy troupe called "Effectively Schizo," delivering laughs and education about living with a mental illness in a crazy world. The team of comedy writers/producers are; Patrick Mellin, a NAMI Speaker from Bernardsville, Jaime Chaifetz, a video producer from Red Bank, Sam Hartman, a teacher in the Bronx but originally from Manasquan, and Danielle Zarcaro, a web designer from Eatontown. Patrick, 34, said, "We originally started our work together ... when someone at NAMI NJ thought we would make a good team. We all share some things in common, like living with a mental health condition, being passionate mental health advocates, and we also appreciate the value of quality humor and love to inspire people with our own stories."

Jaime, 31, a poet and an aspiring comedy writer, has based ES's content on her experiences after "coming out" publicly as a person with [schizoaffective disorder](#). After being diagnosed in her mid 20's, she felt strongly that she wanted people to feel more comfortable with mental illness, so she chose it as the topic of a video project she was working on. She recognized a dearth of artistic material about mental illness, and said, "It's hard to find good content on mental illness, most of it is drab and not the least bit motivating." When I asked her if being "out" was difficult, she said "After a point I said to myself, I don't feel like hiding this anymore." But she did add that while 99%

of the people she meets are supportive and positive in accepting her as she is ; "It's still an issue," but then added definitively, "If they don't like it, *that's just too bad.*" Truth!

Now, with the formation of the team, plus a cast of professional actors, director of the pilot and cinematographer Rob Ciano has the group poised to make their artistic mark on New York City, where they currently gather to create and rehearse. The writers are aiming to create a comedy series that destigmatizes mental health conditions. By portraying the daily struggles of a woman with schizoaffective disorder in a lighthearted and silly manner (without making fun of her), it shows the audience that life can still be enjoyed amidst the occasional not-so-normal things going on in the world.

Why comedy, I asked? "We've all seen [comedy about mental illness] done very poorly", said Patrick, "But as writers we know there is a healthy humor to be had - it's there." Jaime said that her research led her to see that a funny character is often one who is hiding something. "People with no filter can also be funny characters. It's not about labels, it's about people and their funny stories," she explained. "Mental health is not what defines a person. We are everyday people with senses of humor and quirks, and we are compelled to share ourselves as individuals."

According to Effectively Schizo's promotional material, the cliched representation of the token "crazy person," and popular culture depicting dramatic serial killers as schizophrenic are impediments to people's understanding of mental illness. The video series aims to be entertaining for people ... as a positive portrayal of mental illness. According to ES, "We want to showcase the everyday struggles that people with mental illness face, and then normalize it through comedic exploration."

As someone who knows many people with schizoaffective disorder, I feel I can chime in and want to stress that when controlled and treated, folks with this condition are as able, as social, and as individual as any other group. It is quite impossible to make generalizations, since people with mental illness generally present to the world in unique ways, based on their personalities, upbringing, and values: just like everyone else. Some work overtime to blend in as much as possible. In short, mental illness does not have to be *the defining factor* in a person's experience.

The group are looking to create a pilot episode of this series in the hopes of seeing it through to major media. Contributions to the project are being sought through GOFundMe and the group's Instagram and other social media accounts. With series like *13 Reasons Why* and other popular programming now taking on mental illness as content, why not?

Normalizing mental illness is catching on, at least on social media. On my Twitter feed everyday, I see *thousands* of people eager to publicly explore their challenges, both mental and physical: *wanting only to be heard*. The time for such a truthful and daring experiment as this series has surely come, and normalization occurs when the conversation no longer frightens, shocks, or angers, but is commonplace enough that the messages coming out can finally be heard.

We wish the troupe all the best and look forward to some badly-needed laughs.

Photo, from left; Rob Ciano, Sam Hartman, Danielle Zarcaro, Jaime Chaifetz, Patrick Mellin.

[Contact Effectively Schizo to Learn More](#)





NAMI NJ HONORS CAMHOP VOLUNTEERS

By Cynthia Chazen and Maggie Luo

NAMI NJ honored 3 volunteers from it's CAMHOP Division, The Chinese American Mental Health Outreach Program, at its annual meeting, Saturday, June 15 in Edison.

CAMHOP is one of 4 multicultural outreach initiatives at NJ NAMI providing education, peer support, and advocating in underserved communities. The groups are AACT-NOW (African American), coordinated by [Lisa Powell](#), CAMHOP (Chinese), coordinated by [Maggie Luo](#), NAMI En Español (Latino), coordinated by [Nelhy Barreiro](#), and SAMHAJ (South Asian), coordinated by [Beena Bhatcar](#).

Honorees Amy Hu Diamond, PangYen Ben Hu, and Lily Huang were recognized for exemplary service. Congratulations, Stigma Fighters! We appreciate what you do to help your community!



Tabernacle Student Uses Miss NJ Stage to Advocate for Mental Health

By Gianluca D'Elia / gdelia@thebct.com / [@gianluca_delia](https://twitter.com/gianluca_delia)

Part-time model and full-time psychology student, a Burlington County contestant in the Miss New Jersey competition wants to help kids feel in control of their mental health.

[Read Full Story in Burlington County Times](#)

GOOD NEWS FROM THE TWEET DECK



Hackettstown Police @HackettstownPD · 6/7/19

On June 14, at 6:30 p.m. in @Centenary_NJ's Sitnik Theater, the Hackettstown stigma-free initiative "Breaking the Barriers" and @AtlanticHealth System's "No More Whispers" campaign have teamed up to present Kevin Hines documentary, "Suicide: The Ripple Effect."



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National Council @NationalCouncil · 7h

We love this description of what it means to be an advocate!

Mental Health Editor @TheMHEditor · 8h

A chance to change the world through education!

End stigma 😊 #MentalHealthMatters [twitter.com/nationalcouncil...](https://twitter.com/nationalcouncil)

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Vantage Health System

April 25 at 4:52 PM · 🌐

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Last night at Seasons in Washington Township Vantage Health System honored Vicki Sidrow for her more than 30 years of service. Vicki, who was Vantage's CEO for 21 of those years, lead the organization with great care and distinction. She is well known around Bergen County and the State as a tireless advocate for the mentally ill. Vicki will be missed, but her legacy of accomplishment and service expansion will carry on.



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Dumont Tweaks Ordinance for Town Stigma Free Committee

By Carmine DeMarco

At a recent public meeting ... the Dumont Borough Council adopted an ordinance establishing a permanent town Stigma-Free Committee. The ordinance, put forth by Councilwoman Carole Stewart, creates an *official* governmental mechanism to combat the stigma associated with mental illness*.

Dumont's approach differs significantly from the method followed by most municipalities which have embraced the Stigma-Free initiative: typically, a resolution is passed designating an unofficial, informal group of residents as a "Stigma-Free Task Force." The 7 members of the new Stigma-Free Committee were appointed at the Borough Council meeting on Tuesday, May 7. The Committee is seeking residents to participate in a broader, volunteer Task Force. Members of the Dumont Governing Body & Borough Administration, along with newly-appointed members of the Dumont Stigma-Free Committee, posed for a photo at the 5/7/19 Mayor & Council meeting.

From left to right: William Paige; Karen DeMarco; Dr. Paul Barbato, Director of Social Services, Dumont Public Schools; Councilwoman Lisa Rossillo; Councilman Damon Englese; Vicki Iucci, Dumont Women's Club; Councilwoman Carole Stewart; Councilman Andrew LaBruno; Borough Clerk Sue Connelly; Councilman Carl Manna; Rev. Elaine Wing, Pastor, Calvary United Methodist Church; Borough Administrator Tom Richards. (Missing from photo: Mayor Jim Kelly; Councilman Jimmy Chae; Margaret Preis, Vantage Health System; Shelisa Foster, Director of Operations, Bergen's Promise).

*Editor's Note: Most SFZ committees have *not been officially appointed* bodies to date, and it is *not required* that they be so in order to come together to work under the banner of THE NJ SFZ. However, this step taken by Dumont is applauded for its effort to make fighting stigma an official part of the mission of the Dumont local government. Great work!

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