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The positive side of Dirty Laundry

Posted By Hamish MacLean

Posted 1 day ago

Sean Krausert knows that mental illness too often flies under the radar, or is brushed aside, and that people don't like talking about it.

He's gone through that himself. The isolation that accompanies mental illness, can be compounded by an unwillingness to talk about it by both sufferers and those not suffering, he said.

"Whether it was in high school and I was absolutely scared stiff about something or whether it's when I was practicing law and sitting doing my job and I would be in absolute chaos inside, holding back the tears holding back the panic," he said. "Someone would look at me and think I was just the calmest guy they'd ever seen, you just can't tell for some."

"We all have thoughts in our heads — you know, the 'self-talk' — well, when you suffer from anxiety and depression, the self-talk is so negative," he said. "And it's telling you that you're stupid and you're weak and it's your problem, it's your fault and you did something wrong to feel the way that you are. It's not something that you want to broadcast to everyone."

Krausert has lived in Canmore since 1996. When he first arrived he continued to practise law briefly, but soon turned his attention elsewhere.

He's now the producer of a play that he's bringing to the Bow Valley.

Marilyn Avient, 62, is performing in her first play. She has authored five books and gives talks on the issue, and when she decided to move in the direction she made a bold move.

Dirty Laundry is collaboration between mother and son (Avient and Krausert) a two-act, one-person show that features the true story of her life: the journey that saw her struggle with and overcome mental illness.

The play is based on a book written by Avient as well, "Free At Last" — also based on her life.

For Krausert seeing the play for the first time was a little strange.

"I was really self-conscious the first time, even though I was sitting in the booth with the lighting tech and the sound tech, because that was my life being shown — the thing that as a teenager you just didn't want let out of the bag," he said. "It was really bizarre at first, but I had to get over myself and recognize that the benefits of sharing this story far out weigh any personal costs or embarrassment or discomfort that I may have had."

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The aim of Dirty Laundry is to give audiences a different perspective, but Krausert said he's seeing how different audiences do react differently — how some are given their first look behind the curtain, so to speak, while some open up and feel more willing to share their experiences. He said that after the show he's had people come up to him who just needed to give him a hug.

And while neither of the two went into writing or producing the play with an eye to finding something therapeutic, they both, Krausert said, found some therapy in it.

Krausert's mother went into the hospital for the first time on his 15th birthday. And he suddenly found himself in the role of the head of the household.

It's this period of his life that the play has brought back to him so vividly.

"There were a lot of things going on that I just had to suppress, but as this has come out and I had to sit there and put on my producer's hat and deal with the emotions later," Krausert said.

But he deals with it. And the play's first aim is, of course, he said, to entertain.

"It's not all dark, there are some light moments and some bizarre moments. But what really comes through is inspiration and healing and hope — for people who are suffering and for people who have loved ones that are suffering — that you can get through this."

Krausert manages his mental illness now through prescription and therapy, meditation and turning away from negative self-talk to positive self-talk are tools he has acquired over the years.

"That's really what Dirty Laundry provides — it's not somebody just acting out a problem it's somebody reliving a problem, a problem that is real," Krausert said.

Unsurprisingly, Krausert's taken some time to look into mental illness.

One in five people suffer from mental illness at some point in their life. And depression is the leading cause of disability in the world, he said.

A 2003 Insurance Journal study showed that 500,000 Canadians are absent from work every day due to psychiatric problems. It also stated that mental health is the number one cause of disability claims in Canada — accounting for nearly 30 per cent of disability and 70 per cent of the total costs.

And yet, it's perhaps the perception of mental illness that still poses the biggest problem. The Canadian Medical Association's 8th Annual National Report Card on Health Care (2008) reported that 46 per cent of Canadians think people use the term mental illness as an excuse for bad behaviour.

"There's such a stigma," he said. "Myself coming from a law practice, I didn't know it at the time, but when I was suffering from depression, while I was practicing law, I couldn't let anybody know because my sense was that if I did, that it would be the kiss of death for my career."

He suffered from depression twice in his short law career.

And there was a time though that he "just broke down physically" in his office as well, when someone would come in and ask him something and he would just break down crying.

He blamed the work, the stressful job, and so he began to hate the work.

Lawyers are prone to depression, Krausert said. And partly, he believes, this is due to the kind of people that are attracted to law as a profession, but also, he said: "Nobody walks into a law office with a happy thought, nobody goes to a lawyer because they're happy.

"It's not a happy place to be, and so you need a special type of person to be able to do that and I wasn't one of those."

His second break down in a law office led to his leaving the career behind. It's a decision he doesn't regret.

"This is an issue and this is a big issue, there are very few health issues that are bigger than this and people don't talk about it," he said.

"It really is important, it's the elephant in the room that nobody talks about and it really is important that people do talk about it," Krausert said. "There's people at work that if they got the support early they wouldn't miss work, or there's people at home that if they knew they could get help and didn't have to be on edge all the time or get upset, it would make their lives that much better, it would make their children's lives that much better. And so if it's OK to talk about this and it's OK to say, 'Hey I've got this . . .' just like it's OK to say, 'Hey I broke my leg,' then I think we would have a lot happier of a society and definitely a lot healthier."

Dirty Laundry plays in Banff at the Margaret Greenham Theatre at the Banff Centre, March 18 at 7:30 p.m. and Canmore March 21 at the Canmore Collegiate High School Theatre at 7:30 p.m. Tickets are \$20 (\$15 for seniors) and in Banff can be bought at the Banff Centre box office. Tickets in Canmore are available at the Tin Box and Café Books.

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