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Play takes mental illness out of the dark closet

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Nanoose Bay resident Marilyn Avient used to pray to get leukemia.

"I knew that then I would die and it would be respectable, not like suicide," she says of her lifelong battle with depression.

Mental illness, she points out, is the leading cause of disability worldwide and it costs the Canadian economy \$51 billion per year in health care and lost productivity. In Nanaimo, about one in 10 people are currently affected by it and one in five will personally experience it in their lifetime.

But almost nobody wants to talk about it.

Except Avient who wound up writing a play about her personal experiences with mental illness. That play, *Dirty Laundry* is a one-woman show designed to bring attention to mental health issues and get people talking with one another and it will be performed on Saturday at

7:30 p.m. at the Malaspina Theatre on Vancouver Island University's campus.

"I've received a lot of positive response about *Dirty Laundry*," says Avient. "People are really blown away by the impact it has on them when they see it."

But, she admits, the theme means it's not an easy play to get people to attend.

"Before they see it they don't think it can be very entertaining, but it really is a good story even though it can be tough to watch because I am really honest about my life in this play," Avient says. "This is for the many people like me who were just trudging along, trying not to let anyone know how they really feel, the forgotten ones."

Both Avient, who describes herself as a functional depressive that also suffered from bi-polar illness, and one of her sons, have struggled for years with mental illness, but she says that both of them deal with things much better now. She hopes the play depicts the triumph of the human spirit through her lifelong journey into, through, and out of mental illness.

"There were many very rough years," she says. "But my family is close now, we have survived this."

The play's goal is to entertain audiences while creating awareness of the realities of mental illness and to get people to talk, to help remove the secrecy, the fear, the stigma and the burden on loved ones.

"I want people to know there is a light at the end of the tunnel, to show families that there is hope," Avient says.

Tickets for Dirty Laundry are \$20 at the door and \$17.50 in advance. Advance tickets plus more information about Dirty Laundry, including testimonials and a video trailer, are available at: www.dirtylaundrytheatre.ca.

What's Happening runs on Thursdays. Send information to events@nanaimodailynews.com.

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