

Suburban Life

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Schizophrenia

With her head held high, she has learned to say the 's' word

By Larry O'Connor
staff writer

AMID THE din of the dinner time rush of the restaurant, the word is spoken.

Whisper it or scream it. There is no easy way to communicate the term.

But Joan Verbanick has learned to say schizophrenia.

And the grandmother and employee of Ford Motor Co. talks about the form of mental illness without hesitation or a hint of shame. Verbanick, 45, of Farmington, admits as easily as she sips coffee that she is a recovering schizophrenic.

Not everyone can be as open. Verbanick understands that better than anyone.

Verbanick perhaps can see one day when the mental illness can be discussed openly by other people who suffer from it.

"Maybe in 10 years," said Verbanick, perking up to the thought. "Maybe in 10 years we'll be able to say, 'I have diabetes' and 'I have schizophrenia.'"

Verbanick is already doing her part. The Farmington resident is the founder of Schizophrenics Anonymous, a confidential self-help group for those people struggling with the disease. She's also a tireless speaker, going before civic groups to discuss the mental illness that affects 2.5 million people in this country.

She hid the illness from loved ones and her employers for 14 years. Her life has been dotted with psychotic episodes, shock treatments and hospital stays.

BUT THERE was a time when she couldn't even write "recovering schizophrenic" on her insurance forms. She was afraid of being fired from her job if her employers found it.

"I have nothing to hide anymore," Verbanick said. "I hold my head up high. The stigma sometimes is hard

to deal with than the illness itself."

The illness is caused by a chemical imbalance in the brain. People who suffer from schizophrenia hear voices or other delusional experiences. In many cases, proper medication can control the imbalance.

Myths, though, often cloud the facts. The mental illness is not inherited from a schizophrenic mother. Nor is everyone with schizophrenia violent, dangerous or unpredictable, Verbanick said. Many, in fact, lead otherwise very normal lives.

Verbanick is a prime example. She has worked in the credit department at Ford Motor Co. for 16 years. She has been hospitalized seven times. But, progressively, her condition has improved each time.

She regularly takes her medication and hasn't been hospitalized in three years. In 16 years, she's earned five promotions at Ford Motor Co.

One day, someone from the Alliance for the Mentally Ill asked Verbanick to speak in a television interview about schizophrenia. That would be a major turning point in her life.

"I contacted the Public Affairs Department at Ford Motor Company and I couldn't say 'schizophrenic,' she said. "I said, 'They need a recovering mentally ill person to speak.' . . . They said, 'If you want to do it. We support it 100 percent.'"

HER EMPLOYER has remained supportive. But Verbanick readily admits her case is unusual. She's heard of many schizophrenic sufferers who have lost jobs and friends because of the mental illness.

For that reason, Verbanick doesn't recommend people with schizophrenia go public. Instead, she suggests they follow the advice of professional help.

The biggest thing with schizophrenia sufferers is denial, she said. As a result, many do not take their medication properly.



Joanne Verbanick, a recovering schizophrenic, is the founder of Schizophrenics Anonymous, a confidential self-help group for those struggling with the problem.

One of the first six steps of recovery provided by Schizophrenics Anonymous is "I surrender. . . I admit I need help. I can't do it alone." The group is designed to be a supplemental part of professional treatment.

Verbanick started the first Schizophrenics Anonymous group in July 1985. Today there are 12 SA groups in Michigan, including a new one at Montgomery Hospital in Westland. The average member of the group tends to be around 30 years old and a majority are males. Some are high

functioning, holding jobs. Others are not as fortunate.

"They can come to the group and share about their voices, delusions and symptoms," she said. "We know what they're going through. We've all been there."

"The biggest thing is acceptance. I don't think they're crazy when they say they've heard voices."

Verbanick first heard told her to kill herself. At the time, she was married and had two children. Once in the hospital, she believed they were going to kill her. She admits being violent at times.

AFTER LISTENING to others with schizophrenia, Verbanick realizes she was fortunate.

"The saddest case that ever came to our group was a man from up north. He was hearing voices and many members who have schizophrenia . . . have delusions of grandeur and are into religion. He took a quote from the Bible where it says if you're a sinner, cut off your hand. He cut off his own hand. That's how devastating this illness can be."

In her personal life, schizophrenia has its devastating effects. Verbanick has been twice divorced. Future

relationships don't look promising. She's not unhappy, though. Her work with Schizophrenics Anonymous more than keeps her busy.

"My life is the group and work," she said. "Not many people can understand me being paranoid schizophrenic. I would have to tell someone. Otherwise, they would see me on TV."

"If I do start dating again, I'll wait until the relationship develops before I tell him."

Then saying schizophrenia won't be so difficult.

Stage & Co.

Original family recipes served in a place that feels like home

By Noreen Flack
staff writer

IN A COMMUNITY which has come to be known for its here-today-gone-tomorrow restaurants, West Bloomfield's Stage & Co. has proven staying power — seven years on Orchard Lake Road after two decades in Oak Park. The secret? Original family recipes and an atmosphere that says "home."

After 27 years in business, owner Jack Goldberg contends it's his specially menu items — the stuffed cabbage, pickled trout, chicken fricasse and mushroom barley soup — that keep customers coming back. Then again there's the dessert section, headed by Harriet, his wife and Stage co-owner. Harriet has brought fame to Stage with her amaretto poppyseed torte and chocolate sundae cake.

And the ambience. The Stage &

Co. is like a second home for many customers who are greeted with, "It's so nice to see you," instead of "How many for dinner tonight?" Harriet said.

The secret to maintaining a homey atmosphere is that one of the Goldbergs, either Jack, Harriet or Sheila Levine, their daughter and restaurant manager, remain on the floor at all times, she said. "Just knowing one of us is there makes the customers feel secure and it makes our em-

ployees feel secure, too."

"We have quite a few customers that go away for the winter, and a lot of them make sure to tell us that they are going so we don't worry," Sheila said. "And it's true, we would miss them. After a couple of days we would wonder if they're OK."

THE DOWNFALL of many restaurants starts with part-time owners, Jack said. "Owners are just not there. They don't keep an eye on the

business. You can't run a restaurant and be part time. We're always here because our livelihood depends on it," he said.

Jack has always loved to cook. Aside from working in various local delis, he was a cook for three years in the U.S. Army. "But he didn't bring those recipes with him," Harriet joked.

My mother was an excellent cook," Jack said. "I always observed the way she cooked. She used to make cabbage soup. I remember when I first opened the restaurant my brother came in and says, 'Jack, this tastes just like Momma's soup,' and I said, 'Who the hell do you think I've got in the kitchen?' I was just kidding, of course."

Except for a few specialties such as salmon patties, pickled trout and original soup, Jack now leaves the cooking up to Russian cook Rita Melman and kitchen manager, Early Milliner.

It all began in 1962 when Jack found himself out of a job when the Oak Park paint company he worked for closed business. The loss of a job became more of an opportunity for him to do what he had always dreamed of doing — owning a restaurant. The Goldbergs bought what was formerly the Lieberman's Deli on Nine Mile Road in Oak Park, renaming it Stage Delicatessen. After 20 years in Oak Park, they sold the Oak Park restaurant and opened Stage & Co. in West Bloomfield bringing many regular customers with them. The Stage Delicatessen in Oak Park continues to operate under different ownership.

TODAY THE neatly designed West Bloomfield restaurant which the Goldbergs modestly refer to as "the deli" includes a full service bar and a comfortable seating booth area.

When planning the interior design for the Stage & Co., Harriet coined "casual elegance" for the theme. She wanted to create an atmosphere that would allow people to come from a black tie affair or a game of tennis

and feel comfortable.

"When we were working on our menu, I wanted four people to be able to sit down at a table and have one who can eat absolutely anything, one who is on a diet, one with a high cholesterol problem and so on and yet still eat at the same restaurant together," Harriet said.

The Stage & Co. roasts their own turkey breast with some area dieticians "recommending dieters only eat turkey from the Stage & Co." because they know it is fresh and not processed, Sheila said.

"We see the trend. The trend is toward leaner meats and fish," Sheila said.

"We comply with what our customers call for, but yet some people that come here might want to cheat and say, 'Oh well, just this once, I'll have that stuffed cabbage or corned beef sandwich because it's so good,'" she said.

"IF THEY'RE gonna cheat, they'll cheat here," Harriet agreed.

Sheila gave in to family pressure in 1972 and joined the business. Sheila manages the restaurant's 70 employees. Formerly an elementary school teacher in Los Angeles, she said she enjoys being part of running a successful restaurant.

"I'm still teaching," Sheila said. "I'm teaching all the time here. Except instead of teaching elementary school children, I'm teaching employees. I use a lot of the skills I learned in college here on a daily basis."

The most difficult task in running a restaurant is maintaining quality employees who take a personal interest in the business, she said.

"We've been lucky. We can't do it alone, even with the three of us," Sheila said. "We do have a lot of key people here that contribute a tremendous amount. Everyone is important."



JERRY ZOLYNSKI/staff photographer

Stage & Co.'s owner, Jack Goldberg, still spends time in the kitchen, despite the fact that he now employs a staff of 70. He's preparing smoked salmon for serving.