

Neighbor²Neighbor

Andrea's Voice Foundation: A local organization has a national presence dealing with eating disorders

HILARY ZUNIN | Monday, November 7, 2011

For the Register

There's no doubt about it: We live in a culture obsessed with body image and food. It's an ironic juxtaposition. Where once chores, walking to the market and the odd softball game provided the exercise we needed, gyms and fitness centers have proliferated to help us stay healthy and active. As a "fast food nation," we've become accustomed to restaurants not as sources of nourishment so much as sources of fast calories or, at the other end of the spectrum, high art. When we season revised notions of exercise and food with the United States' infatuation with thinness, it's a recipe for disaster. According to the National Eating Disorders Association, the average American woman is 5 feet 4 inches tall and weighs 140 pounds. The average American model is 5 feet 11 inches tall and weighs 117 pounds. There's a disconnect here, and it's one that for millions of women and men can be dangerous, even fatal.

Eating disorders are a group of serious conditions that include anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa and binge-eating disorder. Those who live with these disorders are so preoccupied with food and weight that often they can focus on little else.

Right here in Napa, an organization with a mission that extends far beyond our borders seeks to alleviate the suffering of those fighting eating disorders. According to Doris Smeltzer, president and co-founder of the Andrea's Voice Foundation, "Eating disorders kill more than any other psychiatric diagnosis (Herzog, et al 2000). That said, complete healing is absolutely possible, but it takes early intervention and diagnosis. Prevention is paramount, yet we cannot prevent what we do not understand. Education is key. That is why we do what we do."

What is your purpose or mission?

Doris Smeltzer: "Andrea's Voice Foundation is dedicated to the prevention of eating disorders (EDs) while eliminating the misunderstandings and stigma associated with these illnesses. In the United States alone, 11 million young men and women suffer with anorexia or bulimia. Another 15 million struggle with binge-eating disorder. Ten percent of sufferers are under the age of 10. According to a validated Napa survey, nearly 30 percent of high school students are at risk for developing an eating disorder. These statistics point to the primary motivator that drives our work: the need to prevent other families from experiencing the loss of a child due to an eating disorder."

In brief, what's the history of your organization?

"Andrea's Voice came into being following the death in 1999 of our 19-year-old daughter, Andrea, after 13 months of bulimic behavior. Since then we have sought to get the message out in a variety of ways. These have included keynote addresses at hundreds of universities and conferences, both to organizations in the United States and internationally. We've also written a book, 'Andrea's Voice: Silenced by Bulimia,' and created a website and weekly blog to educate others on these serious illnesses. To continue this outreach and provide organizational support for our mission, in early 2006 we founded the 501(c)(3) nonprofit, Andrea's Voice Foundation."

Who are the people you serve?

"Eating disorders affect all ages, ethnicities, cultures and socioeconomic levels, so we offer support and resources for those who suffer with eating disorders as well as for their loved ones. For professionals, we provide education and an introduction to evidence-based prevention programs."

“In 2010, we were able to directly touch nearly 8,500 individuals worldwide: nearly 3,000 through email correspondence and over 5,500 students and health care professionals through our educational presentations. Millions more are exposed to Andrea’s story via our appearance in the award-winning documentary, ‘America the Beautiful (Part 1),’ and our book, ‘Andrea’s Voice.’ Eating disorders are borderless, thus our efforts must be global.”

Is there an anecdote that illustrates the work you do?

“From one college grad: ‘It was after your presentation that I realized I might die if I continued on my path. Now, four years later, I am applying to medical school. I wanted you to know that I may not have made it to where I am today if you hadn’t come to Amherst.’

“From an Illinois physician: ‘Thank you so much for your continued dedication to raising awareness about EDs. I attended a presentation you gave and your story played a significant role in my decision to focus much of my clinical work on EDs.’

“From a mom: ‘I’m deeply grateful for the work you do. ... We were within weeks of losing (our daughter) when your video shocked me and made me assemble a treatment team.’”

What’s a current need or upcoming project?

“In June, we conducted an educational fundraiser at Veterans Memorial Park in Napa. This Napa Walk was attended by more than 300 people. It featured inspirational speakers, a band, and treatment and prevention information. We are now focused on creating a DVD educational curriculum series based on our Internet radio interviews with world-renowned experts in the fields of EDs, body image, Health At Every Size®, media literacy, and intuitive eating. The initial lessons have been piloted by a family and friends support group in New York to rave reviews.

“We’d like to offer these valuable tools as digital downloads from our website so they can be available to professionals and laypersons worldwide. We need techno-savvy guidance on how to do this in as cost-effective and user-friendly a way as possible. Please contact Doris Smeltzer, 224-8032, doris@andreasvoice.org. For further information, contact the National Eating Disorders Association’s Information and Referral Helpline: (800) 931-2237 or nationaleatingdisorders.org.”

Neighbor2Neighbor is provided to the Register by Napa Valley CanDo. Founded in 2009, CanDo is a grassroots organization dedicated to “easing the path from intent to action.” Each week, CanDo provides a profile of a Napa Valley nonprofit or service club — what the organization does, what it needs and most of all, how an interested person can get involved. For more information on the column, contact Hilary Zunin at CanDoN2N@gmail.com. To learn more about opportunities for community service, email NVCanDo@gmail.com, call 252-7743 or visit NVCanDo.org.