

## Muted Voices

by Joey Clifton

I had a mother stop me the other day to tell me she heard me speak at the Oklahoma Institute for Child Advocacy's Fall Legislative Forum. My task at that forum was to share my family's story. More specifically, I was to talk about the difficulties and pain of raising an emotionally disturbed child. Then I shared with the group a short list of things that would have helped my family along the way-- supports and services we needed but didn't have.

On the panel with me that day were a state senator, a state representative, and a mental health professional. The audience was full of therapists, caseworkers, systems of care staff, educators, and other mental health professionals. Also in the audience, however, were family members like myself who live everyday with the anguish of a troubled child. These parents and caregivers are my heroes because I know the courage it takes to never give up. I understand the depth of their grace that forgives a thousand-fold. I empathize with the river of tears that flow from a spring of hope within their hearts.

When I have the opportunity to tell my story in settings like that one, I can almost immediately tell who in the audience has a troubled child. They start shaking their head in agreement, and often their eyes begin to fill with tears. When I talk of the sleepless nights, they understand. When I tell stories of rejection of my son and my whole family, they empathize. When I speak of my family's courage to find solutions, they hold their head higher as if to say, "Me too." After that particular speaking opportunity while the professionals were filing out of the room, several mothers surrounded me to tell me "thank you." My words had become their words.

The woman I ran into the other day hadn't taken the time to speak to me after I spoke at the forum, but when she caught me alone she shared her gratitude and we conversed about the importance of telling our story. She said she had an opportunity recently to tell her family's story to a reporter who wanted to write a newspaper article about their struggles and courage to overcome. She was excited and couldn't wait to tell her family. Her family, however, was not nearly as enthusiastic. "We can't have a story about us in the newspaper, mom. My friends will read it. I don't want my friends to know I have a diagnosis. If everybody knew, I wouldn't have any friends left."

Her story went untold, and her children continue to live in fear of what others may find out about them. As parents and caregivers, we have stories to tell. Stories legislators need to hear. Stories educators and caseworkers need to hear. Stories our own extended families need to hear. They are stories we need to share in order

to find other families like our own who won't reject us. At the same time, to tell our story puts our children in danger of further ridicule and shame. So we keep silent for the sake of our children. Our silence, however, damages our children's chances for improved services and more sympathetic providers.

One of the reasons I have such a positive response when I speak about family life with an emotionally disturbed child is because I speak for a multitude of muted voices longing to cry out.

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