

Ending The Stigma Of Mental Illness

We would like to think that we as a society have gotten beyond treating mental illness as a shameful condition. That is apparently not the case.

It was distressing to learn that a popular and successful history teacher at a school in southwest Virginia was removed from the classroom earlier this year because he alluded to struggles he has had with mental illness.

The Roanoke Times reports that Blacksburg High School teacher Bradley Kraft, Montgomery County's teacher of the year in 2013, was placed on administrative leave in March after a parent complained that he had spoken about his mental illness to students. The teacher, who suffers from depression and had taken a short leave of absence earlier in the year to receive treatment, opened up to his students briefly about his condition.

What should have been a teachable moment – an opportunity to enlighten young people about the subject of mental illness – turned into an example of the pitfalls of admitting to a condition that afflicts scores of people through no fault of their own.

What was encouraging about this unfortunate episode is that dozens of students and parents came out to a School Board meeting to express support for Kraft and to plea for an end to the stigmatization of mental illness. An online petition entitled "End The Stigma" garnered thousands of signatures.

Kraft, who has since resigned his position to pursue doctoral studies at Virginia Tech, told The Roanoke Times that he is talking about his situation publicly to create greater awareness about mental illness. We wish him well as he tries to change public perceptions about the people who suffer from this cruel condition.

Most people would never dream about disparaging, or discriminating against, someone who suffers from cancer, diabetes or heart disease. Why, then, is it alright to take away

the livelihood of someone who was contributing greatly to the education of our youth?

Like physical afflictions, mental illness strikes in a non-discriminatory fashion and can be treated effectively with proper medical care and attention. It is insensitive, lacking in compassion and runs counter to our humanity to treat mental illness as somehow the fault of the victims and something for which they should be ashamed.

There has been a statewide effort the past few years to reform Virginia's system of mental health services so that it is easier for those who suffer from mental illness to get the care they need in the most effective manner. These efforts were prompted by a 2013 tragedy involving the family of state Sen. Creigh Deeds – he was attacked by his mentally ill son Gus, who then killed himself. Just before the tragedy unfolded, Gus Deeds had been released from an emergency custody order because officials were unable to secure a bed in a psychiatric facility before the order expired.

The case revealed a wide array of shortcomings in the state's mental health services. Over the past six years, Sen. Deeds has spearheaded efforts to reform these services, chairing a subcommittee that is overseeing these efforts. Much has been accomplished, but much more remains to be done.



We were discouraged to learn that there was expected to be a shortage of beds in Virginia's psychiatric hospitals during the July 4 holiday weekend this past week. Officials were bracing for a situation in which people in mental health crises who were being held in temporary custody would have to wait for beds to become available.

Also discouraging was recent news that a majority of children in Virginia who suffer from mental illness are not receiving the care they need. During a hearing in May before the subcommittee Deeds chairs, lawmakers were told that 63 percent of such children are not receiving any services, and, of those who are getting help, only 20 percent are getting it consistently.

We as a state and society must do better. For as long as it takes, we must continue to shine the spotlight on efforts to reform the system. Adequate funding must be provided. And, for these efforts to be successful, we must eliminate the stigma associated with mental illness.

Time To Reconsider The Dillon Rule?

Virginia is a Dillon Rule state. As such, the only powers granted to Virginia's counties and cities are those that are expressly authorized by the state. Are Virginians well served by this?

Congressman Ben Cline thinks they are. At Buena Vista's Labor Day celebration earlier this month, Cline declared that because of the Dillon Rule, "We don't have to put up with regulations at the local level."

We've heard local government leaders, at various times over the years, express a contrary point of view. They have said that they view the Dillon Rule as an impediment to localities being able to address local needs.

As they see it, there are numerous instances of the big hand of state government intruding on what ought to properly be the domain of localities. A prime example would be the so-called King's Dominion Law. In order to supply summer tourism businesses with student labor, a state law in effect for decades decreed that local school divisions couldn't start their school year prior to Labor Day.

The law was amended this year so that schools can open two weeks before Labor Day while also providing students a four-day Labor Day weekend. Still, the principle remains the same – the state knows better than the locality, therefore giving it the right to dictate what a local school calendar would be.

The contentious battle over Civil War statues is another example of the state dictating rules for localities to follow. Virginia has a law that prevents the removal of what are deemed war memorials, including statues of Confederate

generals, from public spaces. Charlottesville has found that it is powerless to remove a statue of Robert E. Lee from a city park without a state law being passed that would grant the city authority to do so.

Localities in Virginia lack the authority to expand the definition of "family" so same-sex partners can qualify for a spouse's health insurance. State approval is needed to change the speed limits for vehicles traveling through school zones. Rules governing the removal of junk cars are dictated by the state. State law supersedes that of localities in determining the location for telecommunications towers. The list goes on and on. If the state doesn't explicitly grant localities the right to do something, they don't have that right.

Those unfamiliar with the Dillon Rule may be wondering who the heck was Dillon and why does he have such influence on the rights and powers of Virginia's localities. John Forrest Dillon was a chief justice of the Iowa Supreme Court who decreed, in an 1868 ruling, that localities derive all of their rights and powers from the state legislature. Thirty-nine states subsequently adopted the Dillon Rule, including Virginia through a Virginia Supreme Court ruling in 1896.

So, the Dillon Rule that strips localities of their right of self-rule has its origins in court rulings rather than in any law that was enacted by a legislative body. The evolution and precepts of the doctrine appear to violate the principles of self-government on multiple levels. It seems to us that local jurisdictions – governments that are closest to the people they



CONGRESSMAN Ben Cline addresses a gathering at Glen Maury Park during Buena Vista's Labor Day celebration on Monday, Sept. 2. (Stephanie Mikels Blevins photo)

represent – ought to have the right to pass laws that they deem would be in the best interests of the constituents they represent.

Because of court precedents, Virginia's cities and counties are powerless to carry out some of the basic functions of self-government. The only remedy would be for the General Assembly to pass a law repealing or greatly altering the Dillon Rule. All 140 members of the Virginia General Assembly are

up for election this Nov. 5. Anyone who feels his or her interests are not well served by the Dillon Rule may want to raise the issue this fall with candidates seeking election to a seat in the General Assembly.

As Congressman Cline observed recently, the Dillon Rule precludes our having to put up with local regulations. However, are we being better served by state regulations superseding the local ones?

Remembering Tammy

We lost one of our own last week. Tammy Jarvis Hamilton, a reporter for The News-Gazette for nearly a decade in the 1990s, lost her battle with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), better known as Lou Gehrig's Disease, on Thursday. She fought a courageous battle for eight years. Her diagnosis came in 2011, though the onset of symptoms began earlier.

It has been nearly 20 years since Tammy's byline graced these pages, but we still considered her part of our newspaper family. Staff members here remained in close contact with her during her second career as an administrative assistant for a dozen years to Circuit Court Judges George W. Honts III and Malfourd W. "Bo" Trumbo, then through her years living with ALS.

Tammy was a scrappy reporter. She went after stories with a determination to get to the truth of the matter and present the facts. Covering "hard news" was her specialty, providing accounts of accidents, fires, floods, crime, court cases, including murder trials. Her affinity for the courts led to her second career.

Her lengthy battle with ALS revealed an inner strength – an ability to cope with adversity and continue to live life to the full-

est, in spite of the mind-boggling obstacles presented by the disease. She became an advocate for those who suffer from ALS. She lobbied legislators on issues related to health care. She made presentations at the Murphy Deming College of Health Sciences of Mary Baldwin University, giving first-hand accounts of living with ALS to students planning health care careers. Two years ago she addressed, via Skype, a group of corporate sponsors of the ALS Association technology support program.

Tammy utilized technological advances that were developed to help ALS patients. ALS is a neuromuscular disease that caused her to gradually lose control over all of her body's movements. She eventually lost the ability to verbalize words with her mouth and vocal cords, long after losing control of her arms, hands and lower extremities. At that point, she communicated with her eyes. Eye tracking technology allowed her to use a device that detected light reflections from her pupils and translated eye movements into a computer's mouse cursor movements so that she could formulate words.

Her mind remained sharp to the end. In fact, that is one of the



TAMMY HAMILTON is seen here with her husband Jim in 2009, two years before her ALS diagnosis. Jim served as her full-time caregiver through the last several years of her illness.

cruelties of this disease – she was well aware of what was happening to her. She was fully cognizant of each different phase in the decline of her mobility. She handled each new hardship with grace and fortitude.

Tammy touched many lives in our community. She grew up in the Collierstown Presbyterian Church and remained active in the church throughout her life. She served in a variety of roles, including church historian and moderator of Presbyterian Women, and was a sub-

stitute pianist before ALS robbed her of the ability to play. Her faith, family and friends were all important to her, helping her to keep an upbeat attitude throughout the ordeal of her long illness.

This newspaper ran a feature on Tammy last year, a story that appeared to resonate with all those who knew her and many who didn't. Her story, readers told us, inspired them.

Tammy helped shine a light on a horrible disease. She elevated the lives of many. She will be missed.