

Battling stigmas

By JOEL MILLS of the Tribune | Posted: Sunday, February 3, 2013 12:00 am

Liza Long knows the stigma attached to mental illness all too well.

By writing about her struggles with her 13-year-old son, Long has tried to dispel deeply ingrained attitudes toward the mentally ill. In doing so, she has found many supporters.

But since she wrote a blog post called "I Am Adam Lanza's Mother" in December, after hearing that the perpetrator of the Sandy Hook Elementary School massacre in Newtown, Conn., was possibly mentally ill, Long has been accused of doing just the opposite.

"I will never make the mistake of Googling myself ever again," the single Boise mom said in her first interview since being on NBC-TV's "Today" show in December. "I can't tell you how bad the ramifications have been. But go to your worst place as a parent, and that's how bad it's been for me."

Long said she has been "living under a rock" since her post went viral. It was read by millions, and hailed by many as a brutally honest account of trying to raise a child who is usually gentle, loving and caring, but who suffers from explosive behavioral issues that frequently turn violent.

Others pilloried Long for publicly airing her family's trials with the son she calls "Michael." And that, she said, speaks directly to how stigmatizing mental illness is at the root of society's seeming inability to adequately address the problem.

"You're turned into a criminal," she said of how this nation treats its mentally ill citizens. "My little guy will tell you that he wants the same outcome for himself that I want. He wants to be a happy, productive adult. He wants to go to college. He wants to be a history professor. But right now, that's going to be a long road for him with all of the issues that he faces."

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Society has come a long way in dispelling stereotypes about physical and developmental disabilities, said Stephen Graci, the executive director of the Idaho Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health at Boise.

"We've overcome a whole lot of that stuff in our attitudes over several generations," Graci said. "But with mental illness, I think it's still very potent and powerful, and the stigmatizing effects are still there."

He said attitudes toward mental illness range from believing it doesn't actually exist, to embarrassment, to something to keep hidden and never talk about. And changing that mindset in a state like Idaho is difficult when there are persistent notions that nothing is really wrong.

"Pull yourself up by your bootstraps," Graci said, mimicking the attitude. "You're just acting strange."

Unlike other obvious physical ailments, people who suffer from mental illness often think it is somehow their fault, or their parents' fault. And parents of children who show signs of a mental disorder will not seek treatment because they believe they're doing something wrong, Graci said.

"It's important that parents realize that they are not bad parents, and that people realize that mental illness is not a crime," he said. "The best treatment for mental illness is not to be locked up and put away and kept out of sight."

But that is how Idaho has chosen to deal with its mentally ill citizens, Graci said. In the wake of deep budget cuts over the last several years to state mental health programs, the issue has become more of a law enforcement problem than a health care problem, he said.

Last month, Idaho Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter threw his support behind a proposal to build a \$70 million, 579-bed secure mental health facility to be supervised by the Department of Correction. Graci said that will only serve to further stigmatize mental illness, and the state would have a much bigger, long-term effect by paying for increased community mental health services.

Long Tweeted as much at the governor on the day he made the proposal as part of his State of the State address. She said money for a new mental health prison would be better spent on early childhood intervention programs.

"We're continuing to criminalize and stigmatize mental illness," Long said. "For whatever reason, we treat mental disorders completely differently from physical disorders, even though it's very clear that problems of the mind are also organic. You look at the brain and you can see areas that are targeted by ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder), for example, or depression."

Long has a crystal-clear anecdote that illustrates the difference. When one of her other children went to the emergency room after breaking both arms, there was a straightforward protocol: X-ray, splint, then return for casts in a couple of days.

But the scene was profoundly different when an ambulance had to take Michael to the same emergency room in an effort to contain one of his violent outbursts. "Nobody knows what to do with the kid," she said of the incident, which she detailed in her blog.

After another incident, a social worker gave the sobering advice that for her son to get help in Idaho, she would need to press criminal charges.

"My kid has been in the system," Long said, with his first trip behind bars coming at the age of 10. "And I can attest, the state actually does have good services available to children who are in the juvenile justice system."

Michael got psychosocial rehabilitation, court-ordered therapy, and a team of child mental health professionals to address his problems. "But once he successfully completed probation, that went away," Long said.

Using the criminal justice system to treat mental illness isn't acceptable to Long. In fact, Michael's sensory integration issues make him extremely sensitive to light and sound, she said.

"He can barely function in a really chaotic, sensory-overload environment," she said. "So it's actually cruel and painful to stick someone with those issues into juvenile detention."

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Vicki Malone is the field program manager for behavioral health at the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare in Lewiston. She said one of the biggest problems with the stigmatization of mental health is that it keeps people from seeking treatment for themselves, a relative, or a loved one.

"This is Idaho, the pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps state," Malone said. "Suck up, man up, cowboy up, however you want to say it. It takes a lot of courage to walk through these doors and say 'I think I need some help.' "

There is abundant scientific evidence that proves mental illness has biological roots, Malone said. But getting people to accept it and alter their beliefs is a different matter.

That has been evidenced by Idaho's continued cutting of its mental health budget, and its shift toward not dealing with mental illness until it becomes a law enforcement issue.

"As we've lost staff over time, we've had to narrow our priorities," Malone said. "Right now, our priority is crisis intervention."

The department also does a lot of work for the courts, like participating in presentence investigations for the Department of Correction, or helping with the three mental health courts in Region 2 (Nez Perce, Clearwater and Latah counties).

"Those are great services," Malone said of the specialized courts designed to deal with people who commit crimes while mentally ill. "But that's still not early intervention. That's after somebody's gotten caught up in the criminal justice system."

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But Malone and a group of other concerned health care workers and citizens are exploring at least one avenue toward dispelling myths and stereotypes: teaching kids the truth about mental illness.

Three and a half years ago, they formed the Children's Mental Health Coalition. Member, former state lawmaker and teacher Liz Chavez said one goal was to either write or find a curriculum that

could be used in schools to promote mental health awareness. To her surprise, the coalition found exactly what they were looking for, courtesy of the National Institutes of Health.

"Lessons, a pretest, post-test, and an assessment are all prepared," Chavez said of the curriculum package.

Chavez helped launch a pilot program at Jenifer Junior High School in the spring of 2011. A teacher at Sacajawea Junior High School has also implemented the program, and Chavez is helping the Lapwai and Coeur d'Alene school districts implement it as well.

"Kids pick on other kids," Chavez said. "It's just the nature of what middle school is about. We've done a really good job of advocating for kids with Down (syndrome) or other kinds of physical, visible disabilities. But mental health, those are hidden disabilities. When you can't see that someone is in pain, or that someone is physically different from you, then it's harder to be an advocate for that person."

But once kids are educated about the underlying causes of mental illness, a "deep well of compassion" opens wide, she said.

Each person interviewed by the Lewiston Tribune said investing more money on early intervention programs for people with mental illness would pay off in the long term. But a comment by Graci was perhaps the most pointed.

"Let's try to identify and prevent and cause treatment to occur early," he said. "That will, in fact, reduce the need for more prison beds, as opposed to making more prison beds available, then waiting for those kids to become incarcerated. That doesn't make sense to me."

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