

**The Revolving Door**  
**Families of the Dually Diagnosed Struggle to Fix a Broken System**  
**by Suzanne Riordan, Families ACT!**  
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These days when I drive by the courthouse, I have a vision of my son in chains, shackled at the wrists and ankles, shuffling down the long tile hallways in orange plastic slippers. I see his eyes, looking to us — his parents — the judge, the DA, the public defender, wondering what we were doing, hoping we knew.

The pageant that takes place daily at this lavish reminder of colonialism is becoming a new parody of justice. The most vulnerable and sensitive young people in our community — those with a thought or mood disorder or brain injury, often with co-occurring substance abuse — are being incarcerated instead of receiving treatment. And there seems to be an epidemic of these imbalances among young adults.

This is why our jails and prisons are overflowing. Last year, at least 70 people died in Santa Barbara County of drug overdose and suicide. Most of their families struggled for years to get help. These struggles, common as they are, are not stories one reads about daily in the paper. The shame and stigma associated with drug abuse, mental illness, and incarceration isolates and prevents families from getting the support that is so desperately needed.

A tragic cluster of deaths last winter speaks for itself. On January 18, 2006, John Tarasovic committed suicide a few days after being released from jail, where he had slit his wrists on Christmas Eve. When his family made its weekly visit shortly after his release, they were told he was not available; no explanation was given. He had been released with no treatment plan. John was a bright 26-year-old computer engineer who worked in real estate. He had been struggling with bipolar disorder and dependency on prescription drugs.

On January 16, 2006, John and Anna Campbell were notified that their son's remains had been found in the redwoods above Santa Cruz. Skye had been missing for almost a year. After a serious fall from a water tower in Bali in 1993, he made an amazing recovery from paralysis, but the effects of head trauma made life extremely difficult and employment almost impossible, as he suffered from post-traumatic stress and constant pain. Drugs helped him cope, but eventually contributed to his addiction and, at times, life on the streets. The chief problem was the lack of local residential treatment. Finally, he found recovery at A Spiritual Abode (ASA), a private, spiritually based residential program in Santa Maria. In January 2005, Skye moved to Santa Cruz, where he went missing.

My son, Ian Bezman disappeared on November 9, 2005. What began as a relaxing day off work ended in tragedy when he received a “dirty test” at a court-ordered program. Ian, diagnosed bipolar, had struggled with low self-esteem and substance abuse for years, but had gained remarkable self-respect in the past few months. He loved his work with the Carpenter's Union and his automotive class at City College; he loved his girlfriend and was proud of his Toyota truck. But now he was facing jail. Again. Frustrated and ashamed, he called his boss to say he wasn't going to be able to work and was going out to get “high.” His body was found three weeks later in a drainage ditch alongside the freeway — a stone's throw from his job site. The toxicology report showed a lethal amount of morphine. His memorial was held at the Alano Club on December 10, 2005, which would have been his 24th birthday.

Two days later, Sharron Rose found her son Richard's body face down in the backyard of his house in Summerland. Diagnosed bipolar, Richard was a talented artist and musician who was having a rough time as his long-term partner had left him. Less than a week earlier, he had asked his mother to get him some help; he seemed to be OD-ing on meth. When Sharron called for help, cops booked Richard into jail on a probation violation, but promised to transfer him to Vista del Mar mental hospital in Ventura when he was released, on the recommendation of his psychiatrist. This never happened. He was released within 24 hours and died six days later.

Ian, Richard, Skye, and John had much in common. All were local young men beloved by their friends and families, and all were intelligent, talented people with a great deal to offer the world. They also had in common the diagnosis of a thought and/or mood disorder combined with addiction — an occurrence known as “dual diagnosis” — which they tried diligently to overcome.

A memorial gathering for Ian in a friend's home was attended by Sharron, Anna, myself, and another mother whose daughter was addicted to meth. As each person spoke around the circle, a determination arose to help families dealing with the twin challenge of mental illness combined with addiction. We began to meet and were joined by other caring parents whose sons and daughters were typically cycling between the streets, home, and jail.

We were competent parents who were doing our best. Our young adult children had been raised with love and discipline, their once bright futures now shattered. None of us approved or condoned drug abuse. We recognized that while there is an element of choice in drug use, no one chooses mental illness. All of us desperately wanted recovery for our loved ones, and all of us were terribly frustrated. We had all been through hell.

We shared stories about what we had been through, about how the system, as well as the illness and the addiction itself, drives a wedge between parents and children. One family had to sign statements saying they refused to let their son live at home so he could qualify for residential treatment. After nine years, he was admitted, only to be kicked out 10 days later. A mother told how her daughter fell off the top bunk in her cell and suffered a concussion, but was refused treatment by jail medical personnel. One young man, just released from Cottage Hospital where he'd had surgery for a strep infection in his leg, was arrested and tested positive for morphine, which he'd been given in the hospital. He was jailed. At risk of leg amputation, he was on 'round-the-clock antibiotics. Though the jail nurses were informed of this, they refused to call the jail doctor to order antibiotics or the hospital to verify his medical situation.

We talked about surreal experiences with the Mental Health Assessment Team. How in order to get a mental health assessment, one must call 911 and the police. About the perverse county policy that often requires young adults to live on the streets before they qualify for residential treatment. About how our sons and daughters are often released from jail in the middle of the night with no linkage to treatment. About the demeaning and senseless vagaries of a broken system.

Dual diagnosis is too difficult for families to handle alone. The revolving door into jail, out of jail, into jail, and too often to prison leaves a trail of death in its wake. What is missing is the door to treatment.

We've formed an organization called FACT: Families Advocating for Compassionate Treatment. We provide support and information to families with loved ones who are dually diagnosed. We want people to know what their options are when they are in crisis. For example, we want folks to know that in court they have the right to disclose their medical history. When the court was informed by a mother that her daughter was bipolar and suffering from post-traumatic stress after her sister's death, the daughter was ordered to residential treatment.

We want families to help shape how this community will treat people with mood or thought disorders accompanied by addiction. We want more residential treatment beds for our dually diagnosed. We want to reduce the high incidence of death.

We want to prevent situations like the recent tasing and incarceration of Mateo Wood. Last November, Mateo was standing on a street near his sober living house. Someone found his behavior suspicious and called 911. When police officers approached, he got on his bicycle. The police report claimed he was “talking unintelligibly” and trying to hide behind bushes. As he tested negative for drugs, he was likely in a manic state, since he is by nature a calm person. Mateo was tasered several times and beaten. Arrested for “resisting arrest,” Mateo sat in jail for about six weeks. One weekend, his mother went to visit him and was told he'd been bussed to Wasco State Prison because his “resisting arrest” was deemed a parole violation. What a sad, unjust punishment for acting odd! Too often, our mentally ill are chased, imprisoned, and convicted of resisting arrest when there is no underlying crime. One young man was chased, tackled, arrested, jailed, and convicted when, according to the police report, he was simply out walking his puppy and appeared “homeless.”

Often the behavior in public of someone with mental illness is misinterpreted. When well-meaning citizens call 911 to report strange behavior, what ensues is not always in society's best interest. Despite remarkable efforts to establish Restorative Policing and Crisis Intervention Training sponsored by Alcohol, Drug, and Mental Health Services, police officers regularly face challenges in dealing with increasing numbers of emotionally distraught and mentally disoriented citizens. We have such a paucity of treatment beds that often there is no place to take them but jail. Other communities manage better. So can we.

Parents are sometimes relieved when their son or daughter is arrested, because they're safer in jail than on the street — a testament to the basic decency of our jail, despite overcrowding. Yet there is something essentially cruel about a society that treats its most wounded and sensitive young members as criminals.

Many dually diagnosed residents of our county have been sent to prison, their “crime” being that they were acting crazy. Sometimes their parents reported them, trying to get help. The last thing they wanted was for their child to sit in prison with no treatment.

FACT wants to help Santa Barbarans come together to deal more compassionately and sensibly with co-occurring mental illness and substance abuse. We are planning a town hall meeting this spring to document what has been going on and to open a forum to search for more humane, effective solutions. We believe the facts speak clearly, and that truth is powerful.

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