

## **BOYNTON BEACH WOMEN START MENTAL HEALTH INITIATIVE (COVER STORY - *Neighborhood Post*)**

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When Gerda Klein's 41-year-old son committed suicide four years ago, she was devastated but determined.

"I didn't want him to become another mental health statistic," said Klein, who lives in the Aberdeen, a community west of Boynton Beach.

Her son, David, had struggled with bipolar disorder for more than 20 years.

Just 5 miles away from Klein, another woman was going through an almost identical experience.

Lorraine Michaelis, who lives in the community of Valencia Lakes, lost her 45-year-old son, Jonathan, three years ago. He suffered from depression his entire life and died of a heart attack from too much medication.

"I had gone to a couple of bereavement groups, but that just didn't do it for me," Michaelis said. "My need was to go out and help other people."

The two women met through a mutual friend and last year created the Boynton Beach Mental Health Initiative, a grass-roots effort to bring about mental health education/awareness and combat any stigmas about mental illness.

Since then, they have organized a few screenings at the local libraries of films from the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention. The first screening in July had a turnout of about 40 people.

The women have handed out fliers about their group at the Boynton Beach Green Market and have reached out to the Palm Beach County School District about bringing mental health education into local schools. They have received the support of Palm Beach County Commissioner Marlene Ross, and the mayor of Boynton Beach gave a proclamation last year recognizing the group's efforts.

They also have targeted the Coalition of Boynton West Residential Associations, which represents 88 communities west of Boynton Beach. Klein spoke at the coalition's last meeting on March 1, and she is already booked to speak at the August meeting.

"We know an organization like **COBWRA** reaches so many people," Klein said.

Similar efforts are under way in Delray Beach and Boca Raton, and together, the three groups have formed the South County Mental Health Coalition. According to Rita

Thrasher, founder of Boca Raton's Promise, this is the first three-city coalition focused on mental health in Florida. They meet on a quarterly basis to share what each group is working on locally.

Right now, Klein and Michaelis are focused on creating mental health events and programs for the month of May, which is National Mental Health Month. They will be showing new films for adults about bipolar disorder and depression. And they will be working with the local libraries to promote awareness through displays of books related to mental health.

"We've been very encouraged by the response to what we've been doing," Klein said. "We're hoping to continue to add to our variety of activities."

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