

Family in tune on fight against mental illness

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BY ALAN JOHNSON

THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

Mental illness is a fearful thing that most families don't talk about, much less sing about.

But the Quinn family isn't most families.

The 11-member Quinn Family Singers performs for fun and as therapy to help cope with the schizophrenia of Pat, the eighth child born to Tom and Margaret Quinn of Zanesville.

The group performed recently in Columbus at the annual conference of ViaQuest, a nonprofit behavioral health-care provider.

The Quinns began singing in the family's living room in Zanesville, but evolved to larger public performances and recently to a professionally produced compact disc.

Pat Quinn, 39, a mental-health-recovery success story, is the band's focal point. After getting his disease under control with the help of medication, he earned two college degrees, leads Schizophrenics Anonymous support groups, and volunteers with the National Alliance on Mental Illness and other organizations.

But 20 years ago, his future was dark and uncertain. As a freshman at Ohio State University, he was besieged by waves of delusion, paranoia and hallucinations that had been building since he was a teenager.

"I remember when I was about 14 or 15 years of age, I had the world by the tail. I was on the basketball team," he said during the Columbus concert. "My classmates were all my friends. I was enjoying my life the way I thought it was supposed to be. The world was there for me to grab, and I was going to grab it."

A few short years later, however, "my life revolved around hospitals, doctors, the search for a proper diagnosis and the right medication," Pat said. "My former friends all abandoned me except one."



JONATHAN QUILTER | DISPATCH

Pat Quinn, left, is congratulated by his brother Tom Quinn Jr. after performing a song with his family.



JONATHAN QUILTER | DISPATCH

Performing at a mental-health event are family members, from left, Gretchen, Brian, Tom Sr. and Paul Quinn.

AUDIO SLIDE SHOW

- See and hear the Quinn family perform.

So Quinn's large family rallied around him. But it wasn't easy.

"We were neither prepared nor educated to become parents of a son with a mental disorder," said Margaret Quinn, 77.

When Pat's schizophrenia was diagnosed, "fear took up residence in our home -- ugly, stifling, paralyzing fear," added Tom Quinn Sr., Pat's 82-year-old father. "We couldn't sleep. We couldn't eat. And at times, we could barely breathe.

"We whispered to each other, 'Don't tell anybody.' "

Mrs. Quinn said she and her husband had to "stop blaming each other for our son's illness. This disease has the power to destroy families. . . . In our case, it has made our family stronger and closer."

Pat's siblings also struggled.

"When we realized that he really did have a serious mental illness, my wife and I started going to Zanesville every weekend to support him and give my parents a break," said Paul Quinn, 50, of Columbus, communications director for the Health Policy Institute of Ohio.

"We literally had to lock him in the house," Paul said. "He was convinced all the neighbors were spying on him."

Francie Quinn Pendley, 44, said her brother's schizophrenia "has been the most difficult issue of my life. . . . When he became ill, I was scared. I was confused. I was embarrassed.

"I thought my brother was stolen from me."

Pendley said it took her a decade to come to grips with her brother's problem. "I never thought I would be up in front of people to talk about mental illness.

"I came to see it's a crime to leave people with mental illness left untreated," she said with great emotion. "I will not sit silent even though I wanted to for a long time. . . . I cannot think of any group that needs our help more."

The Quinns' repertoire ranges from a Beatles ballad to an Eminem rap song. Pat's favorite is *One* by the Irish rock group U2.

One love, one blood, one life, you got to do what you should.

One life with each other: sisters, brothers.

One life, but we're not the same.

We get to carry each other, carry each other.

"Our family truly is one," Pat said. "They are more than just lyrics to a song. We do our best to live this message."

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