

BY PAUL FORSYTH

Associate editor of *Schizophrenia Digest*

The Urge to Tell

They are stories full of deepest anguish and despair, of inspirational poignancy and awe-inspiring courage. Some are told by parents who watched with a feeling of bleak helplessness as the children they love struggled with delusional thoughts and flirted with the dark allure of suicide. Others are written by those whose lives were sent into a whirlwind of torment and paranoia with the onset of one of humanity's most serious and cruel brain disorders.

A growing number of Canadians and Americans are choosing to toss aside the shroud of secrecy and shame too often associated with schizophrenia and other mental illnesses, choosing instead to commit their stories-and those of their loved ones - to paper for all the world to see.

"It was a gut-wrenching experience," concedes Alice Brent, of her struggle to capture in words what it has been like to watch her son's 20-year-battle with schizophrenia.

The Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario woman, whose son was diagnosed with the disease in 1982 at the age of 18 and who has struggled ever since, witnessed her once outgoing, gregarious boy suffer through hospital admissions, failed jobs and a spiral into the ranks of the destitute, living in missions and hostels. Today, he survives on social assistance and lives near Ottawa,

"It took a lot of courage to write my book"

-Talmadge Rogalla

Ontario. Brent says she knows little about his condition because he offers scant information and his doctor won't update her on his progress without a signed consent form from him.

"It's very difficult to accept," Brent says of her son's illness. "It's robbed a young man of the right to

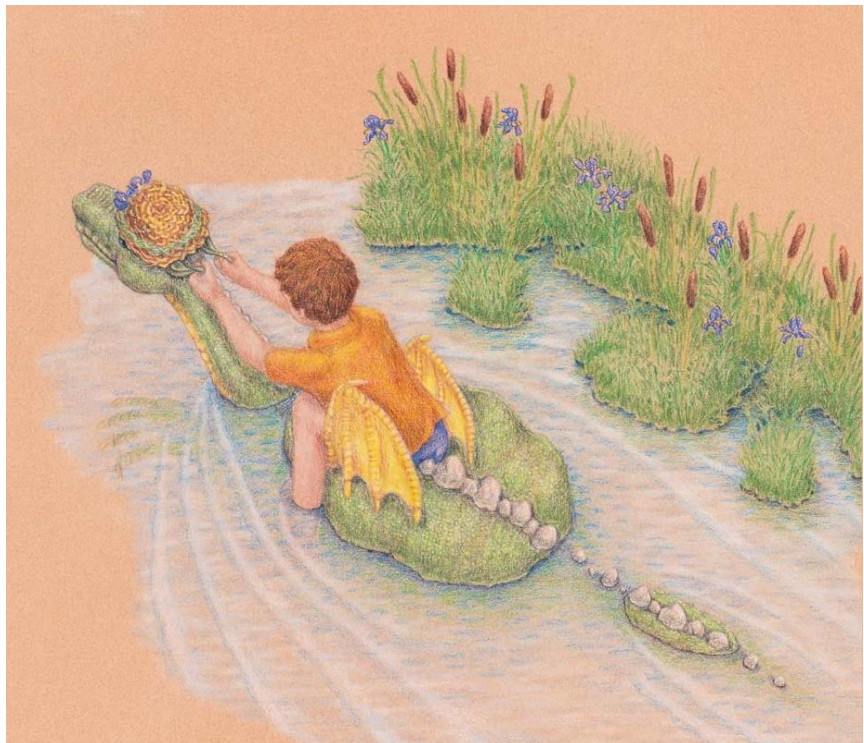


illustration by Carol Nault from *Catch a Falling Star*

Fast Facts: To Order Books

Alice Brent's book, *In the Valley of the Shadow*, is available in electronic format from www.booksforpleasure.com for CDN \$10.95.

Chip Correll's book, *Overcoming OCD and Schizophrenia. With God in My Life*, is available in paperback format by writing to Deloris Nelson., P.O. Box 16542, Clearwaiei, Florida 3376601' at Barnes and Noble. The cost is US \$17.95 in Canada and US \$11.95 in the United States.

Gayle Grass's book, *Catch a Falling Star*, is available from Iris the Dragon Inc., Otter Creek, 667 Highway 15, R.R.#J, Lombardy, Ontario. KOG #10. The cost is CDN \$15.95 plus \$5 postage and handling (plus GST).

Talmadge Rogalla's book, *Delusions of Grandeur*, is available in electronic format from www.zeus-publications.com. It costs US \$5 for a downloadable version and US \$7.50 for a CD version.

live a normal life."

But why tell such a personal story?

For Brent, it was part self-healing: immigrants from England, Brent and her husband had few people to turn to for support in Canada and were forced to deal with the illness virtually alone.

"There's not too many people you can talk to about it," she says. "But I have to talk about it."

If Brent's book- entitled *In the Valley of the Shadow* and available in electronic format- is a chronicle of how difficult schizophrenia is for some people to deal with, Chip Correll is a poster boy for the benefits of early intervention. When the Oldsmar, Florida man began inexplicably to believe his visiting grandmother was planning to kill him in 1995, his parents quickly had the 24-year-old committed and treated. A diagnosis of schizophrenia and the right medication quickly allowed Correll, who also suffers from obsessive compulsive disorder, to gain control of his illness.

His new book, *Overcoming OCD and Schizophrenia With God in My Life*, was published last September after four years of writing.

"It was self-healing writing it-it

was very therapeutic," says Correll, who has received letters from consumers and family members thanking him for stressing the importance of taking medication on time. Correll hopes his book, chronicling his own personal story, will shed light on mental illness.

"I want others to learn what it's like to live with a serious (mental) illness on a daily basis," he says.

Gayle Grass doesn't make her son's mental illness or its effect on her family a focus of her book. In fact, the Perth, Ontario 'woman declines to even talk about the illness. Instead, she hopes to reach kids and their parents with a book meant to erase the fear of mental illness and promote early intervention for young people.

In *Catch a Falling Star*, a book with illustrations by fellow Perth resident Coral Nault, the adventures of young boy named 'Fish and an imaginary dragon' meet are used to describe the beginning symptoms of mental illness in the boy. The boy goes with his parents to 'the city' to a clinic to get the help he needs to become well, then returns home.

"I wanted to break away from the tragedy of the stories," Grass says of

other wrenching personal stories. "I've chosen not to talk about the mental illness.

"I wanted to find something really positive."

If she was expecting to be welcomed with open arms by publishers, she was wrong: over a period of two years, Grass and Nault were turned down by publisher after publisher, who said there wasn't enough interest or a big enough market.

"It (mental illness) was frightening to them, too," muses Grass. "We must have sent out 50 packages all over the States and Canada. There was nothing."

Undeterred, Grass's family pumped in their own money- along with sponsorship from heavy-weight businesses and institutions- to form a publishing company.

"The payback is, you know it's doing something good," says Grass. "There's a great need for this."

For Talmadge Rogalla, a 32-year-old resident of Taunton, England who was diagnosed with schizophrenia in 1990 after suffering symptoms for five years; telling his story helped him to overcome the shame he felt.

In *Delusions of Grandeur*, Rogalla recounts the disturbed sleep patterns, delusions and paranoia- such as believing he was being chased by the military for spreading information on thermonuclear bombs- that eventually led to three suicide attempts.

The autobiographical book includes portions written while he was delusional.

"At first I really felt ashamed of myself," he says, recalling what it was like when his antipsychotic medication began to work and he realized how delusional he'd been. "It was totally humiliating to read my work when I got better."

But Rogalla says writing the autobiographical book forced him to come to grips with his illness.

"It took a lot of courage to write my book," he says. "I hope a lot of sufferers will realize that they are not on their own, and take comfort from my book."