Raising awareness of mental illness

Author Gayle Grass of Lombardy takes multi-media approach

By BRUCE PEEVER

Staff Writer

When it comes to dealing with mental illness, most of us would rather stick our heads in the sand and pretend the problem goes away.

Lombardy author Gayle Grass wants to change that stigma and has embarked on a multi-faceted media barrage that includes a book and a stage production at Toronto’s Harbourfront. These however, are just scratching the surface.

"The major problem with mental illness is the stigma of fear that is attached. But one in four of us suffer some form of mental illness, covering a spectrum from mild depression to schizophrenia. The real problem is a lack of education," Grass says.

"Twenty years ago, people just didn't want to go there. Everyone wants to help cancer patients, but not those with mental illness. It is a very tragic disease," she adds.

Mental illness means the brain is sick. Like any treat it early, the problem can be worsened. Every child who has a mental disorder will have some kind of learning disorder. But we have to be careful and not start fooling around with the body's chemistry. Sometimes if the brain's

Many children now suffer from ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder) which, if left untreated, can deteriorate into something worse. The author recognizes that now, but it wasn't always so evident.

"ADD is now recognized as an early indicator of later trouble and if you don't

There is a lot of symbolism in that book for me. To me, words and pictures are inseparable and this book is very much a homegrown product."

--Gayle Grass

Gayle Grass used a lot of her own experience with her son as a basis for her successful book, Catch a Falling Star. The book has been turned into a play to be showcased this spring in Toronto.
This is the illustration which adorns the cover of Gayle Grass's Catch A Falling Star. Each of the pictures was painstakingly drawn by Perth resident Coral Nault.

"I am very thrilled with the number of people it has touched," the author adds. It was from this high level of interest from her book that Grass was asked to write a script for a play. That performance will be screened at Toronto's Harbourfront March 21 to 31 as part of Madness and Arts 2003 World Festival.

She has also received positive feedback from mental health professionals. That was extremely important to the author from the very beginning.

"I feel so relieved that it appears we did this right," she says.

As well, Grass has developed an Iris special education kit as a guide for teachers to understand mental illness in their classroom.

“Our kits address the idea of a fishing box full of tools or tackles that can be used in the classroom setting for assisting the child and lessen his stress,” she says.

Some of those tools or tackle include stress balls or toys to keep the young hands busy. Grass has also developed a deep breathing exercise called ‘dragon breathing’ that can be learned and used anytime to calm a child.

With the success of this first project, are there plans for more books?

"I do have the second one written and we have some illustrations. But it has not been published," she says.

Catch a Falling Star is available locally at the Valley Book Store on Gore Street in Perth. To learn more about the book, or theatre production, or a special education kit, visit www.iristhedragon.com.
other disease, if untreated the illness will worsen. The key, Grass explains, is to get diagnosed early. It helps too if the proper education is there so that families can know what to look for.

"It would be good if we had more community involvement in this disease and education is so necessary. After that the funding is needed to provide the care. Mental illness is the least funded, but takes up more bed space, of all health issues," she explains.

Grass knows what she is talking about. Her own son was diagnosed with mental illness while he was in university. A lot of her and her son's life formed the impetus for her first book Catch a Falling Star.

The bridge where Iris lives is identical to one over the Tay River where Grass used to fish as a young girl. Many of Nault's richly detailed drawings are of real landmarks and each took over 60 hours to create.

In her afterword, the author explains that mental illness exists, is increasing and needs to be better understood.

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This illustration by Coral Nault, which features the dragon leafing through a book in its cave, is the author's favorite. Each of the drawings took upwards of 60 hours to complete.