

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

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

with illustrations by Coral Nault, a Perth-area art teacher who also had a child with mental illness.

The fictional story revolves around a young boy named Fish who loves fishing and happens to catch the straw hat of a dragon named Iris who lives in a cave underneath a

bridge. Fish and the dragon become good friends and it is Iris who senses the early signs of mental illness in Fish. Iris tells Fish to relax, and to use some of her dragon secrets to a healthy brain. When that is not enough, Iris convinces Fish to seek professional help. Fish is sent away for a time and comes back to Iris who has been looking after him by shining his star.

"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," Grass says.

It is based highly on the region where she grew up before going off to the University of London where she picked up her Masters in Art and Architecture.

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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



EMC photo by BRUCE PEEVER
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.