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Astor raises awareness with Family Fun Day

By Jennifer Warren

POUGHKEEPSIE - After attending a music event for mental health awareness in New Jersey, Trish Luchnick knew exactly what she had to do.

"I loved the idea, and I wanted to do something similar here in this area," said Luchnick, Director for Family Driven Care at Astor Services for Children & Families. "It's remarkable how many lives are affected by mental illness and because of the stigma, it's not really discussed until there is a full-blown crisis."

Intent on opening up the dialogue, while reducing the stereotypes and stigmas attached to mental illness, Luchnick, along with the help of several others, helped create Saturday's free "Family Fun Day," held at Poughkeepsie's Mid-Hudson Civic Center. The six hour event was part of a nationwide campaign combatting the mental health stigma that exists throughout our country. Assisted by a host of local agencies that provide mental health and other services to children and families, it also included free screenings, courtesy of Astor. Entertainment, including the Big Joe Fitz Band M* Power, Rat Boy Jr and illusionist Ryan Ducher, was also on tap.

One of the agencies on hand was the Lexington Center for Recovery. Colorful posters, advocating traditional versus criminal values as well as education on mood-altering substances, stressing education for transformation, adorned the booth in the back, right corner of the Civic Center. Maria Soricelli, who could be seen leading an "Honest Pledge" against drugs, is the Adolescent Program Director at the Center.

"We take the adolescents into the community and engage them in pro social activities," said Soricelli. "We want to let the community know it's okay to be honest about drugs and stop the stigma that someone will condemn you if you're honest."

Another booth filling the Civic Center was Health Quest, one of several agencies emphasizing the integral need for relaying nutrition education to our youth.

"It's so important to educate our children about nutrition, even getting them to drink water, as sugar is found in so many drinks and leads to obesity as well as negatively affects behavior," said Roufia Payman, Supervisor of Outpatient Education Nutritional Education at Health Quest. "We want to promote community wellness; food is your medicine, and it's such an important part of your overall health and life."

With 50 percent of mental disorders beginning before the age of 10 years old and an estimated 57.7 million Americans experiencing a mental disorder, an increasing number of people are in some way touched by these



Brittney Mancuso, Lily Pham and Michael James were on hand for Family Fun Day, an anti-stigma campaign against mental illness, representing the Lexington Center and Recovery program.

conditions. Luchnick, along with the many others who put together Saturday's event, were hopeful education and awareness can dispel some of the needless and harmful stigmas that continue to exist. 'Family Fun Day' appeared to be a great start toward that end.

"My children receive services through Astor, and it's such a good thing to see they are not alone," said Mary Hearth of Poughkeepsie as she chatted with a representative from WellCare about affordable health insurance. "It's nice to come to an event like this and find out about all of the resources available out there as well as the fact that my children are accepted by others."

Tamika Ross of the City of Poughkeepsie had a similar positive experience.

"Today is a good day, especially all of the hands-on activities offered, for the kids," said Tamika Ross of the City of Poughkeepsie. "It's keeping the kids busy and helping build their confidence."

It's that community building and specialness of all children that Astor aimed to not only promote Saturday, but each and every day.

"We are all different, and no one out there should have to be put into a mold," said Luchnick. "We just really want to highlight the families, letting them know they are not alone; it's such a powerful thing to see others share our experiences."