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Challenging stereotypes

Photographer focuses on people with mental illness

By Sue Kiyabu

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Susan's thin braid of black hair falls over one eye. Her face, fixed in black and white, allows us to stare back, to examine the round shape of her eyes, her broad nose and the wayward gray hair that sprouts from the top of her hairline.

The image is striking in its detail, but it's her voice that captivates.

Articulate and without self-pity, she speaks about her struggle with obsessive-compulsive disorder. She shares her need to check her front door lock 50 or 60 times a day, and her ability to listen to a song for 15 hours straight — putting on headphones to hide her illness from neighbors. She says with wisdom and conviction, "There is no such thing as normal."

Jaime also stares straight ahead, seemingly confrontational and impatient, except she has a pain in her eyes that's hard to ignore.

Wearing loud, flowered tights, Jaime's looming pregnant belly is semi-exposed and a lace bra peeks out behind a silky wrap. This is not a celebrity portrait of motherhood.

On an accompanying audio recording, Jaime talks in a clipped British accent about her debutante ball at age 16, skiing in Switzerland, living at The Ritz-Carlton and embassies in France and Italy. Back then, she says, she was full of hope. Now she is homeless and pregnant, a Desert Storm veteran suffering from chronic pain, post-traumatic stress disorder and panic attacks. She says, "Mental illness discriminates no one."

Jaime and Susan are among 55 individuals featured in photographer Michael Nye's traveling interactive exhibit, "Fine Line: Mental Health/Mental Illness," which aims to challenge stereotypes and preconceptions about mental illness. His large-format, black-and-white portraits are combined with audio, allowing the subjects the power of their own words. Some stories are tragic, some hopeful. Each subject struggles with various mental health issues, such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, depression or anxiety. The exhibit has traveled to more than 30 cities in the United States.

Nye says, "Stories take us inside complicated issues, where you can find empathy for someone's life. I wanted stories to be in context of someone's larger life. Not just about mental health — but if they are a musician or a teacher, or a philosopher or someone who was a homeless person, that their story about mental health is also the larger story of their life and what they do and what they believe in."

According to Mental Health Kokua, a statewide organization dedicated to assisting Hawai'i's mentally ill and sponsor of the exhibit: roughly 25 percent of Hawai'i residents age 65 and older suffer from some type of mental illness; more than 85,000 people statewide suffer from depression; and in recent years Hawai'i had one of the highest rates in the country for teens reporting suicidal thoughts or suicide attempts.

"Everyone knows someone who is affected by mental illness," Nye says. "It's such a relevant issue

right now. ... We talk about our physical health and our diets and what we eat, but we rarely talk about mental health and it's so important. The name of the exhibit is "Fine Line," and it represents the fragility between mental health and mental illness."

The idea for the exhibit surfaced about six years ago when Nye's friend Kerrie Crouch committed suicide. A former architecture student at the University of Texas at Austin, an athlete, a poet, painter and naturalist, Crouch was a multitalented individual who built a house by himself at age 19. At 21, he was diagnosed with schizophrenia. For the next 30 years he struggled.

"Knowing Kerrie and learning about schizophrenia, the amount of courage it takes, the stamina, made me want to learn more," says Nye, in his soft, Texas accent. "Sometimes, you just want to hold on to someone else's story."

Nye, a former lawyer, did some research. He learned about brain chemistry and neuroscience. He traveled the country, visiting a diversity of support groups and asking for volunteers for his project. The response was overwhelming. He photographed and interviewed each person included in "Fine Line" over a period of five days, usually ending up with about four hours of tape. From there, he edited their stories to about five minutes. Each person had final approval of the finished piece.

"I found myself being inspired over and over at the resilience and strategies," Nye says. "What we have in common, not so much the differences we have. The illness doesn't define someone — they want to be useful and helpful and they want their life to count for something. I think we all strive for that in our lives."

Sue Kiyabu is a freelance writer living in Honolulu.
