



NORTHUMBERLAND HILLS HOSPITAL

NEWS RELEASE – FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

A story of hope and recovery with NHH’s Assertive Community Treatment Team for Mental Illness Awareness Week

NORTHUMBERLAND COUNTY, Monday, October 7th, 2019—Mental Illness Awareness Week (MIAW) began October 6th, and Northumberland Hills Hospital (NHH)—through the story of one very inspiring client—is taking the opportunity to highlight information on the mental health services available in our region, and demonstrate the impact of one team in-particular, NHH’s **Assertive Community Treatment (ACT) Team**.

There was a time, a decade ago, when **Noah*** would not have been able to sit down and have a coffee and a chat around a table with friends.

Mental illness had interrupted Noah’s life. He had turned away from himself, his job, and from family and friends who cared about him. He was scared and alone, obsessed with the colours black and white, and convinced that he had the power to change the colours in the world... and if he didn’t, or couldn’t, harm would come to him, and to others.

“I was never on drugs,” he explained, “I went to school. I had a job and a license. I had a lot of friends and my life was on a good track.”

While there were some signs in high school, Noah was in his mid-twenties, working, and living with his parents, when his mental illness really presented itself. His obsession with colour, and then numbers, was all he could think about, and in what he recounts as one of his worst moments, Noah found himself in a farmer’s field near his parents’ home in Roseneath. And he did not want to live.

Diagnosed with schizoaffective disorder, Noah has persevered in the face of his condition, and found the help he needed. After multiple hospitalizations, a lot of work on his part, and years of support from his parents, neighbours, outreach community mental health workers, and psychiatrists, he is ready to share his story for Mental Illness Awareness Week.

Today Noah lives independently, and even volunteers to help others who are on mental illness journeys of their own. He shares his story this month as a message of hope for the one in five Canadians dealing with mental illness today. Though his journey to recovery is ongoing, Noah is very grateful for the circle of supports that helped him to get to the good place he’s in today—especially his friends in the ACT Team.

One of 80 clients from across Northumberland County served today by NHH’s ACT Team, Noah, now 37, is a strong advocate for the power ACT had to help him when he needed it most.

A small team, ACT is comprised of a variety of clinicians including a case manager, nurses, a social worker, an occupational therapist, an addiction specialist, a vocational specialist and a psychiatrist.

Based out of NHH's Elgin Street offices, and overseen by **Jennifer Cox**, Integrated Director of Community Mental Health who links care between Ontario Shores Centre for Mental Health Services and both Northumberland hospitals, most of NHH's ACT Team members actually spend little of their time in the office, and the majority supporting people living with severe mental illness in the community. Clients range in age from 18 to 65, and with the intensive support most are able to maintain their goal of staying out of hospital, and out of jail.

"The majority of our clients are living with a diagnosis of severe bipolar disorder or schizophrenia," explains **Julia Smith**, NHH's ACT Team lead. "We are available to them 7 days per week/365 days a year, using a model that goes to where they are, taking care to the client, be that in their own home, with family, in shelter or on the street."

Many of NHH's ACT clients receive daily visits, sometimes twice a day—others are seen weekly. "Our aim is to fit into the client's life, as required, so the support is ongoing. Our ACT services are not time limited and we work hard to support the whole person, as their needs dictate, including mental but also physical and social needs, such as support with activities of daily living like cooking, eating and personal care, housing assistance, help connecting with other community resources, or simply helping with transportation to get to and from a doctor appointment...whatever the need may be, we're there."

When an ACT client is in crisis, and requires hospitalization, the first stop is the NHH Emergency Department (ED). ACT staff accompany the client to the ED, and liaise directly with Laurie Gallagher, NHH's Mental Health Crisis Clinician. Once in the ED, Laurie becomes the lead advocate, and makes sure that they get all the support they need. Likewise, Laurie is a link back to the ACT team, to keep them informed of the client's next steps, and helps to work together with the team until the client is discharged back into the community or transferred to a psychiatric hospital. "The relationship between community support and emergency support is key to our ACT clients' wellbeing," explains Julia. "It's a whole system approach."

Isolation is one of the biggest challenges faced by those with severe mental illness, and in response to clients' suggestions, the ACT Team, in 2016, opened a space to further help combat that. The Living Room, located in the Market Building in downtown Cobourg, now operates two days a week. Noah has been an important force behind the Living Room service, and today, part of ACT's "stepped care" program of less intensive support, he takes a lead role in The Living Room's day to day functioning, opening up, locking up, and—with ACT Team staff—assisting other ACT clients who can use it as a downtown drop-in centre for support and friendship.

Reflecting on his journey to the ACT Team, Noah says: "I was lucky. My mom knew a guy that knew about the ACT Team, and I got in. It's been a total changer for me. I've got a lot of friends."

The trial and error of finding the right mix of medication to suppress his mania has left its mark on Noah. "I still have shakes from the last meds," he explains, showing how his hands shake heavily, "but I've stopped the shaking in my head."

“I got the high more than anything,” he says of his illness when symptoms were at their worst. “Mania was a great feeling.”

For Noah, ACT has become a life-changing social network as well as a clinical lifeline. “The events they have are great,” he says, smiling. “We play hockey in the winter, baseball in the summer. There’s a Christmas party, a summer BBQ, floor hockey—it’s great!” Noah, whose mother has also become a volunteer, has benefited from it all, and now both do what they can to help others, too.

With scheduled home visits from ACT workers once every two weeks, and appointments every six months with his psychiatrist, Noah—and his family—know he can call on ACT any time if he finds he needs help. “I still have times when I think of the stuff I used to focus on,” he says, “but it just doesn’t stick with me now. The meds I am on cut it off, and... I’ve worked on it.”

His message: “The ACT Team is a safe place to come. The people are respectful. To anyone else going through the same kind of stuff I went through, you are not alone!”

By talking about mental health in our community, we can, together, help put an end to the stigma associated with mental illness—and help people find the supports they need, when they need them. 4,669 individuals were served by NHH’s Community Mental Health Services programming in 2018/19, almost 500 more than the year prior. Needs continue to rise. With community partnerships now providing walk-in counselling for adults and youth, to crisis support in the Emergency Department and the local M-HEART team, which pairs mental health professionals with area police services, NHH has a growing list of individual and group services to help support local need. Where specialized service is not available locally, we’re here to help connect.

For information on the mental health services available at NHH today, and contact information for the team, please visit the Patient Care Services section of the Hospital website at <https://nhh.ca/Patients/PatientCareServices/OutpatientCare/CommunityMentalHealth> or contact the team directly at: **905-377-9891** or **1-888-294-7579**

**Noah wanted to share his story, but he asked that his real name not be included to protect his privacy, and that of his loved ones.*

Media contact: Jennifer Gillard, Senior Director, Public Affairs and Strategic Partnerships, jjillard@nhh.ca or 905-377-7757.

About Northumberland Hills Hospital – Located approximately 100 kilometres east of Toronto, NHH delivers a broad range of acute, post-acute, outpatient and diagnostic services. Acute services include emergency and intensive care, medical/surgical care, obstetrical care and palliative care. Post-acute specialty services (PASS) include restorative care and rehabilitation. Mental health care, chemotherapy, dialysis and 16 other ambulatory care clinics are offered on an outpatient basis through partnerships with regional centres and nearby specialists. NHH offers a full range of diagnostic services, including magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), computed tomography (CT) and mammography. The hospital serves the catchment area of west Northumberland County. A mixed urban and rural population of approximately 60,000 residents, west Northumberland comprises the Town of Cobourg, the Municipality of Port Hope and the townships of Hamilton, Cramahe and Alnwick/Haldimand. NHH employs approximately 600 people and relies on the additional support provided by physicians and volunteers. NHH is an active member of the Central East Local Health Integration Network. For more information, please visit www.nhh.ca or follow us on Twitter [@NorHillsHosp](https://twitter.com/NorHillsHosp).

- END -