

How Journey of Hope has Impacted My Life

By Gloria Stumvoll

Journey of Hope is a faith-based support group for individuals with family members living with mental illness.



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Nothing compares to the sweet sound of, *we understand!*

Nearly four years ago, my husband and I attended the first Journey of Hope (JOH) meeting at Calvary. I remember how hesitant I was going through the doors that night – who would be on the other side and what would they think of ME? Little thought was given to the fact that they might be there for the same reason. But who would understand my anger, frustration, discouragement, disappointment, isolation, hopelessness, and yearning to find a God who seemed to have abandoned me?

I was surprised that I knew most of these people! Many had struggled behind closed doors, with the assumption that no one else would understand what they were going through. Nine other couples and two single parents shared their stories of living with family members with mental illness. Nothing had compared to the sweet sound of, *we understand!* I was seeing the faith exhibited by others during life crises and learning to rely more on God (who really had never left). I was learning to cherish each day and the victories it would bring.

During this time together, we've been there for each other in the good times and the not-so-good times. We've mourned the battles our loved ones have had to fight and the heartaches each participant has had to experience. We have rejoiced in

big and little accomplishments. We've provided meals, cleaned, helped with graduation parties and weddings, moved some to new homes, watched each other's children, and so much more. We became the hands and feet of Jesus in service projects like CareFest when we turned the Thomas House into a home with all new curb appeal, and we have walked in the annual NAMI (National Alliance for Mental Illness) Walks for Research and Education raising nearly \$25,000 the last three years to provide people with mental illness the necessary resources to live better lives.

Two years ago, God convicted me that this ministry had to expand to others at Calvary and in the community. A year or so later, I attended an all-day facilitator training program through NAMI. Shortly thereafter - the birthing of JOH 2 occurred, opening up new opportunities for others who needed support. At the beginning of this year, we started JOH 3 with the involvement of 20 more families; again with the intent of sharing the burden and putting hope and trust in Christ Jesus.

How has JOH impacted my life? With several hospitalizations for depression over the years, the birth of JOH four years ago has brought me amazing support through visits, prayer, meals for my family, and seeing me through to wellness while supporting our 26-year-old son who battles bipolar disorder. During my most recent bout of depression, recovery

came quicker than ever before – puzzling the professionals caring for me, but not those who cared for me in prayer. The support and encouragement as we ride the rollercoaster with our son has been life saving for my entire family. Mental illness is very stressful on families. My husband and I know that JOH has sustained us and held us together, providing the strength and encouragement we have needed to support our son.

Through JOH and God's minute-by-minute presence in my life, He has brought me to a new place, and He has revealed the purpose and plan He has always had for me. Last September, I began lay counselor training for Calvary's new Compassion Counseling Center that opened in May. I pray that I will be able to use my life experiences and training to walk beside others who are overwhelmed by life's circumstances.

My hope has been restored, weeks have turned into months and months have turned into years, and all of those who have been on this journey with me are treasured friends for a lifetime and for eternity. I've been through some pretty tough times on this journey, but thankfully God is in control and He knows where I'm going and, best of all, He knows how to get me there.