Monica, a single mother with bipolar disorder, was working as a cashier when an act of violence turned her children’s lives upside down.

Despite reporting the assault to police, the family was forced to move for their safety, causing Monica to lose her job. Relatives took in the older children. With no other options, Monica spent a month living with her younger children in her car, bathing them in the sink of a local Laundromat.

“Not having all of my children with me was very painful. I worried about them so much. I felt so helpless.”

After almost a month on the streets, Monica found an emergency shelter and eventually moved into transitional housing with all four of her children. When Monica began receiving mental health care at Didi Hirsch’s Glendale Center, she was surprised to learn that so many other services were available to help her family.

Both of her teens went into counseling while Monica took a parenting class. And when she needed to leave the temporary apartment, a Didi Hirsch housing specialist helped Monica apply for permanent housing and secure funds to buy kitchen supplies and other items to care for her children.

“I’m very thankful for what I’ve learned about how to be a better mother and keep myself healthy for my children,” Monica says. “I feel so blessed that we have a home.”
Adapted from Dr. Curry’s interview about suicide with The Argonaut’s Managing Editor Joe Piasecki.

Why do people take their own lives? They take their lives because they’re in terrible psychological pain and can’t think of any other solution in the moment. About 90% of the time those people have been suffering from mental illness and/or substance use, which means that, with treatment, there’s hope.

Have you been affected by suicide?
I have lost three family members to suicide. I also suffer from a mood disorder. Keeping my depression a secret didn’t help. Getting treatment did.

What was the impact of Robin Williams’ suicide? In the week after Robin Williams’ death, calls, chats and texts to our suicide crisis line doubled. We called in staff and volunteers from every shift so we could pick up all the calls. Some people who were feeling suicidal said his death shook them up... but they wanted help and saw the phone number in the media.

How has technology affected mental health in society? Social networking can bring people who are lonely together. It can also connect them to people who are feeling as helpless as they are. But if someone types “suicide” into a search engine, one of the first things to come up is the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline phone number at (877) 727-4747.

What are the warning signs of suicide? Some of the most dramatic signs are when a person makes statements like, “you’d all be better off without me” or starts giving away favorite possessions or withdraws from activities he or she normally enjoys.

Are some populations more at risk? It varies from country to country but in the U.S., older and middle-aged white males are at greatest risk of suicide. An equal number of women attempt, but more men die during attempts—probably because they use firearms.

What should you do if you believe someone is suicidal? Let them know you care about them. Asking people if they are thinking about suicide does not put the idea in their heads. If they are that desperate, it gives them an opening to talk without fear of being judged. Don’t shame them or tell them they are selfish because they won’t want to talk. You can also call the crisis line and help them get to a professional.

To learn more about warning signs of suicide, go to www.didihirsch.org.

I became interested in mental health advocacy after seeing firsthand how the stigma of mental illness hurts families. As Board Chair, I want to make sure our message reaches every community in Southern California: lives are saved when people are no longer ashamed to get help.

In addition to erasing the stigma of mental illness, we must overcome communication barriers. Our Suicide Prevention Center’s Crisis Line was one of the first in the nation to have Spanish-speaking crisis counselors available to callers around the clock. We also have Korean- and Vietnamese-speaking counselors during peak hours. And our Glendale site has Armenian-language programs that support the largest population of Armenians in the country.

I am proud of the way Didi Hirsch fulfills its promise to provide quality mental health care, substance use and suicide prevention services to children and adults in Los Angeles and Orange Counties.

I intend to use my fluency in Spanish to do more outreach in the diverse communities that Didi Hirsch serves.

Working together, we can erase the stigma of mental illness, reduce communication barriers and transform lives.
Overlooked Children
Partnering With Schools to Help Military Families

When Gregory started having problems in his 2nd-grade class, his teacher knew from his enrollment form that his mother was an Army veteran and referred the family to Didi Hirsch’s Military Families are Resilient (MFAR) Program.

Gregory and his mom were able to get the help they needed because the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), the nation’s second-largest district, amended its enrollment forms this year to identify military families.

This may seem like a small change, but it has made a big difference for military families in Los Angeles — a mostly civilian area that lacks the built-in networks of support found on military bases.

“The needs of military children are often overlooked in Los Angeles,” says MFAR Program Director Erica Trejo, LMFT. “It makes a difference when teachers and administrators are aware of the special challenges they face.”

Through MFAR, Gregory and his mother participated in a 12-week program that uses proven techniques to improve parent-child relationships. Gregory played therapeutic video games to learn patience while his mother had “homework assignments” to help her develop better coping skills. By the time they finished the program, the seven-year-old was no longer having problems at school, his mom was feeling less depressed and both reported lower levels of stress.

A bill under review (AB2341) would require all California school districts to amend their enrollment forms to identify military families.

A Passion to Serve
Didi Hirsch’s Newest
Board Members

For more information about all of Didi Hirsch’s board members, visit www.didihirsch.org.

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Memorial banners remember hundreds of loved ones lost to suicide.

Many of the participants have lost loved ones to suicide.

Our Alive & Running 5K Walk/Run for Suicide Prevention drew about 2,000 runners, walkers, spectators and volunteers and raised a record $260,000+ for Didi Hirsch’s Suicide Prevention Center. It was also an opportunity to remember loved ones and raise awareness about suicide.

The Sept. 29 event included musical performances, moving presentations by several survivors and an appearance by Tom Kenny, the voice of SpongeBob SquarePants, who emceed the Kiddie-K.

The Suicide Prevention Center received the Top Fundraising Team Award; Team Limelight, headed by survivor Kristine Barry-Olsen, won the Outstanding Team Award; and the Chikara Daiko drummers, brought to us by survivor Marilyn Nobori, whose 14-year-old daughter died by suicide, received the Inspiration Award.

Actor Tom Kenny, the voice of SpongeBob SquarePants, entertains a young audience.
He Can See Clearly Now...

Kenyon was terrified when he believed his co-workers had turned into zombies. “You’re dead, man. Wake up!” he kept yelling.

Kenyon, who suffers from delusions, lost his job as a house painter after that outburst and spent a year eating meals at homeless shelters, living on the streets and in abandoned houses.

“I didn’t know where to go with myself,” Kenyon, now 34, recalls. “I was a bit bitter in my direction.”

When Kenyon began receiving treatment at Didi Hirsch Inglewood Center, his outlook changed substantially. As Kenyon focused on getting physically and mentally well, he no longer saw zombies or experienced other delusions. He signed up for the Healthy Inglewood Project (HIP), so he could get all of his healthcare at one place. As part of this program, he enrolled in Cognitive Enhancement Therapy, where he participated in group activities and used therapeutic computer games to help him improve his communication and social skills.

“‘The human mind is like an umbrella,’ Kenyon says. ‘It functions best when it’s open.’”

In fact, Kenyon’s improvement was so impressive that he was asked to give the opening remarks at HIP’s first graduation ceremony.

“The human mind is like an umbrella,” Kenyon remarked to fellow graduates. “It functions best when it’s open.”

Kenyon said he learned more effective ways to talk to potential employers. “Instead of saying, ‘I ain’t coming in today,’ a better way to say that is ‘Boss, can I take the day off? I don’t feel very well,’” he explains.

In group activities, Kenyon earned a reputation as an effective listener and a caring and compassionate man. “He became our resident philosopher,” says Derek Haskell, Kenyon’s wellness coach. “He always set the stage for his classmates to feel comfortable.”

“Save the dates!”

**Erasing the Stigma Leadership Awards**
**Apr. 23, 2015**

**Alive & Running 5K**
**Sept. 27, 2015**

Many people would like to help Didi Hirsch Mental Health Services, but feel they cannot afford to make a sizable gift today. A bequest by will or revocable trust can be tailored to complement your personal lifestyle and financial goals and also support Didi Hirsch.

If you have not already put Didi Hirsch Mental Health Services in your will or trust, please consider doing so and let us know so we may recognize your commitment in the Didi Hirsch Legacy Society. No minimum commitment is required, and your participation will inspire others to give.

For more information on the Legacy Society and how to include Didi Hirsch in your estate plans, please contact Mickie Faris, Vice President of Development, at 310-751-5425 or mfaris@didihirsch.org.

Tomorrow’s Legacy Begins Today
Using the power of social media to accelerate change, Didi Hirsch launched its #erasingthestigma campaign at our 18th Annual Erasing the Stigma Leadership Awards on April 24, 2014.

Chaired by Didi Hirsch Board Member Shawn Amos and his sister, Sarah Amos, the dinner raised $368,000 for needed services. About 500 people attended the event, which started countless “conversations” about mental health, stigma and suicide across a variety of social media channels such as Facebook, Twitter and Tumblr.

Didi Hirsch honored three champions who leverage social media to erase the stigma of mental illness. Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) Women’s Bantam weight title-holder Ronda Rousey, who co-starred in The Expendables 3, received the Leadership Award for using social media to raise awareness about eating disorders, mental illness and substance use.

Natasha Tracy, an award-winning blogger who writes about her struggles with bipolar disorder in her acclaimed blog “Bipolar Burble,” received the Beatrice Stern Media Award. And American hip-hop recording artist Kid Cudi, who encourages depressed and suicidal youth to get help on social media, was named Didi Hirsch’s first Mental Health Ambassador.

Social media leaders Meghan Camarena and Joey Graceffa, who appeared in the 2013 and 2014 all-star edition of The Amazing Race on CBS, emceed the awards. Kid Cudi brought the dinner crowd to its feet with a rousing performance of his song, “Pursuit of Happiness.”

“This year we are celebrating and harnessing the power of social media to erase the stigma of mental illness and replace it with hope.”

- Event Co-Chair Shawn Amos

Photos by: Beth Herzhaft
The patio at Via Avanta, Didi Hirsch’s unique residential treatment center for women and their children, looked magical. Lights glittered against the night sky and balloons and streamers hung from the rafters and trees as guests enjoyed fruit, tea sandwiches and desserts prepared by the residents.

All were gathered to celebrate nine women who were about to graduate from Via Avanta. They carried bouquets as they walked beneath a flower-and-ribbon-covered arch to take their seats.

With hugs and tears, the graduates and their sponsors and coaches shared stories about struggles with substance use, mental illness, domestic violence and homelessness and their long journeys to recovery.

Elizabeth, a young mother, came from “a good family” and wanted to become a police officer. She started drinking and smoking marijuana to cope with her stress and eventually turned to methamphetamine and crack cocaine.

In and out of jail, Elizabeth wrecked her car, became homeless and couldn’t care for her children. Giving up drugs seemed impossible. But when she faced losing custody of her children, she accepted help from Via Avanta.

“I didn’t want to live any more,” Elizabeth recalls. “My children needed me, but I didn’t think I had it in me to be a mom. I was really broken.”

In June 2013, Elizabeth moved into Via Avanta with her three-year-old son and found the comfort and structure she needed in its therapeutic community. With group support and parenting classes, she learned how to take care of herself and her child. Today, she has rebuilt her life. She has a job, a car and a place to live. Her son is enrolled in pre-school.

“I am living a life beyond my wildest dreams,” Elizabeth said before accepting her certificate. “This place saved my life.”

When she and the others finished speaking, the graduates each lit a white candle and used it to light the candle of a current resident, passing on the torch of healing and hope.
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Didi Hirsch Newsletter

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Alive & Running 5K participants receive white carnations, a symbol of hope, as they cross the finish line.

Mission Statement
Didi Hirsch transforms lives by providing quality mental health and substance abuse services in communities where stigma or poverty limit access.

If you would like to be added or removed from our mailing list, please contact the Development Department at (310) 751-5455.