Riggs Co-hosts Community Event on Suicide

“The focus of this event – suicide, stigma and mental health – is of central importance for both our clinical work and for our scholarship. Suicide is a serious public health issue for our nation, for Massachusetts and for Berkshire County. . . . Every 16 minutes, an American takes his or her own life. Yet beyond this staggering statistic are the ripple effects felt by the loved ones left behind, and by those who continue to suffer from mental illness and contemplate suicide.” Austen Riggs Center Medical Director/CEO James Sacksteder, MD, used these words to greet an audience of 600 at the Mahaiwe Performing Arts Center in Great Barrington at the March 28th event.

Partnering with the Berkshire International Film Festival (BIFF), the Erikson Institute for Education and Research of the Austen Riggs Center presented the documentary, Running From Crazy, as a community-wide event on suicide, stigma and mental health. The event featured an appearance by Mariel Hemingway who co-produced the documentary about her family’s experience with suicide and mental illness. Though stigma surrounding mental illness in general exists, nowhere is it more evident than in its relationship with suicide. The event was a unique opportunity for community members to come together and invigorate conversations around the issues surrounding suicide, stigma and mental health. Working with more than 20 community organizations as well as BIFF, the Center used the film and Mariel Hemingway’s advocacy to focus on these issues. The film and ensuing roundtable discussion helped foster connections for audience members and to communicate the value and necessity of creating a dialogue around suffering, loss and grief.

“We work with patients who are often survivors of very serious suicide attempts, and others who are preoccupied in an ongoing way with suicide in their family or in their personal lives. The stakes are very high. We have an obligation to learn as much as we possibly can about what leads a person to become suicidal and how we as professionals can provide effective education and treatment for those wrestling with the issue of suicide. This is why the Erikson Institute conducts research in the area of the effect of suicide on survivors, and other research on understanding what is going on inside of a person’s mind and in their life when they make a decision to end their life, with the hope that such an understanding will allow us to recognize more clearly moments of heightened risk and to intervene” added Evelyn Stefansson Nef Director of the Erikson Institute, Jane G. Tillman, PhD, as she joined Dr. Sacksteder on the stage to welcome the audience.

The idea for the event began when Steven Ackerman, PhD, staff psychologist at Riggs saw a news story featuring Mariel Hemingway discussing her documentary, Running From Crazy. He had the idea that bringing Ms. Hemingway to the Berkshires would be a very special opportunity to stimulate a community discussion focused on the topic of suicide and related mental health issues. The idea, spearheaded by Janet Hiser, director of development and alumni relations and chair of the Center’s Community Health Needs Assessment program, took shape when Board of Trustees member Jeff Diamond reached out to Kelley Vickery, the founder and director of the Berkshire International Film Festival and invited her to partner with the Center in

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From the Medical Director/CEO

This issue of the ARC News highlights multiple ways the Center is reaching out to connect with the wider world to meet the needs of various constituents and to have needs at the Center met by them. The goal is to create and sustain mutually enriching relationships and experiences that address aspects of the Center’s mission.

For example, the lead article discusses a Berkshire County community event that addressed the issues of suicide, stigma and mental health. This event involved working with over 20 local community organizations and partnering with the Berkshire International Film Festival. It reflected the Center’s long-standing and ongoing efforts to address health care needs that have been identified in the national, regional and local communities that the Center serves.

The report on the College Counseling Center Conference discusses an event that has been held annually for the last 13 years. This year’s topic was sexual assault in the college setting, an issue that is making headlines nationally and that affects countless lives including the lives of patients in treatment at the Center. The conference brought together staff at the Center and representatives from seven northeastern colleges to learn from one another about this urgent social issue. The clinical work at the Center is fundamentally rooted in the understanding of the individual in the social context. Hearing the experiences of those who work on college campuses brought into focus important aspects of that social context. This year’s conference vividly illustrated the richness of the learning that can result from bringing Center staff and staff from the college counseling centers together.

This edition of the ARC News also discusses two initiatives at the Center aimed at providing networking and learning opportunities for mental health professionals worldwide. These are the creation of an online psychodynamic community named “Meaning Matters” and the provision of continuing education activities on our website. New initiatives are intended to allow a wide variety of clinicians and professionals who share an interest in psychodynamic thinking to create a virtual community where deep thinking and discourse and continuing education can occur.

Finally, this edition of the newsletter announces an ending and a beginning in the position of the medical director/CEO of the Center. I will retire on June 30, 2015 and Andrew J. Gerber, MD, PhD, will begin as the next medical director/CEO on July 1, 2015. I have been on the staff of the Center for 38 years. I began as a first-year fellow in psychiatry in 1976 and served in various capacities over the years, including most recently and for the longest period of time, as the associate medical director and director of patient care. It has been an honor, privilege and pleasure to work at the Center. The Center provides an utterly unique opportunity to study and learn about the nature of human nature. This includes, most especially, learning about what goes awry in development and leads to profound emotional troubles and what can be done in treatment to address these issues and help development get back on track. I have loved working at the Center and will deeply miss the work and those I work with but I am also excited and look forward to exploring and enjoying new interests and activities. I am deeply grateful to everyone who contributed to my learning over the years. I am delighted to be succeeded by Andrew Gerber. His education and training and his knowledge, experience and skills as a clinician, researcher and administrator make him uniquely qualified to lead the Center into the future.

Best wishes and warm regards,

James L. Sacksteder, MD

James L. Sacksteder, MD

Annual College Counseling Center Conference Explores Sexual Assault

The annual College Counseling Center Conference, hosted by the Erikson Institute for Education and Research of the Austen Riggs Center, began thirteen years ago when members of the Bennington College counseling center expressed a need for a place to talk with colleagues from other northeast schools about their observations of a sharply higher percentage of incoming students taking psychoactive medications, often with the attitude of combined ignorance about the reason for the medications and an urgency to continue taking them. This recognition presaged the now well-known and written about proliferation of stimulant, antidepressant and opioid use on the college campus and beyond. In coming together and noticing the widespread nature of this phenomenon, conference participants began to wonder, “What are the students showing us about the nature of their experience not only on campus but also in the larger society, and in our collective responses on campus and beyond, what are we showing them?”

As we listen to our patients at Riggs, we develop a sense of who and what social issues are marginalized in our world. Creating a space for reflection that is somewhat separate from the pressures of that world supports treatment. But, at the same time, our work is fundamentally rooted in the understanding of the individual in the social context. Hearing the experience of those who work on the college campus brings into focus important aspects of that social context, particularly in relation to adolescent and young adult development and the current challenges faced in the transition from adolescence to adulthood.

In fact, over the years, as we have reflected on this conference, we have organizing this event. Over a year of planning led to the nearly sold-out event.

The event featured the film, a deeply touching and frank exploration of Ms. Hemingway’s experience of the dysfunctional dynamics in the Hemingway family, which has a history of multiple suicides, substance abuse and profound mental illness. When the lights came up on the deeply affected audience, a roundtable discussion convened on stage with Drs. Sacksteder and Tillman, Ms. Vickery and Mariel Hemingway. Ms. Hemingway addressed the audience as she came on stage, “Thank you for showing up . . . while this is my personal journey, I also think it is everybody’s journey. . . . I do this because I want people to know they are not alone. . . . When we start to tell our stories, we begin to heal.”

Dr. Tillman stated “Tom Insel, MD, the head of the Institute of Medicine, has made research in the area of suicide a national priority for that organization. Based on the work of epidemiologists, we know that in the past 30 years in this country, we have made dramatic progress, and seen death rates decline in the area of heart disease, stroke, AIDS, leukemia, homicide, and motor vehicle accidents. We have made NO progress related to suicide—in fact the rate of suicide in this country has increased during that time. This is why events like this, and the documentary Mariel has made, are so important. We need to have an open conversation about what is at stake for us personally, as a community and as a country.”

One of the more poignant moments during the afternoon was when Dr. Sacksteder spoke directly to Ms. Hemingway, thanking her for sharing with brutal frankness the story of her upbringing. There were many emotional issues that could not be talked about within the family as she grew up that are addressed very directly and movingly in the documentary. Ms. Hemingway acknowledged that the film says ”what I couldn’t say.”

Dr. Sacksteder concluded the event by stating, “It is our hope that today’s event will invigorate conversations about these painful issues, and we hope that the conversations will continue among all of you well after today’s program.”

Underwriting support for this event came from: Bonnie and Terry Burman, Ann Fitzpatrick Brown and Tomorrow. The Marc Guerette Foundation for Treatment Resistant Depression and Suicide Prevention. Underwriting support for this event came from: Bonnie and Terry Burman, Ann Fitzpatrick Brown and Tomorrow. The Marc Guerette Foundation for Treatment Resistant Depression and Suicide Prevention.
One in five women is sexually assaulted in college. Most often, it’s by someone she knows – and also most often, she does not report what happened. Many survivors are left feeling isolated, ashamed or to blame. Although it happens less often, men, too, are victims of these crimes.

The President created the Task Force to Protect Students From Sexual Assault to turn this tide. As the name of our new website – NotAlone.gov – indicates, we are here to tell sexual assault survivors that they are not alone. And we’re also here to help schools live up to their obligation to protect students from sexual violence.

On January 30, 2015, more than 65 people from seven colleges gathered at Austen Riggs for a full day of work on the issue of sexual assault on campus. The conference was co-directed by John Miner, MD, co-director of Psychological Counseling Services at Williams College and Donna Elmendorf, PhD, director of the therapeutic community program at the Austen Riggs Center. As in past years, the conference was designed as a “working conference” where participants share their expertise and experience in the service of collective learning. This year we also hosted a compelling group of panelists:

- April Stein, PhD, Director of Psychological Services, Bennington College;
- Alicia Oser, Director, Office of Sexual Assault Prevention and Response, Harvard University;
- Sarah Bolton, Dean of the College, Williams College;
- Daryl Lapp, JD, Edwards, Wildman, Palmer LLP, Boston;
- Gary Margolis, PhD, Emeritus Executive Director of College Mental Health, Middlebury College; and
- Kate Gallagher, PhD, Psychology Fellow, Austen Riggs Center.

The panelists spoke about the experience of engaging the complicated issue of sexual assault from a range of perspectives including college mental health, advocacy and prevention, administration, the legal field, current research and the role of parent. The panel was brought to life by the willingness of those who participated to share not only the dilemmas they face in their roles, particularly those that exist at the interface with other roles, but also their personal reactions to and experience of engaging their responsibilities.

We spent the majority of the day actively engaged with one another, in the large group and in smaller breakout groups sharing experience, some of which was well formulated and clear, including useful approaches participants had discovered, and some of which was partially understood, not all put together, focused on unsolved dilemmas and tentatively offered. It was through grappling with the not quite known or hesitantly articulated that our learning advanced.

With regard to this very thorny issue of sexual assault on campus, an issue in which the stakes are high, positions are passionately held, and the various roles may have inherent conflicts, the effort was to maintain an open, curious stance without moving too quickly to conclusions. Writing about such learning is complicated, not only because it is a work in progress, but also because an important part of the structure we offered was the agreement to create a confidential space. Having said that, we can share a few broad themes.

The power of differentiated roles and the importance of creating the space for integration was affirmed. As participants learned more about the responsibilities and dilemmas related to various roles, the potential benefit of this differentiation to students’ learning and development emerged. Therapists, deans and advocates have distinct opportunities to support students as they face the issue of sexual assault and, rather than pushing toward a shared perspective, there is value in holding on to and respecting the differences. Such differences can be mobilized as a positive force in grappling with the issue of sexual assault at both an individual and institutional level. From this perspective, the goal is collaboration across differences, not consensus. Relatedly, almost everyone spoke of tension within themselves stemming from multiple institutional responsibilities and/or personal reactions to the issue of sexual assault. While at first glance such experience could be seen as bias to be managed away, if recognized, shared and reflected on, it becomes powerful data for the learning process.

The need for time and support for the professionals, not only the students, was another important theme. In order for one group (for example, psychotherapists) to have the confidence to refer a student to someone in another role (for example, advocacy) the therapist needs time to get to know the advocate and know what the student can expect if s/he engages the advocacy process. Relatedly, the enormous toll that this very stressful work can have on the professionals was noted. The opportunity for therapists, deans and advocates to come together to problem solve as well as to offer mutual emotional support is crucial.

A final theme of note was that of the extremely complicated web of legal requirements and implications that the college professionals must navigate. Title IX, the Clery Act and recommendations from the White House Task Force and the Department of Education are complicated and can even appear contradictory. For example, confusion about which conversations with which professionals are confidential can lead to hesitancy to speak in both the professionals and the students, an unintended consequence of the effort to create structures that offer support. Transparent communication about the legal and administrative process will support
Meaning Matters: An Online Psychodynamic Community

The online world has become a meeting place for minds and communities on the web have evolved to become places where millions of like-minded people share ideas and participate in discussions around common interests. These communities range from the ephemeral (Facebook, Twitter, etc.), where people converse on a wide range of topics that fade daily into a past that few care to delve further into, to longer-lived ventures like technical support forums where topics several years old are still visited by people looking for solutions to common problems.

And then there are communities of interest, where people who share a passion come together to exchange ideas and thoughts in a specific area, which could be anything from politics to gardening, woodworking to religion—anything that inspires or fascinates groups of people.

Related to, and in some ways overlapping communities of interest, are communities of practice, which are groups of people who share a craft or profession. Communities of practice are not new phenomena; this type of connection has existed for as long as people with common occupations have been learning and sharing their experiences. Creating these communities in the online world is not exactly new, but it’s still a young phenomenon in the history of groups with shared professional interests, and it has enabled conversations to take place that transcend geography, in ways that were never possible before.

For many months now, the Austen Riggs Center has been working on an exciting new project that will be something of a hybrid between communities of interest and communities of practice. We are creating an online community that will welcome both mental health clinicians and those in related fields who share a professional interest in psychodynamic practice, research and education. This community is called Meaning Matters.

Currently there is no comprehensive “home” on the Internet for psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers and others interested in psychodynamic work – no primary site that this audience can turn to for a sense of membership based on common interests and practice values. Meaning Matters seeks to fill that gap.

Meaning Matters will be hosted by the Austen Riggs Center, but it’s intended to be a community that will welcome members from the broader population of mental health professionals and will stand alone, separate from the primary Riggs website.

This is a big leap of faith for a traditional, classically-oriented organization like the Austen Riggs Center. Medical Director/CEO James Sacksteder, MD, explains, “As part of a strategic thinking process we engaged in 2013, we learned from many outside the Center about how important it is to build bridges and relationships within the psychodynamically-informed community. The field of psychodynamic psychotherapy could have a greater impact in the world of mental healthcare if community members were less isolated and experienced more opportunities to share thinking and learn from one another. And that is the hope for Meaning Matters. This isn’t about the parochial interests of Austen Riggs, our objective is to convene a wide variety of clinicians and professionals who share an interest in psychodynamic thinking and to create a virtual community where deep thinking and discourse can occur.”

Initial participation in Meaning Matters will be by invitation. Membership will be accepted through a registration process on the website, credentials or other qualifying factors of registrants will be considered in granting membership to the site. Members who have been registered by the community coordinator through this process will have access to the content of the site, ensuring that conversations will remain private and limited to registered members. In addition, a set of “Community Guidelines” has been carefully established. All contributions to the site will be reviewed before being posted.

Meaning Matters will have four major discussion forums, each with its own moderator, who will help guide the conversation, occasionally participate in it and who will keep an eye on the content of the discussions to ensure that community guidelines are being respected and conversations remain relevant. The guiding principle of discussion on Meaning Matters will be adherence to rules of civil discourse.

The four moderators include:

M. Gerard Fromm, PhD, ABPP, is a senior consultant to the Erikson Institute for Education and Research of the Austen Riggs Center. Formerly, he was the Institute’s Evelyn Stefansson Nef Director as well as the director of the Center’s therapeutic community program. Dr. Fromm’s forum is called “Out of the Office: Psychodynamic Reflections on Groups, Organizations and Society.” He describes it as a place to “venture out of the office to explore questions of group identity, of trauma and its transmission, of how people organize themselves, of the institutions they build and of leadership, among many others.”

Richard G. Honig, MD, is an adult and child/adolescent psychiatrist who has practiced psychotherapy and psychoanalysis for more than 35 years. A member of the Affiliate Teaching Faculty at the Erikson Institute for Education and Research of the Austen Riggs Center, he previously served as the director of the Cincinnati Psychoanalytic Institute. Dr. Honig’s forum, “Clinical Matters,” encourages “exploration of what is in fact constitutive of psychoanalytic psychotherapy and psychoanalysis and the impact of these matters on clinical practice across the life span.”

Eric M. Plakun, MD, DLFAPA, FACPsyh, is the associate medical director and director of admissions at the Austen Riggs Center, where he is a member of the Senior Management Group and the Erikson Institute Management Group. A board certified psychiatrist, psychoanalyst, researcher and forensic psychiatrist, Dr. Plakun is the author of more than thirty-five articles and book chapters on patients with personality disorders and

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Board of Trustees Appoints Andrew J. Gerber, MD, PhD, as Next Medical Director/CEO

On behalf of the Board of Trustees of the Austen Riggs Center, I am pleased to announce that Andrew J. Gerber, MD, PhD, will be the next medical director/CEO for the Austen Riggs Center. Dr. Gerber will begin his appointment on July 1, 2015.

Dr. Gerber is currently the director of the Magnetic Resonance Imaging Research Program at the New York State Psychiatric Institute, the director of research at the Columbia University Center for Psychoanalytic Training and Research and an assistant professor of psychiatry in the Division of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry at Columbia University Medical Center. He completed his medical and psychiatric training at Harvard Medical School, Cambridge Hospital and Weill Cornell Medical College—Payne Whitney Clinic, where he served as chief resident; he received his child psychiatry training at the combined Columbia-Cornell NewYork-Presbyterian Hospital program, where he was also chief resident.

Dr. Gerber earned a PhD in psychology at University College London, where he studied with Peter Fonagy, PhD, and Joseph Sandler, PhD, investigating the process and outcome of psychotherapy in young adults. Dr. Gerber’s published scholarship shows his deep passion for research. He currently maintains a private psychoanalytic practice in New York.

The Board of Trustees conducted a thorough national search and is fully confident that Dr. Gerber will bring energy, creativity and collegiality to his role. We expect that he will earn the full support of the staff and the wider psychoanalytic community. He is committed to our mission and uniquely qualified to lead Riggs in the shifting mental healthcare landscape.

Dr. Gerber is married to Andrea Gerber, PhD, who is a clinical psychologist. They have two daughters Samantha (8) and Lila (4) and the entire family is pleased about joining the Riggs community.

The Board also extends warm appreciation to current Medical Director/CEO James Sacksteder, MD, who will be retiring on June 30th. Dr. Sacksteder has been a dedicated leader and clinician whose commitment to the Austen Riggs Center spans more than thirty years. This is a critical milestone for the Center. The Austen Riggs Center has been well served by inspiring leaders such as Dr. Sacksteder, is recognized by U.S. News & World Report as a Top Ten Psychiatric Hospital in the nation and, with the appointment of Dr. Gerber, is well poised for the future.

Cordially,
Lisa A. Raskin, PhD
Chair, Board of Trustees

Meaning Matters continued from page 4

Stefanie Speanburg, PhD, LCSW, is a clinical social worker in private practice, a candidate at the Emory University Psychoanalytic Institute and an adjunct faculty research advisor at the Smith College School for Social Work. Previously, she served as research coordinator at the Erikson Institute for Education and Research of the Austen Riggs Center. Her forum, “Psychoanalytic Intersections,” will host conversations around the need to pull back from biological reductionism and attend again to “clinical, research, policy and educational perspectives related to a psychodynamic biopsychosocial perspective.”

The conversation framed many thorny issues worthy of focused follow up. For example, the Clery Act, the White House Task Force and new policies and procedures on campuses across the county offer much-needed protection and recourse for those who are the victims of assault. At the same time, these detailed laws and policies also impact sexual encounters that are not assaultive, at times impinging on the space for an open exploration that facilitates development. Further, while mandatory reporting may lead to increased safety (research has yet to show the impact), such requirements may also disrupt private spaces, such as psychotherapy, that allow for a more nuanced exploration of complicated human interactions. Erikson pointed out the essential developmental need for a space that is protected from “irreversible purpose.” The view from campus underscores just how complicated it is to provide such a space.

Meaning Matters is now well into development and has treatment resistant disorders. His forum, “Biopsychosocial Matters,” will host conversations around the need to pull back from biological reductionism and attend again to related to a psychodynamic biopsychosocial perspective.”

In addition to these compelling discussion areas, Meaning Matters provides access to news articles of interest across guilds, a national calendar of upcoming events and a resource area for sharing research papers, videos, syllabi or other materials. Members will be encouraged to post content in all of these areas.

Meaning Matters is now well into development and has entered a test phase in which a limited number of early participants have been invited to help build and test this new venture. Look for more news of the public launch in the coming months.
Online Continuing Education Now Offered

Educational offerings provide a systems perspective on treatment emphasizing cultural and familial contexts as well as individual development located at www.austenriggs.org/courses.

We are pleased to offer a continuing education platform on our website where psychiatrists, psychologists and social workers can obtain continuing education credit. If you are not a member of one of these guilds, you are still welcome and encouraged to take any of the course offerings.

The online education platform is located at www.austenriggs.org/courses. Users will first register and provide credential information. There are currently ten courses being offered on the site, ranging from recent conference proceedings at Riggs featuring Andrew Solomon, Scott Stossel and David Finkel to topics on psychopharmacology, issues in psychiatry, DSM 5 and interdisciplinary treatment teams.

Riggs Medical Director/CEO James Sacksteder, MD, comments, “This is a way in which our clinicians and conference presenters can share their learning and scholarship, offering high-quality education that increases the knowledge of mental health professionals while reaching individuals in their own environs to easily take a course and in many cases, earn credit for doing so.” Jane G. Tillman, PhD, director of the Erikson Institute agrees, “Our clinicians are frequent presenters at national and international conferences and give grand rounds at teaching hospitals, typically reaching a small number of people at the specific venue. Our goal with the online educational platform is to reach more people who don’t ordinarily have easy access to psychodynamic education and provide them with a convenient and high-quality offering that provides continuing education, generates certificates and retains an individual’s personal transcript.”

To summarize, the educational platform contains a registration process, a menu of courses with the abstracts, the courses (video and audio), quizzes appropriate for the specific professional guild, a certificate and an online transcript. Courses will be added periodically.

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