

UNIVERSITY STUDENTS LIVING WITH MENTAL ILLNESS: CHANGING THE CONVERSATION



On Monday, September 9, 2013, students, educators, families and clinicians gathered at the University of California (USC) School of Law to share lunch and hear a panel discussion on the pitfalls and progress related to having a diagnosis of mental illness.

Former U.S. Representative Patrick Kennedy joined USC law Professor Elyn Saks, USC law student Evan Langer, and psychiatry resident Michelle Wu in a discussion about how they managed their mental illness through their university years.

Many of the 100 or so audience members listened attentively and asked questions and had comments following the discussion. The USC Gould School of Law and the Saks Institute for Mental Health Law, Policy and Ethics presented the event.

Kennedy, former U.S. representative for Rhode Island and son of the late U.S. Sen. Ted Kennedy, has spent the past several years fighting for services for people with mental illness.

“Eliminating the stigma of mental illness — and finally achieving parity for its treatment — is the next chapter in America’s civil rights movement,” Kennedy wrote in a recent op-ed posted on CNN.com.

University students who battle mental illness face unique challenges, said Saks, founder of the institute.

“Many try to hide their symptoms because they are embarrassed, confused or afraid. Many are experiencing these feelings for the first time,” said Saks, the USC Orrin B. Evans Professor of Law, Psychology, and Psychiatry and the Behavioral Sciences. “We want to provide tools that will help them.”

Kennedy has said that his biggest accomplishment while in Congress was passing the Paul Wellstone Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act in 2008, which provides access to mental health treatment for millions of Americans who previously were denied care. Signed into law by President George W. Bush in 2008, the landmark legislation requires health insurers that offer coverage for mental illness and substance use disorders to provide benefits.

“This was a proud moment for me, but those with mental illnesses are still waiting for some pieces of this law to be implemented.... Today, too many Americans are told that they’re less entitled to health care than those who have diseases like diabetes or cancer or asthma, just because the origin of their illness is in their brain,” Kennedy wrote.

“Without equality, or parity, insurers can refuse to cover mental illnesses at the same level as other physical illnesses, making it harder for people to get well and often further isolating them in their struggle. Together, we must change that.”

