

Words of wisdom on Children's Mental Health

By Gayle Grass

I have a son who has a mental health disorder.

He has had this illness since he was 18 and is now 34. Throughout his early years and into high school, our son was a happy, loving child who excelled in academics and sports. Then he became ill and his dreams were shattered.

As a parent of a child with a mental health disorder, I have a unique perspective. In my quest to find help for my son, I explored several avenues – seeking advice from specialists, reading countless books on the topic and joining many mental health groups. But I soon realized that the primary obstacle for getting the proper care and services for my son was the stigma associated with mental health disorders. What could **I do** to change these attitudes? As a result of my experiences, I decided to write a children's book about children with mental health disorders. And so Iris the Dragon, a series of illustrated books, was created. My goal has been to use the Iris the Dragon Series to help parents and children understand that mental disorders do exist, they are often preventable, and that early education and recognition could make a huge difference. And, even more importantly, Iris the Dragon offers one thing we all need – **HOPE**.

As parents, we all share a common goal. Our stories are all the same. We love our children and only want to make them better. We are no different than a parent who has a child with cancer, diabetes, multiple sclerosis or cystic fibrosis. We are devastated when we hear the diagnosis and look toward the medical community for answers. We look for answers and understanding of the illness. We ask what resources there are in the community to support us. We hope that our friends and family will be supportive. We hope that our child will recover. Hope is our strength, our defense, and our armor.

But as a parent and advocate, I know the need is great for an improved system that radiates medical support, community support, parental support and ultimately support and remediation for our children. We need to continue our fight to reduce the stigma and raise awareness. With HOPE, support and education, parents of children with mental health issues do have more options and opportunities to find help for their children and enable them to lead normal lives.

