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Stigma still surrounds mental illness

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EDMOND — The Oklahoma Chapter of the National Alliance on Mental Illness, known by the acronym "NAMI," recently hosted a luncheon at Crossings Community Church to publicize the fundraising walk that will take place on May 21 in Stars and Stripes Park in Oklahoma City.

Television news anchor Anita Blanton served as the mistress of ceremonies of the event, and she spoke with feeling of how her father was a career military officer who continues to do volunteer work with military personnel who have mental problems as a result of their service to the nation. She reported that she is familiar with the toll that mental illness takes on individuals and families as a result.

Dr. Mac McCrory, who serves as the interim director of the Oklahoma NAMI Chapter, told the attendees of how the monies raised from the walk are used to fund the "family to family" support system that assists families who have mentally ill members by giving them guidance and support. He also said that while last year's walk was very successful, he was confident that this year's event would raise even more money for NAMI.

Terri White, who is the commissioner of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services of Oklahoma, also addressed the gathering. She spoke of how people who suffer from diseases of the body such as diabetes and cancer are the recipients of sympathy and understanding, those who are afflicted with mental illness are often shunned and stigmatized. She praised the efforts that the alliance has made to lessen that stigma, and called on those present to assist in those efforts.

The special guest speaker was retired Maj. Gen. Rita Aragon, who currently serves as the secretary of Veterans Affairs in Gov. Mary Fallin's cabinet. Aragon was the first female to lead the Oklahoma Air National Guard, and she spoke of the need for mental health services for veterans of the U.S. military.

Those who serve in combat in Afghanistan and Iraq often become accustomed to the adrenaline rushes that are part of that experience. When they return to civilian life, Aragon reported, they can become withdrawn and depressed because they no longer are experiencing it. Some of them engage in high-risk behaviors in an effort to regain adrenaline rushes that get them into trouble with their families and the law.

In Tulsa there are veterans courts at both the city and county level that deal with former military personnel who have been arrested, and they are provided with mental health counseling and other services. Aragon said that it has become a model for the nation.

The cabinet secretary also reminded her listeners that while service in the military was almost a universal experience for men in World War II, military veterans of today are a minority of the population and often feel that the rest of the society does not understand them as a consequence.

An eloquent young woman told the gathering of how her family has suffered as a result of the mental illness that has afflicted her mother. She told of how when she was a child her mother would often go into destructive rages where she would break family mementos. Her mother still refuses to take the medications that have been prescribed for her by psychiatrists, and her grandchildren do not know her as a result.

Gail Israel of NAMI was the final speaker, and she spoke of how guests could register for the 5-kilometer walk on the forms that were available.

She also said that those interested could register online on the Oklahoma NAMI Web site.

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