

# 'Acceptance ambassador' talks mental illness



At Boca Raton's Promise for Mental Health program for the public was, from left, Dr. Seth Bernstein, Promise founder Rita Thrasher and speaker Hakeem Rahim. (Photo/Marci Shatzman / FPG)

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**H**akeem Rahim was the first black valedictorian at his high school and went on to **Harvard University**, but he was hiding a secret. Sideline by panic attacks, he was eventually diagnosed as having bipolar disorder and began taking medication. He was able to graduate and earn more degrees at another Ivy League school.

Now he traverses the country as "an acceptance ambassador," mental health advocate and trainer for Let's Talk Mental Illness, speaking before 20,000 students since 2013 and even Congress to press for better benefits, he said.

A guest of Rita Thrasher, the Boca Raton's Promise founder who lost two daughters to mental illness, he spoke in assemblies at Atlantic High School in Delray Beach and the Saint Andrew's School in Boca Raton before his talk at the Boca Brave Community Conversation Jan. 22 in the Dawson Theatre

Education Center at [Boca Raton Regional Hospital](#).

"There is no shame to seeking help. Once we get the help we need, there is hope, and recovery is possible," said Rahim, whose message is normalizing the language of mental illness. "Language is so important. No one says 'I'm diabetes' so I say 'I have bipolar disorder, not I'm bipolar. Language defines us."

"We are trapped by what we don't say. It's important to have the resources so people can get the help they need when they're ready," he said. "You never know who you're going to touch. It's a parent taking a son or daughter for therapy, or a psychologist taking extra time with a patient."

Mental health professionals, people diagnosed with mental illnesses and parents were in the audience, and some asked Rahim questions.

"You feel like you're walking on eggshells," Rahim said to a worried parent. "Be sensitive to the language you use, not to make the person shut down."

"Caregivers get exhausted," Rahim said to a parent. "It's OK to talk about what you're going through."

The subject of gun violence and blaming people with mental illness also came up.

"When there are myths out there, people perpetuate those myths," he said. "I testified before the Senate to treat mental illness like physical illnesses."

"We have been dancing in the dark," Thrasher said after she was introduced by Patricia Thomas, a founding board member and part of the "I am 1, Breaking the Silence" initiative.

Thrasher has been holding a series of events to address mental illness education in schools and to decrease the stigma in the community at-large.

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