

For the first public event of the spring 2015 semester, NAMI-SU hosted speaker Mike Veny to present *Transforming Stigma™ Into Strength*. Mike Veny is the creator of TransformingStigma.com, an expert on mental health stigma, a keynote speaker and a professional drummer*. Mr. Veny, who has been dealing with a mental illness for most of his life, came to Syracuse University to talk about his personal experiences and discourage stigma against mental illness.

Mike Veny began his presentation by announcing that he has a mental illness, though he prefers to call it a “mental health challenge.” While he is not clear on exactly what kind of mental health challenge he has, he knows that he has had it since childhood. Starting at an early age, Veny would have random and uncontrollable outbursts of anger. His blood pressure would rise and he would be unable to stop himself from throwing and smashing every object in sight. He frequently got into trouble with his parents and teachers, who could not control Veny’s behavior any better than he could. During his youth, he was been expelled from three schools and hospitalized three times. He was put into special education classes in the fifth grade. It was there that Veny learned that tapping erasers on his desk, which produced a drumming sound, calmed him down.

As a teen, Veny attended an arts education high school where he had easy access to a drum set—which he would leave class to play whenever his temper began to rise. Veny briefly demonstrated his instrumental skills for the audience by drumming out a beat on the podium. As an adult, Veny has learned to calm quell his outbursts with positive self-talk and regular exercise.

Veny explained that over the years he has learned that mental illness is actually quite common, but the stigma against it causes most people to remain silent on the issue.

He said that that is problematic because the general public remains ignorant about mental illnesses and people who suffer from them are too under informed and afraid of prejudice to find help.

Veny said that in most social and networking situations, he tells people right away that he has a mental illness. Amazingly enough, Veny mostly gets positive responses for doing this. People have admired him for his honesty. He has been hired to work as a drummer, speak publically about mental illness and much more. By being open about his struggles with mental illness, Veny has invited the acceptance of those around him and improved his own quality of life.

Veny wrapped up his presentation by encouraging the audience to help fight stigma toward mental illness by learning about the topic, keeping it in everyday conversation, and being respectful to people who are mentally ill. He also encouraged any audience members who struggle with mental illness to share their stories. They would be educating people, teaching them tolerance, and giving themselves the opportunity to share their stories.

The audience gave a standing ovation after Veny's presentation. Nearly everyone in the auditorium formed a line to speak with him, personally thanking him for speaking and talking to him about mental illness awareness.

All in all, this NAMI-organized event went over successfully. Mike Veny was a strong speaker and an inspirational storyteller. His message of tolerance and acceptance towards those with mental illnesses (or mental health challenges) resonated as powerfully as his drum beats on the podium.

*Cited from pamphlet handed out at presentation (Mike Veny, Inc)