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Family Diversity Projects Inc.
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Dear Peggy and Gigi:

I want to write to you and share some of the highlights of our experience here in Orange County, North Carolina of having brought the Nothing to Hide; Mental Illness in the Family photographic exhibit to our community for two months this past fall. Once we discovered the exhibit, we built an entire project around bringing the show to our community and called it *Nothing to Hide, A Community Dialogue on Mental Illness*. We formed a committee that included representatives from our local NAMI chapter, the Mental Health Association and our public mental health program, Orange-Person-Chatham area program (OPC). We also included community agencies, interested citizens, the University of North Carolina and people living with mental illness in our planning group. These were people that had not worked together before, even though they were working on and interested in similar issues.

The exhibit gave us a catalyst to organize numerous community efforts with a focus on reducing the stigma associated with mental illness. Among our programs we brought a one-woman show "The Balancing Act" by Wambui Bahati, an amazing musical story of one woman's struggle with bi-polar disorder and her success at triumphing over it. We hosted the play at the grand opening of the photo exhibit. We organized a teen band jam and poetry slam, put together by a group of local teens where they gave information about mental health and mental illness and hosted several local bands. We worked with another community group to bring local author Virginia Holman to discuss her book *Rescuing Patty Hearst*, about her own mothers mental illness and growing up with that experience.

But best of all was the exhibit itself. We moved it around our community from place to place, increasing the numbers and kinds of people who were able to see the show. Some of the photos were placed in local restaurants and markets for a time; they were displayed in malls and at the farmers market with information booths and volunteers there to answer questions about local mental health services. They were, for a two-week period at our local ArtsCenter where they received wonderful exposure; we estimate at least 1,000 people saw it at that location. The ArtsCenter was also where we hosted the play and teen night; so all those folks saw it there, as well as many others who were coming to the center for classes or concerts during the two-week period.

I worked an information booth there one Friday night when there was a local art walk going on. I watched as people came in expecting painting or other visual art, and when I explained it was a show of portraits of families with mental illness, I saw their faces change. But I encouraged them on and watched, as they tentatively glanced at one, read the accompanying text, and before they knew, had viewed the entire 20 photos and read every bit of text and left changed by the experience I was sure.

We placed the show for 2 weeks in the human services center in Hillsborough, the smaller, more rural town in our County. It was displayed in the hallway outside the OPC Mental Health Center and below the public library. Staff from OPC told me they were bringing their clients out to see the pictures and read the stories, and share that they were not alone, that they were like so many others. And I received numerous e-mails from County employees that work in that building, who visited the show and wrote to me to comment how moving they were, or share that someone in their family suffered from a mental illness.

We then sent the show to the UNC-Chapel Hill Campus, where a few students organized discussion groups, and a film night, and many students I am sure passed those pictures and I hope took a moment to stop and consider the life of a person living with a mental illness and the effect that has on a family.

We had poetry readings, articles in the newspaper, and brown bag lunches on mental health topics. There is no way to know how many people in our community were touched by this exhibit over the 2-month period but I am certain it was several 1,000. Most of all we achieved our goal, we had a dialogue about mental illness, and we reached a lot of people that may not have gone out of their way to see this show, but by placing it in accessible locations, they may have stumbled upon it anyway and learned something.

Thank you for making this exhibit and for sharing it with us for 2 months in the fall of 2005. I believe it has changed us, changed me, and helped us better understand the work that is yet to be done. Our committee has agreed to continue to meet, to work together to continue to try and reduce stigma, and to help our community understand that mental illness is nothing to hide.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Maria Hitt". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Maria" being larger and more prominent than the last name "Hitt".

Maria Hitt
Senior Public Health Educator
Coordinator, Healthy Carolinians of Orange County
Co-Chair, Nothing to Hide Planning Committee