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Event focuses on mental health awareness

By TERRY FLORES tflores@kenoshanews.com May 23, 2018

Tiffany Konecko found herself in a dark place six years ago after the birth of her first child.

The Mount Pleasant mother of two and the 2016 Mrs. Wisconsin, who was the featured speaker at a Wednesday vigil in Civic Center Park to promote mental health awareness, didn't know what was happening to her as she struggled with postpartum depression.

To the more than 80 people who gathered at the park, Konecko said she knew about anxiety and other mental illnesses, but "postpartum was something that was news to me and I didn't even know I was going through it."

"There were a lot of dark days. There were days I didn't feel I was good enough to be a mom. I wanted to run away from home and hopefully my son would find a better mom that was more worthy," she said. "That was the feeling I was going through. There were days when I couldn't even get out of bed. It was hard."

Diagnosis

According to the National Institute of Health, the mood disorder is marked by "feelings of extreme sadness, anxiety, and exhaustion" making it difficult for mothers to care for themselves or others. As many as 600,000 mothers have been diagnosed with the disorder.

Konecko said the person who saved her was her father, who noticed that she wasn't OK. She wasn't fine, even though she'd told him she was, she said.

"My dad knows me all too well ... but I didn't even know I wasn't fine," she said. "I was screaming on the inside. I felt so alone and didn't know who talk to because I didn't even know what I had."

Konecko, who said she nearly lost her mother to mental illness, said at the time her mother's condition was "kept in the closet."

"So it's very inspiring that we've come so far and are able to speak out about it and not be afraid to ask for help or ask somebody if they do need help," she said.

Ask for help

Konecko said it's important for those who have gone through mental illness to come forward and ask for help or for someone to ask if they need help. She said she works hard every day, is seeing a therapist monthly, exercising, eating "as cleanly as possible" and spending time with family to stay healthy.

"My illness doesn't define who I am. It's just a part of who I am. And I have to work every day, every minute of the day, to make sure that I don't go back into that dark place ... because once you've been there, it's most likely you're going to get there again."

The Wednesday night vigil, observed as part of Mental Health Awareness Month, was coordinated by Bridges Community Center and the National Alliance on Mental Illness of Kenosha County. The vigil also featured the Wilson Elementary fifth grade choir, which performed "Just One Candle" and "Lean on Me."

Awards for advocacy, service and volunteerism were also given to:

Kari Foss, director of the Community Intervention Center for Kenosha Human Development Services, who received the David Wagner Mental Health Advocacy Award.

Jane Nudi, house manager at the Kenosha Adult Residential Emergency Center, who received the Community Service Award.

David Haunstein, Bridges Community Center volunteer and center board member, who received the Exceptional Volunteer Award.

Terry Flores