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PEOPLE: INSPIRING ICON

Caring COUNSEL

Jocelyn Evans offers hope and help for those seeking treatment.

By Michele Roldán-Shaw

Therapy. The word alone brings all kinds of associations to people's minds, not all of which are necessarily pleasant. But if you thought that going to a "shrink" meant lying back on a couch and describing your deepest, darkest tendencies to a man with a lab coat and a clip board, you obviously haven't met Jocelyn Evans.

"It's more solution-based than it is just about how pathological people are," said Evans on the nature of her profession. "I think it's actually the healthy ones who go to counseling because it takes a lot of courage to examine yourself."

Evans, who is originally from Boston and studied theatre at Dartmouth College in New Hampshire, made a sudden and dramatic career change after her sister was diagnosed with terminal cancer in 1988.

"My mom made us all go to this incredible therapist in order to work through our grief," she recalled. "The counseling helped so much that I decided to change professions because I thought, how cool would it be to help people like that?"

After her sister passed away, she went back to school and eventually earned her Master's degree in social work from Simmons Graduate School, which she describes as being very "clinically oriented." After that, she received a grant from the American Cancer Association and wrote a paper on the impact of cancer on siblings. Then in 1991, she went to work as a therapist giving counseling to the families of people who were dying.

"It's amazing how much people can grow when they lose

a family member or a loved one," she said. "Everything is all sped up, and usually there's an epiphany somewhere."

In 1998, she and her husband moved to Greenville and that was when she began giving counseling to clients who weren't terminal, something which opened up a whole new world for her. Ironically, she found that she missed working with dying people. But on the other hand, this unique professional background gave her a distinctively positive approach when dealing with problems.

"I think that maybe losing my sister and then working with people who were dying has helped me look at things in a different sort of way," she explained. "When people tell me about their problems, I think oh good, you're alive! Now let's find a solution."

In October of 2003, Evans herself was the victim of a tragic occurrence when she lost an arm in a car accident. After her 4 Runner flipped several times, she found herself trapped in the vehicle and overcome by an enveloping sense of sleepiness. Then suddenly she was reminded of her situation and, above all, her son.

"I knew my life would be changed forever, but I also knew that it would have been far worse to never see my boy again," she said. "Then a calmness settled in which I will never forget. I force myself to think about the accident everyday so that hopefully I won't suffer post-traumatic stress syndrome."

Though grief counseling was what initially attracted her to this vocation, she has come to deal with a wide array of mental illnesses, in varying degrees of severity. With TV ads constantly advertising medications for diseases such as depression, bi-polarity, ADD, and social anxiety disorder, the average American is well-aware of all the problems one may be diagnosed with.

"There are so many flavors now a days, it's like Baskin Robbins," said Evans. "But the good thing is that all those television ads have helped to destigmatize mental illnesses and their treatments."

She maintains that because each case is different, a careful evaluation is required in order to decide whether a patient warrants medication, psychoanalysis, or both. A situational depression, for example, is going to require different treatment than a person who has a chemical imbalance. But most importantly, she knows that at the root of it all are her sincere intentions to help the person.

"I hope I've helped a lot of people," she said, "but I know I've learned a lot more from them than they have from me. How do you not learn from someone who bares their soul?" **M**