

Patient's struggles show difference Gulf Bend has made in 40 years

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Time ticks slowly as Tina Zetka fills in paint-by-number kits at her Ganado apartment.

This hobby is actually a coping tool for the mental illnesses that have eaten away at most of the 39-year-old's life.

She learned these methods at the Gulf Bend Center in Victoria, which is celebrating its 40th anniversary this year.

Zetka has schizoaffective disorder, a combination of major depression, schizophrenia and bipolarism, which has led her to attempt suicide several times, she said.

"You can't distinguish reality from fiction," she said. "It's very frightening."

Case managers visit her at least six times a month, she said.

A devout Catholic, Zetka writes in her journal, paints, makes quilts and spends time with her two dogs, Chloe and Petey.

She thinks she has found the antidote for the poisonous thoughts that have plagued her.

Zetka has struggled for years against thoughts of an imaginary childhood friend who seemed real, a talking computer or being watched by the government.

Zetka is turning to the next chapter of her journal - hope.



Photo by FRANK TILLEY/ADVOCATE PHOTO

A lingering sinus headache begins to get the best of Tina Zetka, despite her efforts to stay positive, Wednesday in her apartment in Ganado. Zetka is a patient undergoing counseling and treatment at the Gulf Bend Center, helping her cope with Schizophrenia.



"Hopefully this notifies the public that mental illness is a killer, and it's an epidemic," Zetka said. "There is hope if you cope."

A CRESTING HISTORY

That hope started at Gulf Bend, Zetka said.

The center, which is one year older than she, has helped thousands in the Crossroads through services and support for mental illness and developmental disabilities.

The center serves Victoria, Calhoun, DeWitt, Goliad, Jackson, Lavaca and Refugio counties. Since opening its doors in 1970, it has provided services for at least 40,000 people.

Though the center covers a seven-county area, about 62 percent of patients treated live in Victoria County.

The three disorders that make up Zetka's disorder are what the center focuses on in particular, said Don Polzin, the center's executive director.

"We've seen an expansion in the numbers of individuals served for whatever reason," said Polzin, who has been with the center 32 years. "I think there is awareness."

In looking at the center's history, Polzin made some notable observations.

The center began in 1970 with a \$50,000 budget and only four or five staff members.

Now, 40 years later, the organization has a \$10 million budget, 140 staff and programs and services have expanded, he said.

These programs have given back hope to patients like Zetka.

"I couldn't have done anything without them," Zetka said. "It has been the utmost kind of care. You don't understand my relationship with this staff."

In 2009, the center diagnosed 3,300 adults and children with mental illness, serious emotional disturbance or intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Overcoming the challenge of having a person understand it's OK to seek help has become easier in the past 40 years, Polzin said.

The number of services made readily available for those seeking help, not only with Gulf Bend but with mental health in general, also has expanded, he said.

"There is hope for recovery," he said.

At Gulf Bend, not many can say they have seen hope as much as Joel Deborah.



The licensed counselor and social worker does not have to read or research the center's history - he's lived it.

"We've gone from the Dark Ages where everything had to be handwritten on the chart to computers," the 38-year Gulf Bend staff member said. "The amount of services that we are able to provide now is much more than what we used to be."



Deborah doesn't do much counseling now, but he does do a lot of diagnostic assessments on people who come to the center for the first time.

Deborah has noticed the increase in the number of patients like Zetka who are treated as outpatients.

When Deborah first started in 1972, more than 1,000 patients would stay for treatment at the center. Now that number is about 400.

The history of the center isn't the only factor that has changed the way mental health and mental retardation is looked upon, Deborah said.

"There is much more treatment in the community," he said. "There is also a big improvement and advancement in medications. There are just so many more medications now."

Though Deborah has worked for the center for 38 years, his affiliation with Gulf Bend is closer to 40 years, he said.

He once worked at the Gulf Bend Center for Children and Youth, now known as the Child Study Clinic.

FINDING ORDER

As the center continues to grow, Deborah finds himself ready to retire.

The center will go on without him. There is no doubt about that, Deborah said.

"Hopefully, science comes up with more and better medications," he said. "We're always going to have people that we're going to need to see."

Like Deborah, Zetka is also learning to wean herself away from the center.

"I had a little bit of brain cells left to realize what was going on," she said. "I don't want to live in shame. I want to speak out and I want to be an advocate for mental health."

The disorders, which led her to send her two sons to live with family, have been the toughest pill to swallow, she said.

Being diagnosed at an early age could have meant living as normal a life as possible, she said.

Now on disability, she cannot hold down a full-time job, but hopes one day she will.

She hopes the center is there for years to help others, like her, fight to get their life back.

She said she's telling her story for others and for Gulf Bend. "It's my way of thanking them."

As Zetka sits in her apartment, she still finds watching television or using the computer almost impossible.

Instead she continues to follow the numbers on the sheets in front of her.

Her favorite painting so far is one she finished recently - an eagle - the symbol of freedom.

"It's the strength that can fly above the storm," she said.

Gulf Bend History

1957 - Junior Service League Victoria addresses intellectual and developmental disabilities. Organization responsible for development and eventual evolution of Gulf Bend Center for Children and Youth.

1965 - Gulf Bend Center for Children and Youth opens and provides diagnosis and rehabilitation of children with intellectual and developmental disabilities or emotional disturbance.

1965 - The Texas Legislature passes the Community Mental Health and Mental Retardation Act. Local research indicates a need for expansion of mental health care.

1969 - An in-depth local study proposes to build a Gulf Bend Mental Health and Mental Retardation Center.

1970 - Gulf Bend Center opens doors in Calhoun, DeWitt, Goliad, Jackson, Refugio and Victoria counties at 2006 N. Navarro St.

1970 - Thomas G. Kelliher Jr. becomes executive director of Gulf Bend Center.

1974 - Lavaca County joins Gulf Bend Center's service area.

1984 - Gulf Bend Center moves to 1404 Village Drive.

1986 - Bill Dillard becomes the executive director of Gulf Bend Center

1994 - Gulf Bend center moves to 1502 E. Airline Road.

1998 - Don Polzin becomes executive director of Gulf Bend Center

2008 - Center expands to Gulf Bend Regional Plaza at 6502 Nursery Drive.