

## Pete Earley is a 'champion' for mental health

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I had the privilege of meeting Pete Earley while attending a board meeting of the National Association of Behavioral Health Directors in Washington, D.C., in March 2007.

It's not common we have the opportunity to meet Pulitzer Prize-winning journalists like Mr. Earley, so I felt particularly honored.

Pete Earley has been a journalist for more than 30 years, a reporter for the Washington Post, and the author of several nonfiction books about crime and punishment and society. Some of his books have been award winning, even best-selling, such as "Crazy: A Father's Search Through America's Mental Health Madness."

Listening to Pete deliver his message that day revealed to me a man who not only possessed the experience and knowledge of a successful journalist for a prestigious newspaper, but a parent of a son, Mike, who was challenged with the onset of a major mental illness and, who had experienced the reality of the mental health care system in America today. That experience was not friendly, nor was it one in which the Earley family could easily be of support to their son. Why? Because, as Pete Earley describes it, "An array of incompatible laws about patient rights stood in their way, like a line of trees."

"I just feel so damn helpless," he told his wife, Patti. "I want to do something, but I do not know how to help him." To that, Patti's response was, "Then do what you do best. You are a journalist and you make your living investigating stories. Investigate it to determine why the mental health system in this country is in such a mess."

And that is what Pete has done. He has traveled across America and worked with leaders and professionals in the mental health system, law enforcement and the judiciary to learn the truth. And he has written a documentary of his findings. He is a strong advocate and someone I call a "Champion."

I came away from that meeting and Pete's presentation feeling his sense of desperation. His graphic depiction of events he experienced with his son and while conducting his investigative work made me feel both compelled as a mental health professional to do something back home to make it better, and fortunate as a father to have three children who were healthy.

That day, I bought Pete's book "Crazy." I recall reading the book while aboard my plane waiting to depart Washington's Reagan International Airport, tears in my eyes and thinking that it could happen to anyone. That I could have a son challenged in the same way that was caught up in a system of care that so desperately needs changing for the better. There are far too many individuals with mental illness in our jails and prisons today who are non-violent and who have been incarcerated for repeated misdemeanor offenses who need treatment.

Yet our society treats these individuals as though they are criminal. I felt blessed in some way.

I invite you to join Gulf Bend Center and the Victoria College Lyceum in welcoming Pete Earley to our community.

You are invited to hear Pete's message at 7:30 p.m. Tuesday, Nov. 16, in the Victoria College Auditorium, 2200 E. Red River St., in Victoria.

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