

Stigma Free Essay Contest Winners: Junior High

Junior High Winner for Primary Essay: Melody Hart
School & Grade: Homeschooled (Gillette, NJ), 8th Grade

Going Home

The word ‘stigma’ is a Latin word meaning “a mark made on skin by burning with a hot iron.” In our society, it refers to the prejudice that results from the labels we put on people who have some undesirable condition, such as mental illness. More often than not, it becomes a building block for a jail cell that eventually imprisons the one who is inflicted. I will focus on my experience with my grandfather, the effects of stigma in his life, and how awareness can cause a positive change.

Three years ago, grandfather had stayed in our home in New Jersey. ‘Papa’ as I called him, came to us after having been evicted from his condominium in Florida. He had stopped taking his medication to treat paranoia schizophrenia and made decisions that triggered his whole life to come crashing down.

Mom arranged for Papa to fly to our place. After a medical checkup, he was told that cancer had spread to his kidney. It seemed that in a split second, our ‘lenses’ had been instantaneously changed, like that of a camera. It is strange how a dark moment can cause us to see things we have never seen before. Walls that had been built up over decades seemed to have crumbled to fragments in just a few minutes. We all became more aware of Papa, in all his humanity; rather than ‘our dad with the mental handicap.’ We all realized how deep-rooted was the stigma he carried, even amongst his closest family members.

During Papa’s stay, I got to know him as we spent time playing the piano, walking, and sharing stories of the past. The grandfather I got to know was someone who was passionate, musically talented, highly intelligent, and one who did amazing architectural renderings!

Papa seemed to always have this quiet frustration about how people treated him. Even with his clouded judgment and perception, he knew when people shunned him. He was fully aware of his family members who had cut him off from their lives because of the fear and shame of the stigma he carried. This caused him much more pain than the strange looks and responses he would get from others.

Each person has the right to “life, liberty and pursuit of happiness”, but for a person stigmatized with mental health, that right is taken away. You see, Papa lived within 2 prisons – the one caused by mental dysfunction; the other, created by stigma. The effect of stigma is deep and not easy to comprehend. A stigmatized person may never feel he has a home. It is probably why Papa was always restless and seemed to be chasing something he could never find.

Part of the solution lies in awareness. When my family opened up and embraced my grandfather without judgment, we saw greatness in him. He felt true acceptance, love and a sense of belonging. Awareness breaks down walls, and allows us to see the value in a person who is different from us.

I believe that if we made more effort to spread awareness of mental illness, stigma would diminish. The climate in our communities would become one that helps to foster healing, rather than judgment and fear of those who face mental health challenges.

Why it's Important to be Stigma Free: Melody Hart

Raise the Bar on Freedom, Lift the Bars of Stigma

In our national anthem, we sing of a country we call 'the land of the free....' However, some people with mental illness are not free at all because the stigma they carry has created an internal prison.

We hear about school shootings and crimes committed by someone with a mental disorder. Was it a way to escape from their inner prison? Was it a raging cry to be relieved not just from the disease itself but also from the oppressive bars of stigma?

Lifting the stigma attached to mental illness can free a community to begin to truly heal.

Junior High Winner for Project: Melody Hart

School & Grade: Homeschooled (Gillette, NJ), 8th Grade

Project: Paint and Rip – Melody Hart

In order to reduce and remove the stigma, we need to bring awareness to our communities and also provide a healthy outlet for those who struggle with mental illness.

The project I imagine is 'Paint and Rip.' This is based on the original idea of 'Paint and Sip' which are social events led by an artist to do a painting as the attendees enjoy beverages such as hot chocolate. In Paint and Rip, a mental health professional would go alongside an artist to lead the event and inspire people to 'rip up' negative labels attached to a mentally ill person and paint a picture reflecting hope or freedom from the chains of stigma.

Each participant will be asked to write down a negative label, often tagged on to an afflicted person, on a post-it note. Then, the notes will be posted on a 'Stigma Wall'. As the notes begin to cover the wall, guests will realize how extensive the judgment is that we cast on a mentally ill person.

This would help to foster compassion, hope and relationship in families who trek a dark and lonely terrain as they try to find lasting solutions for a loved one.

Stigma Free Essay Contest Winners: High School

High School Winner for Primary Essay: Samia Shivon

School & Grade: Boonton High School (Boonton, NJ), 11th Grade

Stigma is the disapproval and discrimination against a person based on perceivable social characteristics that serve to distinguish them from other members of a society. When it involves mental illness, someone views a person in a negative way because they have a mental health condition. Some people describe stigma as a feeling of shame or judgement from others. It can even come from an internal place, where people feel embarrassed or ashamed for the illness they possess. It is very important to be stigma-free. Navigating life with a mental health condition can be tough and exhausting. The isolation, blame and secrecy that is often encouraged by stigma can create huge challenges to reaching out, getting needed support, and living well. Stigma causes many people into silence and prevents them from seeking help, which hurts them severely in their life. If more people were stigma free, it would result in people being comfortable with getting help and even save lives.

One stigmatized issue that has affected me and those I know personally is the mental condition called depression. I have never experienced depression, but I know people close to me who have and how it affects them. For example, one of the most important people in my life suffered from depression. When she was around others, she pretended to be happy. She was social and laughed as if everything was fine in her life. However, when she was alone with me, I saw how upset she felt. Her emotions made me frustrated because I felt there was nothing I could do to help her. In addition, many relatives in her family don't understand mental illnesses. Many think that it "does not exist" or "it does not last." Due to this, she did not talk about how she was truly feeling for a long time. The social stigma caused her to stay in silence. She could have reached out and been given help earlier if it wasn't for this stigma.

A paragraph in the original essay has been removed to preserve confidentiality, and will be edited before its final publishing.

...

There are many methods we can use to help lessen the negative impact of the stigma. One thing that we can do is to make students more educated. Students are our future. If we can make them knowledgeable about this issue, they can teach others while they are growing up. We can talk about social stigma as a topic during health class or invite guest speakers to come into our school and talk to everyone about their experiences. Also, everyone should be conscious of language. It is so easy to refrain from using mental health conditions as adjectives. We should learn to talk openly about mental health in class discussions or at family gatherings. We can put posters around the town with a message that supports the end of social stigma as a kindly reminder to everyone to not judge others. We should all remember to be supportive of anyone who is dealing with a mental illness.

In conclusion, stigma views a person in a negative way. This hurts people who have a mental health condition because it forces a feeling of shame and guilt on them. It makes them think that they are not good enough to receive treatment or that it is their fault for having that illness. People who are close to me who have depression suffered and felt pain because of the stigma they received from others. If we all work together, we can end stigma once and for all. Ending this cruel discrimination will influence people to seek help and save many lives from being taken.

Why It's Important to be Stigma Free: Samia Shivon

It is important to be stigma free because it hurts the well-being and health of others. Stigma views someone who possesses a mental illness or substance use disorder in a negative way. Discriminating people for these issues makes them feel distressed because of the shame and judgement being put on them. This results in people not obtaining equal opportunities as others and being forced into silence. Being stigma free gives people who have issues a safe and comfortable environment to seek help. The support they can get from others will help them deal with the problems they face.

High School Winner for Project: Esme Lockwood
School & Grade: Montville Township High School (Montville, NJ), 11th Grade

Project: 'No More' – Esme Lockwood

I would like to create a drug-free initiative in schools, primarily in New Jersey, called the 'No More' project, rather than "say no to drugs" which ignites the ignorance of choice versus illness. Fundamentally, 'No More' represents the gradual abolishment of specifically, heroin, and the perpetrators who make money off of their victims. In this project, I would like to recruit members who are or know someone battling heroin addiction. In school, I noticed many drug-related topics are swept under the carpet and many people who have lost their lives to drug-addiction are not being properly remembered. With a strong team, we could implement after-school therapy to create a safe-space for students who are too afraid to go to their parents or counselors. Essentially, the 'No More' project will ensure improvement for those who are struggling with any personal issues and alleviate stigmatized topics while including active students.

Why It's Important to be Stigma Free: Esme Lockwood

Inevitably, most people in life have a clouded and judgmental perspective on stigmatized issues. In my experience, I have learned to treat people who are going through personal addiction with understanding rather than anger. Anger limits their self-improvement and encourages them to only continue their addiction. To have a stigma, is to be ignorant, and humanity can never improve if we treat every stigmatized issue with negative criticism. Ultimately, once we free ourselves from judgement, we will liberate others to seek help and positively reconstruct our understanding for future generations.