

# Park Ridge Community Women raise awareness of eating disorders, money for national organization

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Mary Allen, a member of Park Ridge Community Women, holds a poster in memory of her daughter Veronica during a fundraising walk supporting the National Eating Disorders Association on April 17. Allen's daughter died in 2017 from complications of an eating disorder. - Original Credit: Park Ridge Community Women (Park Ridge Community Women / HANDOUT)

Since the loss of her daughter from complications of an eating disorder more than three years ago, Mary Allen says she lives by the motto that “if you share it, others can help you bear it.”

Allen’s grief, but also her desire to help others struggling with eating disorders by raising awareness, led the Park Ridge mother to approach Park Ridge Community Women, a philanthropic group of which she is a member, with a request to make the National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA) a recipient of the group’s next fundraiser.

“Anything I can do to help raise awareness and get supporters information to help their loved ones is my way of dealing with my pain,” Allen acknowledged. “It’s cathartic, but healing, and it’s been a wonderful community-supported fundraiser.”

A walk in support of NEDA took place on Saturday, April 17 in Park Ridge’s Uptown, and drew 16 participants, some holding posters calling attention to the association and eating disorders, which are often stigmatized.

As of Monday, Park Ridge Community Women’s “Angel Warriors” team had raised more than \$8,700, Allen reported.

“We had a goal of \$1,000,” she acknowledged. “We underestimated our ability.”

In 2017, Allen’s daughter Veronica Allen died after a 12-year struggle with eating disorders, Allen said. She was 30 years old.

Allen said her daughter, a 2005 Maine South High School graduate who excelled in softball, volleyball, basketball and track and field, developed an

eating disorder while in high school, around the time when one of her coaches asked her to “drop a few pounds so she would be faster on the court.”

But it wasn't just the coach's comments alone that triggered her daughter's preoccupation with weight, Mary Allen acknowledged. Peer pressure to “fit in” and wear fashionable but small-size teen clothing brands, combined with a drop in self-esteem, helped to fuel the illness, Allen said. By college, where Veronica Allen had earned a basketball scholarship, she had “started to fall apart on the inside,” her mother said.

“It's a disease that's not seen,” Mary Allen said. “That's the hardest part. You can't gauge on the outside what's going on inside.”

The 12 years of her daughter's illness were a journey of hospital visits, support groups and appointments with counselors, Mary Allen said. It was during this time that she learned of NEDA and the resources it provided, she said.

According to NEDA's website, the association provides support to individuals with eating disorders and their families through programs, resources for obtaining treatment, support groups and a helpline.

For her daughter, reaching out for support and help was difficult, Mary Allen acknowledged.

“As a young person, she was proud,” Allen said. “Her strength became her weakness.”



Park Ridge Community Women hosted a fundraising walk on April 17 for National Eating Disorders Association. - Original Credit: Park Ridge Community Women (Park Ridge Community Women / HANDOUT)

Allen said Saturday's walk was a step in bringing eating disorders out into the open and encouraging people to talk about them in an effort to de-stigmatize the disease and encourage those dealing with it to seek out professional help.

According to the [National Alliance on Mental Illness](#), an early diagnosis can produce the best outcome for recovery.

NAMI defines eating disorders as “extreme food and weight issues,” each with unique symptoms, that can lead to serious and potentially fatal medical complications. These disorders include anorexia nervosa, bulimia and binge eating disorder, the alliance said.

In the United States, approximately 20 million women and 10 million men will suffer from an eating disorder at some point in their lives, according to NEDA. While Allen shared her own story with the participants of the Park Ridge Community Women walk on Saturday, some of the walkers also told personal stories of their own experiences with an eating disorder or knowing someone who has one, Allen said.

“There are many people in Park Ridge who are struggling with an eating disorder themselves or they have a daughter who has an eating disorder, a daughter’s friend, or a sister,” she said. “I’ve gotten a lot of emails behind the scenes asking for advice and where to go.”

Park Ridge Community Women member Kimberly Walters said awareness and conversations happening “within our own little circle in Park Ridge” have the power to make people feel that they are not alone.

“For me, and I think everyone who was there (on the walk), eating disorders are something that don’t get talked about very much,” Walters said. “Bringing awareness and being able to have a conversation about this is huge, especially for people who are going through this on their own and are not reaching out for help.”

Allen said she would like to continue raising awareness of eating disorders. “I’m committed now to moving forward to do more, be more involved beyond this one fundraiser,” she said. “I’m not sure what it’s going to be or how it’s going to look, but it’s important work and there are a lot of people in the dark that need help navigating this.”

More information on the National Eating Disorders Association can be found at [www.nationaleatingdisorders.org](http://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org).

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