
The Public in Public Policy

Stories from North Carolinians with Mental Health Challenges

EDITOR'S NOTE: One of the goals of the Center's Strategic Plan for 2012–16 is to “increase the use of stories of people affected by our research.” It is important to see the faces and hear the stories of the public in public policy and to understand that real lives are impacted, for better or for worse, by changes in policy.

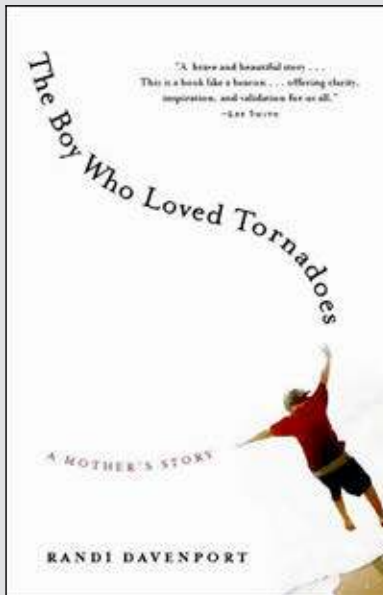
No Place To Go

by Randi Davenport

I noticed her as soon as I arrived at the podium. She sat in the back with her purse on her lap and a tense expression on her face. As I read from my book about my son's mental illness, she leaned forward. When I finished, her hand shot up. She was counting on me to save her family. But I knew that neither I, nor the latest in health care reform, would provide the help she needed for a loved one facing chronic mental illness.

They come to my readings in droves, these women with lost children, siblings sleeping on the streets, parents vanished into worlds beyond reach. One woman stood up and said, “Tell me what to do.” She had a wrenching tale of not being able to find services for her son. Others send email messages. “I knew the minute I read your book,” one wrote, “that you were the person with whom I must speak.” Another said, “I will do anything.” They describe their loved ones: “My daughter who is 23,” “My son who is 14,” “My sister abandoned by our parents.” They share stories of unspeakable

loss and pain. I hear them clearly. They need answers. They need to save someone. And they believe that I can help.



I can't. I know no better than they do how to wring services from a state that has made cuts or from an insurer that refuses to pay. But I have deep sympathy. I used to be just like them, calling everyone I could think of, saying,

“Please. Please.” I could be just like them again, at any moment, with one stroke of the pen.

My son, now 22, suffers from a disorder that includes features of both autism and a psychiatric illness. Just exactly what is wrong with him has eluded experts from Duke to UNC to Yale. When he was hospitalized with a baffling psychosis, I found myself on a self-guided tour of our mental health system just as some of the worst budget cuts were getting underway. I heard of states that stopped funding group homes, sending the sick into the streets; of parents forced to quit work and go on welfare to care for a child no provider would take; of residents of private group homes living on powdered milk because it cost too much to buy milk in a carton. I did *not* hear of providers willing to take patients whose clinical picture disrupted the business model. The most disabled were left with no place to go.

Randi Davenport is the author of The Boy Who Loved Tornadoes, a book about her son's mental illness.