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## Artist talks of being liberated 'from invisible opponent' at Kent Center community event

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by John Howell

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It's said that a picture is worth a thousand words.

Jeffrey Sparr had the words and he painted the picture at Kent Center's 5th annual awards breakfast Tuesday at the Crowne Plaza.

Sparr is an artist and the founder of PeaceLove Studios in Pawtucket that uses the creative power of art to find peace and meaning for people of all ages.

Sparr knows the power of art in confronting the "invisible opponent" of mental illness. He's a beneficiary.

Sparr was the keynote speaker at the breakfast attended by more than 300 people.

At the gathering celebrating community spirit, The Kent Center recognized Dr. Joseph Bevilacqua with the outstanding leadership award; Kent Hospital and T.J. Maxx with Community Partner Awards and John Warren, chairman and CEO of Washington Trust with the Eleanor Briggs Award.

Sparr said he is one of the fortunate ones to be diagnosed as having OCD, obsessive-compulsive disorder. He has compassion for those who don't understand their illness and go through life wondering what is wrong with them.

He said his initial reaction was relief, "to find out that I was not going crazy." The next steps were to find out what he had to do better and to stay that way.

But contrary to what is a common conception, Sparr said even with medication the condition doesn't just go away.

"I found myself wanting a lightning bolt to get better, but there's no lightning bolt," he said.

He compared his level of anxiety that can be triggered by seemingly inconsequential things to a parent in the middle of a crowded airport and suddenly discovering their 3-year-old child is no longer at their side.

Sparr discovered he felt better when he painted, although he was not trained as an artist. He was a businessman and turned to art as a form of relaxation. It later turned into his work.

"You have a vision," he said of the artist. "You have an idea and you have no

limitations.”

Sparr had a number of his paintings on display and throughout his talk he referred to different canvasses and what he was conveying. Common to his works are faceless people, which he suggested is fitting to the facelessness of mental illness and how it can affect people of all ages, abilities and wealth. But that is not to suggest the works are without emotion.

Sparr turned to a blank canvass and in seconds outlined a figure in black and then in red gave it a heart and a head. The message, he explained, is the core to what he views as the therapeutic and releasing qualities of art that he said, “combines peace of mind with love.”

To those with mental illness the word is “that it’s going to be alright.” To all those who view his work as well as those who pick up a paintbrush during his sessions, “I challenge them to think of what peace/love means to them.”

David Lauterbach, president and CEO of the center, praised Bevilacqua for his commitment to assist consumers of mental health services to realize a sense of security, economic welfare, belonging and control of their lives. Bevilacqua served for 21 consecutive years as State Commissioner of Mental Health Services in Rhode Island, Virginia and South Carolina. He served two terms as president of the National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors.

In honoring the hospital and T.J. Maxx with community partner awards, Lauterbach said the center and Kent “have a long history of working together to assist those with mental illnesses and devastating addictions through emergency situations.” He also talked about a new arrangement where center personnel are working in the emergency department.

“Through this partnership we are helping to guide members of our community in a psychiatric or substance abuse crisis through some of their darkest days,” he said.

Lauterbach praised T. J. Maxx for its involvement in the Hillsgrove House’s Transitional Employment Program. He noted that since being started in 2006, T.J. Maxx has assisted 13 Hillsgrove House members, playing a vital role assisting people to return to work.

“It’s [finding employment] a key element in recovery, an important ingredient for regaining self-esteem and the ability to lead independent and productive lives,” he said.

The Eleanor Briggs Award, named after a longstanding Kent Center volunteer who passed away just a couple years ago, is given to an individual who upholds the ideals of volunteerism and community service.

Warren serves on the boards of numerous civic, professional and charitable organizations. He is a member of the Board of Directors of the Rhode Island Public Expenditure Council; the Board of Governors of the Rhode Island Commodores; the Executive Board of the Narragansett Council – Boy Scouts of America; the Board of Advisors for Rhode Island for Community & Justice; and The United Way of Rhode Island, where he is Chairman. Warren also serves on

the Board of Trustees of The Westerly Hospital, where he is assistant secretary, and as incorporator for South County Hospital Foundation. In addition, he is a member of the Brown University Civic Leadership Council.

In accepting the award, Warren spoke of the volunteer work of his wife, Karen and thanked Washington Trust employees for their community involvement.

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