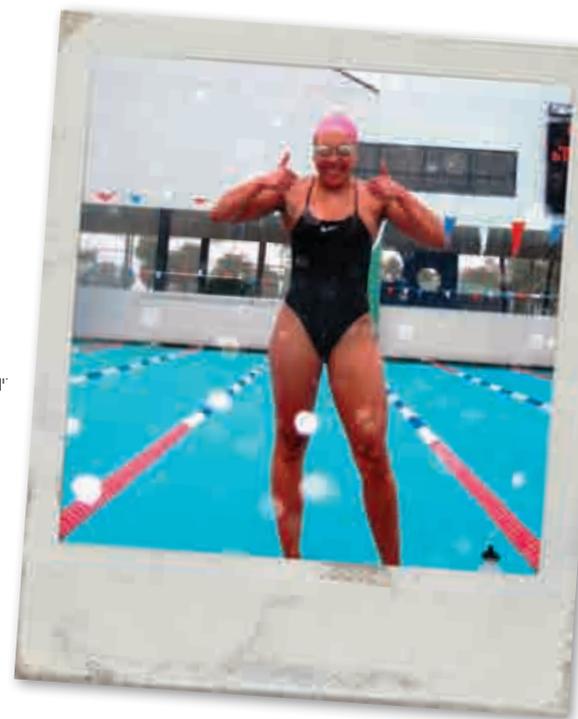


BATTLING BORDERLINE PERSONALITY DISORDER



BY SHOSHANNA RUTEMILLER
PHOTOS PROVIDED BY MIKE MENU AND LYNN COUREY

SWIMMER SASHA MENU COUREY, WHO WAS DIAGNOSED WITH BORDERLINE PERSONALITY DISORDER, TOOK HER OWN LIFE AT THE AGE OF 20. HER PARENTS ARE NOW SEEKING WAYS TO INCREASE PUBLIC AWARENESS OF THE SERIOUS MENTAL ILLNESS.

It is common to experience highs and lows in life. But what happens when those emotional ups and downs are too difficult to handle?

In June 2011, collegiate swimmer and Canadian junior national team member Sasha Menu Courey took her life after years of dealing with borderline personality disorder (BPD).

While most people are able to handle difficult situations, Menu Courey, because of her mental illness, had trouble thinking rationally in stressful situations. When a back injury left her unable to swim with her collegiate team at the University of Missouri—combined with a relationship that had ended—she found her life too difficult to handle.

Since their daughter's death, parents Mike Menu and Lynn Courey have made it their mission to raise awareness about the disorder.

"We wanted to make sure that her death wasn't in vain," said Courey. "It's unimaginable to lose a girl who was 20 years old who had so much in front of her."

So, the heartbroken parents formed The Sashbear Foundation, with the twin goal of raising funds for BPD research and treatment programs as well as raising public awareness of the illness. They also set up an informational website, Sashbear.org.

The impetus for increasing awareness occurred in the months following Menu Courey's death when her mom realized just how unaware she had been of the severity of her daughter's illness.

"I said to Sasha, 'Oh, that's not so bad—you are borderline,'" said Courey. "But it was actually one of the worst diagnoses she could have."

According to the National Alliance of Mental Illness, BPD affects between one and two percent of the general population. Although not as well known as schizophrenia or bipolar disorder, BPD is just as common.

People with BPD have extreme difficulty regulating or handling their emotions or controlling their impulses. They are highly sensitive to their environment and can react with intense emotions to small changes in their environment. The illness also seems to impact women more severely than men.

Menu Courey didn't know how to react after losing the stability she had enjoyed by training and traveling with her collegiate team. After several months of not training and being cut off from her social circle on the swim team, she had spiraled out of control. She checked herself into a psychiatric clinic in Columbia, Mo., in March of 2011, where she was diagnosed with BPD.

"She would tell me, Mama, swimming for me is my life," said Courey. "I want to swim. We realized later that it was more than her life—it was her lifeline."

WHAT ABOUT OTHERS?

Both parents began to wonder if other high-level athletes experienced such extreme responses after being removed from their respective sports.

"When you do sports, it relieves stress, especially when you do sports at a high level," explained Menu. "When you stop, unless you find a way to replace all of those release mechanisms, you can end up in a hole."

Although Menu Courey is an extreme example of what can happen when an athlete stops training and

competing, her parents began to worry about other athletes experiencing bouts of depression in similar situations.

Naturally, when a personality disorder is suspected, the first course of action is to seek professional medical help. Sasha's parents, however, want to increase public awareness of the serious mental illness before it happens. Based in Toronto, they reached out to a local high-performance school to speak to its students about mental health in athletes.

"We thought it would be good to promote a healthy mind and healthy body among swimmers and athletes," said Menu. "If you are mentally healthy, your body will perform better."

They presented their daughter's story to a thousand students at the school and received a positive response. However, the parents know this is just the beginning. They hope to use their daughter's story to emphasize how important psychological counseling can be for some athletes.

The parents are also trying to develop a system that coaches can implement for athletes who are removed from their sport due to injury or illness, or after they have retired from their athletic careers. Menu believes that coaches should give their athletes warnings about what they may feel after leaving their sport.

"If there is a support system in which coaches can arrange for another activity while (their swimmers) are out, that would help a lot—even if that support system is just a discussion of what an athlete might feel when they are done with their sport," said Menu. "It is really important that coaches and athletes know that it is difficult to stop 'cold turkey' because it is so intense."

Menu and Courey feel that another solution is, perhaps, to keep the athletes involved in the practices. For their daughter, one of the most difficult parts of being

removed from her team at Missouri was losing her social circle. Both parents suggest that high-level athletes stay socially involved with their team because most of the friends they develop are in the sport.

INCREASING AWARENESS

In addition to raising money through The Sashbear Foundation, Menu and Courey hosted their first walk to raise awareness for BPD last May. Nearly 300 people attended the 5K walk on the border of Lake Ontario at Sunnyside Park in Toronto.

"The motivation was and still is to erase the stigma and get talking about it," said Paige Schultz, one of Menu Courey's closest friends and former teammate on the Canadian national junior team. "Also, we want to help fund the training of professionals in dialectical behavior therapy (DBT), which is the best method to treat BPD. We're making a difference."

According to MedicineNet.com, "DBT aims to help people with BPD to validate their emotions and behaviors, examine those behaviors and emotions that have a negative impact on their lives, and make a conscious effort to bring about positive changes."

Menu and Courey attended therapy classes with their daughter at the McLean Psychiatric Hospital in Boston. "I remember writing down that we need to get this information out," said Menu. "We can't wait until people are in high-stress situations and try to get treatment. This information and techniques need to be disseminated with early prevention in mind."

Both parents will continue to seek ways to increase awareness of the illness that took their daughter's life. With a course of action available to athletes once they find themselves removed from their support system, Menu and Courey hope that no other parents will ever face the tragedy of losing their child because of BPD. ♦



PICTURED >
(PREVIOUS PAGE) SASHA MENU COUREY ENJOYS HER TIME TRAINING IN FLORIDA; (FAR LEFT) SASHA PREPARES TO RACE, THEN (LEFT) CELEBRATES HER SUCCESSFUL PERFORMANCE.