

# B Business

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## Business inspired by life

■ Consultant using her experience of having sons with bipolar disorder

**Mark Koestner**

Staff Writer

So often, a person's time-consuming business becomes his or her life. In Susan Mikolic's case, her life became her business.

Mikolic's business is Stepping Stones Mental Health, An Educational Consulting Service. It is a business started in 2002 from personal experiences that began long before.

At a young age, Mikolic's sons, Brian and Matt, now teenagers, were diagnosed with bipolar disorder. Aside from the stress the illness placed on the family's psyche and finances, it also made difficult the children's educational development.

Matt and Brian were missing about 60 days each per school year, and Mikolic recognized educators were not fully equipped to handle the educational needs of emotionally disturbed students.

She was determined not to let her sons fall through the cracks.

"The national statistic is only 41.7 percent of kids identified by the schools as emotionally disturbed graduate from high school," Mikolic said. "I wanted my kids to be in the 40 percent, not in the 60."

Mikolic, working as a nurse at the time, began getting involved in what she calls "trying to change the system." She became an advocate for emotionally disturbed children, working with the Ohio Department of Mental Health and Department of Education, among others.

Before long, she was being asked to speak to various groups, lending the knowledge gleaned from extensive research and first-hand experience. Mikolic soon began helping educators assist emotionally disturbed children to achieve academic success.

She is not surprised there was such a demand for her services.

"There's a total lack of understanding of how these illnesses affect a child's education," Mikolic said.

She now specializes in consulting educators with emotionally disturbed students, seminars and workshops designed to help educators and families understand mental health in children as well as personal coaching, support and advocacy for families.

Last week, Mikolic's business took her to



Jeff Forman/News-Herald

**Tapping into her own experiences, Sue Mikolic founded Stepping Stones, a consulting business to help families and educators deal with children with mental illness.**

Indiana for a conference. In April, she will speak to a National Alliance for the Mentally Ill group in Maryland and an American Federation of Teachers conference in Washington, D.C.

Those who bring her to speak say she has an obvious strength.

"She's lived it," said Carmen Provenzale, a special education professor at Cleveland State and John Carroll universities. "A lot of people do research, then speak about it. Her research is she's lived it. That's what makes her presentation so good."

With two emotionally disturbed children, Mikolic was spending 30 to 40 hours a week just taking them to doctors. With health insurance coverage not as extensive for the mentally ill as for the physically ill, she and her husband fell into a debt of nearly \$300,000 — a hole from which they are still

trying to climb, even though Matt and Brian are doing much better now.

"There aren't words in the English language to tell you how difficult life is," Mikolic said.

Mikolic, who works — appropriately — from her home in Eastlake, is still active in health insurance reform, in addition to her educational consulting, and is also in the beginning stages of writing a book.

"I think my first career, in nursing, I picked that," Mikolic said. "But this career picked me. Life and circumstances led me to do this, but I think I'm one of the very few that gets to say that I absolutely love what I do."

*To contact Stepping Stones Mental Health, An Educational Consulting Service, call (440) 513-6098.*