

# D Health

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## Mom on a mission

■ Woman's life experiences lead to consultancy in teen mental health issues

### Janet Podolak

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Life experiences in dealing with mental illness have helped Susan Mikolic set herself up in business as a mental health consultant and motivated her son, Matt, to consider a profession helping others.

The Eastlake mother and her son have shared the journey though Matt's long battle with depression and suicidal thoughts, and his brother Brian's emotional challenges.

A few years ago, Susan founded Stepping Stones, a consultancy to help educators better understand their students with emotional disturbances, and assisted them in setting up specific curriculum strategies to help children perform better.

Matt, who is now 18 and poised to graduate from North High in Eastlake was just 5 when he changed from a gentle, loving child to a hostile, aggressive one. "We searched for reasons why he would behave so differently and looked for answers with counseling," Susan recalled. As a registered nurse, she is more familiar with the health care system than many people, but despite her efforts, things were going from bad to worse.

"By 7, he was telling us he wanted to die," Susan said. "He began seeing a child psychologist and was put on antidepressants."

Now, however, Matt is free from drugs, and Gov. Bob Taft has appointed him to a spot on the Ohio Transformation State Incentive Grant as a youth voice for mental health. He's been invited to speak to other youngsters with problems and has a message of encouragement on the Web site he and his mother have established.

As a younger child, Matt spent months staring at a wall, unable to attend school or perform the simplest of tasks, his mother recalled.

"I learned that one young person kills him or herself every two hours in this country, and that suicide is the third leading cause of death in children 10 to 14," she said. "I found out that only 42 percent of children classified by schools as emotionally disturbed graduate."

On the Web site, they've established at [www.steppingstonesmentalhealth.com](http://www.steppingstonesmentalhealth.com), Matt describes how he felt.

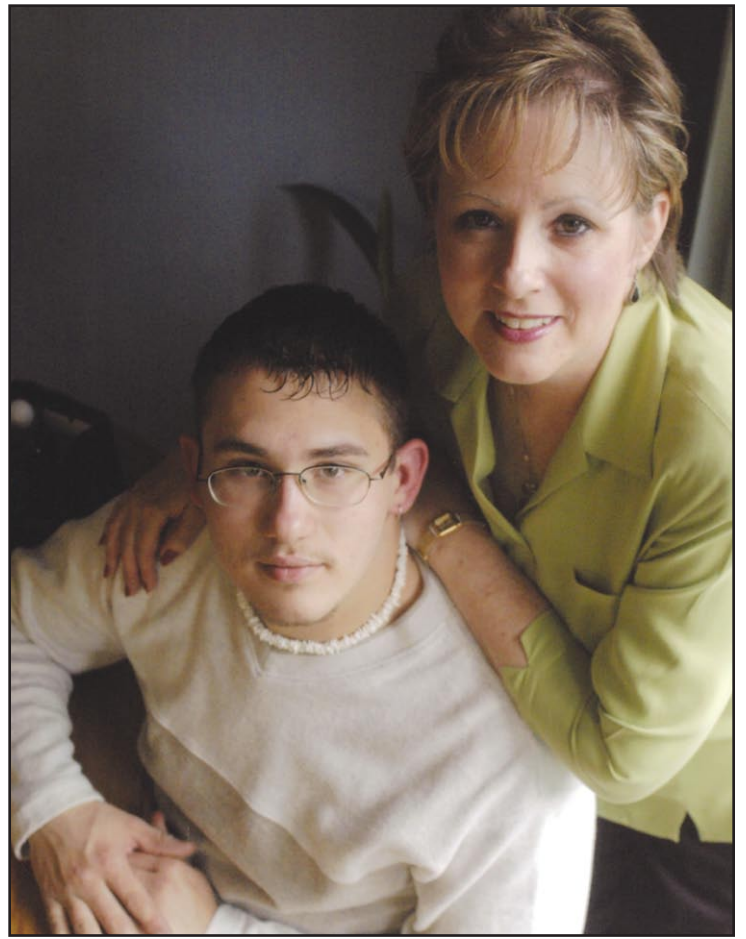
"When the days got shorter in the fall, I would begin to fall into a bad depression that lasted most of the winter, and would come out of it in spring. That turns out to be most of the school year.

"One year, my depression was so bad I just sat and watched movies for three months. I didn't do any school at all, and my mom and doctor began to talk about what could be done the next fall because they didn't want me to ever get that sick again. So the next two falls, I had electroshock treatments. They really helped me keep more stabilized in the winter."

Susan was tireless in getting help for Matt — much of which seemed to be treatment by trial and error.

"By the time he was 8, he was diagnosed with bipolar disorder," she said. She later learned that there was a family history of suicide, and the genetic disposition may have triggered an overreaction to the antidepressants her son was taking.

"I found out we had five



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**Sue Mikolic founded an agency to help educators better deal with students who have emotional disturbances. Gov. Bob Taft recently named her son Matt, left, to a panel where he serves as a youth voice for mental health.**

suicides in the family," she said.

When her second son began showing signs of emotional disturbance, Susan was devoting so much time to trying to find answers, she lost her job as a trauma center nurse.

"I got involved on the state level trying to change the system, spent time at meetings with the schools, and spoke constantly to doctors," she recalled.

Soon after, her husband left her. "I realized then I wasn't giving time to my marriage," she said. "It was good he left, because it made me get focused."

Her sons were making progress in their treatment after the Mikolic family made diet and lifestyle changes. She and her husband got counseling and reunited.

"I spent 24/7 for 14 years working in and out of the system, so got my education by fire," she said.

So she turned her newfound skills into a business helping others, organized as Stepping Stones.

"She gave our parents hope," said the Rev. Tom Johns, pastor at St. John Vianney Catholic Church in Mentor.

"We had her talk to groups of parents with children who were having problems. Susan is very committed to what she does."

Rick Hart, principal at

Willoughby-Eastlake Technical Center, invited Mikolic to speak to teachers at a staff meeting.

"She gave an awareness session to educate our teachers about the kinds of obstacles kids like this face," he said.

"Depression in kids looks like irritability," Mikolic said. "Parents and teachers expect that kids will be withdrawn and sad, but that's just not the way it exhibits. It's behavior that looks willful and manipulative, but the kid is in pain and doesn't have the vocabulary to express that."

Matt works part-time and is graduating from high school, and his younger brother is on the honor roll.

Susan has worked with special education programs at the Rocky River and Cleveland school districts, for Great Oaks Career and Technical Institute in Cincinnati, and with the Ashtabula County Education Service Center.

She does speaking engagements, consults with groups and families, and serves on the Ohio Department of Education's State Advisory Panel for Exceptional Children and its Positive Behavior Support Advisory Committee.

*Stepping Stones*  
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[www.steppingstonesmentalhealth.com](http://www.steppingstonesmentalhealth.com)