

NEW PALTZ | AUTHOR

Meet the author

"Losing Aaron" is a moving account of one family's experience with a catastrophic mental illness

by Frances Marion Platt

ON SATURDAY, MAY 19, New Paltz author Ingrid Blaufarb Hughes will be giving a live reading at the Adriance Memorial Library in Poughkeepsie, along with Nina Belén Robins, author of *The Supermarket Diaries* and *A Bed with My Name on It*. A poet who taught English, including ESL, at various CUNY campuses for decades before retiring in 2010, Hughes will be reading from *Losing Aaron*, a memoir published in 2016 by Irene Weinberger Books, an imprint of Hamilton Stone Editions.

This "Meet the Authors" event at the Adriance is subtitled "Focus on Mental Illness," reflecting the fact that May is Mental Health Awareness Month. Since the death of her son Aaron at age 31 in 1999, Hughes has been on a mission to educate other families about the symptoms of schizophrenia, the disease that changed everything for her entire family and ultimately prompted Aaron's suicide. Hughes terms it "the most devastating mental illness" - especially in a case like her son's, which manifested as paranoia so severe that Aaron regarded any attempt to persuade him to take medications as part of a conspiracy to poison him and control all his actions.

"He was very frightened. He was convinced that we were cooperating with other people, and he was angry at us because we wouldn't admit that we were colluding," Hughes recalls of Aaron's last few years. Complicating matters was the fact that the affected part of his brain caused him to experience a symptom known as anosognosia, making it physically impossible for Aaron to recognize that he had a mental problem. "It's not denial," Hughes points out, "it's an inability. It's something getting in the way of the brain perceiving something."

Consequently, Aaron remained highly resistant to the urging of friends and family that he seek help - once they realized that something serious was going on, that is, which took longer than it might have with a youth who was less competent, self-possessed and self-motivated. Aaron was a stellar student and always very independent even as a young child, Hughes recalls, although they had been emotionally close.

Among the earlier symptoms of the disease -



Ingrid Blaufarb Hughes.

LAUREN THOMAS

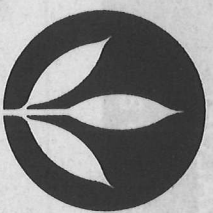
missed by family members because they arose while Aaron was away at college - were olfactory hallucinations, which led him to believe that he "smelled terrible" and was "repugnant to other people." Increasingly convinced over time that people were mocking him, Aaron became more and more socially withdrawn and suspicious. At his worst, the young man believed that television news anchors were speaking to him directly and knew much more about him personally than they should have. But up until near the end, he still managed to ace his studies and impress his professors, whose recommendations led to him being accepted into a highly competitive physics graduate program at MIT.

Much of what Hughes now knows about her son's descent into delusional thinking was pieced together in retrospect after his suicide, by reading his journals, letters to friends and medical records. She had interpreted Aaron's first outbursts of anger and sarcasm toward her as reactions to her separation from his father, and his loss of confidence as an ordinary adolescent reaction to social rejections and academic pressures. "Nowadays people have more awareness of what mental illness is. We had no preparation," Hughes says, noting that there had been no acknowledged previous history of schizophrenia on either side of the family.

Like anyone who has lost a loved one to suicide, Hughes, her ex-husband Arthur and their daughter Stasha - two years older than Aaron - asked themselves afterwards what they might have done differently. "There may have been a window when we could've intervened," she speculates, had they been fully aware of what was going on inside the young man's head while he was away at school. But she believes that ultimately, wallowing in what-ifs becomes "a form of denial. You can't wish it different. You can't rewrite the story." She also acknowledges that, from Aaron's perspective, life had become truly insupportable. "He lived with his illness for a decade. His suicide was a choice that we regret, but can respect."

What can other families learn from the Hughes family's terrible experience? She recommends familiarizing oneself with the symptoms of mental illness, for starters. "There are several good memoirs by people who live with schizophrenia," she notes, and has provided a list of them as an appendix to *Losing Aaron*. The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) is a great resource, offering workshops specifically for family members of the afflicted. Developing a support system for the caregivers is important: "Spell yourself," she advises. And if you're a friend of the family, you need to educate yourself as well. "It's not supportive to say, 'Everything will be all right.' ...Whatever you'd do for a friend with cancer - bringing meals, inviting them out for a walk - that's what people need."

These days, Hughes lives with her second husband, Jay Klokter, in New Paltz, which she terms "a good place to write. It's far enough away from New York City to feel like the country, but close enough for Jay to commute to work." Besides focusing on her writing and on sharing Aaron's story, she currently volunteers as an educator in the Alternatives to Violence Project at the Eastern Correctional Facility, and remains politically active on behalf of progressive causes. "I knew I wanted to stand with Women in Black as soon as I saw them, because I have always opposed war as a way to settle conflicts, and supported the rights of Palestinians to their occupied lands and to full rights as citizens," she says. *Losing Aaron* is a stunning piece of writing as well as a moving account of one family's experience with a catastrophic mental illness. You can hear excerpts from it at 2:30 p.m. on May 19 in the Charvat Meeting Room on the ground floor of the Adriance Memorial Library, located at 93 Market Street in Poughkeepsie. For more on Ingrid Blaufarb Hughes' work, visit <https://ingridblaufarbhughes.com>. ++



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