

Today, Mary Guardino, winner of the 2001 Welcome Back Award in the area of Destigmatization, serves the mentally ill as Executive Director of the organization she founded, Freedom from Fear (FFF). FFF is a community-based mental health outreach organization in Staten Island, New York. Mary Scullin, who nominated her for the award, describes Guardino as "a fighter."

"Mary is an outspoken woman whose 'feisty' nature has helped her successfully battle the stigma associated with mental illness. Since 1984, she has worked to address the injustices suffered by people with anxiety and depressive disorders."

It wasn't always like this. For 25 years, Brooklyn-born Guardino struggled with depression. "I'd have very good periods," she recalls, "and then I would have terrible periods. In the early '80s, my depression significantly worsened. It became so bad that it was difficult for me to care for my family or go to work."

Because of the intense stigma attached to mental illness at the time, no one talked about clinical depression. So, Guardino had no name for the cause of her problems. She only knew that she was overwhelmed and nothing her physicians suggested - having another baby, getting more exercise - helped.

One day, Guardino discovered her aunt was planning a European vacation. She was stunned. Guardino's aunt had long suffered symptoms similar to hers. That Guardino's aunt was suddenly happy and confident enough to tackle Europe was almost unthinkable. After some investigation, Guardino found out the source of her aunt's miraculous transformation.

A doctor had provided her aunt with antidepressant medication and counseling, which had given her the motivation to tackle life again.

"So I called my aunt and got the name of her doctor," says Guardino. "During my first appointment, the doctor diagnosed me with major depression. Major depression? I didn't even know what that meant!"

Although she doubted that anything could help her, she was desperate enough to continue her visits and take the medications the doctor prescribed.

"That initial visit was the beginning of a tremendous transformation," Guardino says. "I saw that doctor for over a year and during that period, life blossomed. I slowly began to experience the ups and downs of everyday life. Most importantly, I realized I would never again leave a wonderful party not knowing what it was like to have a 'good time.'"

Her life finally back on track, Guardino decided to reach out to others who are unable to identify their depression. She examined her own experiences and talked to medical experts and people living with depression. "I wanted to comfort them, offer them hope, and be able to learn from them what they experienced, so they could be my teachers."

In 1984, a psychiatrist friend asked Guardino to share her story. She agreed and that first speech blossomed into a full-blown one-woman outreach and educational campaign that became Freedom From Fear. Founded that same year by Guardino, FFF has helped thousands of people with depression return to productive lives and overcome the stigma associated with the illness.

"All of the people who have shared their personal success stories with me have been my guiding lights, Guardino says. "Even when I'm tired and close to burning out, their examples inspire me to never give up my quest to educate others about depression and its treatment."