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Brain Week RI speaker shares lifelong struggles with schizophrenia

MARY KORR
RIMJ MANAGING EDITOR

PROVIDENCE – **ELYN R. SAKS, JD, PhD**, shared her harrowing and lifelong struggles navigating the shifting, delusional scaffolds of schizophrenia at Brown University on March 12.

The author of the best-selling memoir, *The Center Cannot Hold: My Journey Through Madness*, was the keynote speaker for Brain Week RI, presented by the Cure Alliance for Mental Illness during international Brain Awareness Week.

A law professor and MacArthur “genius” Fellowship recipient, Saks described the first serious manifestation of the illness when she was a Marshall Scholar at Oxford University. “I was in terrible shape...I heard voices in my head. I wandered the campus thinking about ways to commit suicide. At the same time I had no awareness of the severity of my condition.”

Taken to the hospital by a professor, a glance in a mirror showed a wild, disheveled person she did not recognize, and which shocked her. “Until that moment I did not understand I had a mental illness.” But it would take decades before she acknowledged the depths of her illness. “My thought was I was different...my challenge was to take that woman in the mirror and tame her. I thought of it as a transient mood or thought disorder.”

When she returned to this country to study at Yale Law School, her condition deteriorated. “I was overwhelmed,” she said. One night, after failing to convince two fellow students that the memos they were preparing for a professor had been infiltrated and changed

by unknown entities, she climbed to the roof of the law library and began singing the Beatles’ Golden Slumbers: ‘Once there was a way to get back homeward...once there was a way...’

Shortly thereafter, she was admitted to a hospital.

“During the next year, I would spend five months in the psychiatric ward. At times, I spent up to 20 hours in mechanical restraints, arms and legs tied down with a net tied tightly across my chest. I never struck anyone. I never harmed anyone. I never made any direct threats. If you’ve never been restrained yourself, you may have a benign image of the experience. There’s nothing benign about it,” she said.

After being released from the hospital, she resisted advice to take a menial job and drop out of law school, and returned to classes the next semester. She started “talk therapy,” which she said helped her cope with her stresses and fears and gave her a safe place to, at times, unravel.

After graduation, she worked as an attorney in Connecticut before joining the USC Gould law school faculty in Los Angeles.

Saks said for years she resisted taking medications, thinking that if she could cope without medications she could prove to herself that she was not really mentally ill, that it was some grave mistake. “My motto was, the less medicine, the less defective. My L.A. analyst, Dr. Kaplan, was urging me just to stay on



BRIEF BIO

Elyn R. Saks, JD, PhD

Orrin B. Evans Professor of Law, Psychology, and Psychiatry and the Behavioral Sciences at University of Southern California Gould School of Law

Adjunct Professor of Psychiatry at the University of California, San Diego, School of Medicine; and Faculty at the New Center for Psychoanalysis

Recipient of MacArthur Fellowship in 2009.
JD, Yale Law School

PhD, Psychoanalytic Science from the New Center for Psychoanalysis. Los Angeles, CA

Her 2012 TED talk has been viewed more than 3 million times (https://www.ted.com/talks/elyn_saks_seeing_mental_illness)

Books

Informed Consent to Psychoanalysis: The Law, The Theory, and The Data (with Shahrokh Golshan) (Fordham University Press, 2013)

The Center Cannot Hold: My Journey Through Madness (Hyperion, 2007)

Refusing Care: Forced Treatment and the Rights of the Mentally Ill (University of Chicago Press, 2002)



medication and get on with my life, but I decided I wanted to make one last college try to get off."

She describes this in the following passage from her memoir:

I started the reduction of my meds, and within a short time I began feeling the effects. After returning from a trip to Oxford, I marched into Kaplan's office, headed straight for the corner, crouched down, covered my face, and began shaking. All around me I sensed evil beings poised with daggers. They'd slice me up in thin slices or make me swallow hot coals. Kaplan would later describe me as 'writhing in agony.' Even in

this state, what he accurately described as acutely and forwardly psychotic, I refused to take more medication. The mission is not yet complete.

Immediately after the appointment with Kaplan, I went to see Dr. Marder, a schizophrenia expert who was following me for medication side effects. He was under the impression that I had a mild psychotic illness. Once in his office, I sat on his couch, folded over, and began muttering. 'Head explosions and people trying to kill. Is it okay if I totally trash your office?'

'You need to leave if you think you're going to do that,' said Marder.

'Okay. Small. Fire on ice. Tell them not to kill me. Tell them not to kill me. What have I done wrong? Hundreds of thousands with thoughts, interdiction.'

'Elyn, do you feel like you're dangerous to yourself or others? I think you need to be in the hospital. I could get you admitted right away, and the whole thing could be very discrete.'

'Ha, ha, ha. You're offering to put me in hospitals? Hospitals are bad, they're mad, they're sad. One must stay away. I'm God, or I used to be.'

She then said, "Eventually, I broke down in front of friends, and everybody convinced me to take more medication. I could no longer deny the truth, and I could not change it. The wall that kept me, Elyn, Professor Saks, separate from that insane woman hospitalized years past, lay smashed and in ruins."

She said the acceptance of mental illness and the therapeutic value of psychoanalysis and effective drugs, mentioning clozapine, was "like daylight dawning. After 20 years I understood I had a real illness...by making peace with the lady in the chart, the less it defined me."

Saks added, "I did not make my illness public until relatively late in life, and that's because the stigma against mental illness is so powerful that I didn't feel safe with people knowing. If you hear nothing else today, please hear this: There are not "schizophrenics." There are people with schizophrenia, and these people may be your spouse, they may be your child, they may be your neighbor, they may be your friend, they may be your coworker."

She said her lifeline has been her friends, family, and the support of her colleagues.

Her goal is to translate ideas into action "so that those of us with a mental illness can find a life worth living. Hope for a cure lies in research."

To that end, she donated the \$500,000 proceeds of her MacArthur Fellowship to establish the Saks Institute for Mental Health, Law, Policy, and Ethics, a think tank founded to foster interdisciplinary and collaborative research among scholars and policymakers around issues of mental illness and mental health. ❖