

Once reluctant, now he uses his full name to talk about mental illness

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By Petula Dvorak, June 30, 2022



Cast members and filmmakers of “Hiding in Plain Sight” get tattoos before the film's premier in Billings, Mont., on June 28, 2022. Kevin Earley is at the far right. (Kevin Earley)

He was known as “Mike” in his father’s book about mental illness and the hellish journey it was to access care in a dysfunctional system. “Mike” was wrestled to the ground and Tasered.

“Mike” was receiving encrypted messages from an Oliver Stone movie.

“Mike” broke into someone’s home and took a bath.

“Mike” has “an incurable disease. He will never get better,” a doctor told Mike’s father, best-selling author (and former Washington Post reporter) Pete Earley.

He told the story of the devastating news in the documentary: “It’s unlikely he will ever be able to hold a job, he’ll ever marry, have kids. And there’s a high chance he’ll have an encounter with police, be arrested, may become homeless.”

But at the White House last week and on screens across America, he’s using his full name — Kevin Mike Earley. And he has a graduate degree, a job and a full, artistic life.

“If we’re going to say there’s no shame in having a mental illness,” Kevin Earley, 43, said, “how am I going to go around, using my middle name?”

Earley is one of more than a dozen Americans profiled in the latest Ken Burns documentary, “Hiding in Plain Sight,” a two-parter about the arresting mental health crisis gripping our nation’s youth.

A New York 15-year-old who overdosed in class talks about her pill obsession and three months she spent in the wilderness as part of a recovery program. A sweet-faced 9-year-old talks about his suicidal ideation. A Montana family explains how hard it was to make the 800-mile round trip to take their son to the psychiatric facility that had room for him.



Filmmaker Ken Burns poses, seen in Nashville in 2019. (Mark Humphrey/AP)

An abridged version of the doc was screened at the White House last week by first lady Jill Biden, who invited the subjects of the film — most of them kids — to the gilded screening room and acknowledged that their stories are “hard to watch. It’s impossible not to be moved by the pain of these young people.”

She underscored the breakthrough we as a society seem to be making — that like a cast for a broken leg or antibiotics for a strep throat, we must treat mental illness. “Mental health is health,” she said.

“But the solutions to address these challenges aren’t always clear-cut,” she said. “The journey to treatment is rarely a straight line.”

And that’s where the next challenge — the key to success — lies. Access.

There are mental health crisis lines. Rapper Logic (a guy from Gaithersburg who solves Rubik's Cubes onstage — love him) had a hit song aimed at making an earworm out of the nationwide suicide hotline: “1-800-273-8255.”

But unless you're a hardcore Logic fan, it may not be an easy number to remember. So on July 16, the United States has a new emergency number for anyone experiencing a mental health crisis: 988.

It will connect the caller to professionals on standby who can help avert a crisis and get someone on the path to getting real help.

It's only a start, though.

In Pete Earley's book, “Crazy,” which was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize, the father explains how tough it was to get his son into a safe place and for insurance to cover treatment for his bipolar diagnosis. “Mike” was in crisis, but until he proved to be a threat to himself or others, it wasn't easy to get treatment.

Another family in the film said they were told going to the emergency room would be the fastest way to get help. But once there, they had to wait another four months to find a doctor that would take them.

“Even if you're a family of means, like we were, it's difficult,” Kevin Earley said. He missed the White House event last week because he tested positive for the coronavirus. But he was negative in time to be with the rest of the crew when the film premiered this week to a live audience in Billings, Mont.

It's home to one of the counselors in the film, Kee Dunning, who invited everyone for the premier. And it routinely has one of the highest per capita suicide rates in the country, switching off with Wyoming and Alaska, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Earley said he loved meeting the other subjects — all much younger than him — for the first time.

“They're so articulate and well-spoken and able to clarify their experiences,” he said. “I was amazed at how wise beyond their years they are. I wish I had that.”

But it was a different world 20 years ago, when Earley began experiencing bipolar episodes, and the cops would call his family and tell them “he's crazy.”

“At least it wasn't like the '50s, where they just lobotomized us,” he said. Two hours before the premiere, the group decided they should get tattoos to commemorate the event. They scrambled to find a shop in Billings to take the rush job. “Most of the others got the name of the second part of the documentary, ‘Resilience,’” he said. “I got the name of the film.”

It's the perfect message for Earley, now a peer counselor working in Arlington: "Hiding in Plain Sight."