

Never Give Up Hope

By Elena Acoba

Hope. It's what NAMI Southern Arizona gives to those with mental health issues and to the people who love them.

Before COVID-19, I was part of a team of about a dozen volunteer facilitators. We ran six Family Support Group meetings. Sessions where partners, parents, siblings and friends could talk about their biggest challenges, their darkest fears, the best ways to cope. And to find hope by seeing they are not alone.

But on March 17, 2020, that all shut down. The Tucson office of NAMI—the National Alliance on Mental Illness—ceased public activity. Locations closed off our access to meeting rooms.

We hoped that this would end in about a month. As April went by, we knew it would not.

COVID-19 happened to open up my own work schedule. That gave me the time to help NAMI move to online meetings. It was part of my promise to pay back what NAMI did years ago—gave our family hope during a mental health crisis. We had to help these families survive quarantines. Stabilize mental health in these tumultuous times. Keep hope alive.

We started from scratch. I learned how to use the new NAMI Zoom account. Created policies and procedures. Set up a registration system. The contents of print material that we brought to meetings were posted to the website.

Through the difficulties of coordinating all this, we never gave up. We pushed hard to make this happen as soon as possible. Before hope died.

Thanks to facilitators willing to adapt, we launched five online monthly meetings starting June 3. In those early months, the groups tackled many things related to COVID-19. How isolation worsened depression and psychosis. How hard it was to get loved ones the therapy and medication they needed. How getting stuck at home all day created powder kegs of stress.

Our reach expanded. Family members joined in from all over Arizona, as well as from California, Washington and on the road. Two of our facilitators, both winter residents, continued running meetings from their summer homes in the Midwest.

In the two years that we ran only Zoom meetings, we gave dozens of families the aid and comfort they sought. Shared ideas on how to snatch moments of peace...cheered anything that felt like progress...kept hope alive that we would get through this.

Today we are slowly moving back to in-person meetings. But we still have two Zoom sessions a month. A third one...in Spanish...serves both in-person and online attendees. These we'll keep.

NAMI adheres to a crucial principle of support: We will NEVER give up hope. Thanks to dedicated volunteers, we were able to keep that hope alive. Because WE never gave up.