

## **“It’s All About The Brain”**

*Three Characters: Connie Kennemer, in her scooter (Multiple Sclerosis), Katie Wood (Mental Illness), Patty Kraft (Narrator)*

**CONNIE:** I’m in this scooter for a reason. You might call it my “mobility-aid of choice”! I have Multiple Sclerosis, a disease of the CNS. Basically, it’s a disease of the brain. My legs don’t pay any attention to the nerve impulses sent by my brain. So annoying! And no matter how many times I repeat what the little train said: “I think I can, I think I can”, my legs have the same response: “*You wanna bet?*” So minus leg-power, this scooter works wonders. And I am grateful.

MS is a socially acceptable illness. People clear a path when I am on my scooter or in my wheelchair and they have smiles and warm expressions on their faces. Sometimes I try to imagine the thoughts running through their minds: *Poor girl. What a bad break. It’s really a shame. Or...What a brave woman she is!* Sympathy and bravery. I can live with both!

**Katie:** I do not have MS. You probably already guessed as much. I wish my disease was that easy to diagnose. Granted, an MRI and a spinal tap are not very appealing, but they tell the story. No, my brain disease is something that is less socially acceptable. Shall we use the “S” word? It applies, so I will just say it. *STIGMA*. You know what that means, don’t you? Let me quote Daniel Webster: *STIGMA*. “A mark of disgrace or infamy; a stain or reproach; as on one’s reputation.” Or how about this? “A mental or physical mark that is characteristic of a defect or a disease.” Oooh. That’s not respectable *or* acceptable.

So help me with this. Connie has MS, a brain disease. I have depression or bipolar or schizophrenia or your garden-variety mental illness, take your pick. Mine is also a brain disease, but it is a “closet illness” that is...what? Shameful? *A defect?* We’re talking about the same organ, aren’t we? The BRAIN? Why is her illness honorable and mine odious? Why do people think she is brave and I am broken? If the scooter is the ticket, I am in the market! Sign me up...

**NARRATOR (Patty):** They both are victims of diseases of the brain. Decades ago, we didn't understand MS—and believe it or not, it was stigmatized. But education, medical progress and research have opened our minds and turned on the light for people with MS. So Connie finally has our favor, our empathy, our money for further research. We want to do everything possible to turn the tide for folks with MS. Katie's brain disease is equally debilitating but still misunderstood. Even though we are more educated and enlightened; even though medical research in the field of mental illness is expanding, it still carries an element of stigma—a stain, a defect. And quite honestly, we are ALL defective, at some level. We always struggle with what we don't fully understand. So the goal today is to open our minds, open our hearts, ask our questions, educate ourselves, give our money to help experts restore this organ in the body that has malfunctioned. And remember that our illnesses do not define us. Connie is not MS. She *has* MS. Katie is not her mental illness. Each of them is uniquely endowed with wonderful gifts, some of which have been informed and enlarged by their journeys with their particular disease. Are the cures on the horizon? That is our greatest hope and prayer. Until that day our job as a caring community, as caregivers and consumers, as advocates and medical professionals is to keep the conversation going and move together toward restoring wholeness: Body, mind and soul. Our community forms a team working toward this common goal. Connie and Katie are the ultimate “team players.” Let us count on going the distance with them. Let's finish the race together.

\* \* \*

By Connie Kennemer – February 27, 2010  
CAHM's Fourth Annual Forum – Poway, California

Community Alliance for Healthy Minds  
P.O. Box 27744  
San Diego, CA 92198  
[www.cahealthyminds.com](http://www.cahealthyminds.com)