

Pope meets with Edmonton mental health advocates

For Edmonton couple Austin and Catherine Mardon, mental illness is personal.

Austin has schizophrenia. He is an author, community leader, advocate for individuals with mental illnesses, and an assistant adjunct professor at the University of Alberta. Austin is also a special adviser to the Glenrose Rehabilitation Hospital.

Meanwhile, Catherine – a retired social justice lawyer in the U.S. – has Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder after she was attacked and left for dead after testifying against the head of a white supremacist group. She's also an author and advocate for the disabled.

Together they foster children and young adults with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome.

Austin and Catherine have been married since 2003. Both say their experiences have led them to devote themselves to working on behalf of people with mental illnesses, many of whom, they said, end up without a family and living on the street.

The Mardons met Pope Francis after the general audience on Nov. 6. They also gave the pope copies of their book – *Gandy and the Man in White*, the latest in a series about basset hound – in English and Cree. The Mardons were interviewed by Salt + Light TV.

They were inducted, in 2017, into the Pontifical Order of Pope Saint Sylvester, a papal Order of Knighthood, for their work on behalf of the disabled.

A native of Oklahoma, Catherine said she has always remembered what one of her childhood teachers, a Carmelite nun, once said: “We don't help people because they're Catholic, we help people because we're Catholic and we're called to do it.”

“Look around,” she said. There are people in need of love and support all around, but “don't be afraid, don't be afraid” to reach out.

A scientist by education, Austin was part of a NASA meteorite recovery expedition to the Antarctic in the 1980s at the age of 24. Unfortunately, the extreme difficulties of the expedition affected him mentally and physically.

Despite these challenges, he earned master's degrees in science and education and published more articles and books, before being diagnosed at age 30 with schizophrenia, which he manages with medication.

He has since also obtained a PhD in geography and continued to publish and speak extensively in the fields of science, mental illness and disability.

Catherine was previously a lawyer focused on social justice issues, including death row appeals. She also helped the homeless and people with AIDs, and her work brought her into contact with many people struggling with mental illness.

"I have helped people that most other ordinary people didn't want to be in the same room with," she said.

Catherine's attack left with physical injuries, a traumatic brain injury, and PTSD. She was no longer able to practise law.

But Austin and Catherine have taken their sufferings and transformed into an opportunity to help others.

"When I got hurt and couldn't practise law anymore, I didn't just sit on a beach or curl up in a corner somewhere. I started taking care of people. Because that was something I could do, including (helping) a couple of kids who had Fetal Alcohol (Syndrome)," Catherine said.

The difference between Fetal Alcohol Syndrome and other severe mental illnesses, like schizophrenia or bipolar disorder, they said, is that there is no treatment, because it is caused by permanent brain damage before birth.

The best thing for someone in this situation is early identification and intervention, Austin said, "to give them coping mechanisms to manage it, teach them techniques."

"It's almost like teaching someone who is blind or deaf how to maneuver around a world that they can't quite perceive," he said.

Catherine and Austin discovered, however, that many children and young adults with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome do not get early intervention. In many cases, due to poor family situations or a loss of their parents, they end up in foster care, and then, when they age out of the system, on the streets.

So, the Mardons started taking some of these teenagers and young adults into their home. They also reach out to other young adults suffering from mental illness. They throw parties for them and invite them over for the holidays.

"The most important thing when it comes to dealing with the disenfranchised is first you have to recognize their equal human dignity. And secondly, you have to take them where they are," Catherine said.

People automatically expect the mentally ill to be scary, she said. "They're humans."

"They want to be invited to Sunday dinner... They want somebody to remember their birthday. They want somebody to invite them to Christmas."

The Mardons encourage others to find ways to support young people with mental illness, especially, they said, older adults who either do not have children or whose children are grown.

Young adults leaving the foster care system are in need of the kind of support a family would offer, they said. While there are charities to provide financial support and resources, these individuals often miss out on the practical advice of a loved one and the chance to form healthy relationships with others.

“Somebody’s got to take care of them,” Catherine said.

Austin said what he would like Catholics – both priests and laity – to understand about mental illness is “that today there are effective treatments,” through both medication and therapy.

He added that some Catholics think mental illness is a character flaw that can be solved by prayer. This is a dangerous misconception, he warned.

“We don’t say that you should pray instead of take medication for your heart, but many Christians and Catholics believe that [mental illness] is a character flaw ... It’s not a character flaw,” he emphasized.

Austin often speaks on the topic, and he said his faith always informs his advice for people with mental illness or for their family members.

“I think that faith without action can be very hollow,” he added, “but then action without faith can sometimes be misguided.”

-With files from Grandin Media