

'We are all connected': Artists share stories of mental health at Richmond Hill event

Comedienne Luba Goy, Grammy award-winning musician Dan Hill and author/cellist Erika Nielsen will share stories at Richmond Hill Centre for Performing Arts April 4

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Luba Goy (left) and Ingrid Taheri. - Meaghan Weinberg/Invision Studio

The whole time she was growing up, Luba Goy tried to keep her father's troubles a secret.

Known as "the Ukrainian Charlie Chaplin," her father, Stepan, was a talented actor, comedian, singer, mandolin player, director and writer.

But a dark side developed after he underwent experimental treatment for epilepsy.

He had suffered a skull fracture in Belgium that led to epileptic seizures and for eight years, treatment included outpatient visits at the Brockville Mental Institution — a place that terrified young Luba.

"My father didn't belong in a scary old place with all those people suffering with mental illness," she says. "Some of the treatments were experimental, which caused hallucinations, he got electroshock treatment, and later fell into a dark depression."

As his seizures grew worse, Stepan was told he required a lobotomy. It was shortly before Christmas and he worried the procedure would leave him in a vegetative state, or kill him. Luba and her mother skipped decorating a tree that year, knowing doctors would keep him in hospital, under observation, awaiting the procedure.

The lobotomy never happened.

On Christmas Day, the hospital sent a telegram home and 12-year-old Luba, the only one who could speak English, read the message to her mother.

Stepan Goy had passed away the day before, Jan. 6, the Ukrainian Christmas Eve. She learned, later, he had died by suicide.

Luba Goy has come a long way since then to become a veteran of CBC's AirFarce and a beloved Canadian comedian, but her experience with mental illness has left a lasting impact — and a desire to spread a message of hope.

It's why she will host a special mental health event April 4, organized by High Notes Avante, a registered charity that uses artistic expression to inspire and bring together those touched by mental illness.

Goy, along with Grammy award-winning musician Dan Hill and author/cellist Erika Nielsen, will be at the Richmond Hill Centre for Performing Arts to share stories, music and laughter, hoping to remove the stigma that prevents people from seeking help for mental illness.

Hill is working on a book about his own mental health and that of his son, his late sister and mother.

"Our family has a lot of mental health challenges," he says. "Seems we tiptoe between brilliance and insanity, or, at least, mania ... I really believe openness about mental illness is the key to rising up and overcoming the various obstacles."

Dan's mother was diagnosed as manic-depressive when he was 10. He suffered his own mental health breakdown and was diagnosed bipolar after his sister died several years ago. He hopes talking about his experiences will help others.

"Many people look at mental illness as a sort of laziness or vanity because you are not displaying any physical differences," he says. "We are all connected through our humanity. We all have different challenges. If we accept certain other challenges, then it is natural that we should be able to accept the challenges of mental health."

Until the age of 27, Erika Nielsen never understood why she sometimes felt as if she were floating on sparkling clouds, enchanted by her own brilliance, while at other times, she huddled sobbing in a dark place, overcome with her own inadequacy.

A chamber musician, collaborative artist, orchestral player and educator, she suffered from major performance anxiety, destructive and ruminating thoughts, auditory hallucinations and suicidality.

"I thought it was all a part of being a performer and artist, or a sign that I didn't deserve to be one."

When she was diagnosed with bipolar disorder, she was "beyond frightened. I was in shock, and felt isolated, humiliated, ashamed, and alone."

Now that is receiving treatment, she says she still feels intensely but no longer feels scattered.

"I never knew it was possible to feel this balanced. I feel like I got my mind back."

Now she believes she can help others by sharing her story through events like High Notes Avante, her blog www.soundmindbook.com and a newly written memoir "Sound Mind" — a story of hope, healing and transformation.

"Mental illness is quite normal for a big percentage of the population," says Ingrid Taheri, High Notes Avante's artistic and executive director.

"I believe that if we raise the image of mental illness, those affected will slowly get the same compassion and respect as those living with other, physical illnesses, receive."

"These Are Their Stories" is set for April 4, 7:30 p.m. at the Richmond Hill Centre for Performing Arts, 10268 Yonge St.

To learn more, visit highnotesavante.ca or contact the box office at 905-787-8811.