
Holiday Heroes: Using faith to fight for mentally ill

By Michelle Hiskey
For the AJC

Branko Radulovacki chose psychiatry to challenge his mind, to go beyond outward symptoms and tease out the problems in a patient's thoughts. In 2007, a born-again experience challenged him to treat not just a patient's mind and body, but also their spirit.

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Phil Skinner, pskinner@ajc.com Branko Radulovacki founded FaithWorks, a one-man organization created to galvanize a body of believers who would take action in response to the state mental health crisis.

In 2008, when he read in The Atlanta Journal-Constitution about the crisis in state care for the mentally ill, the Atlanta physician known as “Dr. Rad” felt challenged again — this time, to influence minds across the state to care for those who are mentally ill. The result was FaithWorks (faithworksga.com), a network of people whose beliefs spur them to help those who need mental health services, both in their communities and congregations.

Through conferences and speeches, Radulovacki galvanized this coalition to fight the stigma of addictions and diseases of the mind. He also formed CHIP (Community Health Interfaith Partnership), which earned federal funding to create a model network of faith-based and community mental health services.

This father of two volunteered both time and money to this mission.

“He has not let the size and scope of the problem keep him from taking action,” said his wife, Susan, in nominating him as an AJC Holiday Hero.

“He has not allowed the politics of the problem to intimidate him. He has not let naysayers discourage him. He has not let professional colleagues’ questions about his motives silence him. He has not let fatigue stop him. He has been determined, persistent and focused on doing all he can.”

Radulovacki, a member of Peachtree Presbyterian Church, found his inspiration in the Old Testament story of Nehemiah. Despite opposition, and by himself, this prophet heeded God’s call to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem and make the city secure.

“I don’t have friends in the legislature,” Radulovacki said of his initial resources. “I don’t have connections at the Capitol. I don’t have the kind of wealth that will open doors of power. The one thing I have is deep compassion for people with these problems, and a willingness to be a voice on their behalf.”

Like Nehemiah, Radulovacki is a longtime outsider. Now 48, he was born in Belgrade, Yugoslavia (now Serbia), moved to Chicago at age 7 and became naturalized at 12.

He earned an MBA, but the cubicle life offered too little hands-on work solving human problems. Enter medical school.

Radulovacki felt sadness and righteous anger at the dangerous conditions faced by a vulnerable patient population, a situation made worse by government failure to respond. Until a recent federal settlement,

resulting partly from efforts by him, the Carter Center, the National Alliance on Mental Illness and other advocates, Georgia's mentally ill were safer outside the system than inside.

"Like Nehemiah, I realize that I am called to do something ... to speak out and act on behalf of those who can't or won't — those who will suffer the consequences of our state's lethargic response to the mental health crisis," Radulovacki wrote in a 2008 essay for the AJC's opinion page.

"We are all potentially at risk. And so, we all have a stake in ensuring the safety net will hold if or when we need it. Today, each of us can choose to be an everyday hero — like Nehemiah — and help those with mental illness. It's a moral call for me. I urge you to make it yours, as well."

AJC 2010 Holiday Heroes

For the second year, the Atlanta Journal-Constitution has selected a group of metro Atlanta residents to honor as Holiday Heroes, members of our community who, often at their own expense and without fanfare, do what they can to help others. Thirteen winners were selected from among dozens of worthy nominees. Besides having their stories told in the AJC and on ajc.com, this year's Heroes will also be featured on radio station B98 FM, and each will receive a \$250 gift card donated by the Buckhead Life restaurant group. The stories of all the 2010 Holiday Heroes can be found online at www.ajc.com/holiday.