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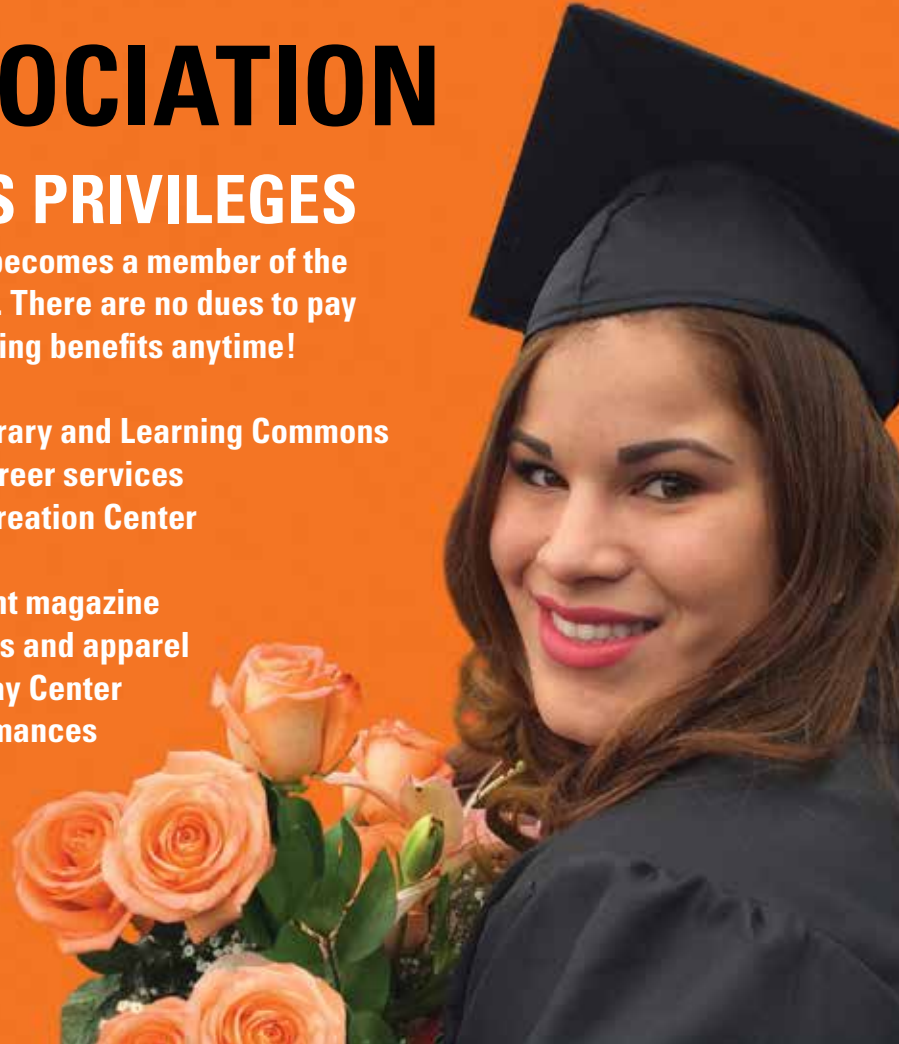
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ABOVE AND BEYOND

Students and Alumni Who Inspire Us



While nearly 20 percent of pregnant and postpartum women struggle with depression, Belsito wanted to make sure that none feel helpless and suffer alone, as she had.

BREAKING THE SILENCE

After ‘Hitting Rock Bottom,’ Advocate Takes Battle Against Postpartum Depression to Capitol Hill

BY ASHLEY FESTA

Jamie Zahlaway Belsito’s deep, dark secret has helped shed new light on a devastating, yet very common, mental condition—and legislators around the country are taking notice.

“I felt like I was a cat hanging on a screen,” said Belsito ’96, who suffered from postpartum depression (PPD) after giving birth to her two daughters. “It’s like there’s nothing stable under your feet, and you’re holding on for dear life.”

At the time, Belsito didn’t realize her compulsive thoughts and feelings of rage were normal and treatable. Following the birth of her first daughter Hadia, and again after Rose’s birth two years later, she knew she needed help, but was unsure where to find it.

“I kept my depression under wraps because I was worried people might think I was crying wolf,” said Belsito, whose stress was compounded by caring for her toddler and newborn while her husband was traveling for work. “I had this thought that people would deem me to be a bad mom, and intervene by taking my children. You can bet I wasn’t going to say anything.”

When her anguish persisted for months after giving birth to Rose, Belsito called her health-care provider, saying she had hit rock bottom and needed immediate intervention. The provider told her she couldn’t be seen for eight weeks, and suggested she go to the emergency room.

Desperate, Belsito called her therapist, whom she hadn’t seen for a long time. Her therapist explained to Jamie’s husband that his wife’s condition was real and could be treated. With validation of her feelings—and therapy—Jamie eventually emerged from the depression she had been experiencing for 10 months.

After learning that nearly 20 percent of pregnant and postpartum women struggle with depression, Belsito wanted to make sure that none feel helpless and suffer alone, as she had. She wanted to take action, and she wanted the effects to be big.

And she just so happened to know her way around the government landscape. Before the birth of her children, the Salem State University political science major had worked as a congressional intern and later as a lobbyist in Washington, D.C.

In October 2013, Jamie Belsito reached out to State Senator Joan Lovely, a 2006 Salem State alumna who led the Massachusetts Joint Committee on Mental Health and Substance Abuse. At their first meeting, she asked if Lovely would be interested in joining the state’s special legislative commission on postpartum depression. At their second meeting, she spent two-and-a-half hours describing her journey through depression.



photo by Lisa Nipp

“Jamie reached out, asking, ‘Who can I talk to in the governor’s office? How can I get people to pay attention on Beacon Hill?’ I helped connect her to Lt. Gov. Polito. I was happy to do so because what’s amazing is that Jamie is doing this out of passion, and with no pay. She’s doing this for moms. This is what citizen activism is about.”

—Matt LeBretton '98

Facing Page: Jamie Zahlaway Belsito '96 works on federal legislation for postpartum depression screening at Sen. Warren's office in Washington.

“I listened to her symptoms and remembered my own experiences following the birth of my child, now 28,” said Lovely, who joined the commission shortly after their discussion. “I went through intensive therapy for panic disorder because I couldn’t leave my house. Was that manifested postpartum depression? I’ll never know. I didn’t go back to my obstetrician; I just tried to figure it out on my own, and that’s what a lot of women have done.”

At Lovely’s invitation, Belsito attended one of the Commonwealth’s Special Commission for Postpartum Depression quarterly meetings. The room was filled with child psychiatrists, mothers support groups, Medicaid representatives, perinatal social workers, psychiatric nurses, obstetricians, pediatricians, family practice physicians, and health insurance representatives. The discussion focused on how to support moms who may be struggling and get them screened for postpartum depression.

“If a standardized maternal mental health support system had been in place when I found out I was pregnant, a nurse or doctor or even a pediatrician could have given me information about what’s normal pre- and post-birth,” Belsito said. “There would also have been informed people who could have told me about mothers’ support groups and the potential for anxiety.”

Jamie Belsito also wanted to involve the governor’s office. She reached out to another Salem State alum, Matt LeBretton '98, who, in addition to his job as vice president for public affairs at New Balance, also serves as finance chair for Governor Charlie Baker and Lt. Gov. Karyn Polito. Belsito knew LeBretton from their undergraduate days when they both served as members of Salem State’s student government association.

“Jamie reached out, asking, ‘Who can I talk to in the governor’s office? How can I get people on Beacon Hill to pay attention?’” LeBretton said. “I helped connect her to Lt. Gov. Polito. I was happy to do so because what’s amazing is that Jamie is doing this out of passion, and with no pay. She’s doing this for moms. This is what citizen activism is about.”

Herself the mother of two, Polito sympathized with Belsito and wanted to help. “Too often, postpartum depression goes undiagnosed and untreated,” she said.

Jamie continued her activism by joining the North Shore Postpartum Task Force, which brings together a variety of resources to assist mothers and families on the North Shore. The website provides contact information for a range of services, such as breastfeeding support, counseling, parent education, play groups, and food banks.

At a task force meeting in September 2014, the group proposed creating an advocacy day to raise awareness. On June 29 of last year, the event—Bringing Postpartum Depression into the Light: Decreasing Stigma, Supporting Families and Implementing Policy Change in Massachusetts—drew about 200 people to the State House. Pediatricians, obstetricians, maternal mental health specialists, and more than a dozen state legislators gathered to hear real-life stories about the effects of postpartum depression, and to discuss ways to assist mothers in the future.

At the event, Polito made a major announcement: Beginning in spring 2016, MassHealth would pay for mandatory postpartum depression screening, the first step toward helping women, infants and families receive better care post-birth.



photo by Lisa Nipp

TAKING ACTION

These mandatory screenings resulted from one of two pieces of legislation passed in Massachusetts to help postpartum women. Within a year of Jamie Belsito contacting Senator Lovely, Massachusetts mothers suddenly had many more options for perinatal health care.

“When Jamie puts her mind to a cause, she’s unstoppable,” LeBretton said.

The screenings include a series of questions designed to identify mothers who are having mental wellness challenges following birth. Mothers exhibiting symptoms of depression receive resources about where to find help. Women can be screened by their obstetrician, their general physician or even their newborn’s pediatrician, who often see new mothers more frequently than any other doctor throughout a baby’s first year of life.

A second bill provides funding for a pilot program of four health centers in low-income and multi-lingual communities. Funded through the Massachusetts Department of Mental Health, the centers will be a one-stop shop for mothers on Medicaid, administering the mandatory screening

along with other services, such as postpartum doula and lactation counselors. Mothers will have access to emotional support as well as referrals to appropriate mental health counselors when necessary.

Another new program, MCPAP for Moms, was launched in July 2014, and gives health-care providers a toolkit of resources to make available to new and expectant mothers. The program is an extension of the Massachusetts Child Psychiatry Access Project (MCPAP), which helps primary care providers meet the needs of children with behavioral health problems. MCPAP for Moms provides information and assistance to screen mothers, identify women at risk and refer them for treatment, and has already assisted more than 700 patients.

“If mom is having a hard time, it affects not only the health and wellness of the child, but their ability to bond,” Belsito said. “When a tiny person is depending on me as a parent, I have to be the best I can be and I have to figure out how to do that. Pediatricians now have the resources to help.”

MOVING FORWARD

Jamie Belsito was recently appointed advocacy chair for the National Coalition on Maternal Mental Health (NCMMH) and she’s also working with U.S. Rep. Katherine Clark, who filed a bipartisan federal bill in July to fund postpartum depression services at the state level.

“Jamie’s drive, advocacy and guidance played a crucial role in our introduction of the Bringing Postpartum Depression Out of the Shadows Act,” Clark said. “Our bill invests in comprehensive maternal care and screenings so that mothers know they’re not alone, that their suffering matters and that getting the help they need and deserve doesn’t make them bad moms.”

Belsito is thrilled that, on November 19, Senator Ed Markey cosponsored legislation in the U.S. Senate to create screening and treatment for PPD.

“I want to see the conversation start from the day a woman finds out she’s pregnant,” she said. “Postpartum depression is nothing to be ashamed of. It has nothing to do with whether you love your child—you just want your sanity so you can be the best parent you can be.” ■