



6/05/2010

Margaret Downing, Editor
Houston Press
1621 Milam Ste.100
Houston, TX 77002

Dear Ms. Downing,

I read the column written by reporter John Lomax on Justin Furstenfeld and wish to express my concern and request for retraction and clarification to set the record straight.

Lomax wrote that Justin claimed during our press conference on April 12th, 2010 that he suffers from schizophrenia, then went on to impugn our tours credibility as a fundraiser, and lastly questioned if Justin as a spokesperson for our organization and our mission actually had a mental illness.

In addition to being the founder of 1-800-SUICIDE, the Kristin Brooks Hope Center and the Pick Up the Phone Tour, I was the organizer of and a speaker at the press event at which Justin spoke on Capitol Hill April 12. Not once did Justin say he has or suffers from schizophrenia.

This accusation undermines Justin's credibility, the credibility of our organization, and the overall goal of our awareness tour. It borders on libel and is, at best, irresponsible reporting.

Lomax also implies impropriety regarding the tour as failing to raise money. This tour was never billed as a fund raiser. The Pick Up the Phone Tour raises awareness about our organization and it's mission that would cost us millions over the life of the tour to purchase the same number of impressions. It is difficult enough to get celebrities to support mental health issues much less suicide. Lomax's disparaging piece served to make finding celebrity spokespeople all the more difficult, and, in turn, prevented more awareness. The comments left by people reading Lomax's article attest to the damage to our organization, our message and the purpose of the tour.

During the press conference that Lomax cited (an event he did not even attend nor are any transcripts or reliable footage available for) Justin shared the story of his stay in a Minneapolis facility where, instead of confiscating his shoelaces and cigarette lighter, staff allowed him to keep both and invited their friends down to get his autograph and take photos with him. In Justin's words, he could have burned the place down and hanged himself. Up to 1,600 individuals in psychiatric care facilities commit suicide each year—a statistic that served as the press event's centerpiece, and a statistic Lomax failed to mention in his piece.

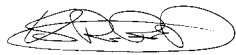
We are grateful to Justin, Blue October and their management for affiliating with such a stigmatized issue and taking a proactive approach to suicide prevention—a responsibility we all have, but few of us take on. Accusations of faking mental illnesses do nothing but scare people from coming out and getting help. Public accusations, like Lomax's article, was a discouraging piece for someone that might have a mental illness but doesn't want to seek help for fear of being labeled or worse accused of faking it.

A person's brain disorder—whether Type I or Type II bipolar, depression, schizophrenia, or anxiety—is between that person and his or her doctor. An accurate diagnosis can take up to 10 years, and many people who have one type of disorder can actually have co-occurring disorders but not even know it. Again, it is no one's business but that of the doctor and patient. We support Justin in his efforts to raise awareness and encourage others to seek treatment for a variety of issues.

We were also greatly turned off by Lomax's request to see Justin's prescription. Individuals with many different types of disorders are prescribed medications by general practitioners who do not have the psychiatric background to prescribe these types of medications. Studies show that you cannot tell what someone does or doesn't "have" by simply looking at a prescription label. Additionally, as of the 1990s, CAT scans, MRIs and SPECT scans are the most valid bits of medical proof of a mental illness because you can actually see the condition in the brain. We do not need to see Justin's diagnosis on paper or his prescription bottles to know if he has the illness. If Lomax had wanted accurate "proof", he would have asked for this information—not bottles. Proper research on Lomax's part would have shown these truths. Lomax could have read tea leaves and had a better bearing on Justin's condition.

These personal and organizational attacks have hurt the mission of the Pick Up the Phone Tour. It is our opinion that Justin is nothing less than a pioneer in the efforts to erase the stigma associated with mental health issues and should be praised for taking on that role.

Best always,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "H. Reese Butler II", enclosed within a simple oval border.

H. Reese Butler II,

Founder & President