

*From the Baltimore Sun*

## 'Voices' speaks of poet's painful childhood

By Susan Reimer  
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Michael Mack was only 5 when the brainstorm of schizophrenia swept his mother up in its turbulent embrace.

She had shown signs of fatigue and depression after the birth of each of her four children - Michael is the oldest - but nothing like this.

She thought she was the Virgin Mary. She chopped off her waist-length hair. She ranted that Lucifer ran her house. She trashed her son's room. She said an angel visited her on a bus. She threw a party for the neighborhood children, gave out cigarettes and her children's toys. She would disappear, leaving the children alone and untended.

It was pure craziness, but he was a kid. What do kids know about mental illness? All they know is what they are living.

"When she was the most ill, she was the most animated," said Mack, who spent some of those turbulent years in Baltimore but now lives in Cambridge, Mass.

"She had so much life, so much spirit and vigor. Over the top, yeah. But so much life."

Mack, 50, celebrates that life with a 90-minute, one-man poetry show, *Hearing Voices (Speaking in Tongues)*, that he will be performing at McDaniel College Sunday through Tuesday.

A poetry slam champion who worked through pieces of this play in competitions and on open-mike nights, he first performed it in its entirety in 1995 in Boston and has performed it perhaps 100 times since - at theaters and in clinical settings.

"He channels his mother," says Dr. Laurence B. Guttmacher, chief of psychiatry and acting clinical director at Rochester Psychiatric Center.

Though skeptical, he invited Mack to perform last fall for his long-term patients, some of whom are very ill.

"I am a big believer in traditional lectures. Here was some sort of poet doing some sort of play. This is not an easy crowd, and they were rapt. Afterward, they said, 'He gets it. He understands'," Guttmacher says.

It took a long time for Mack to understand his mother - he calls her Annie in the play, and he has taken a stage name to protect his family's privacy - and his feelings about her illness and about the "shadow," as he calls it, that schizophrenia casts over the children who fear they will inherit the storm.

And he just kind of stumbled into the vehicle for that understanding. Poetry.

"When I was a kid, I kind of went with what was happening. There was no reason to think other households might be different.

"In my late teens and early 20s, I started to wrestle with it. I just made up some story about it to tell people," he says.

After a stint in the Air Force, Mack was accepted at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Sloan School of Business.

He registered for a poetry class as an elective, hoping for an easy 'A.'

"I found myself writing about my mother. I had found a venue for something I had been holding inside me for decades."

In the late 1980s, Mack studied under Nobel laureate Seamus Heaney and Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Maxine Kumin.

His poetry is more than cathartic. It is remarkable.

"I encouraged him to write what he knew and to write out of his very difficult childhood," says Kumin, who remembers Mack as a student on the edge, very conflicted, almost troubled.

"I often wondered which way he was going to jump.

"I remember telling him: 'You have fabulous material to work with, and you have a moral obligation to use it wisely and to write from the heart.' He did. He does. I hope he continues."

Mack was born in Washington, D.C., and was living in Takoma Park when his mother first became ill. She had always been timid about leaving the house, but the onset of her schizophrenia was devastatingly sudden.

Her husband went to the grocery store just five weeks after her fourth child was born. When he returned, she had cut off all her hair and was saying that his face had changed. He looked like Jesus.

She was hospitalized within the week for the first of perhaps 20 times.

Mack's father, who taught electronics at a trade school, lost the family house trying to pay for her treatment.

He moved Mack, his brother and two sisters into a building his uncle owned in Baltimore - near Chase and Calvert streets.

After repeated attempts to bring his wife home from mental hospitals, only to have her give up her medicine and be forced to return, Mack's father packed the kids up and sent them to North Carolina to live with family.

"I think my father thought my mother's behavior was having a bad effect on us kids, so he send us to North Carolina for a year until he was able to come up with a new plan."

By the time Mack was 10, his parents had split up. Well, not exactly split up. His mother just sort of floated away.

"She'd be living on the streets. Then she would get picked up and hospitalized. They'd stabilize her medication and release her to a group home or something," Mack says.

"She'd start to think the medication was making her sick, and she'd stop taking it. And the whole thing would start again."

When his mother was hospitalized, he would visit with his father.

It was like visiting someone under water. Everything was morbidly slow-mo.

He liked her better when he saw her on the street, he said. Outrageous, loud, alive.

Psychiatric medicine caught up with his mother in the mid-1980s and she stabilized enough to live in a group setting.

For the last decade of her life, she lived in a family-type home on White Avenue in Hamilton, run by Jack McKeon and Mark DiDomenico.

"I will never forget her," McKeon says. He and his partner continue to care for mentally challenged elderly in a home in Aberdeen.

"When she came to us, she had walked away from an institution, and they found she'd been living on the streets for about 18 months."

But she stabilized remarkably at that group home, where all four children visited her regularly. She died at 73 in 2002 of pneumonia, after receiving a diagnosis of cancer. Mack's father and his siblings were at her side.

But there were no grandchildren there that day. Neither Mack nor any of his siblings, all of whom feared they would inherit the storm, have had children.

"Yeah," he says, ruefully. "We joke that the line stops here."

Mack's mother knew he was writing poetry and that some of it was about her.

"At first she didn't want to talk about those old days. She felt it brought up too many painful memories," he says. "But she was flattered that anyone would want to hear her story."

The poetry slams at which Mack was so successful were a mystery to his mother until he took her to an open mike night at a place near the Johns Hopkins University.

"She was just amazed. And for weeks, that's all she could talk about was this place. And how the FBI didn't come and get the performers."

His mother died within months of that visit. Though she never saw Mack perform his act, his father, brother and two sisters have seen it. All are of the same opinion: It is heartbreakingly beautiful.

Says Janet Jump, former president of the Maryland chapter of the National Alliance on Mental Illness, who arranged for Mack to perform at McDaniel: "He captures the raw agony of it and the mystery and he still gives you comic relief."

Mack says, "The dream that I had for a long time was that at the very end of the play, I would invite her up to take a bow."

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