An Introduction and Interview with 
Dr. James McSwain

Don: As a parent and school administrator, what has been your experience in dealing with mental health issues?

James: In the early years of my experience, I made every mistake and committed every wrong that I have criticized in our society. When my oldest son Phillip began to exhibit symptoms of Paranoid Schizophrenia at the age of seventeen (and probably a couple of years earlier), I did not recognize it. At that time, I held an earned doctorate with a minor in Counseling and I had years of experience in education. I had a lot of advantages and training that others did not have, and I did not see what was in my own home. My reaction was very stereotypical. This was bad behavior, so I applied “normal” behavioral management strategies that included sending him to the military to “straighten him out.” After years of a severe downward spiral that included long periods of disappearance and homelessness, I was contacted by a volunteer doctor in a downtown homeless shelter. She called and told me that she had my son in her office and that he was very sick and that I needed to come there immediately.

On the drive downtown I was angry. I still thought it was bad behavior and that he must have contracted some communicable disease. When I arrived, I learned that she was a psychiatrist and she had diagnosed my son with Paranoid Schizophrenia. That changed my entire family and my approach to my son. I went into full battle mode determined to find the doctor and treatment that would cure my son’s disease. I soon found that I was fighting not only a battle against a deadly and incurable illness, but I was also fighting a culture that considered my son’s disease to be a personal weakness. In other words, society saw him as I had initially seen him; he was exhibiting bad behavior and good discipline would cure him. We would see friends and family quietly withdraw because they were afraid of strange things my son said.

Don: As a parent and school administrator, what has been your experience in dealing with mental health issues?

James: For one thing, I learned how to visit my son in jail. If you have ever been associated with the penal system you know how difficult that can be. I also found out that my health insurance would not pay for the extent of treatment and therapy he needed, so the costs of providing treatment drained my financial resources. In spite of spending all of my financial resources, I was never able to afford or get the only therapy currently known to be successful with his disease. It was available in a cutting edge Houston based research hospital. He needed six months to a year of hospitalization and ongoing therapy for the rest of his life. For hospitalization, they charged $1,000 per day before any usual medical procedures like blood tests and medications. It was private pay only and required a $60,000 cash deposit – simply unattainable for most families.
At one point, while experiencing a delusional episode in public, my son was arrested for disturbing the peace. Since we could not afford long term hospitalization, our attorney did everything possible to actually keep him in the Harris County Jail. The Harris County Jail has a very good mental health hospital inside that treats more mentally ill people than all other State of Texas mental hospitals combined. We were fortunate to keep him there for sixty days. The symptoms of Paranoid Schizophrenia are similar in some ways to Alzheimer’s disease or other forms of advanced age dementia. My father suffered from dementia. His health insurance and retirement resources paid for the best doctors and care. I have often wondered what would happen if we had to take our parents and grandparents down to the county jail and checked them in for care. I suspect there would be change, because children and grandchildren would demand better treatment of their loved ones. The mentally ill do not have that advocacy. Their parents are their advocates and they age and pass away. Soon we may find that we have filled our prisons and our street corners with the mentally ill children left behind.

**Don:** How did your son’s mental health issues impact you as a school administrator?

**James:** One day while contemplating my own situation and frustrated from trying to deal with the bureaucracy and difficulty of finding help for my son, I walked into the front doors of my school during a passing period and stood among the mass of young humanity – my students. I had been complaining to myself about the scattered nature of mental health services. No one was able to explain to me all the services that were available or how to access them. I understood that the public health workers I had met were good people, but they worked in an underfunded system with little means of coordinating with other agencies. Suddenly, I was struck by the magnitude of my own ignorance. I asked the question of myself – what am I doing to help kids and families in my school? Where in my school would a student or family go for help? We were a good school and we did prioritize the academic needs of our kids. We had school counselors. They were nice people and students could make an appointment to see one of them by going to the secretary in an office full of other students and telling her why you needed to see the counselor. Then, next week, you could go in to tell the counselor of your issue and they would listen and tell you how much they cared about you and supposedly your problem would then be solved. So, working with my staff, we created the Student Service Center. We knew we could not solve all problems, but we could bring the connections of all the available services into one place. We could do a much better job of coordinating the resources that were available to help kids get needed assistance.

**Don:** What is your son’s legacy with regard to mental health issues?

**James:** My son Phillip died in 2009. I regret spending so many years being ignorant. I am determined to consistently challenge my own ignorance as a school leader. I am determined that students in my school will have access to all the services we can possibly bring to them in the hope that early access to care may help them not only be successful in school, but in the rest of their lives as well. There are numerous issues in education, but we cannot lose sight of our purpose. We shape young lives. There will never be enough time, money, or resources to accomplish all that is expected – but how can we use what we have in the most efficient manner to realize that mission? As a legacy to my son, I serve as an advocate for other school leaders to examine their practices and embrace a similar approach.

**Phillip (center), with Anthony and James**