

# SOUND MIND & BODY

## Susan Mikolic turned a personal challenge into inspiration for her business

BY DIANE DIPIERO

**S**usan Mikolic has been a nurse for many years, but her ability to start her own business focusing on mental, physical and spiritual wellbeing was more a result of her own personal challenges than anything she learned working in a hospital. The Lake County resident raised two sons, Brian and Matthew, who were diagnosed with mental illness at an early age. While most moms spend their weeks shuttling children from one activity to another, Mikolic took her boys to countless doctors' appointments for help with ailments like depression and bipolar disorder.



Years of working full time, caring for her children and facing mounting healthcare bills eventually took an emotional and physical toll on Mikolic, who wound up going on disability. She looks back at that time as a blessing. "It was like God was telling me to slow down," she says.

Mikolic became active in the Lake County Chapter of the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill (NAMI), eventually serving as president. She began to speak to schools and government agencies about the need to help children with mental illnesses succeed academically. She found herself advocating not only for her sons, but for thousands of children in the country who battle mental disorders. All of this led her in 2002 to form a business, Stepping Stones Mental Health, an educational consulting service.

Around the same time, Mikolic began what she calls an integrative approach to bringing health to herself and her boys. A combination of Western medicine and simple but significant changes to their lifestyles—for example, eating whole rather than processed foods, getting adequate amounts of sleep, exercising regularly, praying and eliminating negative thoughts—seemed to transform the family in a number of ways. Within a year, Mikolic says, she, Brian and Matthew had lost weight, looked healthier and, most important of all, were experiencing fewer and fewer bouts with mental illness.

"Look at us," she says, pointing to side-by-side, "before and after" photographs of the trio on her laptop computer. "Here we look pale; here we come to life. These smiles are fake;

these smiles are genuine." Indeed, the mother and sons look weary in one photograph, but vibrant in the picture taken a year later.

Mikolic says that her family has eliminated a variety of illnesses: Asthma, colitis and migraines are a thing of the past. The depression, ADD and bipolar disorder that her sons experienced had diminished so significantly that she eventually took them off of their medications. "Three years later," Mikolic says, "we live in joy, peace, balance and health."

Exhilarated by these results, Mikolic decided to share her success with others. Her program, the Energy Equation, is a comprehensive life-changing plan to reduce stress, renew energy and find a sense of balance. "This is an approach [to wellness], not a method," she says.

As the name suggests, there is some basic math involved in the Energy Equation. A ten-point system determines the amount of time an individual devotes to a specified set of activities. For example, if you seldom exercise, you'd probably give yourself one or two points for that category. If, on the other hand, you make sure you get plenty of sunlight every day, you might score a nine or ten there. Other items on the list include getting enough sleep, slowing down and letting things go. After giving a point value to each of the 14 categories, you add up the total. A low score requires concentration on areas that are being deprived. By following the plan to raise the numbers, the end result is meant to be a balance of physical, mental and spiritual health.

Mikolic holds seminars throughout the year. Group discussions during the seminars allow participants to share and help one another overcome situations that are keeping them from reaching their goals, she says. She also speaks to businesses that want to increase their employees' health and productivity. In working with companies, she sees an opportunity to reach an even wider audience. "The employees can use the Energy Equation as a model for their families," she explains.

Mikolic believes she is providing something that other self-help programs do not. "There are people with pieces of the equation," she says, "but not all of it." Whether participants are looking to gain energy, a greater sense of peace, a more productive work style or a healthier body, the Energy Equation promises to provide a sensible solution.

While Mikolic says that she and her family are medicine-free, she doesn't claim that those who follow the Energy Equation will be able to throw away their doctor-prescribed treatments. Instead, her goal is to help others find the peace and wellbeing that she has discovered.

With Stepping Stones and the Energy Equation, Mikolic says she has found more than just an occupation; she has found her calling. "I feel like I'm the vehicle to deliver the message," she says. Her newly found energy and optimism promise to keep her moving in the right direction. ■

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