My name is Jack Collins and I am writing to nominate Dan Lukasik for the Mental Health Association’s Clifford W. Beers Award.

I met Dan two years ago when I became his research assistant for a project he was working on concerning depression in the legal profession. Dan has been a lawyer for over twenty-five years and is well-known in Buffalo, New York as a mental health advocate.

I was interested in this position with Dan because I struggle with bipolar disorder. I graduated from Georgetown University in 2014 and have been dealing with this condition since. I will be attending Case Western Law School in the Fall.

As I got to work with and know Dan, I came to understand some of the trials he has gone through during his own bouts with mental illness. When he was 40 and a managing partner at his law firm, Dan was diagnosed with Major Depression. It was a very painful and difficult chapter in his life. He couldn’t work for three months. He felt the terrible sting of stigma and the feeling of complete isolation that so often accompanies depression, when he disclosed his problem to his three fellow partners. “Why don’t you take a vacation,” one of them angrily said. Feeling ashamed and broken, Dan struggled to make it back to work. When he did, no one asked him how he was doing or if he was feeling any better. As he remembers it, people acted as if he had never been gone and that mental illness was not a “real” illness.

Despite his illness, Dan has won many accolades as a trial lawyer and has been listed in the publication, The Best Lawyers in America for many years. He was listed recently in “The Elite Top Ten” as one of the most respected lawyers in his community. Having worked with him these past two years, I can attest to the personal integrity and character that has garnered him such recognition.

In 2007, Dan wanted to challenge the stigma of depression and contacted the Trial Magazine, a publication put out by the American Association of Justice in Washington, D.C. He wrote an article “One Attorney’s Depression Story.” When his partners read it, they were furious. One of them said, “Who is going to hire a mentally ill lawyer??” Another partner told him about running into another lawyer at court, one of the firm’s competitors, who said, “How is Dan? Is he really nuts? Is he walking around the streets in rags?” Dan’s partner told him he was ashamed of him and worried that colleagues and judges would “throw stones at him.” But Dan persisted.

Later in 2007, Dan wanted to find a way to help his fellow lawyers that suffer with depression to go through what he did alone. So, he created the website Lawyerswithdepression.com, the first website of its kind, where he would blog about his personal experiences coping with depression while working and living his life. Before launching it, he had lunch with a federal judge. He told him about his idea. The judge said, “Why Don’t You Do It Anonymously? Dan replied, “Isn’t that the problem? Why should I have to do it anonymously? I wouldn’t have to if I had another serious illness like diabetes or cancer”. Dan didn’t do it anonymously. The website has gone on to have over 2 million page views to date and counting. Over the past five years, his blogs and message have been directed towards a wider audience to include anyone interested in or suffering from any type of mental illness. It has been named one of the top depression blogs in the U.S. for the past several years.

Since its launch, Dan’s work has been reported on in The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, on CNN and many other national and international publications. In 2010, he obtained three grants to produce an original documentary, “A Terrible Melancholy: Depression in the Legal Profession” which has been viewed all across the country. Dan also speaks around the country at colleges, law schools, mental health organizations, and other community events. In the past year he has been to both Yale and Harvard Law School to discuss mental well being for JD candidates.

Navigating depression is a journey fraught with hardship and despair, but it is also one tinged with the blessings of support, community and hope. Dan’s story is one of struggle but it is ultimately defined by his ability to lead a fulfilling, productive life while dealing with mental illness. Dan continues to fight stigma through his work at the Mental Health Association of Erie County in Buffalo, New York as its new Director of Mental Wellbeing in the Workplace where he will keep on speaking out on this issue. His knowledge, advocacy and passion make him a deserving candidate for this years Clifford Beers Award and I am honored to present his candidacy.