



Hope and Mental Illness

Jono Oliver's Movie Hits Home



By **Bob Carolla**, NAMI Director of Media Relations

Home is an inspiring independent film about mental illness: serious, warm, intense and humorous. It has won the Entertainment Industries Council's PRISM Award for 2014 for its portrayal of a person living with mental illness and was a nominee for Outstanding Director in a Motion Picture at the NAACP's Image Awards.

Many of the faces in the film are familiar from such television series as HBO's "The Wire," "NYPD Blue," "The Good Wife" and "Blue Bloods" and movies like *Terminator 2* and *Blackhawk Down*. The film was recently released on DVD and Video-on-Demand; more information about the film can be found online at www.homethefilm.com.

The story revolves around Jack Hall, played by Gbenga Akinagbe ("The Wire"), who has schizophrenia and lives in a New York City group home. Hall has a job as a messenger and is trying to gain independence by moving into his own apartment; in doing so, he is hoping to salvage his relationship with his young son, reestablish his life and try to achieve some sense of normalcy.

Jack's psychiatrist must approve his discharge, but doesn't believe he is ready. Other residents of the group home have their own differing opinions as to whether Jack is ready to live independently out in the world.

NAMI had the chance to speak with Jono Oliver, the film's producer, writer and director. Oliver lives in Brooklyn and currently serves as first assistant director for the television series "Blue Bloods."

What was your inspiration for the film?

I've always been attracted to films that show regular people who we might not be used to seeing on screen. These are people we might walk by on the street, taking for granted all that they might be going through and might have to offer the world. I like stories with challenges for characters that might seem small to most of us—such as getting a new job, asking a person out for a date, finding an apartment—that are no less than life or death for them.

As for the mental illness aspect, my parents were social workers. My mother was a school social worker with the NYC Board of Education, and my father ran a mental health clinic in Brooklyn back in the '70s and '80s. So perhaps that's where the seed was planted. I also have been very aware of the media's depiction of people with mental illness as usually one of two things: psycho killers or jokes. I was excited about portraying a group of people to help break down that stereotype.

The film has an incredibly talented cast. How did you recruit them? Did they research and study for their roles involving mental illness in any special way?

I was blessed. Many great actors wanted to get involved for practically no money. They just did it for the love of the project. It was a lot of work to cast the "group." I wanted the right balance of pathos and humor, and I took ethnicity and age into account, but the most important thing was to get a cast who were fantastic actors and who were real, believable and truthful.



The cast of *Home*.

I was very conscious of the potential criticism the film could receive if I screwed up the mental health depictions. It would have gone against a lot of what the film stood for in my mind. I needed some humor and a lot of humanity, and thankfully the cast I assembled did this beautifully. They played their characters with love and dignity. Some had prior experience with mental illness, both with themselves and those around them. Some of that was discussed when talking about their characters during rehearsals.

I also had an amazing technical advisor, a psychiatric nurse, who worked with me to come up with diagnoses for the entire cast. Each person had a very detailed backstory, even though it was typically not an overt part of the film. Not one diagnosis is spoken out loud in the film. It was important to me to not label them. I wanted the audience to get to know them as they act and behave as opposed to by some illness that someone says they have, with all of the preconceptions and misconceptions that this often breeds.

You have said that *Home* is a story that everyone should be able to relate to. Did you intend it as a metaphor about life in general, not just a story about mental illness?

Absolutely. Jack's story in *Home* is very specific, but we can all relate to having a goal, facing obstacles and doubts and trying to overcome them. Sometimes we fail, sometimes we succeed, but the victory is in trying. I often laugh about the parallels between making this film and Jack's goal of simply getting an apartment. The true obstacle is other people's doubts.

What was the most difficult challenge in making the film?

Not having money to make it! (*Laughter.*) But in a way, that helped because everyone involved, cast and crew—everyone—did it because they simply wanted to help tell this story. I'll always be grateful to them.

Was there a moving “real-life moment” in making it?

Real-life moments have come in people's reactions to the film. When we were struggling to find distribution and get the film noticed, and seeing the reactions of the audiences really kept me going—knowing that we had a very good movie that people should see.

The DVD's bonus features include videos from NAMI NYC Metro. Have you had other involvement with NAMI?

I joined NAMI many years ago while I was researching a TV show about mental health workers. That's when I first became aware of NAMI. I like their model of family involvement in the treatment process. We also handed out green ribbons at this year's NAMIWalk in New York.

I was in Los Angeles recently accepting the PRISM Award, which last year went to *Silver Linings Playbook*. I met some great people from the Stigma and Discrimination Reduction Consortium of the California Mental Health Services Authority, of which NAMI California is a partner. They're doing a great campaign to raise awareness, called “Each Mind Matters.”

One of the most exciting things about *Home* is that we're really trying to use whatever attention it gets to help give mental health groups a platform for them to be heard by those who might normally turn a deaf ear.

Anything else you want to add?

I want to thank my whole cast and crew for their continued hard work and support. And thank you, NAMI, for taking the time to talk about *Home*. It's really hard for us little guys out here in the world of independent films to get notice and support, so I appreciate it greatly! 🍷

Visit www.homethefilm.com for info on where to watch *Home*.