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Zak Williams & Al Gilbert



Dr. Boyd-Smith & Al Gilbert

NAMI San Francisco Honors Felton President & CEO Al Gilbert with Champion Award

Guest Speaker Zak Williams Encourages Advocacy & Education

SAN FRANCISCO, CA (October 28, 2016) — On October 27, 2016, Felton Institute President and CEO Al Gilbert was awarded the first ever Champion Award by NAMI San Francisco (NAMI SF). NAMI SF is an affiliate of **the National Alliance on Mental Illness, the largest grassroots organization dedicated to improving the lives of persons living with serious mental illness and their families. More than 20,000 people are helped each year from the efforts of NAMI SF staff and 150 volunteers.**

NAMI Board President Dr. Gifford Boyce-Smith presented the Champion Award to Al Gilbert at the beginning of a warm and wonderful evening of celebration and incisive conversation about support for those impacted by mental illness.

“Al came in with his private industry turn around experience and completely turned around Felton. So he knows how to turn around organizations; he knows how to operate. I know him from working on various grants together, and he’s a brilliant guy. And he continues to be the best friend of NAMI that we could possibly have. So because of Al, and because of Felton, and our history sort of coming of age, we created something called the Champion Award. And tonight we’re giving that first ever Champion Award to Al Gilbert,” Dr. Boyce-Smith said before presenting the award.

“It’s really our pleasure to partner with NAMI,” Al Gilbert smiled as he thanked NAMI SF for the award. “Nationally, your work is so important, and locally, your work is incredible. We have partnered with NAMI around some of the programs including Family to Family and our PREP program. We look forward to continuing and expanding our collaborative work. And I need to say thank you for all of your commitment, because it’s your commitment that actually drives us. I would also ask anybody here who’s not a member of NAMI to join.”

“Words can’t express how thankful our organization is to Al. He has been so integral to our success, with putting on our programs and the impact that we’ve had in our community. We are grateful not only to Al but also to the entire Felton Institute. And it’s great that the whole organization as welcomed us with open arms,” NAMI SF Community Relations Director Jessica Lobedan enthused.

NAMI SF Executive Director Anne Fischer warmly introduced her friend and NAMI SF’s guest speaker Zak Williams, son of the late Robin Williams. Zak spoke poignantly of the beloved comedian’s struggles, his suicide and the need for support for those living with mental illness.

“I’m standing in front of you here as someone who is directly impacted by mental illness, as someone who seeks answers about how mental illness affects my life and those around me, and as someone who has dealt with the disease personally. My personal experience with the disease is something that I do not speak about often. I suffer from depression. My father also suffered from depression for years prior to taking his life. Despite our shared illness, we rarely spoke about it directly. In hindsight, I wish we could have talked about what we were going through more openly. But there is so much shame associated with mental illness that we suffer in silence and hide our disease. I saw my father suffering and so wanted to help him and make him feel better. For a son to have to share his dad with the world and see someone give his all to his fans only to find himself drained and vulnerable in private and not being sure what I can do to comfort his pain is a terrible feeling. I lost my father to depression and suicide and it is an incomprehensible thing to go through.”

“Research shows that the most effective way to combat stigma is personal testimony. Much of the work NAMI SF does is designed to educate the public and reduce stigma. Hearing from an individual with a mental health condition teaches people that recovery is possible. Talking with a parent whose child has been homeless or incarcerated as a result of their mental illness makes it harder to ignore the individual sleeping on our streets. We need to harness the power of social mobilization. We need to empower advocates with tools so they can use them with passion and great effect. We need to put a human face on the disease in a knowledgeable and articulate way. People won’t seek out treatment until we get rid of the negative attachments to mental health in America. For that to happen, we need to be more open about addressing the issue.”

All of NAMI’s programs are free, and the organization relies on membership, donations and foundations to make its work possible. namisf.org

Felton Institute was founded in 1889 with the mandate that children and families in crisis must have access to social services and resources in order to help them build upon their inherent strengths and develop self-sufficiency. Its name honors executive director Dr. Katharine “Kitty” Felton whose innovation at the turn of the 20th century greatly expanded social services throughout San Francisco and garnered national acclaim. For more than 127 years, Felton Institute has been a leader in innovative mental health and social service programs for all.

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