

{PROFILE} OF THE WEEK

RACHEL PRUCHNO: AUTHOR AND RESEARCHER

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Contributor

Sophie hastily gathered her belongings into three garbage bags, gave her mother a parting glance, and walked out the front door, into the night and out of her family's life.

This emotional scene from Jan. 17, 2011, with her daughter was the catalyst for what would eventually become Dr. Rachel Pruchno's first book, "Surrounded by Madness," a memoir based on her family's experience with mental illness as her adopted daughter—referenced as "Sophie" in the book—dealt with bipolar disorder, ADHD and borderline personality disorder.

"I started writing it when my 18-year-old daughter left home with a heroin addict," said Pruchno, director of research for the New Jersey Institute for Successful Aging at Rowan University's School of Osteopathic Medicine.

"My husband and I had hidden her mental illness from our closest family and friends. I started writing because I needed to explain to my friends and family where she was. I felt like I couldn't tell people what happened and I needed to tell the whole story."

As a way to find solace in their struggles, Pruchno decided to finally come clean about her family history. Although the names within the book were changed to protect the individuals and institutions involved, Pruchno left the facts unaltered to allow people to gain an understanding of what the healthcare system looks like, what happens to patients with mental illness and why it is vital to raise awareness on mental health issues to help shake the stigma attached to them.

As the director of research, Pruchno is a vital part of SOM, where she received a combined \$3 million in grants to fund her research on the long-term effects of Hurricane Sandy on New Jersey residents in the past year.

Deviating from her lifetime of scientific research and studies pertaining to older generations, "Surrounded by Madness" delves into Pruchno's personal life, both past and present, to shed light on the realm of mental illness.

"My mother suffered from manic depression, which was discovered when I was 12 years old," said Pruchno, who lost her mother to suicide as a result of her illness.

What began as a therapeutic outlet has taken on the form of a voice for mental health problems, with Kirkus Reviews literary magazine stating that "Pruchno's feelings of desperation and powerlessness speak more to the reality of mental illness than an academic case study ever could" in a review of the book.

According to Senior Director for Student Health at the Rowan University Wellness Center Dr. David Rubenstein, one in four adults will suffer from mental illness in any given year and 50 percent of adults will experience some form of it during their lifetimes.

"I think it's terrific [that] she wrote this book," said Rubenstein. "It has the impact of continuing to de-stigmatize mental illness. I applaud that kind of openness—keeping silent is the problem."

Prior to Pruchno becoming a published author, she graduated from Pennsylvania State University in 1982 with her Doctor of Philosophy in family studies and human development. In the years following, she spent most of her



Rachel Pruchno published her book *Surrounded by Madness*, a memoir about her family's dealings with mental illnesses, in March 2014. -Photo courtesy of Rachel Pruchno

life conducting research on older individuals, family caregiving and decision making at the end of life at institutions ranging from the Philadelphia Geriatric Center, to the Miami Jewish Home and Hospital for the Aged. "My whole career has been research," said Pruchno.

As the current director of research, Pruchno has turned her passion for research into a new data panel referred to as Ongoing Research on Aging in New Jersey: Bettering Opportunities for Wellness in Life (ORANJ BOWL). With the help of a five-year, \$2.8 million dollar grant from the National Institute on Aging, the project was established to under-

stand successful aging and what predicts it.

After writing her memoir, Pruchno determined that although she writes frequently as a researcher, she discovered a new part of herself through the experience.

"I think there will be another book, but I don't know what it will be or when because right now, I am on a mission to spread awareness on mental illness. We need to stop hiding and being fearful. That is my message," said Pruchno.

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HOROSCOPES

♍ Virgo

Obligations to friends and family are likely to come up. The best plan is to get everything done as quickly as possible and spend the rest of the day relaxing.

♎ Libra

Don't be surprised if lots of visitors show up today, but you should be brimming with energy so you can handle it.

♏ Scorpio

You could be feeling a bit antsy today. Don't push yourself past your limits, exercise within your limitations.

♐ Sagittarius

An exciting communication could inform you of an opportunity that you should explore. While you'd be quick to act under normal circumstances, today you might be more cautious.

♑ Capricorn

A friend could ask for a loan and you might hesitate to give him or her the money, but follow your instincts as the person may not be too savvy about money.

♒ Aquarius

You're likely to experience a burst of energy that may temporarily turn you into a workaholic. Take care of the most pressing tasks and then relax.

♓ Pisces

Frustration may be the word for today, as you could be experiencing a bit of wanderlust. Use your placid nature to get grounded, then use your practicality to solve the issues at hand.

♈ Aries