

### Finding the strength to persevere.

*“But families have voice and choice. The Idaho System of Care’s strength-based approach identifies family values, and then local mental health councils figure out how people in the community can work together to get what the family needs.”*



BUILDING ON EACH OTHER'S STRENGTHS.

**Like so many parents turned advocates, Angela Hicks’ dedication to helping children with serious emotional disturbances and their families is rooted in her own personal experience of needing help and not knowing where to turn to get it.**

#### **What is a serious emotional disturbance (SED)?**

**SED includes a range of behavioral and emotional disorders severe enough to limit or interfere with a child’s ability to function in the family, school, or community.**

Angela has two sons. The youngest one showed signs of emotional and behavioral problems almost from birth. By the time the boy was old enough to attend school his behavior had become a real source of concern. In school he was frequently reprimanded for disruptive behavior, and Angela felt he was perceived to be a “bad” kid by his classmates and teachers alike.

Living in a small town in Idaho, Angela had few resources to draw upon to help her understand what was going on with her son. It was not until he was hospitalized after a psychotic episode at age seven that he was diagnosed as bipolar with attention deficit hyperactive disorder (ADHD). Two more episodes over the next nine months prompted the family’s insurance company to drop their coverage, leaving Angela responsible for more than \$90,000 in medical bills.

Using the family home as collateral, Angela took out loans to cover her son’s mounting medical expenses. In addition to her financial plight, Angela felt frustrated because the treatment, which included medication and cognitive therapy, appeared to be doing little to help her son. On the brink of financial ruin and desperate to assure her son the best care possible, Angela made the difficult decision to assign parental rights to the state so her son would be eligible for residential care.

#### **All it takes is one person to make a difference.**

Angela’s son remained in the Hope House residential care facility in Nampa for five years. By age 13 he had made sufficient progress to return home. While the goal was for him to reenter the public school system, academically he wasn’t performing to grade level – especially in the area of reading. Angela agreed to meet with middle-school staff to work out a solution. Entering the room where the meeting was to be held, Angela was surprised and a little intimidated by the 25 people assembled for the meeting. Those in attendance represented various family and community

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services in addition to the local public school system. Although these people were there to help her son, Angela felt the majority of their comments focused on his limitations and not his strengths.

There was one exception, and it was that one exception that made the difference for Angela and her son: A young teacher, asked the question, "What does your son like to do?" The directness of her question caught Angela off guard, and it took a moment for her to think of a response. From the time he was a small boy, Angela's son loved to go to the grocery store. There was something about the people and the seemingly endless array of visual curiosities that made the experience so memorable for him. When she mentioned her son's interest, it didn't take the woman long to come back with an idea: They would use grocery store ads to improve Angela's son's reading ability. Through diligence and an educational approach that combined the Linda Mood Bell reading program with grocery store ads from the local newspaper, the teacher, Angela, and her son were able to achieve the results they hoped for and much more.

**With the right help things do get better for everyone.**

Angela credits their success to her son's strength and his teacher's willingness to think outside the box.

Today that boy who couldn't read to grade level is 17 years old and completing his high school education with an impressive 3.8 grade average. Moreover, he has set his sights on college and has already secured two scholarships to help him along the way.

Looking back on all that has happened, there is every reason in the world for Angela and her son to share a feeling of accomplishment. "At first you don't understand what's going on so you feel overwhelmed and all you want to do is isolate yourself," says Angela. "But families have voice and choice. The Idaho System of Care's strength-based approach identifies family values, and then local mental health councils figure out how people in the community can work together to get what the family needs."

Angela says it was the little successes that kept her going. Today, in her role as a family advocate, she presides over a variety of local, regional, and statewide mental health organizations to ensure every Idaho child with a serious emotional disturbance has the help necessary to achieve their own successes.



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**For more information about the Idaho System of Care and services and support available in your area, call the Idaho CareLine by dialing 211 or 1-800-926-2588.**

**You also can contact the Idaho Federation of Families, an Idaho-based support organization for families with children affected by SED, on the Web at [www.idffcmh.org](http://www.idffcmh.org) or by calling 1-800-905-3436.**