

Maley family  
of La Grange



# *The* **MALEY WAY**

*Local teacher uses experience with depression to help others with mental illness*

By Nora Dudley || Photography by Cheryl Brown

**I**n 2001, Jim Maley was a star basketball player at Lyons Township High School, but during the first game of his senior year, he suffered a severe concussion.

“This was back when we didn’t know as much about concussions as we do today,” Maley said. “I went on to play in a game the next day, which is the worst thing you can do.”

It was during this time that Maley began losing interest in things he typically enjoyed. He also couldn’t sleep or think clearly, but he put off seeking help. Maley was recruited later that year to play Division I basketball at Northwestern University, where he started as a freshman. It wasn’t long, though, before his symptoms returned.

“I slept 16 hours a day, I lost interest in

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basketball, and I remember hoping I would tear my ACLs, so I wouldn't have to play," Maley said. "I was thinking irrationally, and told my coach that I wanted to walk away from basketball."

His coach Bill Carmody, who Maley said was ahead of his time, brought up that he might be suffering from depression, and thought he should seek help. Maley wasn't ready to hear the advice, and left Northwestern, later finishing at College of the Holy Cross in Massachusetts.

After graduating from college, Maley became a high-school physical education teacher and basketball coach. It was during his second year at Kenwood Academy on Chicago's South Side that debilitating symptoms of depression returned. Maley experienced racing thoughts, and again had difficulty sleeping and making decisions and thinking straight. His wife Katie came home one day and found him curled up and crying. Concerned, she called his parents, who rushed to their apartment in the city.

Maley's mom Pat had suffered from depression as well, and had experienced the benefits of treatment first-hand. Together, his parents and wife encouraged him to see a psychiatrist at Rush University Medical Center, who diagnosed him with severe depression, and treated him with medication.

But Maley's bouts of depression would return five years later, necessitating a leave of absence from teaching and coaching basketball at St. Laurence High School, where he worked at the time. After undergoing treatment, and not knowing what to say to his students and team when he returned, Maley's mom encouraged her son to be honest about his experience.

"She pulled me aside and said, 'Jimmy, there is going to be someone in that locker room that hears your story and gets help because of what you tell them,'" Maley said. "As always, she was right."

Maley went into the locker room, and emotionally told his story to his team. Within a month, one of his players knocked on his door, and Maley could tell he was in bad shape. They spoke for a while, and Maley helped him get the support he needed to address his mental illness. With the support of his school leaders, Maley began sharing his



Jim and Katie Maley of La Grange



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*Jim Maley*

story with more students. He started seeing results, and received e-mails from students saying that he saved their life.

When Maley's mom passed away suddenly in 2018, he gave the eulogy at her funeral, and shared his struggles with depression publicly. Maley spoke about how his mom helped him through difficult times, and how he planned to carry on her legacy as an advocate for mental health. He received positive feedback, and the seed was planted.

Maley believed he could help others on a larger scale, and began speaking at schools across the Chicagoland area until COVID hit. His struggles with depression returned, but

this time, he began having suicidal thoughts. Maley was hospitalized and underwent therapy. Doctors switched his medication to one that had been successful for his mom, and also encouraged him to prioritize exercise, proper nutrition, hydration and sleep.

"I had this amazing life with an amazing wife and kids to live for, so I used my time in the hospital to reset," Maley said. "I also stepped down from coaching, and became relentless about self-care. Today, I feel the best I have ever felt."

Maley credits his mom and his wife—his high-school sweetheart—for saving his life. He recognizes that mental health challenges like depression affect not only individuals, but also their families and communities, and believes it is crucial for families to identify the signs of struggle to support their loved one and get help.

Maley, who today lives in La Grange with his wife and their four kids, has turned his attention to growing his voice and sharing his story to destigmatize mental illness. This led him to found The Maley Way, through which his mission as a motivational speaker is to eradicate the stigma surrounding mental health by sharing his personal experience and empowering others to do the same. He hopes to help cultivate a world where mental health is openly discussed, and seeking help is a sign of strength.

"I believe that together, we can break the silence," Maley said. "While my voice alone may not dismantle the stigma, I encourage each person I connect with to share their own story of resilience. By doing so, we create a powerful network of hope and healing, capable of changing lives and potentially saving them."

In addition to sharing his personal story with depression, Maley's talks cover topics such as the connection between concussions and depression, recognizing symptoms of depression, navigating suicidal ideation and effective self-care strategies.

"Talking about my experience and seeing how it helps people is my therapy," Maley said. "The Maley Way has turned out to be the best thing I have done for my depression." ■

*For more information about The Maley Way, or to invite Maley to speak at your school or organization, visit [themaleyway.com](http://themaleyway.com).*