

"Self-help comes from talking about eating disorders"
Tuesday, February 17, 2004
By TOM DAVIS

Gail Schoenbach went to Passaic Valley High School recently and couldn't believe what she saw. The topic was eating disorders, and the girls who came to listen to Schoenbach sat there like statues, stone silent. It was the boys who had all the questions. Schoenbach dutifully answered, because that's what she does. And spreading awareness was why she was there. But she couldn't help but think of the irony: Men aren't usually associated with eating disorders. Anorexia and bulimia, in fact, are often labeled as women's diseases. But her 24-year ordeal of experiencing and now talking about eating disorders has been as much of an education for Schoenbach as it has been for her audience. By promoting dialogue on the subject, she's learned more than she ever thought she would. And it's why this petite, 43-year-old woman is putting her heart and soul into talking about such illnesses that are affecting 11 million Americans every year - 1 million of them men. No one is sure how many of them die every year, because few admit to suffering from eating disorders. But advocates do know one thing about eating disorders. "More women die from anorexia than any other mental illness," said Schoenbach. "But many people who have died because of a heart attack or something may have died because of anorexia or bulimia. But they don't give that as a direct reason for why they died." A year ago, Schoenbach started For Recovery & the Elimination of Eating Disorders, a non-profit organization dedicated to spreading awareness about such illnesses and helping people get treatment. Last year, the organization hosted its first golf invitational in Watchung, raising more than \$35,000. The foundation has raised more than \$60,000 for advocacy groups and treatment programs. "I had my own experience with a lack of funds. I saw women with no financial resources," she said. "I wanted to help with raising money for treatment." Promoting awareness, however, is one of the organization's most important duties. Every year, the American public is learning a little more about what eating disorders do, whom they affect, and even who ultimately succumbs to them. And thanks to publicity campaigns - such as National Eating Disorders Week, which is Feb. 22 to 29 - fewer people are staying silent about it. Schoenbach is working with national organizations, such as the National Eating Disorders Association, to promote the week. The association, in turn, has been putting up posters at colleges and urging the media to talk about it. "We're just trying to get more people on the same page," said Lynn Grefe of Edgewater, who is chief executive officer of the National Eating Disorders Association. "I run into people who have lost their children. We don't want to see more people die." Talking about it is never easy. I should know, because I've experienced symptoms of bulimia in my life. I've written columns about it, and I've been praised for showing courage. But I've also been criticized for grandstanding, and some question whether I harmed my reputation for admitting something that's perceived by some as a weakness, not an illness. Schoenbach, on the other hand, is a role model of sorts, because she recognizes that the experience is not only rewarding because it helps other people. It's cathartic, because talking about it helps her, too. Eating disorders are sneaky illnesses, and as a child, Schoenbach didn't necessarily fit the prototype. She grew up a happy kid, with loving parents. But she's always been very worried about her appearance, and she sometimes goes too far to please everybody else. When she was a student at Rider College, that feeling got the best of her. She was a marketing major because she thought everybody wanted her to go into business. Ultimately, however, she developed bulimia, and her obsession with staying slim, beautiful, and, as she says,

"perfect," caused her to purge as many as 16 to 17 times a day. It got to the point where she would find shopping bags and throw up in them. "I didn't know how to tell anybody I was unhappy," she said. After college, her anorexia sort of leveled out, and she'd purge herself, on average, two or three times a day. Schoenbach, in fact, went on to have what some may consider a normal American life, marrying and having three children. But the old demons were still there, and she still wasn't doing anything about it. "In stressful times, it got worse," she said. "I tried to manage it as much as I could, but I was not very successful." Her husband, Rob, was one of many who would tell her to "stop it," because he didn't understand at first. But after talking to friends, he was ultimately the one who helped save her and get her into a treatment program. The road to recovery has been rough, at times, and she suffered a major relapse around the time of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. But she's been on a mostly steady path since she went to the Renfrew Center treatment program in Florida in late 2001. She's also taking anti-depression medication. Around the time of her treatment, she started talking about her issues more openly and beyond the confines of her family. In 2001, she taped a segment for the Oxygen network about eating disorders, and she was featured in an article in Self magazine. In February 2002, she attended the inaugural Eating Disorders Coalition fund-raiser in Washington, D.C., that honored Sen. Hillary Clinton and the late Sen. Paul Wellstone of Minnesota. It's ironic, certainly, that she's gone from suffering what many consider a "lonely" illness to telling the world about it. But her ultimate hope is that everyone who has these symptoms follows her example. It took her two decades to do it. But she still did it.