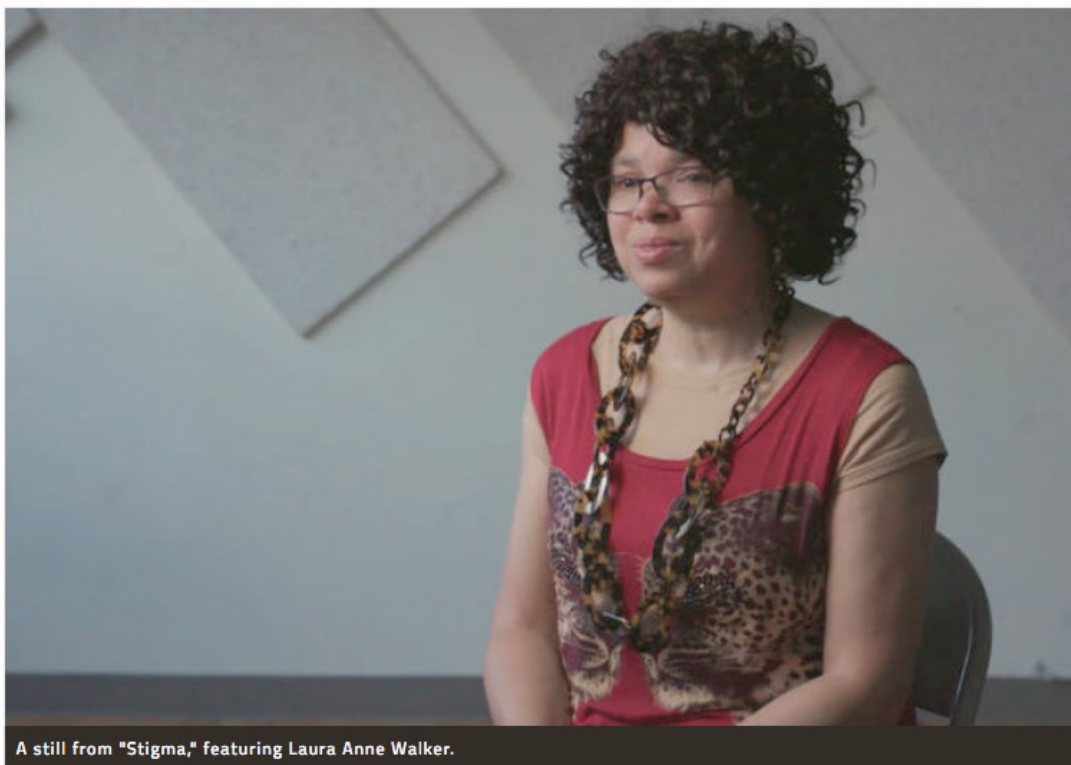


# *Mental Health Film Festival Takes on 'Stigma' of Illness*



A still from "Stigma," featuring Laura Anne Walker.

*"Stigma" Film*

QUEENS — Laura Anne Walker remembers the moment of her mother's death as a painful experience that set her on a decades-long journey with mental illness.

"The second she died, that last pulse, was like no other," she said. "I knew there would be no more. Something in me just snapped."

The stress of caring for her mother in the final months of her life came just after two other deaths in her family. She held her mother's hand as she died in the hospital room in Manhattan. From that moment, everything changed.

The 59-year-old artist began having psychotic

episodes, she said. One day she walked out on the tarmac at LaGuardia Airport. Another day she thought the television was speaking to her.

She was hospitalized three times in the months after her mother died, which began a life of navigating the city's mental health programs. It took her to centers around the city, such as the Citiview Clubhouse, where Walker and others were approached about performing with the Village Playback Theater.

The theater's artistic director, Randy Moulder, wanted to use improvisational theater to help break the stigma of mental illness.

Walker auditioned, sharing her story and how she

found ways to cope with her diagnoses.

“I was kind of scared and thinking: ‘I can’t possibly do this,’” she recalled. “But I was going to stick it out anyway.”

The troupe went on to perform at the [Queens Theatre](#), taking prompts from the audience and opening up a dialogue with everyone about their own experiences with depression, anxiety, bi-polar disorder and more.

And now a film about the show, called “Stigma,” is screening Oct. 14 at the Mental Health Film Festival, which will be held at Village East Cinema, 189 2nd Ave. It was directed by Zach Caldwell.

The festival, which began in 2005, screens fiction and non-fiction films that show the diverse struggle for people with mental illness.

It’s the oldest film festival of its kind in the United States, screening more than 50 new and old films that focus on an element of mental illness.

Although public discussion and acceptance of various mental illnesses have improved over the years, there’s still a need to talk about it, Moulder says in the film.

“There’s a great need with regards to people’s perception of selves and the public’s perception of mental illness,” he said.

Through the interactive performance people opened up about their own struggles. In one example, theatergoers were asked for prompts based on words that should no longer be used to describe mental illness.

Walker said the experience with the improv group was wonderful for allowing her to learn more about herself, but other people.

“I built up my self-esteem, my confidence, I learned life skills and I learned to be more empathetic,” she said.

She’s bringing family and friends to Saturday’s

premiere, and hopes viewers see some similarities with themselves and the people they see on screen.

“Mental illness could be anybody,” she said. “If anything we need to be included, and not excluded.”