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Greenbriar parent a pro at postpartum concerns

By **KARIE ANGELL LUC**
CONTRIBUTOR

For more than a decade, Greenbriar School parents have come to know Sarah Weller as a Northbrook volunteer and mom of three with that cool British accent.

But did they also know she is Dr. Sarah Allen, clinical psychologist?

It may be also rare learning of a neighbor having direct access to the Illinois governor's office. Allen convinced Gov. Pat Quinn to designate May as Postpartum Mood Disorders Awareness Month. In a press release, she is quoted as chairman of IL PPD Alliance, which helps mothers overcome postpartum depression. Allen began the alliance after relocating in 1997 from Portsmouth, England.

"When I came here 13 years ago, it (PPD) wasn't widely recognized so I set up a state-wide non-profit organization that has a helpline and Web site to help women and their families find resources to help them," Allen said, referring to www.ppdil.org. "The U.K. was much further ahead in the recognition and treatment of PPD and when I came to the United States, I was shocked how little awareness and resources there were here for moms with PPD.

"I went to the Postpartum Support International (PSI) conference that year (1998) to meet other professionals in the U.S. that shared my interest and because of the extent of my knowledge came back as the PSI leader for Illinois," said Allen, whose family became U.S. citizens in 2008.

Wearing several hats is typical for Allen although she owns no Mother's Day bonnet.

"Mother's Day is a recognition of how all year round

moms are looking after everyone else in the family — it's a day to relax and also to think about my own mother and all she did for me," Allen said.

She and her husband, Mel Weller, a Chicago financial software analyst, are parents to three sons. The two youngest, Michael and Thomas, are twins and also Greenbriar School fifth-graders. Their oldest son Jamie, a 2009 Glenbrook North High School graduate, is a University of Illinois sophomore returning home for the summer this Mother's Day weekend.

"It is also his birthday a couple of days before so I expect we will have a nice meal out to celebrate," she said, referring to Jamie. "Hopefully I'll get breakfast in bed too," Allen added.

Well-deserved breaks are appreciated as Allen will likely spend part of Mother's Day weekend preparing for next Wednesday's workshop in her Dundee Road Northbrook office.

The May 12 free workshop from 6:30-8 p.m. is called "The Path to Postpartum Emotional Wellness." Allen welcomes new and expectant mothers.

"At least 20 percent of moms experience perinatal mood disorders and by increasing awareness of how common and easily treated it is, women can know that they are not alone," Allen said.

"When a mom experiences pregnancy or postpartum depression or anxiety, it not only negatively impacts her quality of life but can also impact bonding and can predispose the child to depression in later life," she said.

"I feel very strongly that treatment should be readily available to every mom who needs it and the sooner she receives treatment, the sooner she can forge a secure attachment with her



Dr. Sarah Allen is a psychologist who started a postpartum awareness program in Illinois that Gov. Patrick Quinn just honored. (Joel Lerner/Staff Photographer)

infant and counteract any negative effects her illness may have had," she added.

One patient success story is Katie Axford Ford, a Lake Forest mother of four to Ellie, 6, Harry, 4, Maisy, 3, and Buck, who just celebrated his first birthday.

"Katie had extreme postpartum OCD where she obsessed that somehow she would harm her baby and each day was very hard for her to get through," Allen said. "Helping her normalize her experience and reassure her that OCD can affect 5 percent of postpartum moms and having these thoughts didn't mean she would actually hurt the baby."

Ford is now a PPD IL Alliance volunteer and is often on the other end of the line when callers phone the helpline.

"The IL PPD Alliance re-



Buck Ford, 1, and his mother, Katie Ford (left), are in Dr. Sarah Allen's office. Allen (right) runs a postpartum awareness program, PPD IL Alliance, which had Ford as a client. Ford now volunteers for the postpartum program's hotline. (Joel Lerner/Staff Photographer)

lies solely on donation and is run entirely by volunteers and without them it just wouldn't exist," Allen said.

To think — a helpline run

by moms and volunteers for moms who become volunteers. A Mother's Day gift in itself.

To register for Allen's

workshop, call (847) 791-7722 or email sarahf-callen@comcast.net, or visit www.dr.sarahallen.com and www.ppdil.org.