

THE COLORADO  
PSYCHIATRIC SOCIETY  
AND CHARG RESOURCE  
CENTER PRESENT:

5 YEARS OF  
**MENTAL  
HEALTH  
STORIES**



# 5 YEARS OF MENTAL HEALTH STORIES

## PROGRESS, RECOVERY, SUCCESS

### INTRODUCTION

*“Today your letter arrived about receiving an honorarium for my essay . . . I am so grateful that you gave me this opportunity to feel that I am advocating for myself and those who have had similar experiences. I feel like my voice was heard and I can't describe how precious a feeling that is.”*

*“Not only have you given me a very happy Christmas, but also the very healing gift of telling my story!”*

*“I am elated to have had my essay chosen for your Mental Health Stories essay contest . . . together, we can strengthen our efforts towards bringing forth a more positive, stigma free world”*

The above excerpts are from just a few of the notes we have received over the last five years in response to the Mental Health Stories project, a partnership between the Public Information and Education Committee of the Colorado Psychiatric Society and the CHARG Resource Center.

Our purpose is to reduce stigma through broadly communicating mental health stories. Stigma can be internal as well as external and there is no better way to counter stigma than to tell the stories that include examples of effective diagnosis, treatment, empathy and support from family, friends, employers and a therapeutic community. Diagnosis is referred to in terms of mistakes, delays and the importance of its accuracy as a path to successful treatment.

Special thanks to CHARG Interns Shannon Wallace, Tiffany Anderson, Anna Polovin, Michelle Neumann and Alyson Anderson Lewis for their help in coordination of the entries and the Committee.

If you are interested in sharing your story, being added to our email list, being a co-sponsoring organization, a peer specialist committee member or otherwise becoming involved in the next annual Mental Health Stories project in 2017, please contact us at: **303-692-8783** or **office@coloradopsychiatric.org**.

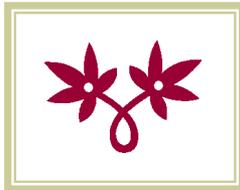
This booklet is also available at [www.coloradopsychiatric.org](http://www.coloradopsychiatric.org).

We hope you learn as much as we have reading these stories.

Robert B. Cowan, Jr., M.D.

Chair, Colorado Psychiatric Society Public Information and  
Education Committee

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# MENTAL HEALTH STORIES 2016

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

THE CAGE .....	6
L.L. Lecter	
My Journey.....	8
Michele McCallister	
Weather's not Bipolar. My Mom was.....	12
H. Kennedy	
I Was Not Behind My Eyes.....	13
Danielle Raspberry Levin	
Shattering The Silence.....	15
Angelica Oliver	

# THE CAGE

By L.L. Lecter

"A Robin Redbreast in a Cage Puts all Heaven in a Rage." -William Blake

Like so many stories, this one begins with "once upon a time." However, there are no valiant knights to save the day. Sometimes, princesses must put on armor, breathe fire, and roar louder than the dragons that keep them. Growing up isn't about denouncing the monsters under your bed, it's befriending them.

Age four. I am happy and bright-eyed.

My mother and I live together in a beautiful house, and sunlight follows us wherever we go.

My days are spent in the depths of my toy box, chasing ice cream trucks, and digging Barbie shoes out of the maw of the vacuum.

Age five. The sunlight will soon abandon me.

My mother has met a man. His tongue is made of silver, but he is sticky at the seams. We don't see the rust and rot beyond his gums, but what big teeth he has.

He has bewitched my mother with a poison apple called methamphetamine. The world is turning to grey about me, and my mother is transforming into a dragon.

Age seven. I spend my time at my grandmother's.

I am fond of the twinkling fountain of her laughter, and the cauldron-like bubbling of her coffee pot.

I also spend a lot of time with my older cousin.

He starts pulling me away to be alone. His hands always find me.

Age nine. Everything is going up in flames.

I stay with my grandmother and bring my mother meals. I leave them in the kitchen while she sleeps. If I wake her, she roars.

My grandmother puts her hands on her hips, smiles sadly, and says she thinks my mom is doing drugs again. I don't understand what this means, but I put my hands on my hips and shake my head, too. Tsk tsk, silly mommy.

My mom tells me that we will be evicted from the apartment. That people will come and throw our things on the street.

The day of the eviction, I can't focus on much else. I fake a tummy ache and ask the nurse if I can call home. To my surprise, my mother says she'll be there right away.

I'm pushing macaroni around on my plate when she comes into the cafeteria and pulls me into a hug. She tells me that our apartment caught on fire.

I stare up at the smoking building, and a fireman hands me a teddy bear. We go in to see the remains. The walls are black and bubbled and the air reeks of smoke and chemicals.

The sunny days in the pretty house are long gone.

Age fifteen. The world seems sinister.

I don't do my schoolwork. I disappear in my stories. I hardly look up from my notebooks, from my ink and graphite fingers.

My mother doesn't let me leave the house. My friends learn not to ask if I can visit them. I don't mind. Reality is foggy and dull, and I am content to lose myself in my fiction.

My mother quits her addictions, turns to religion. I turn to self harm.

Age nineteen. I've met a man.

He is charming. He can make decisions and take control.

The first chance I get, I move in with him.

He becomes demanding, manipulative, and cruel. I believe that I deserve it. I stop eating. I make myself sick. Maybe if I am thinner, he will love me.

I am tempted by the siren song of suicide.

I used to dream of being an actress, of being a writer. But now, all I am is grey. My identity is a thousand shattered shards of mirror, and I don't know if I'll ever

be whole again.

Age twenty-four. With trembling hand, I dial the number to a mental health clinic.

My first day walking home after therapy, I am terrified by the strange blossoming of hope.

My therapist is a wonderful wizard, My peer specialist a fairy godmother, my psychiatrist a wise blue caterpillar. Together we're working on putting the pieces back together. Step by step, I am finding a balance between fiction and what is real.

Sunlight is creeping through the cracks in me. Hope blossoms bright in my chest, and through that, I might find the key to my happily ever after. My scars are fading to pale reminders.

I am an actress, now. I am a writer.

I'm also a survivor, and my story is just beginning.

## MY JOURNEY

By Michele McCallister

It seems like my entire adult life I've been addicted to something. I started off pretty good but my 2nd marriage ended with an epic mental breakdown. Somewhere between Dr. appointments, cheerleading practice, fundraisers, PTA meetings, cleaning, owning an insurance agency, 3 kids, and a husband. I became overwhelmed and I lost myself and my identity. I lost **ME**.

That's when my 1st battle with addiction began. I had tried therapy and antidepressants but nothing in my environment was changing. I didn't have a support system at home to deal with my feelings of being overwhelmed. I was introduced to meth and it seemed to be the answer to my problem. There were more hours in the day, I had all the energy in the world, and my house was insanely clean all the time.

It didn't take long before my life quickly spiraled out of control and I lost everything. Being overwhelmed was the least of my problems. My meth addiction cost me my kids, my marriage, my home-MY LIFE! On March 13, 2005 I found a letter in my husband's briefcase that said "Dear Michele, I'm sorry it's come to

this but I've taken the kids and filed for divorce"...along with the divorce papers. I carried this letter in my wallet for 9 years as a reminder and as a punishment to myself for my actions.

For the next 2 years I used meth to block all emotions. I was out of control during those 24 months. Anytime those nasty emotions like guilt, shame, or anger rose to the surface all I had to do to make them go away was get high. Then everything was ok. It was the only coping skill I had. I was emotionally unavailable. I was so wrapped up in the misery of my addiction I couldn't see the pain and the damage I was causing to the people in my life who loved and cared for me. Especially my children. Every time they came to visit all they saw was me and my mom constantly fighting. I became an angry, mean, horrible waste of human life that hurt everyone in my path. I was a lost cause.

In January of 2007 I told meth to kiss my ass. It wasn't the first time i'd tried to quit but it was the last.... I was tired of "the life". I knew what I was in store for...the withdrawals, the cravings, the bitchiness, the emotions...all of it. And the worst part was that after 2 years of being divorced I was gonna have to deal with my shit and face the pain and guilt and shame of what I did to lose my family. I felt like someone had ripped my heart right out of my chest. There was a void in me that i had tried to replace with drugs. I needed to get control of my life again and fill that void with what was supposed to be there...my family

My addiction caused a huge strain on my relationship with my mom. For the most part I lived with her and my daughter after my divorce. Things did improve after I got clean from meth but after awhile I did start drinking heavily. In 2011 the country club I worked for was sold to a land developer. As a result of this and my unhealthy choices I was under a lot of stress and became ill. In September of 2011 I was diagnosed with "chronic cyclic vomiting syndrome. For 2 years I was in and out of the hospital, sent to multiple doctors and specialists, and given insane amounts of medications. Some of these medications should not have been given to or taken by me...an addict. Among many other medications I was given high doses of xanax, ativan and dilaudid. Each to be taken 3x's a day. This was a toxic combination. And my health was not improving. If anything I was quickly deteriorating. By this point it was Fall 2012 and I had lost 40 lbs due to my illness, I was in no physical shape to work nor would my primary care dr release me to work. I was in a deep dark black hole of depression, and I was at war once again with my mom. We had a long history of fighting over my sobriety. It was a pattern and her rules were simple..... If I wanted to live under her roof I had to be sober and I wasn't. I was abusing my medication. I was trying to kill myself. I

was depressed. I felt worthless. I felt like a failure. So i did what I knew how to do best.I ran away from my problems...or so I thought.

By this point I had very few friends and not many options for a place to stay. My friend Lou offered me his couch. Lou is a dear friend i've known for 20 years unfortunately Lou and his girlfriend are current meth users. He's one of the few people from "that life" i've kept in touch with throughout the years. I stayed on their couch for about 3-4 while behind a locked bedroom door they used. I did not. My willpower and strength were tested everyday. And everyday I proved to be stronger than my addiction. I made the decision years ago not to touch meth again. I know what's on the other side. I know how fast meth destroys everything in it's path. And I definitely wasn't looking for anything to keep awake and aware of my hell on earth. I was stuck in the misery of my depression and I wanted to sleep for eternity.

I definitely needed to find a healthier environment to stay. So I called Dan. Dan has been a friend and a part of the family for many years. I explained my situation and not only did Dan open his home to me but he also encourage me to seek treatment at ADMH. For the first few months it was a rough start. I have no idea how I escaped my first appointment with my new therapist Erin Hart, without being hospitalized. I remember thinking to myself.."I want to die...and there's no way in hell i'm going to tell you that because you're NOT going to stop me.." At this point in my life I always had a full bottle of sleeping pills on me at all times. I was ready to go when the time was right. But instead of ending my life I kept going to those appointments with Erin and something amazing was happening that at the time i didn't realize...but now i will always treasure. I made a special connection with Erin.

In August of 2013 I moved into the Women's HUD house. The first month or so was ok. To say the least it's an adjustment living with 5 other women under 1 roof. We had weekly house meetings to reduce to "conflict" in the house. I remember one of my first house meetings looking around at a couple of the girls I had just gotten to know...girls who had a high sense of entitlement and very little motivation for bettering themselves and their lives and thinking "i don't wanna be like these bitches" Each week in these house meetings Matt gave us advice on what it took to be successful to survive and move forward from the HUD house. Whether or not he knew it I was listening. His best advice...The best way to survive the HUD house is not be at the HUD house. So since I wasn't allowed to work due to my illness I became my new full time job. I became more involved in my treatment by doing one on one therapy sessions more frequently I started attending a depression and anxiety group, a healthy relationships group, and on

December 31, 2013 I made a huge commitment in my treatment plan and started Dialectical Behavior Therapy...

The goals I listed on my DBT application seemed unattainable and so far out of reach on that day in December. I wanted to work again. I wanted a REAL custody agreement with my kids. And I wanted to be able to coexist on the same planet with my mother. And of course I wanted to have my own place to live. In January of 2014 my 11 year old son was diagnosed as bipolar with suicidal tendencies. His dad thought that since I had mental health issues this was my fault and I should not be allowed to see my boys. For the first time in years I was doing better than i had since our divorce. And as Tyler's mother I could support him with his mental health issues...not hurt him. So I went to my case manager, Sarah and told her I was ready to address my custody issue. All I needed from her was moral support. In March I went to court, with Rebecca Smith by my side, I was granted everything I asked for...Goal Accomplished.

By the end of April I was working. I was originally hired at Southglenn Country Club to work 15-20 hours a week. This job was perfect for me. It was in an industry that was familiar to me and the hours were flexible enough that DBT could and would remain my #1 priority. In June, we lost an employee so I took over her position and hours. Although my hours more than doubled I was still able to keep DBT as my priority. I needed all the extra money I could get. One way or another I was getting the hell out of the HUD house and into my own apartment. And more importantly this job gave me the human connection i needed to introduce myself back to the world and get myself out of the shell i was hiding in.....Goal Accomplished

Not only were my mom and I able to coexist on the same planet but we actually started to spend some quality time together. She would invite over to spend the weekends with her so I could get a break from the house. She saw the improvement and the change in me and our relationship began to grow with that change. And I know she was finally proud of me. On October 8, 2 days before I signed the lease on my apartment my mom passed away. This was the first tragic event I faced without the aid of drugs. And I survived.....Goals Accomplished

DBT taught me so many amazing skills that are automatic to me now. I'm confident in my ability to make wise mind decisions and not react based on my emotions. These skills, my amazing therapist Erin, my case manager Sara, Matt, Rebecca Smith, Becky Howard and the rest of my A team have helped me start a beautiful new beginning instead of hitting rock bottom.

Today I have a wonderful relationship with my 3 amazing kids, a job where i have been blessed to meet some very kind hearted and truly wonderful people and I now have my own apartment. I've learned so much about myself through this journey. I used to think of myself as a scared little girl. I'm the strongest person I know. I'm kind .I'm courageous. I'm strong. I'm independent. And I love my life.

## **WEATHER'S NOT BIPOLAR. MY MOM WAS.**

**By H. Kennedy**

So many people have equated the weather in my state with Bipolar Disorder. When it's a high a of 80's one day and snowing the next. I've fought this sentiment, because it negates the devastation of this serious illness. But I can see many ways in which extreme weather events are like mental illness.

In my family, stories of severe mental illness (extreme weather) are the norm, not the exception. My mom struggled with BiPolar Disorder, Anorexia, tobacco addiction, and drug abuse. She was in and out of psychiatric hospitals and jail cells. She gambled with her life and ours. The courts did not grant her custody in the divorce. She was a tornado. A danger to all in her path. There were always warnings, sirens, which served as alerts that she was close to the edge. The levy that she had carefully built, would break, flooding desperation and confusion. Parts of her that were never meant to be seen would surface. After every storm, there's the cleanup, the promises for new systems, new ways of dealing with storms. But the next storm is just waiting, and devastates all the same.

She would rather brave these storms than settle for a cold wet gray medicated fog. Bits of sunshine would shine through, moments when she'd play "pennies from heaven?". If only I could've turned my umbrella upside down to capture those moments. But instead, we were left mostly with the wreckage. She died when I was 15. She weighed 85 pounds. The storm swallowed her and left us with just a few washed-out photos.

On an ordinary day of 6<sup>th</sup> grade, on the brink of puberty, an avalanche named BiPolar Disorder engulfed my brother. For months, he was buried, there was very little sign of the person we knew. He spent 3 months in a psychiatric hospital. My dad was, by now, an old veteran, storm chaser. We had all learned from my mother's storms.

Not until, in 2010, did I understand how these storms could shut out the light. My form of illness is like the wind, a little of it helps to pollinate the flowers, too much can knock down power lines and shut down all operations.

The wind was always there, but mostly it just helped me to be successful. The wind picked up intensity the day my son was born. I was supposed to differ-

entiate his consistent innocent cries. I hated nighttime, when it was my burden to soothe this person that seemed to hate me. Everyone had so many opinions on how to make him a “happier” baby. “Try this. Try that.” My son’s pediatrician never asked how I was doing. Yet, I kept making appointments to get to the root of his crying. After hours of holding him, my mind would drift to ways I could escape. In the morning, bleary eyed, exhausted, standing at the top of the stairs, I could visualize falling down the stairs on top of him. So I’d scoot down the stairs with the little bundle snug in my arms. At this point, the wind was howling. I shut the door on the wind as I went to work, but just when I opened the door at the end of the day, the wind would knock me down, into my pillow, tears of pain, worry, hatred for this person I had become. I called my health care provider to “get help”. They told me that I was on the four-month waitlist. The wind picked up speed. After 8 weeks on the waitlist, after four nights of not sleeping, I told my partner “I’m having thoughts about driving into ongoing traffic”. Saying those words aloud made me feel so weak. I couldn’t believe that, a professional in the field of mental health, could have these feelings, these thoughts. The wind had knocked out the grid. We drove to the hospital, and I finally got care. I was diagnosed with anxiety, depression, and obsessive-compulsive disorder.

I went on medication, I went to therapy, I learned meditation. The wind is still there, it sometimes picks up intensity, but I have a windsock now. I try to be the friend people can share their storms with.

So, I guess, mental health is like the weather, something that you can prepare for, but hard to predict, and sometimes devastating. And like the weather, I would like mental health to be something you can easily talk to people about over the water-cooler.

## I WAS NOT BEHIND MY EYES

By Danielle Raspberry Levin

Somehow, I was not behind my eyes! That’s what she said to me later, after that ordeal. (‘She’ is my mother.) I knew he was upset for me too, then. (‘He’ is my father.) Luckily, and because of the hard work of “a village” (Hillary Clinton), I got better over time!

The second ordeal was a pretty big deal! My body knows when I am in trouble...bodies are quite capable of healing themselves...my body couldn’t have healed without my own help and the help of other people and the help of medications. Originally, I thought my second ordeal came from insurmountable trouble breathing – I had an oat or a hair stuck in my throat. No one at the party would take me to the hospital or call an ambulance. So I did the seemingly reasonable thing, as a nineteen-year-old female, and ran from my family and jumped in a total stranger’s car. Sure, it made sense. The driver had a hat on with my college’s mascot depicted, and when you are manic, you for look for any sign of any thing

that makes sense. Luckily, he knew one of my childhood best friend's family, so he took me to their home. And they took me there ('there' is the ER).

Once 'there,' I had to pee. They would not let me pee. ("They" is the whole ER staff.) Then a group mistreated and abused me when all I wanted to do was to pee in private. (The 'group' was comprised of two police officers, two doctors, and two nurses.) This was in 1993 when there was way more stigma. Healthcare for those with biopsychological diseases were not as respectfully cared for as we are today. They charged at me, picked me up, and put me in four-point restraints. All I wanted to do was use the bathroom and I only asked to pee in a kind voice. To no avail.

Once in the psychiatric ward, I didn't understand what was happening. I thought I was trapped in hell. I played "the game" of taking all my meds because I was rewarded with kind behavior if I complied. Eventually, a petit occupational therapist showed me the movie "Call Me Anna" starring Patty Duke...clearly our manic behaviors were related and I, finally, understood why I was hospitalized.

When a doctor told me, "You have a disease called Bipolar Disorder I..." my first thought was "Am I ever gonna be able to have a boyfriend again?" My second thought was, "I cannot tell my friends. None of them will like me!" It was very scary being the only person I knew out of all my friends and out of all of my family to be diagnosed this way.

Here are some things that helped me when I was having my second ordeal: 1)My parents, the best friend and her family, and my aunt and uncle visited me during my two week stay in the PSYC ward. 2)My mom, who could not see me/could not recognize the daughter she knew behind my eyes said, "Are you lost, Honey?" "Do you feel stuck in a hole?" And I said, "Yes" with the first tears in my eyes that I had been able to muster up since her visits. Then my mom looked deep into my eyes, wherever I was, and she said, "I promise, I promise I will get a rope and I will pull you out!" And I said, "Okay." (And for forty four years my mom has kept her promise!) 3)I took my medicine as directed. (I still take them faithfully to this day and I owe my life and recovery to them!) 4)I learned everything I could from the team at the hospital about my diagnosis and how I could get better. I gained tiny successes every day in that PSYC ward such as leaving the hospital in a state of balance rather than being manic, hypomanic, mixed manic, or depressed. 5)I had fun bonding with the other patients. You form this pseudo-family. 6)The Occupational Therapy was great for life skills once admitted from the PSYC Ward.

Today with a diagnosis of schizo-affective disorder...Paxil gave me schizophrenia..., I have a very happy life! I am out of the hole and I am certainly "behind my eyes!" I have a fiancé! And I have friends! I am healthy! And I am kinder than I was pre-diagnosis! Thanks medical community! Thank you to everyone!

# SHATTERING THE SILENCE

By Angelica Oliver

When it first started - in April 2011, two months after I turned eighteen - I kept it a secret.

I was scared of what I was experiencing and didn't understand why it was happening to me.

It started happening more frequently as the months of keeping this secret went by.

I was still in high school and I did volunteer work at the library. But sometimes I would have to leave when the symptoms came.

Since it was happening more frequently, I realized I couldn't keep this secret much longer, especially from my mom. My mom and I are best friends. It's hard to keep secrets from her. So, the first person I told was my mom, in late July or early August 2011.

My mom made a doctor's appointment for me once she knew. I told the doctor what was going on. My secret was now exposed to two people.

The doctor had me schedule an appointment with a therapist at their clinic who is a PhD and LMFT. When I had the appointment, I told him everything.

Long story short, I later met with a psychiatrist and had been to the psychiatric hospital many times. I was diagnosed with Schizo-Affective Disorder.

See, what I was experiencing was: having hallucinations, paranoia, and hearing voices.

I was prescribed medication (anti-psychotics, anti-depressants, anxiety medication, and a medication for nightmares). I take these medications on a daily basis to help me not experience these symptoms as often.

The advice I would give to other people who hear voices is to get help before acting on the commands the voices give you. I always got help first, if I hadn't then I would be in prison or dead now because the voices I have tell me to kill myself or other people.

When I have these symptoms, I hear two male voices, I see bugs and people, and I feel like I'm being watched or spied on by the government.

The people I see are very scary. I see The Man With The Axe, The Girl In White, and The Shadow Man.

When I would have paranoia, I would have this terrible feeling that I was being watched. It was even hard to take a shower. I thought that the neighbors were working for the government to spy on me and that they could see through walls. I also thought that this one company was

poisoning people's foods, trying to kill us. I avoided those foods and water but the company makes a lot of different foods, like frozen food (which we were

poor so that's all we ate) and candy.

I now take my medication everyday and am doing better.

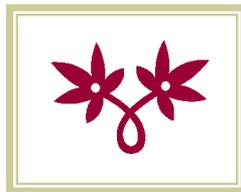
I volunteered at the library for seven years. I had started volunteering there in high school and continued even after I got my mental illness.

When the symptoms first started, I thought about dropping out of high school but instead I joined an online public school and graduated from there in May 2012.

I've done a couple of speeches. One or two years ago, I spoke in front of new doctors. And on June 23, 2016, I spoke in front of a larger audience of psychiatrists and therapists. Each time, I shared my story and my poems.

My story isn't over yet. I have goals I want to accomplish. They include going to college, learning how to drive, being a published author, having a job, and eventually having kids. I think I'll even do more speeches in the future.

And I couldn't have got this far if it wasn't for the support of my family, doctors, therapists, my psychiatrist, and my faith.



MENTAL HEALTH STORIES 2015  
PROGRESS, RECOVERY, SUCCESS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

A Pep Talk .....	18
Christopher Feld	
The Actual Good News.....	20
Jessie Holt	
A Time to Live .....	22
Allison Greenstein	
An Open Letter to Myself .....	24
Kat Atwell	
Denial and Acceptance .....	26
S. Luna	
In the Mirror.....	28
David Muniz	
My Experience of the Truth .....	30
Trevor Groves	
UprootED from Life. ....	32
Courtney Rubio-Ontiveros	

## A PEP TALK

By Christopher Feld

There's a bandage on my left arm, on the inside of my elbow. They draw my blood from there once every four weeks. It was once every two weeks for six months before that, and once a week for six months before that. The phlebotomist told me there's a lot of scar tissue around that vein. And it makes sense, the vein having been tapped so many times in the name of counting my white blood cells. The Clozaril might weaken my immune system, though my psychiatrist hasn't had it happen with more than two (possibly three) of the patients he's prescribed it to in the past thirty-some years.

Getting everyone onboard, me chief among them was the first struggle — everyone was in denial, diagnosing me with epilepsy though they didn't have a degree in neurology. We couldn't talk about it, it made it real and that's the last thing we wanted. A long road, among the many long roads just to come to terms that maybe my life was over.

Then it was compliance — swallowing the little pills every day at the prescribed times. Some of them might have worked if I'd given them the chance. The worst ones — the Haldol, the Xanax dehumanized me. Sure they quieted the schizoaffective disorder, but they also robbed me of my personality. I've always been a hugger — not when I'm on Haldol or Xanax.

You go to a lot of doctor's appointments. You learn to wait, you learn to take a book with you. You learn to entertain yourself privately in public. Don't bring anything funny, — no Vonnegut, no Neal Stephenson. You learn to deal with your body's malfunctions: the aching joints despite young age, sweating profusely because the pills make your body unable to regulate its own temperature, poikilothermic it's called.

You learn when to keep your mouth shut — when you can trust someone with your darkest secret and when it's best to lie; to tell them you make your living fixing computers in your apartment and not that your living is made for you, deposits in your bank account that come regardless of your productivity. Because there's stigma — you're a homicidal risk, a parasite leeching off society, a manifestation of everyone's worst fear.

You do what you can — you write a blog, you speak in front of people about your experiences. But you can't tell the baristas at the coffee shop you go to so often they start making your drink as soon as you walk in. People have to be mentally *prepared* to be told about mental illness — its ugliness and also its overwhelming beauty.

You do what you can — you're an ambassador for the mentally ill. Because you're high functioning. Held up on a pedestal, the constitutive example of your species. But still, you lose friends. Because someone always gets tossed overboard when the ebbs and flows of the illness become violent.

And you sit there, once a week, across from an educated someone who has no idea what you're going through, what it's like, and try to answer the question: what happened?

You can't.

There's hardly ever an answer with mental illness. They can't test for it, they can't take blood to see its progress. You have to do the work, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week and you have to suffer through it. But you get these moments of inexplicable beauty — the sunsets you hallucinate you wish your parents could see. And, in those moments it's worth it. There are new friends, and you're thankful. God is good, you say. And indeed He is.

Life doesn't end with mental illness. Seeming and being are two different things. Mental illness, and the ECT that accompanied it, gives you a chance to start over — to build your house on the solid rocks

instead of the vapid sand. Chances like that are rare — they ought to be taken. Because you're taken care of: that living you make without earning is your only shot at independence, it lets you live the life you've always wanted. You work on your projects when you're feeling well and you take care of yourself when you're not. You take your pills, and you take your walk every day, and you love people the best you can. Because your parents always told you try your best, and that's really all you can do.

## THE ACTUAL GOOD NEWS

By Jessie Holt

"The good news is this will all go away  
once you're in a less stressful environment"

This is the biggest lie I've ever been told.

At the time, I was abroad on a service mission. I had minimal contact with friends and family and was hard at work to use my time effectively. Yet without my support system, I was crumbling quickly.

I had always been an anxious and depressed person but I coped just well enough to skim by. Being so far from my support system, my chest started to tighten... and tighten... until it felt like one day it snapped. It was as if something broke in my chest and, in turn, my mind. Panic attacks ensued and about a year into this service my body had had enough. Suddenly, one day, I couldn't speak above a whisper, color dimmed, it took me 15 minutes of concentration to sit up in bed. I couldn't eat for 7 days and lost 11 lbs. I stayed in bed and stared at a wall for those 7 days and felt my mind begin to crack.

Inexplicably, after 7 days, my mind woke back up. I sat up, began to cry, and ate something through my tears. I was started on medication, and was talking to a therapist regularly over the phone. This was the man who said, "The good news is this will all go away once you're in

a less stressful environment."

A few months later, I finished my service abroad and came home to my "less stressful environment." Needless to say, my depression and anxiety did not suddenly disappear. I was put on a new medication that made me nauseous and put me to sleep for 14 hours a day.

This just scratches the surface of the difficulty of battling your own mind, but the next few years involved self-harm, isolation, suicidal ideation, self-sabotage, and a lot of panic attacks.

During that time, I thought about death all day long. I cannot describe the relief that I felt at the idea of escaping the thoughts that haunted me on a regular basis.

As a person with healthy self esteem it's confusing to suddenly have thoughts like:

"Everything you do is wrong"

"No one cares what happens to you"

"You're an inconvenience- just by existing"

"You're not lovable"

I know these things are not true. I know myself too well, I know my family, friends, and the worth of a human being too well to say any of those thoughts are true. Sometimes knowing doesn't matter. The hellish feeling of depression isn't defeated by knowledge.

I finally saw change when I went to a psychiatrist and begged him to take me off the medication. We tried a medication that is designed for epilepsy but it slowed my brain down and allowed me to experience life without constant panic. I found a wiser therapist who helped me process my pain.

As I began to get my life back in order I found myself leaving my destructive relationships and forming a loving, caring relationship. This special someone said "Are you kidding me? Of course!" when I asked if he still wanted to continue our relationship, knowing about my

mental illness.

Since that time, I've married the man who said "Of course!", am loving and excelling in my graduate program, have run a marathon which I used to raise awareness for mental health through the National Association on Mental Illness, and I have more good days than bad days.

Here's the Actual Good News. There's nothing wrong with someone who struggles with their mental health. These struggles are like a broken arm or leg. Sometimes something terrible happens and you need to take measures to heal and sometimes you just slip and there's no one to blame, not even yourself. Also, we don't need to be afraid of mental illness. The less taboo the subject is the less scary it is when it strikes. However, the only way to defeat the taboo is to become educated and understand that a person with mental health struggles is not broken.

I feel my mental illness every day but I can still accomplish incredible things. I do, and plan to continue to, with or without the demon of mental illness. With or without the thoughts about death. But with a lot of love from God, the good people in my life, and a real understanding that the depression belongs to me, not the other way around.

## **A TIME TO LIVE**

**By Allison Greenstein**

I sat on my bed and stared at the posters on my closet door. One by one I took the bottle of pills that sat on my nightstand. "Now there will be no more pain" was the only thought going through my mind.

The following day I would be admitted to an adolescent psychiatric unit where I would spend the next three months. I was fifteen years old.

For the next 25 years, I would spend my life in a self-made prison. No sunlight would enter this cell. The moon and the stars were blocked by the cement ceiling and the bars that replaced the door could not be penetrated. I saw no future and felt no hope.

I tried to escape the pain with drugs and alcohol. That worked temporarily, but eventually made things much, much worse. I would cut myself with a razor, thinking the physical pain would distract me from my mental pain. This was also a temporary solution. I found myself popping handfuls of pills at a time, not caring about the damage this could inflict. You see. I wanted to die. I prayed for death nightly and was disappointed when I awoke in the morning. Life was unbearable and there was no saving grace. I saw many therapists throughout the years and received various diagnoses. It's hard to diagnose an individual correctly when drugs are involved. I was out on many different medications, from antipsychotics to anti-depressants. I would end up in six psychiatric hospitals, a rehabilitation center, two halfway houses, and a couple of intensive outpatient programs. I would do well for short periods of time, but always seemed to fall apart again.

Finally, after decades of failed treatments, I decided to try Electro-Convulsive Therapy. I would undergo treatments for over a year. I believe this is how I got my life back. I became functional again. I was no longer suicidal, and I discovered hopes and dreams that had been discarded over the years. I took an active role in my recovery. I attended a WRAP (Wellness. Recovery. Action. Planning) course which taught me the coping skills I would use to stay well on a daily basis and how to avoid ending up in crisis again. I attend a support group on a regular basis and I share my story with audiences around the state. I now have a life that is worth living.

However, I would not be here now if it were not for the two most incredible individuals I have ever known, my parents. They have supported me through every step of my journey. through every heart-breaking moment. They were there to take me to the hospital when I was in crisis. They attended the Family-to-Family course offered

through NAMI. a class for family members of those living with mental illness. They attended support groups offered through my rehabilitation center. These two amazing individuals would come to my apartment to clean when I was unable to function. My dad would do the stack of dishes that had been piling up for weeks, and my mother would help with the weeks of unopened mail and unpaid bills. My father flew in from Ohio twice in one month just to sit on the couch with me while I was suicidal. They commuted an hour each way, three days a week, to take me to m ECT treatments. My parents are my heroes and my inspiration.

I now wake up early every day to watch the sun rise. I hear the birds chirping and I see the flowers blooming. I see a world that is full of life and light. I walk through the Dark and I want to spin around and sing songs of joy. The world is no longer dark and dangerous. It is filled with wonder and enlightenment. I can now say the words that have eluded me all of these years...I am happy.

## **AN OPEN LETTER TO MYSELF**

**By Kat Atwell**

Take a deep breath, from way down deep. Unclench your jaw. Relax your muscles. Focus on these words, and ignore the critic in your head that tells you to ignore it. Read this right now.

You are so hard on yourself. Today, you need to take a step back and look at the bigger picture. While I know this may sound trite, you have survived. Do you recognize the gravity of that statement? You are a survivor. Wear that badge proudly, and look at it frequently. You are a survivor on purpose.

I know that some days are hard. You beat yourself up for so many reasons. The thing is, there is no accomplishment you will ever achieve that will put you into that safe place you blindly drive toward when you're in the dark. Your safe place is already here. It exists right

now. It sounds unbelievable, and probably feels impossible, but it's the truth. You already crossed the finish line just by existing in this moment. Every second you move forward, you are a winner. Granted, sometimes you might have to slog and crawl, but you keep going. I know you're never going to give up. I know you know that, too.

Every moment of every day there are people, hundreds of people, who will heed your call if you ask for help. Those people will jump to your aid without hesitation, and will be happy to help you. There is no need to constantly be on guard. It is so much better for you and everyone around you to go forward anticipating the good, instead of expecting the worst. That being said, though, if you can't think positively in the moment? That's OK, too. One of the worst things that you have a tendency to do is to beat yourself up for not being happy. Nobody is happy all the time. You don't need to be ashamed to feel sad, or angry, or lost.

Love yourself for who you are today. I know that you think you should be doing more, but you don't need to. You are perfectly you right now, and that is exquisite.

It's funny, because I know that you're doubting all of this. You're skeptical, and that voice in your head can be so loud, and so cruel. Please remind yourself that the voice inside your head is a phantom. It does not exist. That voice is not you. Would you ever say those things to others, those things you say to yourself? You wouldn't. And here's the deal: Because you wouldn't ever say that to someone else, you clearly do not deserve that sort of punishment bestowed upon yourself. Please be more gentle with the real you. The real you needs to be nurtured, cared for, and loved.

I don't want to talk down to you. I don't want you to be frustrated in the event that you don't believe any of these words. It is no small feat to love yourself when you're deep in a depression. Remember, though, you have done it before, and you have walked away from those times a braver, more powerful woman.

I know it's hard to be who you are, but you are perfect for this role. It was made for you. Each day, that role is recreated, and you get to build upon it. Your story wouldn't be nearly so stunning if it weren't for these dark times (I know you don't want to hear that, but it's true). You know that your bright moments shine even more brightly after you have escaped from the abyss.

So, take comfort. If that means taking a nap, then take one. If you need a hug, then please, ask for a hug. Allow yourself to be gentle. Your job is to take care of yourself first. With that sort of strength, you can accomplish anything. I love you. Other people love you. You are loved.

It'll be OK. I am here.

## **DENIAL AND ACCEPTANCE**

**By S. Luna**

I don't remember the exact date I was first hospitalized in a psychiatric hospital, but I believe I was 24. I am now 50. I attempted suicide in my early to mid-twenties. My behavior was very erratic. My mood was up and down, and I had a bad temper which would flare up and hurt those around me. I had a case manager who helped me get on Social Security Disability. At the time, I didn't appreciate her help. I was young and stubborn and didn't want to believe that I had a mental illness. I was on Social Security Disability for a time, and she was a good case manager, but I left treatment in my thirties. I wouldn't seek help until 2008 when I was 43. I hadn't liked taking the Depakote and Risperdal because I had gained weight and felt a tingling at the back of my neck which scared me about the medication.

I continued to live my life in a manner that hurt other people and hurt myself. I proceeded to live my life un-medicated and therefore chaotic and explosive and paranoid about people. My anxiety was always sky high too. I was unaware that I had Post-Traumatic Stress dis-

order. I thought I was perfectly fine, but I moved from job to job and constantly had problems with the people I worked with due to paranoia and anxiety. I thought I heard people calling my name or laughter and sometimes voices.

In 2008, I had a difficult time hearing and seeing things. I sent someone 200 emails. I was not well. My good friend Carmen, along with a few other friends grew concerned, and they asked me to seek help at the Lafayette Mental Health Center. I was diagnosed schizoaffective, just as I had been diagnosed in my early twenties. This was not an easy thing for me to accept. I had been successful and independent in my mind, but everything came crashing down.

It was at the Lafayette Mental Health Center that my trauma resurfaced after my step-father passed away. I did EMDR therapy with my new therapist and this helped the fog lift a bit. I was put on Abilify, Lamictal, Ativan and a number of other medications to calm my mood and help me differentiate between what was real and what was my paranoia.

Unfortunately, the Lafayette Mental Health Center closed and I had further problems. Luckily, I moved to Arvada and began to go to Jefferson Center for Mental Health. I was still struggling terribly with keeping employment and was working at Seven-Eleven despite my education. I just couldn't control my anxiety, paranoia and depression and ended up homeless. When my stress level increased, my symptoms increased.

It was then that there came a turning point. Jefferson Center for Mental Health put me up in a hotel for three weeks and invited me to stay at In Between, a residential facility. I stayed there for seven months and received the best help from a caring staff, case manager and psychiatrist. After that I stayed at Hilltop, another residential facility and received even more help. I stayed at Hilltop for twelve months. My medications were changed and Sapharis was added. Sapharis was very helpful. The fog in my mind began to lift.

I participated in groups and one was called Seeking Safety. It was there I first truly began to understand how childhood sexual abuse affected me. The therapists were kind and I began to understand trauma did not have to deplete my self-esteem. I could change my core-beliefs about myself.

I am back on Social Security and thankful to have received all the help I did despite my personal stigma about mental illness. I am learning that my illness doesn't define me. It is not who I am. I still struggle with mood swings, suicidal thinking and paranoia, but I am learning coping skills to manage my illness. My case manager told me that relapse is a part of recovery. I understand now that I can learn to love myself and be kind to myself. I work hard on grounding, self-soothing techniques and walk and swim, along with taking my medication in order to manage my illness. It is my goal to be a good peer and listener to others with mental illness.

## **IN THE MIRROR**

**By David Muniz**

I used to look in the mirror, but no one was there. Yet, there was a sense of fear, dread and denial of a person I knew should be there. Most of my life, I did not exist. My Mother was a single parent, with a ninth grade education. She was raising me and five other siblings. I was stuck in the middle, invisible. My Mother did all she could do to feed us and keep us together. She worked long and difficult hours cleaning rich people's homes. Consequently, we were home alone to fend for ourselves. Living in an environment without any guidance or nurturing, we were surviving instead of thriving.

Growing up in a survival setting, I learned to focus on eating and competing for affection and attention. Any attention would do, even if it wasn't affectionate. My Mother would usually come home exhausted and hungry, like a mother bird returning to her nest after a meager day of hunting. With so little food and so many mouths to feed,

mother bird had only rushed time and energy to give.

Without any nurturing or guidance, I learned to cope with my agonizing emptiness by self-medicating with anything and everything. I did not like the feeling of being alone with myself. I discovered that drugs, sex and alcohol helped numb my pain and would allow an escape from the reality of my isolation. After a life-time of using and abusing myself, I realized this was only a temporary fix. My issues were my closest companions and they would stick with me forever!

One winter's night, the frost was thickly wrapped around the window. The icy chill outside left the busy streets abandoned, just like I felt inside my apartment. The presence of isolation and hopelessness surrounded me like haunting demons of death. They were calling me to join them in their abyss, whispering "Do it, chicken, do it!" As I looked in the mirror, the only reflection I could see was, hating me! I truly wanted to end my misery. With knife in hand and wrist bleeding, I was ready to go.

Suddenly, I heard a calm voice, inside my head, "if it's that bad, change!" A light came on; I had an answer, change! I put down the knife and decided to find out just who I was letting go? Who was this man in the mirror? I looked; it wasn't a man at all. To my astonishment, it was a little boy! I feared and hated this person but did not know why? That was the first time I came face to face with my authentic self.

The lies I've believed about myself were exposed. I was ready to receive the truth. In the mirror, while practicing Yoga, I come into child-pose. It is here I can see into my soul and the little-boy inside the man can now be told the truths. In the silence of meditation, I opened my heart chakra to release my fears and receive love.

I allowed long conversations with myself, questioning the hurts and feeling the pain of my past. In doing this, I could hear the agreements I made with the lies and beliefs that came from a lifetime of carrying a wounded child. This was a child that was alone, unlovable and bad. I have now replaced those lies with truths and have received heal-

ing. Most of all, I've learned to love and accept myself, just as I am without judgments. I forgive myself and shame has no place in my life!

I've made new agreements with my authentic self. I am not an orphan, I am beautiful, I am loveable capable of loving myself and others fully. I may be alone but not lonely. I will never forget that cold winter's night when I meet my Authentic Self. I owe my life to me, making the choice to thrive and not merely exist!

I look forward to sharing my journey with others so that I can guide and encourage others to listen to their hearts and believe the truths in themselves. Within acceptance and forgiveness of self and others...there is peace, love and freedom. I can now share my many tools and practices of self-discovery and transformation, reflecting the way for others to find their freedom.

I look in the mirror now and I see me; the beautiful and whole man that I am....and I like that!!

## **MY EXPERIENCE OF TRUTH**

**By Trevor Groves**

It all began 12 years ago, I was 24 years old. I heard someone say "your breath stinks". As I turned around to find who made the comment, it occurred to me that I didn't hear the comment with my ears, I heard the voice with my mind. At that moment I didn't think much of it. Eventually though, as the voices continued, I had to acknowledge them. To me there were 2 possibilities about the source of the voices. Either I was crazy, or I stumbled upon some sort of telepathy and the ability to read others thoughts. Naturally, I would have rather believed that I was some sort of alien human hybrid than I was a lunatic. However, if I was to believe I could read people's minds, than perhaps they could read mine. My paranoia began. I became so worried that my mind was transparent to everyone; I began having impure and offensive thoughts. I would never have these thoughts were it not for my fear that

people could hear them. My schizophrenia evolved.

As time passed, schizophrenia began to consume me. It became so prevalent in my mind that I would have trouble focusing on the most rudimentary functions such as listening during a conversation. Any human interaction I had would be blanketed by paranoia. What if I called this woman a witch in my head? Could she hear it? Mental health professionals call this reality testing. I was constantly trying to get a visceral reaction from people that I was trying to communicate with telepathically. It never worked and this weighed heavily as evidence that it was not real and I was in fact a schizophrenic.

As time passed, the schizophrenia became more intense. The voices told me my thoughts were being broadcast to the world. They told me grandiose things like I was Jesus Christ or god on earth. On the other side of things they said that I was a human sacrifice and a scapegoat for society's problems. They even began to tell me to kill myself.

I eventually began to view schizophrenia as a test. The core of this test was to overcome my ego. I came to believe that aliens were here watching us from the collective unconscious, which is the concept that we are all connected to each other subconsciously. It's a place with a free exchange of thoughts and ideas. It's what makes telepathy possible. As it turns out, we are all capable of telepathy, but since it occurs in our subconscious mind many people such as me are not aware of it. Through schizophrenia I have come to believe that the collective unconscious is another plane of existence, a mental plane free of the limitations of the physical world we call reality. To quote my favorite band "today, young men on acid realized that all matter is merely energy condensed into a slow vibration and we are all one consciousness experiencing ourselves subjectively. There no such thing as death live is only a dream and we are just an imagination of ourselves." Basically, the collective conscious is what we refer to as god. If there is anything I've learned as a schizophrenic, it's that I cannot comprehend the universe as it truly is.

I often wonder if there is a purpose to life, One of humanities

most prevalent questions. I believe there is. I believe we have a place in the universe. I believe we can evolve and achieve enlightenment. To me enlightenment is a state of mind, it is total consciousness. It's letting go of all the negative emotions we experience and shining the light on the darkness where pain cannot exist. It's becoming one with everything and everyone. The real mystery is how to attain this blissful existence.

There are no instructions to life, and no map. A lot of people in our culture are confronted with depression, anxiety, attention deficit, anger, fear and all sorts of emotional pain. There are many ways to overcome these problems. Yoga and meditation, diet and exercise, finding joy and love in our personal relationships and hobbies are all effective in finding a sliver of enlightenment. We can all achieve inner peace in our own ways through our own belief systems. For me it is simple, it's all about how we treat each other. It's about being the change we wish to see in the world. Mental illness sucks, but maybe it's worth it.

## **UPROOTED FROM LIFE**

**By Courtney Rubio-Ontiveros**

The older I get the harder it is to remember life before my ED (Eating Disorder). It was early middle school when things took a turn for the worse. I've gone over it many times, what could have triggered my ED? I came up with many possibilities such as, my grandparents divorce, the fact that I moved from the South of my school district to the North (the demographic of people were completely different), I had a father that was always in and out of my life and it caused a lot of emotional issues, and of course I was at the age when a young girls body begins to change. It could have been anyone of these reasons, or maybe all combined but I was triggered and it took a very long time for me to even realize what I had been doing to myself.

Anxiety is the common fuel to my Eating Disorder. I've been diagnosed with High Anxiety for awhile now and to be honest I may have had it since my childhood. Everything that others feel is minuscule

compared to how I end up feeling. My entire body becomes affected when I have anxiety attacks. My emotions are all over the place, my heart races, my head pounds, and it's all so exhausting. However, with this mental issue another arose. I turned to food as a coping mechanism when I became too anxious to handle. Eating was comforting to me and I didn't know when to stop. I had behaviors, but since I wasn't taught about eating disorders I didn't know what I was doing was wrong. It was an endless cycle and it destroyed my health.

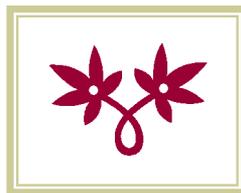
I continued to have my ED all through High School and the beginning of my college years. The time I feel like I lost the most was in High School. Having ED affected every part of me; it truly was an endless cycle. I loved joining groups and playing sports in High School, but when I had deadlines, practices, and games my anxiety was too much to handle. I would eat and then I would feel so full I would panic because I knew I wouldn't be able to perform the way I needed to, so I had behaviors. These behaviors allowed me to have energy for a little while and then I would become so fatigued. I couldn't make my times for running, I didn't start on my teams, and I was too stressed for my deadlines. And with all of this my emotions were all over the place. What happened when I would have behaviors was that my body became chemically imbalanced, I could be happy one second and angry the next. It even affected the first real relationship I ever had. ED controlled my life and all I could do was be a passenger to what was supposed to be some of the greatest years of my life.

I think a lot could have been avoided if I had been truthful with my family. Even though I wasn't aware of my ED at first I eventually learned what I was doing was wrong, but I still kept it from those who cared about me. I would make up lies and cover up for my ED. I felt isolated and helpless; I would think to myself, is this going to be the rest of my life? Until one year in college I was praying late at night in the chapel below my dorm. I wanted to be free, I wanted to be happy and I wanted to live my life without ED. I felt a calm come over me and right then I decided that I would find a way to get help. It took some time to finally tell my parents the truth, but when I did they told me that they

would help me in any way they could. I then joined EDCASA, now ERCSA.

One of the first things I was taught and the most impactful lesson was that I needed to separate my Eating Disorder (ED) from myself. I needed to learn what thoughts were my own and what ED's were. When I finally mastered this it was like the life I was stuck in stopped and I started a new journey. I began to distinguish when ED was trying to bully me. When I had thoughts of body shaming, excessive food consumption, negativity towards life, and the feeling of being completely alone I knew these thoughts weren't mine. By no means did this coping mechanism stop my ED entirely, but it gave me the strength and knowledge to push forward and fight every day.

The process of healing is a sacred and beautiful journey. You become one with yourself; you love yourself, and you begin to live life the way you were meant to. It isn't an easy path, but with the right support and encouragement you can overcome it all. There may be times when you feel alone, or that no one understands what you are going through. Always know that there is help and support available. It took me a very long time to realize this, but once I did I started my journey in healing. There will be bumps and bruises along the way, but never stop. Keep pushing forward; ignore the negative thoughts because in the end it's your life not ED's.



**MENTAL HEALTH STORIES 2015**  
**PROGRESS, RECOVERY, SUCCESS**

**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

Life with Medicine.....	36
Nicholas Miller	
I AM NOT Bipolar, I HAVE Bipolar.....	38
Courtney Maupin	
My Own (Painfully) Human Mind .....	40
Christopher Feld	
Everyone Struggles with Something: A Journey of Loss, Letting Go and the Courage to Begin Again.....	42
Jason C. Hopcus	
Ipomoea Alba Blooms In The Dark .....	45
Sheila Benintendi	
The Strength Within.....	46
Chrissie Hodges	
For Every Season .....	49
Anthony Trumble	
G.R.A.T.I.T.U.D.E. ....	51
Cynthia Wolfer	

## LIFE WITH MEDICINE

By Nicholas Miller

My troubles with schizoaffective disorder started in grade school. Life was very difficult for me. My parents didn't understand. The psychiatrist they got for me started treating me for Bipolar disorder. The lithium helped a little bit, but never fully controlled the illness. He kept giving me larger and larger amounts of the drug. Lithium is a salt and makes a person very thirsty. As a freshman, I only weighed 120 pounds. Every 45 minutes, I had to urinate. I couldn't even stay in class for the entire period. My illness was still untreated and the doctor kept increasing my dosage. I started wetting the bed at night, and it was so humiliating. Nothing was working and my illness got worse. I started hallucinating. My parents couldn't handle it anymore. After signing me over to state custody. I ended up in numerous group homes.

Foster care was rough. A couple fights ended me up on probation and some short stays in the juvenile detention center. Some of the foster parents I had stayed with really helped me finish high school with a 3.0 GPA even though my illness was coming on again by the time I graduated. Without my parents forcing me to take medicine, I had stopped. I was just so burned out by all of the side effects. Everyone makes it sound so easy. Just take your medicine and everything will be fine. They have to be very strong to treat the brain and have nasty effects on the body.

After being accepted to the University of Northern Colorado, I started hallucinating again. My girlfriend at the time filed a restraining order against me. I was not in good shape. Being completely out of my mind. I went to talk to her at her work. They called the cops on me. When they arrived, I was paranoid and thought they were part of a conspiracy against me. I got in my car and the cops chased for a couple miles before giving up. I was arrested a couple days later. They charged me with a restraining order violation and vehicular eluding. I was looking at 6 years in prison.

The DA ordered a competency hearing. I argued with the judge because I didn't want to go to the hospital again. Luckily I had been spending time in the law library, and read my rights had been violated because I did not get a preliminary hearing within 30 days of being charged. The felony was dropped, however I was sent to the State hospital in Pueblo. It took 6 months of medicine before I become lucid enough to stand trial. It was there when my diagnosis was changed from Bipolar to Schizoaffective disorder. My life changed forever.

After receiving antipsychotics and mood stabilizers, my symptoms finally got better. My hallucinations were gone, and I started to cheer up. It was such a struggle coming back to reality. After getting out of jail and the state hospital, I was ordered to two years of mental health treatment. Everyone I knew disowned me. Luckily I was able to stay at a half-way house treatment facility.

My medicine was working and I ended up getting a stocking job at Safeway. I worked hard but had some problems forming personal relationships at work. Every day I took the medicine, my brain chemistry got better. In therapy, I started to challenge my thoughts using cognitive therapy. After a year or so, I had my own apartment and saved enough to get a car. I ended up getting promoted at work and started taking classes at the local community college. The medicine was tolerable, and I felt so relieved with my brain functioning the way it should.

In 2008, I graduated with an Associate's Degree. I kept going to school, kept getting promoted. 2010 graduated with a Bachelor's Degree. 2012 graduated with my MBA. Currently, I have a professional job as a Product Manager at a major electronics distribution company in Englewood, CO. I have tons of friends and enjoy traveling the world on vacations. Recently, I was hired as an Adjunct Faculty member in an online MBA program headquartered in Utah. My dosage is small and taken twice a day. My psychiatrist only asks to see me once a year. I wish more people knew mental illness can have huge success when treated. The medicine has really given me a second chance at life. Hopefully someday there won't be such a stigma, so I can tell more people.

# I AM NOT BIPOLAR, I HAVE BIPOLAR

By Courtney Maupin

“I don’t think it is post-pregnancy hormones anymore.

You need to seek help”.

She doesn’t want to be on medication like her Mom. She doesn’t want a label put on her. She thought after she placed her daughter for adoption her life would get back to normal shortly after. It had only just begun.

She didn’t have to go the traditional way. She could do this naturally. The chiropractor told her so many people are over-diagnosed with mental illness in America. She started taking Magnesium vitamins. They seemed to help at first.

After time had passed, she couldn’t take the swirling and craziness going on in her head. She talked so rapidly, everyone asked her to slow down. She went from a feeling of self-inflation to isolating herself from the world and contemplating suicide. She couldn’t control it. She went to her primary care doctor who did a preliminary screening, suggesting she had bipolar disorder. She was then referred to an outpatient mental health facility. They started her on .5mg of Abilify and started a small DBT (Dialectical Behavioral Therapy) program. She started to feel better.

Her primary care doctor then stepped in again, changing her to Effexor and Lamotrigine. She was on top of the world. She could buy whatever she wanted, she was the best at everything and she craved sex like a drug. This “freedom” as she so felt was the best she had felt in over a year.

And then the breakdown came. She lined up her pills; she was ready. Ready to swallow every pill and lie down to sleep forever; Ready to end the pain and escape the situation; Ready for the peace. Then she

thought of her cats, as silly as that was. She thought about these wonderful creatures that had given her so much love. What would happen to them? If her aunt answered the phone she was meant to live. Her aunt drove her to emergency psych ER and stayed with her until a bed became available upstairs. She felt hopeful.

As soon as she stepped in the intake room, the doctor ordered that the Effexor be raised. She was on a 72-hour hold filled with therapy sessions, activities and rest. For a short amount of time life was being taken care of for her. A CNA helped her realize that although she felt on top of the world during her Hypomania caused by her Bipolar Type II disorder, it wouldn't be labeled a disease if it were a good thing. She held on to this advice.

Everyone desires freedom. So when a therapist came upstairs and told her she could leave early if she went to their Intensive Outpatient Program, she rapidly accepted. She was discharged and went home to sleep and cuddle with her kitties. But then she slept too long. She missed her first day of IOP. She was woken by the cops doing a welfare check. Oops.

Then she regularly attended; being kept in the 4 week program for 8 weeks. The psychiatrist repeatedly tried to find a medication resolution for her. Remove the Effexor, raise the Lamotrigine. Try Seroquil, migraines. Try Safris, speech impediment. Try Trazedone, drowsiness. Try Clonazepam, depression. Try, Try, Try. Bleh, Bleh, Bleh. 300mg Lithium/ 2x day at night, tired but calmer. 100mg/4x day, 2 at night and 2 in the morning, counteracts the drowsiness and help bring back the light. Are her days of being a guinea pig finally over?

DBT and CBT (Cognitive Behavioral Therapy) 5 days a week; Discovery, recovery, resistance, acceptance, happiness.

The stability lasts for over two years. Then she goes to jail on a bench warrant because she missed court when her dog escaped from the backyard. She sits in holding with her medications being withheld until she sees the nurse. Then she goes to "the pods" after 18 hours

where they only have one of her medications available. To make up for it they dope her up on anti-anxiety pills; 8x the dose she normally takes in an emergency situation. As she sits in holding she tries to tear the veins out of her wrists with her nails, getting nowhere. After a 41 hour ordeal she heads home and spends every minute re-stabilizing. She then truly realizes she needs her medications to have control of the illness.

She knows now that she is not her illness, but rather has an illness, that she will always overcome.

## **MY OWN (PAINFULLY) HUMAN MIND**

**By Christopher Feld**

I work through long, sleepless nights; dreading the onslaught of demons who always seem to be lurking, as if waiting for me to close my eyes that they might take me unawares. Fear defines me as I count down the hours until bedtime. My thoughts, always attuned to the most tragic of things, zero in on the worst possibility. My thoughts betray my fear and those demons go mad with hunger when they smell fear.

Progress is slow but inevitable. It comes unannounced when I find myself telling doctors I haven't hallucinated in weeks. And I half celebrate, half dread our formal schedule change to every two weeks because I'm cynical like that; because progress means an inevitable set back. I take two steps forward and one step back but forget I've still made a profit. I concentrate with an acute, unreasonable mind on that one step back. It comes in the form of psychosis or maybe a particularly embarrassing delusion. I hole myself up in my apartment and forget all about the victory of my biweekly appointment schedule or the fact I haven't called my mom in the middle of the night in two months.

My cynicism breeds pessimism and I'm thankful for loving friends and family, for astute doctors who remind me of my own triumphs in the face of my gravest enemy: my own (painfully) human

mind.

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I sit here watching the news like any good citizen. Hearing about the atrocities I know I'll remember and the happier news, the fluff pieces, I'll forget the minute they break for commercial. And so it goes with my illness. I go to my biweekly appointment and report the gravest of news, only the terrible things my own (painfully) human mind has produced; and not the fact I walked a mile by myself to go to a coffee shop because I have a crush on one of the baristas and it's been four years since feelings of that sort have even entered my mind.

Pessimism can be a driving force and my doctor thinks he hasn't been attentive enough. He blames himself while I blame the inevitability of that one step back. But he *has* been attentive, I *have* made progress. Two steps forward and one step back and we both forget this amounts to one step forward. Because we only focus on the bad and not the good and it's little wonder seeing as how my bad is always more grievous than those of my kin.

My mom is good at giving us perspective. She tells him about how peaceful her sleep has been; uninterrupted by the late night phone calls she dreads but still dutifully answers. She gives us a more complete truth, it's been months since she and my dad have had to get in the car to come pick me up in the black of night. She tells me how strong I am, how far I've come, and in those moments I feel as though a certain truth has been revealed. My news-watching-brain is always looking for the worst to report, the most dramatic, the most dire. And I make a promise to myself that I'll finally see the truth of my life and I'll report the good things with the bad. My news-watching-brain forgets the victories, dismisses them as no more than fluff pieces. My news-watching-brain forgets how essential these victories are. I make goals for myself, some I fail at and in some I succeed. I can't call Comcast to get a credit on my bill for the outage last month but I *do* manage to stick to my routine for a full week and that's a much greater victory.

Progress happens slowly, but can come in great bounds, and growth is minute but comes as inevitably as the next psychotic episode. I work hard on my grounding techniques, I stick to my routines, I try to remain as mindful as possible, and I've started succeeding more often than not. It comes down to perspective, it comes down to seeing more than just the muck as you make your way through the damp, muddy wasteland the mentally ill so often find themselves in. Like an athlete, like an artist the lives of the mentally ill are ones of progress, plateau, and more progress. It's just a matter of perspective. Do you notice the one step back? Or the two steps forward?

## **EVERYONE STRUGGLES WITH SOMETHING**

### **A JOURNEY OF LOSS, LETTING GO AND THE COURAGE TO BEGIN AGAIN**

**By Jason C. Hopcus**

Everyone Struggles with Something.

Consider that thought for a minute.

Each and every person struggles with something.

Maybe a weight issue, poor grades or a failed relationship.

Perhaps a more serious situation like addiction, trauma or loss or...

Better yet, an illness, a mental illness.

Imagine what any of those other struggles might be like...with a mental illness.

Mental illness affects a staggering portion of our population. Personally, this lifetime, it has been my own greatest struggle. One, that at many points felt like it might never improve. Eventually, things did get better. Today, I can fully embrace this struggle and with great pride

also know that it is my supreme achievement. I believe my road to recovery is a true success story, one of overcoming, achievement and coming back to life.

Elevated moods had always played a role in my life's course, both positively and negatively. I had succeeded at a very high level and experienced huge wins, mastering the elusive "American Dream." Then, everything began to unravel. Almost in the blink of an eye, it all changed, greater manic highs and lower depressive lows, a lifetime of work and achievement littered along the road to ruin.

One fateful January day, providence intervened. It literally stopped me in my tracks and pulled from the comfort zone I'd always known. Oddly, I was acutely aware that life, as I knew it, would never be the same again. But, at that time, my mania fueled ego kept me from seeing the blessing of this intervention. Ultimately, there was no way I could deny any longer that something had gone terribly wrong, too many poor choices, too many risky decisions, words and actions that were not my own. This glimmer of self-awareness finally led to a very late but timely diagnosis of Bipolar 1. The answers finally came into focus for so many previously unanswered questions. Differently than I had imagined, nothing since has been the same. Rock bottom became the foundation from where I rebuilt my life.

I have always been a firm believer that everything happens for a reason. Given my radical departure from the life I'd always known, my gut told me that something important must be ahead. Instinctively, I knew this diagnosis had shown up to teach me new lessons, even though in the early days I was most unsure of the outcome. I stepped out in blind faith and began again. I became a seeker of knowledge, direction and peace from others and within myself. A courageous feat that hasn't been easy, but looking back it feels like a life lived on my own terms. The knowledge gained invaluable.

Successful recovery from a mental illness is an active process. It takes unwavering commitment and perseverance. My recovery is built upon four cornerstones, which are acceptance, accountability, af-

firmation and action. Each of these serves an appropriate role.

Accepting my illness

Accountability for my treatment

Affirmation- gratitude in daily life

Action in my recovery

My journey has been one wrought with incredible loss and heartache. But, the conscious act of letting go set me free and resulted in a life beyond my imagination, one that is now richly blessed. With each step, I've discovered how to live more fully in the present, which has offered me greater self-awareness and self-love. With open eyes and heart, I can see beyond my own self, and acknowledge the struggle of many others with empathy and love. Acknowledging that everyone struggles with something changed everything.

Fully embracing these cornerstones has shown me infinite possibilities of how I can be of service to others, a conduit of guidance helping those who haven't yet found their voice. It's something bigger than my illness and myself. In doing so, I have made peace with my past, learning the humility, dignity and grace of living life on my terms. Every experience mattered and I don't regret a single step.

Struggle, in all of its forms, is really the only thing that has the ability to shake our very core. It is the birthplace of authentic living that can shape who we've been and where we are headed. Ironically, it has been the most beautiful gift, a conscious choice of not letting struggle define me, instead imagining the life I desire and setting forth to live it with intention.

The road ahead has infinite possibilities.

# IPOMOEA ALBA BLOOMS IN THE DARK

By Sheila Benintendi

I entered the hospital for the first time that year on January 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2007 . It would prove to be a very dark year for me as I would find myself being “admitted” time and time again, hospital after hospital, emergency room after emergency room, visits to the ICU; a pattern that had defined my life since I was about 20 years old.

A dear woman, the head nurse on that particular shift, sat on the bed with me, holding my hand while I sobbed. It was this particular nurse who would later bring another gift to the hospital unit: a small pot, some soil and a packet of seeds. The Ipomoea Alba, botanical name for the more familiar Moonflower, can be described as a statuesque plant bearing large twisted buds that unfurl at dusk and stay open until the first glimmer of dawn. That would be an accurate snapshot of my life. My desperation had brought me to a place where the soil was fertile for growth.

The nurturing soil? Perhaps it was Karis Community, a residential setting for people who have persistent and recurring mental health issues where I invested 4 years of my life working, sharing and growing together with the most amazing and resilient people I have ever had the privilege of knowing. Or, perhaps it was dialectical behavioral therapy (DBT), or maybe it was the electro convulsive therapy (ECT), breathing and calming techniques...perhaps, each holds its bookmark in the story of my life.

Mental and emotional progress would sprout quickly as I began volunteering in the community and speaking openly about my journey. This was major in that I began to see the benefit of sharing myself with others as a way of healing.

I began to have a greater sense of my own personality, something I had seemingly lost, buried ‘neath the guise of medication, the self-reproach and the agony of day-to-day existence. A dream was

“unfurling”!

The Moonflower is deliciously fragrant when open; and has large heart-shaped leaves. Spiritually, this would describe me to a tee. Interesting, I’ve been able to reclaim my religious faith, not because of a childhood mandate, but this time because it is meaningful to me ...an aroma that is ever so sweet! I am able to choose my own path, and I have come to belief and conviction that reside in my heart, just as the heart-shaped leaves, the cornerstone of my ongoing recovery. It seems clear to me that from so much hurt, so much healing has come.

My music (piano performance was my emphasis in college) has become a developing, pleasant source of expression where originally there had solely been that underlying sense of competition. Playing the piano during the height of my illness was more a sense of self-loathing: never enough, never quite on top, never making the mark according to everyone else’s expectations, but most of all never achieving the expectations that I had set for myself.

The white color of the moonflower blossom resonates with me as a type of purity, a new start, a hope. Could it be that someday I’ll be able to give that final collegiate recital I was unable to give because of hallucinations; not so much for others this time, but for myself in a way that is honoring to all?

It is also said that the moonflower plant reseeds freely to the point of being “invasive” in some growing conditions. Me? I would rather think of my enthusiasm as being infectious. I have become a part of the fellowship of the unashamed, blooming ...yes, even in the dark!

## **THE STRENGTH WITHIN**

**By Chrissie Hodges**

At 20 years old, my outside world was picture perfect. That is how I wanted to be seen. I was on full scholarship to university, I was impeccably religious, and my social life and grades were to be admired. I

created this image, hiding the secret that haunted every single moment of my everyday life. I knew if I could piece together perfection to the outside world, the reality that I was collapsing out of fear, shame, and guilt on the inside would be covered up. I would devotedly continue this fallacy as long as I could manage it. But, I knew the charade would have to end eventually.

At 20 years old, one of my best friends died unexpectedly. The weight of his death triggered me to sink into a long, lingering, and torturous bout of depression. All of these years I had invested into upholding this perfect life, and now I was powerless. I watched as it unfolded, and the shadow of this unknown illness began to paint my world black. All of my constructed facade was now put in jeopardy. The person that everyone thought I was began to slip away. I was too weak, too scared, and too overrun with the convolution of my mind to try to put it back together.

At 20 years old, I could no longer hold together my sanity and I knew my life needed to end. I would rather die than reveal the horrendous obsessive thoughts that had infected me and taken over every ounce of my energy and my being.

12 years prior, my mind developed a broken record inside of it. I had horrible, unwanted intrusive thoughts that were disgusting, blasphemous, and violent. The harder I tried to stop them, the more powerful they would become. My mind was consumed with shame that I was a bad person for being unable to control them. My physical body would react when the thoughts were present. I would feel unable to breathe, shaky, numb, and consumed with panic. I developed ritualistic thought patterns of reassurance and mantras of prayer to combat the panic and manage what was going on. I never spoke about the thoughts for fear that saying them out loud would prove they were true. I was trapped. Waves of depression came and went periodically. I relied on my rituals to pull me through the tough times. However, I knew instinctively that if I could not control the thoughts, I would rather die by my own hands than ever reveal this secret.

At age 20, hopeless and exhausted after months of a seemingly endless battle with crippling depression, I made the decision to end my life. I submerged myself in a freezing creek and injured my stomach with a knife. The only sadness I felt was that I would never see my family again...but I was convinced if they knew how horrible of a person I was, they would wish I was dead as well. After lying in my freezing, watery grave for hours, my head quieted enough to hear my true inner strength beckoning me to stand up and save myself. I fought the urge with tears and screams, but I followed my heart. I crawled out of the water toward the nearest porch light, desperately seeking relief.

I was diagnosed with the Pure O/Intrusive Thoughts branch of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. I was treated with Exposure Response Prevention, a proven treatment to teach individuals to manage OCD.

After successful treatment, I fought a long battle with personal stigma surrounding mental illness. I was plagued with shame, guilt, and embarrassment that surrounded my illness. True recovery came when I experienced a relapse in 2011. I embraced OCD as part of my life, but neither a definition of myself nor myself as its defining victim. Recognizing that this is a disorder that I will live with and manage for the rest of my life successfully if I choose to be diligent brought me peace with my experience, peace with myself, and a deep appreciation for those who live with mental illness.

I have learned that inner strength perseveres at our most vulnerable times. If we listen carefully, it will guide us with courage and determination that we never knew existed within. My inner strength continuously proves that I am stronger than my mental illness; it was present the night that I almost lost my life, and will be forever present in my future battles with OCD.

# FOR EVERY SEASON

By Anthony Trumble

“All of man’s troubles stem from his inability to sit quietly with himself”

*Blaise Pascal*

My name is Anthony and I'm a 55 yr old bipolar 1 homeless man on disability. At the moment I'm not living outside on the street though I certainly have in the past. I've been homeless for about eight years now living either in shelters, flop houses or hotels or as I said, outside. At the moment I live in a somewhat skid row hotel in downtown Denver, CO. Our tenants include the mentally ill, disabled, drug dealers, a couple strippers and of course your garden variety alcoholics. My life consists of getting up and going to the food line at 8:00 am at the church across the street to get a bologna sandwich and a cup of coffee. The rest of the day is spent foraging for food at soup kitchens or food banks. I have virtually no money besides rent. I try and reuse discarded things whether it's food, clothing or furniture, I find a certain pride in being able to survive on so little and recycle others' waste. Don't get me wrong I still miss the steaks and lobster at the Palm. But one \$10.00 martini I used to drink when I was an investment broker could feed me for four days. My background is I was a fairly successful musical theater actor in NYC for the better part of 10 years in the eighties. I did Radio City music Hall, Cruise Ships, Dinner Theater, soap operas But my favorite was always playing Santa at Macy's NY for several years. I have been an acting coach for "At Risk Youth" where I used improv, role playing and theater games to help process the difficult issues they faced. I then moved on to sales, presentations, demos, anything that needed a short burst of high energy and humor without a rigid schedule or long steady process. The other Bipolars and caregivers will certainly be able to relate to this I hope. I didn't realize it at the time but not only was I doing something that I loved,

I was doing one of the few jobs that would fit my Bipolar cycles. I enjoyed doing the sales jobs because the travel allowed me to return often to my beloved NY.

NY is and always will be my home. From the moment I saw the traffic, heard the pace of the dialogue, the energy of the whole city, I knew that this truly was “The Island of Misfit Toys.” It really feels like a city of Bipolars and consequently I don’t feel like an alien. I know it might be difficult but if anyone could send me a bacon, egg and cheese on a bialy, I’d be very grateful.

Throughout this time my disease was very active. I would not sleep for days before auditions. I would be great at interviews and then either not show for work or crash and leave after a few weeks. As time went by the disease got worse. The swings got much more intense and it became harder and harder to hold down jobs. Relationships crumbled, family became less and less supportive and the confusion and self-loathing grew. Eventually I found myself in a psychiatric ward, very suicidal and lost. I couldn’t figure out why this beautiful creative brain couldn’t see things through. I always knew something was wrong with me but I didn’t know what. I generally thought it was bad character, undisciplined etc.. So now ten years after that I’m living on skid row on disability and so desperately want to be a citizen again.

The great news in all of this is that I’m closer to that goal than I have ever been. My medications are helping a great deal and with the help of my therapist (who is seeing me on the side because she knows I must process verbally) along with me taking a much more active role in my treatment, my energy and creativity are coming back. I’m now able to write a blog called “Bipolar, Homeless and Thriving in Denver” (to be published on 10/22) and planning on going to kickstarter to get some money for video and sound equipment so I can interview others dealing with these issues.

So the message is we can break out of feeling warehoused. If we start with some things that bring us joy and get us involved in

helping others, then our problems somehow seem to be lessened. And then we won't be defined by our disease, but by our deeds.

## G.R.A.T.I.T.U.D.E.

By Cynthia Wolfer

Long ago, in the DNA evolution of my ancestors, certain neurotransmitters mutated in the brain, producing a chronic illness with extreme shifts of moods cycling dangerously high and excited, risky and dysfunctional, and then plunging us into an irreconcilable depression. Scientists theorize bipolar disorders combine both our genetics and stress triggers. The disease affects approximately 5.7 million adult Americans. It's an equal-opportunity disease without discrimination against any man or woman, age, race, ethnic group or social class.

Currently, the psychiatrist who treats me monthly for a diagnosis of Bipolar 1 disorder also holds a medical degree in Neurology. First, I step on a digital scale so that he can record my weight. He tests my blood pressure. When I visit him he asks how tall I am. Then there's his flurry of questions determining how well I sleep or if I'm in touch with reality. Each time he asks if I'm taking my medications.

Faithfully I take the prescribed 250 mg of Depakote five times a day, 10 mg of Propranolol twice a day for a severe familial hand tremor which is also caused as a side effect from the Depakote, and 0.5 mg of Xanax 1/2 to 1 tablet once a day if needed, to treat my anxiety and panic disorder caused by depression. While it's difficult for me not to constantly suspect the unpredictability of this disease, with its dangerous seductions of manic highs, and subsequent depressions, my confidence in managing the disease increases under his competent psychiatric care and consistently taking my medications.

Unlike the over-sized patient's recliner chair I can never quite sit in straight, he leans back in his comfortable chair, and, if he's in a good mood, he might grin and ask what's recently happening in my life.

Usually there's my latest different spikes in mood or past crisis. Although he's not a therapist he answers questions about my disease precisely or about my conflicts with other people logically and objectively. His sense of humor is dry and quick and cutting.

*He's my lifeline to sanity.*

Without my loving-me-no-matter-what parents, two strong and humorous people who understand I'm not the disease no matter how I might verbally explode in anger, act out wildly impulsive stunts, extravagantly overspend money, express nonsensical ideas, and rapidly spit out too many confused words at once, my supportive brothers and sisters, a caring and generous aunt, and honest friends helping me bridge the still difficult situations I throw out at them like a curve ball, how could I manage a Bipolar I disorder disease without their help? Because of them I'm not abandoned, a cast-off, a stigma to be avoided. Practicing my religious faith introduces me into a kind and caring community.

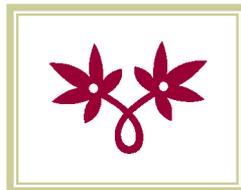
*Their smiles and hugs welcome me as an okay person.*

In 1973, at the age of 19, experiencing the first bipolar episode in my life, I'm diagnosed with Bipolar I disorder. Since then, from the age of 26 to the age of 46, I've been hospitalized six times, treated with lithium, and when that failed as a drug, with the more successful Depakote. At 56 I underwent another episode of decompensation. What increased my stress levels were when I was unable to adapt to normal activities of my life like working at my job, driving, shopping for food, or dealing with my friends. However, since I had been stable on Depakote for the past ten years, successful psychiatric intervention, and for the first time, therapy is introduced. The female psychiatrist I saw then worked hard to pull me through the latest mania, anxiety, panic and PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) I suffer from.

While I continued following the doctor's prescribed regimen of Depakote, unfortunately, I was allergic to Lamictal (an anti-depressant drug) and too sensitive to use, first, the anti-depressants Celexa and then, secondly, Zoloft.

*She was professionally enthusiastic about saving my life.*

Both of the women therapists I encounter are confident and hopeful that I can encounter a new woman in me again. "You're successful at managing your disease," says the first therapist. With the second therapist I learn to deal with PTSD by following her guided finger in various EMDR: Eye movement desensitization and reprocessing sessions. After buying a child's set of finger paints, I smear large poster papers with a colorful brush. Slowly, from 2010 to 2014, I recover. Here's my g.r.a.t.i.t.u.d.e. toward all of the medical people who help me and the family and friends I love in my life.



MENTAL HEALTH STORIES 2013  
PROGRESS, RECOVERY, SUCCESS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Untitled.....	55
Christopher Feld	
Out of the Cryssalis.....	56
Anne Livingston-Garrett	
Untitled.....	58
Dagger Miles	
Up and Out.....	60
Sheri Nickles	
The Prison Inside My Heart.....	62
Lynn Roth	
The News at the Door.....	63
Susan	
A 10 Minute Slice.....	65
Ken Haack	
Sailboats, Hockey Camp and the Great Spirit.....	67
Douglas P. Jowdy	

# UNTITLED

By Christopher Feld

When I first heard the term “recovery” quite a while ago now, I had pictures in my head of someone recovering from a bike accident. I've been in a few bike accidents and it's always been such a frustrating process to be “in recovery” from one. I imagined limping from place to place, the searing pain of each step being an all too vivid reminder of the accident. Recovery didn't seem like it would or should be a goal of mine. I can't help but chuckle at the naivety of my reaction to recovering from mental illness.

But I still think there's some inherent wisdom in the first picture I conjured up about recovery. Recovery isn't a noun, it isn't something to be obtained in the sense that, once you own it, you can rest peacefully knowing you're in recovery. With a mental illness, you're constantly in a state of looking back at old scars and realizing how far you've come and how much pain and suffering you've gone through. Recovery comes with limitations. Recovery comes with a certain kind of immobility.

When I was still coming to terms with schizoaffective disorder, I was completely ignoring the limitations that come with living with this illness. I was walking around, leaving a trail of self-hurt everywhere I went. To be less abstract: I was still going to parties despite the panic attacks, I was still watching TV despite the paranoia, I was still going to school and working full time despite the crippling effects of psychosis, and I was still stubbornly, even openly, refusing to take my medication.

My brain was making requests of me, my brain was pleading with me to take it easy, but I just ignored it completely. But no one can ignore such gaping, tragic wounds for too long – and I soon found out that my wounds were going septic. So I ended up in the hospital, I ended up getting electro-convulsive therapy – and my entire life fell apart. I lost my memories, I lost my job, I lost my fiancé, I lost my independence, and I nearly lost my faith.

But people believed in me, people helped give me the tools I needed to mend my broken brain and I took the medication that would remove the sepsis of my brain and minimize the grip of my illness. I must admit it was easier before I got to the point of recovery. It was easier to embrace my delusions and paranoia, to believe the voices in my head, and to treat my hallucinations as real. It was easier to wallow in the pain of depression and act impulsively in the grips of mania. But the

easier path leaves a trail of destruction in its wake.

I initially put in the hard work to get to recovery for other people; because of how much my suffering hurt those who love me. Then I discovered how much I longed for independence and how much I desperately wanted to be healthy. Nearly 3 years later, I've learned that it takes nearly all of my energy to stay healthy and stable. I work and struggle every day to maintain as healthy a lifestyle as I can. I've discovered that I can live with tremendous discipline and I've discovered how strong I am. My therapist calls me "tough as nails" and I try to live up to that each minute of every day.

Recovery comes with a limp of sorts. I've slipped many times. But slip though I may, I've always gotten back up again and I've kept on walking – tending to my wounds with a tenacity I've come to depend on. Recovery requires tremendous strength and a good deal of help. I'm thankful to those who've let me lean on them when the crushing weight of psychosis has nearly crippled me.

In honor of my newly found limp and limitations, I've avoided large crowds whenever possible to reduce panic attacks. I've learned grounding techniques to keep panic and chaos from reigning high. I've sworn off TV and movies, I've mastered mindfulness techniques to keep my mind from drifting. I've applied for and obtained disability so I can realize my dream of being as independent as possible. I've decided to attend to the needs of my brain. Above all, I've learned to accept the fact that, even though my brain is a malfunctioning brain, it's a beautiful brain nonetheless. A brain deserving of careful attention and love.

## **OUT OF THE CRYSSALIS**

**By Anne Livingston-Garrett**

For many years, I knew something was different about me. I remember not sleeping as a teenager and eating lots of sugary foods and watching television to self-soothe. I didn't know that this wasn't normal behavior for other teens, although no one else in my family did this. I had very

low self esteem and engaged in risky behaviors which were destructive in nature.

My parents were concerned with my behavior in college where I was very active in the Sixties counter culture including Civil Rights and anti-Vietnam War activities. In Dallas, Texas, these weren't always safe activities, so my parents made me an appointment with the university chaplain. He was trained in pastoral counseling and I had a positive experience in my time with him. Over the years, I did a lot of talking therapy and gained much insight into my family of origin and my childhood. I did biofeedback and group therapy. However, no one suggested that I had Depression. Even in graduate school for clinical social work, no one suggested that I might need medication.

Over the years, I had many times of deep sadness—this impacted upon both my personal relationships and my profession. It wasn't until I hit menopause, that I had a meltdown and my primary care physician prescribed my first antidepressant. Additionally, my psychologist got me into a week-long treatment program focusing on living well. However, I wasn't through with the medication merry-go-round, as meds would stop working and I would have to begin on another one. Additionally, I would often think that I could do without medications—little did I know!

On top of the Depression, I developed Migraine headaches and Vertigo. These physical illnesses would deepen my brain disorder. I went through divorce and leaving jobs rather than being fired as I couldn't function. This made me feel a lot of guilt and shame. These things led to a legal separation as well.

Over that time I began to become acquainted with National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) and I began to learn more about my illness and talk with peers. There was a whole world of recovery and advocacy. I began participating in support groups, programs like In Our Own Voice where I share my story of recovery and hope and began advocating on the state level with the legislature. A whole new world opened up for me! My recovery became an explosion of positive reinforcement and new experiences.

One of the things that my recovery and NAMI has taught me is that there is ALWAYS hope. Each day brings a new beginning in recovery.

Seeing a friend in peer support group blossom and grow lets me know that I can do the same, I'm not alone in my recovery. Watching a bill go through the legislative process and succeed in helping others with mental illness improve their lives, brings me much satisfaction and gives me a sense of accomplishment.

What I would say to those who are struggling with brain disorders, don't give up! If I can do it, you can, too. Come out and fly with me—we CAN do it together!

## UNTITLED

**By Dagger Miles**

I had a lot of challenges throughout my life and one by one, after being beaten down, I would rise like a phoenix out of the ashes. I rose out of the ashes as a child that was emotionally, physically and sexually abused. I claimed victory again when I spent eight years in the foster care system, living in 21 different homes and having 19 various social workers. I stood as tall as I knew to stand, but there was a lot of brokenness inside. I survived my adolescent and teen years by baptizing myself into any form of work, the most pure form being sports. I played football, wrestled and worked towards a triple black-belt in taekwondo. I was eight years old when I worked for my first dollar and I worked whether I got paid or not. I rallied by helping other people in need. By eighteen I was working in girls and boys shelters and was working with young people. I eventually opened my home to foster kids and ultimately I owned a foster group home for high risk teen children. I taught kindergarten through college and was even a probation officer.

I helped everyone and tried to love each person, but didn't know how to love myself. I did however, find a loving family who decided to love me and I instantly inherited two awesome sons and a devoted wife. It was a little over a year ago and I was in my final year of college. I was working towards my teaching degree with a licensure in special education. I was working at a charter school, kindergarten through eighth and I only had four classes left and my student teaching. School was out for the summer at the charter school and I was feeling depressed and dealing with terrible insom-

nia. I had experienced nightmares since I was a child and my wife suggested seeing a counselor for my depression and the nightmares. I went to the counselor and she informed me that I had complex PTSD and that there was a high blood pressure medicine that was very affective with veterans. The medication would take away the nightmares immediately and so it did. The very first evening I took the medication the nightmares disappeared. The unfortunate side-affect were vivid day-mares. My world quickly became a living hell of terrifying repressed memories of horrific abuse. My wife had only seen me cry a couple of times in ten years, but now I was crying daily. I wasn't able to sleep, eat or function and the clinic where I had received the medication didn't know how to help me and we didn't know what to do. I had no coping skills and so I began using a coping skill from my childhood and I began to cut. It was the only thing that seemed to give me any relief. My wife tried everything to help me, but I was getting worse. My behavior became erratic and I was eventually kicked out of college and I lost my student teaching placement. I became so severely sick and cut so terribly that I would be admitted into our local mental health hospital. There I would be diagnosed with bipolar, complex PTSD and depression. I was put on medication and stabilized. I went back to work three days after I was discharged and fired within a month because they discovered I had been hospitalized for mental illness and feared me working with the children. Again my depression seemed overwhelming. This time I returned to the mental health facility, but rather than being admitted I began attending Peer Support Groups. All were offered to me free and I attended every group offered Monday through Friday. I received support, encouragement and coping skills. I began getting well and eventually was starting additional groups and being a co-facilitator.

Recently I fought to be readmitted into college and will complete my degree by December 2014 and will be returning to work after a year of recovery. I have done many wonderful things in the last year, while I made recovery my full time job. I have reclaimed my life and look forward to a promising future. I believe that my experience will make me an even better teacher and I desire to help children with behavior problems due to mental illness, neglect and abuse. I stand tall to say I have mental illness, but I am victorious just like a phoenix rising once more.

# UP AND OUT

By Sheri Nickles

I grew up with a father who was a member of a wica cult. I was in the cult from preschool to past my thirties, when my father died. When he died, I exited the cult.

My father was in many ways, a good man. He taught me music, singing and playing the guitar. He taught me hiking, fishing and biking. But, my father brought me along as a toddler to the cult séance meetings. In these meetings there was practiced devil worship, alcohol and drug use and prostitution.

Both children and adults were abused. Words spoken backward, were chants or spells cast. Wizard and witch costumes were worn. Halloween was a sacred holiday. There were animal sacrifices. Satan was King.

Tempers flew and anger was the main emotion. In my second life, which was in the normal world, I had difficulty controlling my anger and therefore, it was tough keeping friends. One life was following my father against my will, into the cult. The second life was in the outside world at school. I lived a double life.

The cult had a guru. The guru controlled all aspects of our lives – how many children mothers had, who married who. Members were told they couldn't live without the guru. The outside world, we were told, was evil and didn't care about us.

Prostitution and drug dealing were the main sources of income. Pornographic films were filmed, produced, directed and acted –in. Residences where prostitutes resided, were maintained and managed.

Violence was exerted against children and adults to keep them compliant, obedient and manageable. Exploitation of young people was common and a main focus. It seemed a person's self-esteem was crushed, and a brain-washing took its place so a person would accept a life of exploitation willingly.

When I entered college, the cult was making a million dollars. I

helped other cult children get jobs, medical appointments, food, clothing, and money for college. I helped them exit or escape the cult whenever I could.

People stayed members of the cult because they were threatened with death, or death of a family member, if they attempted to escape.

As a consequence of these cult living conditions, I never married nor had children. I didn't want to marry a wiccan man or bring children into cult prostitution. Also, I suffered a maturity delay, and considered myself a child even into my thirties.

I later learned to forgive my father. After all he was also a victim and addicted to cult philosophy.

I lived with my brother, but we couldn't afford living in the house. We called a shelter to see if they could help us. Calling the shelter was the best thing we could have done. It saved us from living on the street or in a car.

A downtown shelter suggested I had PTSD and mild schizophrenia. Up until that time I didn't think I had a mental illness. They prescribed medication, and I became eligible for disability classification.

The downtown shelter was a surprise. There were women who came from prison or jail or homelessness. But there were also women who were down on their luck and seemed like regular people. Some worked at jobs, others job-hunted. Still others were placed on disability like I was. I remember after college how they described "bag ladies," and these ladies didn't seem to fit that description at all. Many had good jobs, and some had college or degrees.

I know that because of poor focus and disordered thinking, I had trouble keeping employment. And making a good impression in job interviews was difficult. Shortly after college I'd had good jobs –data entry and accounting assistant. But mental illness had "caught up with me," explained one shelter professional.

The social worker at the shelter shocked and surprised me. I'd explained my childhood briefly and my present difficulty, and she granted me 120 days at the shelter! I looked for work on the internet while at the shelter,

but obtained no interviews. It was a blessing and I learned I had a disability of mental illness.

Later, a staff member assisting the homeless in getting housing, recommended CHARG. Since I was headed towards homelessness, they helped me obtain an apartment. CHARG is wonderful. There is free psychological counseling and social get-togethers with others experiencing emotional disability. Everyone is so open and accepting. Quite a difference from the cult and the outside world. Instead of being out, I'm up— in recovery and walking in the sun-light of possibilities. I can set goals in the normal world. Faith in God and in CHARG surely assists my recovery.

## THE PRISON INSIDE MY HEART

By Lynn Roth

Who would have thought as the beautiful, pristine, snow laid upon the ground that it would lead to evidence of something so horrific that my life would be forever altered! A pair of pantyhose! Footprints engraved, like an arrow, leading straight to the perpetrator.

Lying naked, on a cold cement floor, gripped with torment, terror, fear and despair, waiting for the demon's return, I took the invisible key, turned the lock only I could turn, and instantly forgot where it was!

He pled guilty, waived a trial and we were both sentenced to 24 years. Slowly, we began to serve our time. He, inside the confines of the State Prison. Me, inside the dark, invading walls of my memories.

Years of psych wards, psych meds, cutting, crying, bleeding, dying; hopeless, helpless, daily struggling to escape the chains that held me captive to the unseen monster that changed my life. The sentence was years, but mine seemed like life. Eventually, parole dates came and went and my attacker refused them. He served out his full time.

Still, I was locked in a prison with an unseen key, that only I could turn. Only I knew where it was. What it was. I just had to find it! Slowly, very slowly, I began to realize that **I was not in a prison; the prison was**

**within me!** Unforgiveness had buried me in blame. Much of it unfounded and destructive, but real, nonetheless. Blame had turned to anger, and anger turned to hate and that hatred turned to tears. Tears began to wash away the mountains of pain and in that cleansing, beneath the blame, anger and hate, I found the key. As I began to forgive, healing began to bathe me in the glow of It's' being. The power of negative things that held me down was replaced with the awesome truth that I had forgotten. I was worth loving! God loved me!! He once again showed His love to me, and brought me back to myself. Suddenly, the key was not in my hand but in my heart, and as it turned, I was changed! A new, clean and beautiful self, emerged. A woman of faith, love, and acceptance. A woman who has something to give everyone I meet. A woman who wants to live!

I began to lovingly protect myself with thoughts of joy and peace. The past is forgiven and forgotten. In this moment, I am free! Now with childlike anticipation, I await the coming of the purity of snow. Looking ahead with hope and peace that has come with the certainty that the broken, wounded, betrayed and frightened person I once was, is no longer there. She has been laid to rest and in her place, is a woman set free, because my prison bars have been broken!

## THE NEWS AT THE DOOR

By Susan

“Mom just died,” my brother Chuck said after I opened the door. I was only fifteen, just beginning my senior year of high school. Thoughts began racing through my head. Where was I going to live? How did this happen? I couldn't breathe.

I recalled when my mother and my sister, Becky left: It was about three a.m. They were driving Becky to the east coast so she could attend a music conservatory. I was relieved that I was not going with them. Every time I went with them somewhere, they would argue. The morning they left, they were screaming at each other. I felt something bad would happen, and I wished my mother could be at peace.

We will never know exactly what happened, but mid-way to their destination, bad weather overcame them. Becky was driving, and the car flipped over on one side, killing my mother. Something bad *had really* happened, and my mother *was now at peace*. Becky survived with minor injuries, and went on to pursue her college career and her highly competitive ways.

Three of my older brothers were already teenagers when I was born. I never knew my father, but I was five when my mom and dad divorced. Chuck, the brother who had come with the bad news, along with the other two brothers, came over one day to get their things. A fight broke out over what they felt entitled to take, and they beat up my mother as Becky watched. I heard my mother's cries as my grandmother pulled me away. Outside, a man was waiting by his car: The first and last time I saw my father.

I cannot write here what it must have been like for my mother to be married to a man who beat women, but that is also what happened in the marriage.

Chuck, the brother at the door was also one of the brothers who incested/raped me from age two to five years. Ironically, all these years later, I was glad to know that he and his wife were going to be stopping by while my mother was away. I never really expected something so bad to happen.

My mother had endured unspeakable tragedies earlier. Fifteen years before I was born, the family home caught fire from a gas leak. Her twins, age two, died of smoke inhalation. Later, Judy her firstborn died at age five of a mysterious choking. All of these tragic events are why I wanted peace for my mother. And she finally got it.

Now, I was left feeling like I was the one to blame because the night before, I had even thought that if she were to die she wouldn't be miserable anymore. I also felt badly because I was not along on the trip to keep Becky from fighting with mom, and to help with the driving.

In the next few months, I stayed at Chuck's house, then two other places. My mother's cousin became my guardian. I asked her for help getting therapy, but was turned down.

I tried to get therapy a few times during my five years of college,

but was unsuccessful finding that valuable resource for myself.

It should come as no surprise at the age of thirty, I found myself in a troubled marriage. I again sought help. It took me years to find the right psychiatrist and therapist. I had sustained a head injury, and was unable to work. I was hospitalized to get off of a problem medication, and was homebound for weeks. I became isolated from much social interaction and had little emotional support for over twenty years. Finally, with the right help, I managed to end and escape the marriage.

I am now proud to be starting my life over with the love and support of many friends, and with a great set of health care providers. My community mental health center has offered me an amazing array of intensive services that I could have only wished for all my life. I have a wonderful therapist who listens, knows and helps.

Intense family turmoil has left serious marks on my health and soul. I would love to heal and express my feelings by writing, storytelling, painting and making music. As things are right now my medical and mental health treatment takes up so much of my time that I wonder if the doorways to fully expressing my talents have been closed forever.

## **A 10 MINUTE SLICE**

**By Ken Haack**

"Can you take out the trash dear?" inquired my wife. "Sure," I replied, my mind a million miles away, as usual. Picking up the bag of trash, I noticed a can of coffee that we had recently purchased, so I grabbed it with the other hand and proceeded down the short flight of stairs towards the garage. I placed the trash by the garage door, turned, and went down another short flight of stairs to put the coffee away in the basement. I heard a noise from our solar system so I placed the can of coffee by the pantry door and went into the furnace room. The noise I heard was bubbles coursing through the pipes. Thinking that I should purge the air up on the roof, I headed back upstairs when I spotted a random collection of tools that I had used for various projects. I scooped them up and went to the garage, walking past the trash bag, to put them away. Outside, I could hear my neighbor cursing profusely so I quickly scooted over to help him place his trailer back

on the hitch of his truck. After a short exchange of man-talk, I went back to my house while watching a rabbit scurry across the street. "I need to finish making that adapter for my grinder," I thought to myself, and started digging out my machine lathe. The neighbor across the street spotted me and called out that he needed my help on his car. I sighed and walked over to check out his problem. The Bare Naked Ladies song "Pinch Me" was playing on his radio: ***When you try to see the world beyond your front door; just to try to figure out what all this is for.*** Hmmmm – how apt for my life.

As a child I grew up not understanding that the chaos going on in my head was anything less than normal. I was not treated very well, and often bullied and beaten because I was "different". Progressing through life I repeatedly had difficulties working with others due to my distractions. While in school listening to the teacher, I felt as if I was watching a television uncontrollably changing channels. Random thoughts would scroll rapidly through my skull. Often I would miss a key segment to the lecture and then would have to scramble to try to figure out what I missed. This "adaptive behavior" honed a skill that would later be the cornerstone of my electrical career, specifically troubleshooting. I could be given a task of resolving an electrical issue with limited facts, and would figure out a multitude of solutions based on derivation techniques within seconds. I just had trouble doing the paperwork. My work performance was less than stellar when I would forget important details and miss deadlines. I once spent time with a therapist who asked me what I was thinking. It took me 20 minutes to catch him up on the three minutes that passed while I was in his waiting room. He declared that if he had to spend five minutes in my head, he would come out screaming. Throughout my struggles in life, I sought out many solutions to my troubles, not even realizing that I also suffered from depression. Unknowingly, I became a jokester and adopted the idea that if I could not put a smile on someone's face, the day was lost. Being a people pleaser seemed to make me happy – now I realize I am just looking for approval. I tried alcohol and women, neither fixed the way my mind worked. The best relief came from the drug Welbutrin. Although it left me numb and non-creative, anytime I started to feel bad, my thoughts would drift to something less depressing. Now when things get rough I try to redirect my thoughts to something I enjoy and most of the bad thoughts fade considerably. Squirrel!

Though the journey through life has a multitude of speed bumps, and at times life just sucks, I try to smile. But as my wife will attest, among other things, the trash is still at the garage door, the air is still in the solar system, the coffee can remains on the floor, the tools scattered where I dropped them, and the adapter is still incomplete.

Wait, is that the mail lady I hear? What are the dogs barking at? Got to go, I think I left the water running.

# SAILBOATS, HOCKEY CAMP AND THE GREAT SPIRIT

By Douglas P. Jowdy

Thoughts of suicide had been crashing on the shores of my consciousness for months, at least 8 if my memory serves me right. The thoughts included a laundry list of ways to commit the “ultimate sacrifice.” This is what suicide is called in the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous. People don’t understand, but for those of us with mental illness the thought that we can end it all actually brings relief. It did for me.

I knew if I left Richmond, VA to spend the Fourth of July weekend in Virginia Beach I would take my life. This was 17 years ago, and I vividly remember making that decision to join Kelly, my girlfriend at the time who was 10 years sober. As I write this, I recall taking my dark green swimsuit off the door knob of my closet door and putting my swim goggles in my bag. Of all the options, I decided drowning myself would be the way to enter the afterlife.

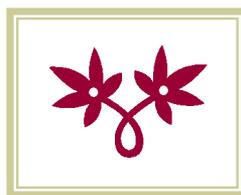
After telling Kelly I was going for a swim, I entered the Atlantic Ocean. I swam and swam. At one point two men on jet skis stopped and asked if I was okay. I said, “yes, great,” and kept on swimming. Later as a sailboat approached they insisted on giving me a ride back to shore. I replied, “No thanks, I am training for a triathlon.” They continued on their way. And as I watched the boat continue into the horizon I felt the ice cold water against my body. I thought of sharks, felt the fatigue and realized I was going to get what I was asking for. The shore was nowhere in site. Then a force that I now believe was divinely inspired turned my head to the sun that was sitting peacefully in the bright blue sky. I asked, “Please help me.” Not save me, but help me. I just wanted the pain to stop. So I began to swim. I took my best guess where I would find the shore. After some time I had my feet back on mother earth. When I saw Kelly she knew and cried. I had no tears left.

After telling my therapist the story that week she said, “If you leave here I will call the police. You are going to the hospital.” I was welcomed by the nursing staff on the 7<sup>th</sup> floor at St. Mary’s hospital on Memorial Avenue in Richmond. This was just about 2 miles east of Virginia Common-

wealth University where just two years before I earned my second master's and a doctorate in counseling psychology. And this admission occurred just 6 months after I was on a postdoctoral fellowship at Stanford University Medical School. The nursing staff told me that it was my time to be the patient.

While in that "hockey camp" I was diagnosed with Major Depressive Disorder, Severe and put on an arsenal of psychotropics. And to up the ante after discharge I was referred to a treatment program for my drug and alcohol addiction. Since that time I have continued to explore the health care system. I spent time in "hockey camp" on two more occasions and diagnosed with Bipolar Disorder Type I. At last count I have been on about 23 different medications over the last 17 years. And I have been clean and sober for over 16 years.

There are not words to describe the process of recovery. What I can say is that my healing has led to a life I would have never been able to realize without the adversity I have experienced. More than ever I know helping others is my life's work. As a psychologist, I am able to walk with other pilgrims as we "trudge the road to happy destiny" as we say in AA. When I have the privilege of sitting across from someone who has a mental illness and addiction I can often times predict what they are going to say. All the theory and research I was indoctrinated with informs my work, but as fellow patients in hockey camp used to tell me, it is my personal journey that would make the difference. It has. I have been divinely inspired as I was many years ago when I went for a swim in the Atlantic Ocean. As a result, I am having a love affair with the Great Spirit whom I know is God in disguise.



**MENTAL HEALTH STORIES 2012**  
**PROGRESS, RECOVERY, SUCCESS**

**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

Redefining Success .....	69
Caroline Pugh	
It's Difficult.....	71
Diana Hunt	
From Confinement to College and Beyond.....	73
Susan Dolph	
Escape from Bellevue.....	76
Freddy Bosco	
From Anorexia to Obesity: Finding Balance.....	78
Mary Elizabeth Van Pelt	
Rising from the Ashes.....	80
Jeff Weiskopf	
My Life So Far.....	83
Amanda Stettenbenz	

# REDEFINING SUCCESS

By Caroline Pugh

After being diagnosed with bipolar disorder at the age of 21, I went from a little girl writing poetry to impress my English teacher to a medical statistic using poetry as my therapist. I would cry night after night convinced I was destined to be a failure. All of my past achievements became smug reminders of the girl I once was and the girl I would never be able to compete with again.

After graduating from college, I attended the publishing program at Columbia University, but I still had no idea how to achieve my dreams to be a writer, book publisher and photographer. Thus, I took a terror-inducing accounting job at an investment bank in San Francisco. My self-esteem was destroyed while I worked there. I became paralyzed by defeat so much so that rather than quitting the job, I continued working there for three years in a state of suicidal panic. I'd read self-help book after self-help book, but as soon as I'd feel slightly better, misery would approach me again and beat me like a rag doll.

After I finally garnered the courage to quit that toxic job, I became determined to rescue my dreams at all costs. I moved to Brooklyn, NY and for the next three years worked alone on my own writing and photography projects obsessively. I was elated when I finally finished my first screenplay and won a photography contest, but I had absolutely no one to share my happiness with. I had worked myself into complete isolation by consistently choosing my career over making and keeping friends.

I was so disconnected from the world that I attempted suicide. When I woke up with absolutely no one by my side — not even the medics — I realized that I needed to find a community and fast. That was when my aunt who lived in Denver suggested Karis Community.

The mission of Karis Community is to provide a transitional community living opportunity for restoring basic life skills and improving the social well-being of individuals recovering from serious and per-

sistent mental illness. Their Empowerment Program provides Community members with the opportunity to learn new coping skills and life skills that promote dignity and greater independence.

Now, rather than pursuing my passions alone, I could work all day and come home to a houseful of fascinating roommates who ranged from chefs, artists and snowboarders to historians, playwrights and nurses. But no matter how much I wanted to be best friends with my roommates, I'd always immerse myself so deep into my writing and photography projects that a true human connection was impossible.

I realized I needed to rapidly change my behavior if I ever wanted to really bond with my roommates. I stopped working on all of my projects, so I could focus fully on engaging with the community. This was terrifying at first. My photography and writing projects were safe. Photography couldn't hurt me. Writing couldn't reject me.

But instead of rejection, the Karis Community greeted me with open arms. And I reached back full throttle without using work as a defense mechanism. I was told repeatedly how happy people were to see me now that I wasn't hiding behind my computer anymore.

When I was first diagnosed with bipolar disorder, I thought I was destined to be a failure, but it's 9 years later and I've never felt so successful in my life. Some may see ending up in a transitional living community for the mentally ill at age 30 as a failure, but I view it as a successful response to an unpredictable and harrowing decade. My choice to live at Karis is a decision I will always respect myself for. And the level of dignity and respect I've been treated with by everyone here was only a pipe dream before.

Likewise, I have incredible respect for everyone who comes to Karis for so many reasons especially their courage and commitment to changing their lives and taking their destiny in their own hands.

I am so honored that the Karis Community invited me to live at Karis and I thank God everyday for the loving, loyal and supportive friends I have been blessed with.

# IT'S DIFFICULT

By Diana Hunt

Being bipolar is difficult from the onset of symptoms to diagnosis through medical and on to the new life. I was officially diagnosed as having bipolar roughly six and a half years ago. I was 41 years old. I first started experiencing symptoms in my teens. My 20s were rocky but my 30s were out of control. I was moody, jumpy, emotional, irritable, sleep deprived and generally out of touch with reality. I behaved like I was superwoman. I took on tasks that filled my days and then some. I never just sat quietly. I was obsessed with being busy. I spent on the order of \$60,000 out of my budget and just figured everything would work out okay.

I was starting to have serious trouble concentrating at work. My depressions were much worse than previously and the depression medicine didn't seem to make a difference. I was beginning to hear things, see shadows. I asked my general physician for recommendations so that I could get a formal diagnosis. I went to my first appointment and he had me pegged in 20 minutes flat. The next couple of years were really rough. Trying to find the right mix of medicine was difficult. I hallucinated, had trouble with my balance (to the point of falling over without warning), was paranoid, and the side effects left me feeling terribly ill especially in the morning. Oh there was a medicine that worked well however I gained twenty five pounds, which I still have not lost all of it and it leaves me feeling bad about the way I look. Other medications left me feeling drugged and numb. Somehow we made it through the trials and tribulations of dosage and brand of medication and came up with a cocktail that has had me stable for four years now. I still have ups and downs but the peaks and valleys are much more subtle. I have somehow managed to keep an engineering job and teach at the community college part time. My brain doesn't work like it used to. I was very sharp and creative when I was manic. I still miss those days however I do not miss spending money I don't have or hallucinating.

During the time we were fine tuning my medication I sat and cried a lot. I tried to ignore the noises in my head and the dead people that I saw everywhere. I lost interest in most everything in my life, my friends, climbing and hobbies. I was blah. I didn't know how to fix it.

I still suffer with depression, anxiety, mild manic episodes and insomnia but I can honestly say that I have not been psychotic in years. Being psychotic is a very strange state of mind. You've heard the expression, wearing rose colored glasses... Well it's that ten-fold. People, even your friends are too polite to say anything negative about your behavior. You learn a lot about the people you call your friends. Many of those friends are no longer in my life.

I need a lot more sleep now and am committed to a regular schedule. Soon after taking my medication at night I am ready for bed. It's difficult because some of it is supposed to be taken with food however I can not effectively teach or do anything that requires concentration after taking this medication.

I live a very quiet, scheduled life now with just a couple of friends and a wonderful boyfriend. He has seen me frustrated, tired, melancholy but never really manic. He's seen me slightly manic but not over the top. He is my solid ground in a rocky world. My quality of life is much better than it was although I do miss the endless energy levels and creativity that would just pour from within me. I'm told this is how normal people live. There's a side of me that thinks this is boring but then I remember how I used to hallucinate and decide this is okay. Sometimes I still want to crawl into a cave and hide. I need time alone to regroup. I get tired. This one I struggle with. I'm not used to getting tired. I think overall I have adjusted well but it's different and it's still difficult. I feel very deeply about things which I think affects my moods. I'm told this is common for bipolar patients. We have the ability to feel more deeply than the average person – a gift.

# FROM CONFINEMENT TO COLLEGE AND BEYOND

By Susan Dolph

I start with a poem I wrote:

I entered this world with noose 'round my neck.  
My brain was gasping desperately for air.  
What's happening to me, you'd better check.  
Let me live oh God freed from my despair.  
My parents were told my brain would forever run slow.  
While silent in protest, I'm tucked away in prison hidden.  
I cry for home then surrender all.  
Lest I be crushed by the master's mighty roar.  
My days I spent in basement working place.  
Night time I slept in room behind locked door.  
Rarely I gazed upon my parents face.  
Unconsciously I hoped for freedom yet.  
Not knowing if 'twas better life to get.

This poem reflects the first of 3 mentally retarded facilities I was in.

I was sent to the first facility at age 4. The only thing I remember at that time was a lady took me to another building that had a very bad odor. We had to step over dogs and cats lying on the floor to get to the room where we played. Later I learned the animals were sick. At age 7, I went home to try public school. Two summers later my parents asked me if I wanted to visit my old friends. I was excited. Two weeks later I was called out of the rooms and was told that I will never go home again. The weeks turned into months, then years. I ceased to look for anything else. I saw my parents for about 15 minutes 3 or 4 times a year in the formal living room, the only room they were allowed to see. A few of the residents had "private accommodations" in the attic. The rest of the girls slept in one room and the boys in the other.

All the rooms were locked and had a steel bracket. I saw a small whip being used and I was sexually abused. Then one day 5 years later, to my complete surprise I was called upstairs and told that my mom was there to take me home. I could have told people the truth about that place, but never said a word until years later.

Two months later, I went to the second facility. This one was much larger with 600 residents, 2/3 of which I call “lifers” because they had job assignments to keep the costs down. I was in the 1/3 that received education. In some ways it was nicer. There wasn’t any physical abuse, though some of the staff, especially group leaders, were like drill sergeants. One had to tell the time to avoid demerits. This only happened to me once, but I was called by my number which was assigned to me prior to admission, which had to be marked on all my belongings. I stood quietly, not daring to say something like, “I have a name, use it.” That would have been a demerit, not for what was said, but for the act of assertiveness, something unbecoming for a resident. Finally, they never let one forget where they were or what they were, a M.R. in an institution. One of the nice things was that I went home for the holidays. There was very strict segregation in all areas, even in the school building and outside play areas. There weren’t any co-ed activities.

At this time of my life I was expected to function with the parameters that were put in place according to my test scores. If I tried to step outside by trying something new, I was pulled back in.

The third program was semi-residential. For about 2 years, I lived with a family and commuted to a farm to work. Then my mom took me home due to a dispute with the program, and set me up in my own apartment and I attended a sheltered workshop. This was the catalyst to a new life, shortly before she died of cancer. My dad had since died.

My case worker at the workshop, who happened to have a different approach, noticed that something wasn’t right and that I may have been misdiagnosed. He lifted me out of my parameters so that I

could try new things on for size. Most of them fit perfectly. He helped me to get a full time job as a report distribution clerk, which I successfully held until my layoff 6 ½ years later. Under a program for laid-off workers I was able to attend a junior college. To get there I rose at 5AM and took the first of 3 buses at 6AM. I studied Mental Health and graduated with a G.P.A. of 3.2. In my final semester, I did my internship at the workshop where I had been a client. This enabled me to see the program from a staff perspective. Also, I called the director of a mental health program I was in to ask for some help with a term paper. He said that he was hoping to talk to me. I asked why. He then told me the Board of Mental Health had decided to have a former client as a member and that I was selected out of 6 possible candidates. This was a great honor and I served until I transferred to a 4 year school to continue studying the same major.

While I was at the 4 year school, my testimony was published in the Journal of National Association for the Mentally Retarded, in May 1987. I also received a national achievement award and graduated with a G.P.A. of 2.8. I moved to a large city that would have a good transit system in hopes of finding work in my field. Six months later I developed clinical depression and a year after I ended up on total disability for several health issues. After struggling for 10 years, some very close friends invited me to join their ministry. I continued to be hampered by my depression and other health issues. Eleven years later they felt I should go and live with my brother who happens to live near Denver.

Last November I had to have hip surgery and due to serious complications, I had to stay in a nursing home for 4 months. This dramatically affected my depression, causing me to become so critical I almost crashed. Fortunately I have a fantastic doctor who averted my crashing by prescribing 2 particular groups at CHARG. CHARG has been an integral part of my continual since January. I then moved into an assisted living program that is affiliated with my church. As soon as I moved in, my deep depression vanished. I have started to do some advocacy work and I am preparing a seminar on the crisis of deinstitutionalization based on clinical and personal experience. I have sent

many letters with my published text and abstract on the seminar to the Dean of Psychology at Regis University and the Director of Mental Health in hopes that I will be invited to present it.

## ESCAPE FROM BELLEVUE

By Freddy Bosco

The janitor evidently thought that I — in my three-piece suit — was a doctor, so he let me pass through the door. I had spent the previous month locked up there, and I was most eager to leave.

I was wearing the suit I had worn on the day I had been admitted, a day which found me trying to assassinate the president of my company with a pastrami sandwich. It's a long story, so let's begin years earlier, when my psychiatric complaint first manifested itself.

Like my father, and his father before him, I showed irrational behavior in ordinary situations early in life. Childhood eccentricity developed into adolescent anxiety and depression with a marked propensity towards alcoholism which I inherited from my mother's side of the family.

I did not receive professional help until my freshman year in college, when I was in confusion due to my mother's remarriage. I began to experience acute anxiety coupled with severe depression.

I began to voluntarily see a psychological counselor at Metro State. I attended twice-weekly sessions with her. Before transferring out to the University of Denver, a year and a half later, the chief psychologist recommended to me that I seek the services of a psychiatrist.

I actually did make one appointment with the university's psychiatrist. He treated me with respect, but did not think it necessary for us to engage in sessions of therapy.

For the next half-decade, I self-medicated with alcohol. After

much pain I turned back to therapy; I had a desire to seriously approach mental health treatment. I entered into therapy with a psychiatric resident at the University of Colorado. He did not medicate me, but kept our sessions focused on talk.

I experienced some professional success in my field but continued to drink to excess. The resident took me along a Freudian path of self-discovery in which we mainly talked about my relationship to my mother. When the resident's term came to an end, I stopped going to therapy.

In haste, trying to end an alcoholic relationship with a woman I'd been battling it out with, I took a "geographical cure" by moving to Manhattan. But I soon found myself drinking again. I also, as I was told by New York relatives, needed psychiatric care.

By fits and starts, in minor therapeutic relationships, eventually I became hospitalized for a week in Bellevue Psychiatric Hospital with a diagnosis of schizophrenia. I was prescribed Thorazine, and yet, regrettably, did not stop drinking. The booze and Thorazine were of course not compatible. I made the mistake of stopping the medication.

A year after my first hospitalization, I was working very hard in a professional capacity. Still drinking and still unmedicated. It happened that I chose to act out after many days of overwork. I told my employer that I was going to kill him with what I had in a paper bag (a sandwich). He ran out of the office and I took over his desk, which I refused to give up. In my dementia, I had Gotten to the Top. I was interrupted, however, by a suggestion of contacting a psychiatrist. Then I realized I was delusional and allowed the police to take me in handcuffs to the hospital. Bellevue again.

I spent a very painful month, with the staff at a loss as to what to do for me. I took my first opportunity to leave — escape — and I headed West, back to Colorado. Again, I worked with a CU resident who was very excited to tell me he thought I'd never been schizophrenic. He told me he was convinced I was bipolar, and he successfully put me on lithi-

um. Finally some progress. And I have been able to achieve sobriety with the help of 12-step groups, to whom I remain anonymous.

In two intervening decades, I have had painful moments, but I have stayed with a program of recovery in a private clinic where I have been successfully treated and also employed as a receptionist four afternoons a week. I have had my own professional victories, and I feel closer than ever to leading a full life.

I feel grateful not for the pain (which I've felt and caused others), but for arriving at a place in the sun I can call my own.

## **FROM ANOREXIA TO OBESITY: FINDING BALANCE**

**By Mary Elizabeth Van Pelt**

A severe eating disorder is like walking with death.

People ask me, “How did it begin?” And then they want to know, “How did you get over it?” They want a quick-fix answer, like a little blue pill, and rarely have time for the real answer: It was a journey.

Anorexia doesn't have a clean point of entry like a date of birth. It was a long, slow process getting in and equally difficult getting out. I can tell you the date I weighed seventy-four pounds, the date I started seeing the psychiatrist, and the date when I believed my only way out was, in a blind rage, to eat-myself-to-death. It was a long journey, a slow process, and a big part of the person I am now; although, I have no physical scars to show as proof of my endurance, the battles fought and battles won.

In the beginning I didn't even know I was entering a dark place of isolation, a place from which many, one in ten, never return. Others survive but never regain full health. An organism can exist in a state of

near-starvation, like suspended animation, for a very long time — but that isn't living, it's existing.

Some women fantasize catching the disease of starvation, just a little bit, for a little while — to lose a few pounds — but that's like wishing to experience the depths of alcoholism for six weeks and then return to health.

At the age of seventeen, isolation and starvation was the only way I knew to survive. I lived in an environment with high expectations and had no place to develop my own sense of self. Rather than rebel outwardly like many teenagers, I retreated and withdrew.

Obesity is a mirror of anorexia. After many long months of dragging my weak skeleton-self to therapy, and feeling the external pressure to change, the day came when I believed my only way out was to eatmyselftodeath. Months later came the sad realization of how truly miserable I was in my fat body. Eatingmyselftodeath wasn't working. I hated myself. I had to find my way out of the uncomfortable one-hundred-ninety pound fortress I was living in. I had to find a new reason for living other than my perpetual internal conflict, like being caught in a victim's triangle with food. The path out was far from clear, level, and straight.

Nutrition and health experts talk about the epidemic of obesity in this country. Reports advise people to eat more fresh fruits and vegetables and get more exercise. These reports rarely address the emotional reasons people have for eating high-calorie, high-fat foods. People frequently eat in excess for emotional satisfaction, stuffing their feelings with food — anxiety, restlessness, loneliness, agitation, fatigue, internal conflict, external conflict, boredom, numbness, or when feeling a nebulous discomfort that has no words. We reach for cookies, chips, and high-calorie foods that create a craving for more.

Both my obesity and my anorexia were about unexpressed feelings and emotions. Not knowing how to deal with my feelings, not knowing what to do with my life, unable to live up to the impossibly

high expectations that surrounded me — I withdrew, sank into myself. It was a form of death.

Ultimately, my recovery was a process of finding balance in my life and making peace with food. I had maintained my isolation in starvation and then in obesity for so long that I had to rediscover people and relationships. Figuring out how to develop and maintain friendships was an important piece of my recovery that did not come easily.

I had to find a way to live so that food, too-much or too-little, wasn't absorbing all my thoughts and energy. My focus on food had to decrease so that my energy could find a new path. The world, outside of the comfort I found in overeating, was a frightening place with many overwhelming choices. Cautiously, I began to explore new things. I found new places where others accepted me, and I began accepting myself. With support from my parents I enrolled in a community college and pursued my real interests — art, drawing, painting, photography, and ceramics. As I found balance, my eating disorder gradually receded. The process of returning from the extreme of death-like isolation and recovering my life took years.

I never got over it; I walked through it.

## **RISING FROM THE ASHES**

**By Jeff Weiskopf**

Hello, my name is Jeff and I'm a recovering alcoholic/addict.

In addition, I have been struggling with bipolar, anxiety and depression disorders along with the substance abuse. Many professionals in these fields agree on the relativity between my mental health and substance abuse. I too, was able to make the connection between my use of alcohol and cocaine being related to my inability to produce ade-

quate serotonin in my brain, thus creating and or enhancing my bipolar, anxiety and depression disorders. Now, the disease of addiction coupled with my mental health issues have most likely been with me from the beginning. As I look back to childhood, I can recognize a pattern of not only addictive behavior, but also mental health problems with attention deficit and obsessive compulsive disorders. I have accepted and now embrace, the realization that I have a disease and other disabilities. That has not always been the case for me. For many years, stemming from late teens to early thirties, I lived in total denial and ignorance of my problems and dealt with them through self medication. I was not conscious of my self medicating, but soon found out in my first visit to rehab. Wow! what an eye opener. However, I certainly did not just throw up my hands and surrender my will, because I thought I was capable of controlling all these issues. I was smart enough I thought, after all I went to college. I was a strong, confident and able individual. Then someone mentioned pride and ego in the conversation. What? Are you kidding me? It was a man, a CEO, from my first 'real' job in hotel management, that mentioned he thought I needed some help. Really? Me? Alright, I'll try rehab, please my employer, my family (they had been dropping hints too), maybe I can get them all off my back. Then I could resume my using in a controlled manner. Well, come to find out, several rehabs and doctors later, my substance abuse was but a symptom of my much larger problem. So, coming to grips with these disorders, these demons, was the beginning of a long hard ride.

That was the good news, recognizing these problem areas, I have been systematically able to address them individually and often collectively. I entered my first substance abuse treatment program in 1991 and subsequently have been involved in many more since then to include several 28 day 'spin dry' programs. Several extended stay medical detox facilities (seizure problems), a 2 year behavior modification program (Cenikor), 2 long term residential treatment facilities to include the Arapahoe House Wright Center (twice) for 20 months and 16 months respectively. In addition, an 8 month stay in the Salvation Ar-

my Adult Rehabilitation Program and now currently involved with the Substance Treatment Service (STS) program with the Colorado Coalition for the Homeless (CCH), an excellent program I have been a participant in for over 4 years. Yes, I have heard the term 'institutionalized' tossed around a bit but the outpatient setting of the STS program partnered with the CCH program has ultimately been the saving grace in my pursuit of long term sobriety. The staff of STS and Stout Street Mental Health Clinic have been unquestionably the most significant human force in my recovery efforts.

Realizing that knowledge of my condition alone was not going to keep me sober I have been blessed with an environment which enables me to work proactively on my issues. This would include one-on-one sessions with my mental health providers, my case managers and all other counselors facilitating support groups which present everything from recovery skills, self-management, alcohol and drug education, focused language therapy and the untold support and help in numerous and various areas of life enhancement.

The fact that I have been on this recovery journey for over 20 years gives me some solace that my experience may help pull me through to a successful life once again and can actually share my experiences and insights with others. Today, I am at peace with myself and the reality of my purpose in life through the grace and mercy of my higher power. Also, I am grateful for the people that have been put in my life so that my recovery efforts can come to fruition, be realized and culminate into a success story. A story that essentially says "you do not have to go through what I have been through." There is a solution, there is hope, if you are ready, willing and able.

Willingness and perseverance are not only critical, but necessary in my opinion, if success is to be found. It IS available, if only I keep an open mind and heart to my creator, have faith and listen, really listen! to the advice and support I have received and continue to receive.

Today, I'm dancin' in GRACE!

## MY LIFE SO FAR

By Amanda Stettenbenz

I am thirty years old and was diagnosed with schizoaffective disorder, depression, borderline personality disorder, and anxiety. Why is my age so important? Because even five years ago, I did not think I would make it to this age. I have struggled with mental illness my entire life. In fact, my first suicide attempt was at age seven.

Living with my mental illness has given me many ups and downs throughout my life. Some days I felt on top of the world like I can accomplish anything, and some days I have felt so down that I just wanted to die. I think my darkest day was when I called Social Services on myself. I had a four-year-old daughter at the time. I slept all day and could not take care of her. She was basically taking care of herself. I was cutting in front of her and it really scared her.

I never imagined what calling Social Services would do for me. Immediately, many people came into our lives. At the time, I thought calling Social Services was the worst decision I ever made, but looking back, it is probably the best decision I ever made. I was able to place my daughter with my parents and really focus on myself. A couple weeks after my daughter was removed from my home, I ended up in my last psychological hospitalization. That was when I decided that suicide was no longer an option and barring any accidents, I would live for a very long time. It was at this point I decided I was going to live a happier life, and I was going to make the most of any opportunities I was offered.

One of the best things Social Services did for me was pay for my individual and family counseling. I also participated in a wellness program offered in the community that not only focused on mental wellness but also physical wellness. I was also offered the support of a

peer specialist and I learned that I was not alone and there were others out there just like me. Not only that, but this peer specialist appeared to be successful. I knew one day I would be just like her.

I began to progress with all my classes and therapy. In fact, at one time I was registered for nineteen wellness classes! The people in the mental health center began to see my progress and began to offer me other opportunities. I began to volunteer at the mental health center making phone calls, working events, and stuffing envelopes. I then got offered an opportunity to sit on their Behavioral Health Organization's Client and Family Advisory Board.

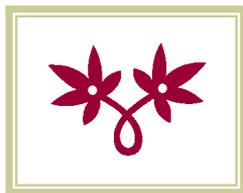
Through all this, I began to develop my confidence. I began speaking to politicians and to anyone else who would listen about the prevalence of mental illness and all the needs to be done to support people in recovery. I had hope! Once my Social Services case closed, I discovered an opportunity to help other families through the system, and I jumped on it! I mentored families with mental illness problems through the system. I also went to Team Decision Making Meetings through Social Services as a family advocate.

Now that my confidence level was soaring and I actually felt like I was worth something, I mustered up my strength and even left an abusive marriage. I now have a great boyfriend who treats me well. Because of my recovery, I would never go back to being abused again.

I had decided by then it was my passion to help others with their own struggles with mental illness, and I applied at a couple of places with openings for peer specialists positions and to my surprise, I got offered both jobs. I accepted a full time position and have been working as a peer specialist for over a year now.

I still struggle with my mental illness but it is manageable now and I am happy with my life. I have gotten to take what society may see as my weaknesses and that I have made them my strengths. Mental illness does not define me, it compliments me. What excites me the most is that every struggle I have been through, means something powerful in

my life. I can reach out to others who face similar struggles, and I will make an important impact on them like the transformative impact others had on me.



## GET INVOLVED!

If you are interested in sharing your story, being added to our email list, being a co-sponsoring organization, a peer specialist committee member or otherwise becoming involved in the next annual Mental Health Stories project in 2017, please contact us at: 303-692-8783 or [office@coloradopsychiatric.org](mailto:office@coloradopsychiatric.org).

