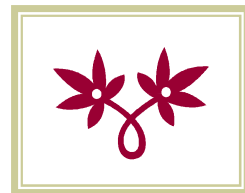


THE COLORADO
PSYCHIATRIC SOCIETY
AND CHARG RESOURCE
CENTER PRESENT:

MENTAL
HEALTH
STORIES
2012



MENTAL HEALTH STORIES 2012

PROGRESS, RECOVERY, SUCCESS

INTRODUCTION

The project started with listening to patients' successes. It has been a partnership between the Public Information and Education Committee of the Colorado Psychiatric Society and the CHARG Resource Center. The call for entries went to a number of different mental health organizations. Forty entries were received and ten honoraria were awarded. The eight stories are presented here with the authors' permission.

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.

The challenges of suffering, despair, hopelessness and isolation are described. Feelings of anxiety, depression and mania as well as loss are addressed. The stories move past the challenges to describe the achievement of balance.

Stigma can be internal as well as external. Diagnosis is referred to in terms of mistakes, delays and the importance of its accuracy as a path to successful treatment.

The authors describe eating disorders, Attention Deficit Disorder, bipolar illness and substance abuse, both as a primary and co-occurring conditions.

Special Thanks to Alyson Anderson Lewis, an intern at CHARG for her help in coordination of the entries.

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

Chair, Colorado Psychiatric Society Public Information and
Education Committee

© Colorado Psychiatric Society
CHARG Resource Center

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Redefining Success	4
Caroline Pugh	
It's Difficult.....	6
Diana Hunt	
Opening the Door.....	8
Kate Ingmundson	
From Confinement to College and Beyond.....	10
Susan Dolph	
Escape from Bellevue.....	13
Freddy Bosco	
From Anorexia to Obesity: Finding Balance.....	15
Mary Elizabeth Van Pelt	
Rising from the Ashes.....	17
Jeff Weiskopf	
My Life So Far.....	19
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 persistent 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.

OPENING THE DOOR

By Kate Ingmundson

I was diagnosed with bipolar disorder 30 years ago. Back then, it was my identity. Now, I seldom think about my diagnosis, except for when I am telling my recovery stories.

I am a mental health counselor and case manager. It's not a job. It's my *path*. It's not about illness. It's about recovery. When I tell my stories to others who are recovering, I hope that they will be inspired.

I've lived with severe anxiety and depression. I've lost jobs and relationships. I've been on the verge of homelessness. I've survived on crappy food from well-meaning food banks (and been grateful for it). I've lived in a society that judges and fears me. I've given up my power in a locked hospital ward. I've tried to kill the pain with drugs. I've considered suicide. I've been consumed by rage. I've hurt the people I claim to love with my words and actions.

I have learned that creativity, loving kindness, and intelligence are within me as well. I have discovered a truth: I can take the time and effort to look at myself honestly, and this allows me to become more compassionate and insightful than I might have been otherwise. This is not Little Mary Sunshine speaking. Healing has been, and continues to be, difficult work.

I heal myself with meditation. I meditate twice a day. When I meditate, I practice being still. I watch thoughts arising and falling away, without grasping them, pushing them away, or ignoring them. In this way, I am learning not to judge myself or others. It helps me to see more clearly. It's a lifelong process.

My first meditation experience was with a group. We asked a lot of questions. I realized that my questions were no different from everyone else's questions. My pain was no different, my joy was no different, my confusion was no different. Their lives required courage, and so did mine.

I was no different from all of those people in the room who had no label. That was a revelation. I was not special. I was a member of the human race.

This was the turning point: I was no longer identified with my label.

I have another favorite story: I used to see a counselor and healer. I went to her and complained about my life: “I don’t have money. I don’t have a boyfriend. I hate myself.” I didn’t want to get out of bed in the morning. She advised me to get up anyway, to keep feeling the depression, keep going, and not push the depression away. I told her that she was crazy, but I kept going back.

Then, I hit bottom. I had no more tricks in my bag. So, one day, in desperation, I got out of bed and decided to go to work, get through my day, and feel depressed.

Then the strangest thing happened: When I allowed myself to feel depressed and anxious, these feelings lost their power over me. Anxiety and depression had been knocking on my door for my whole life, demanding my attention. When I invited them in for tea and asked them what they were about, they had stories to tell. When I listened to them, I learned a lot about myself.

Something else happened, even stranger than that: When I let depression and anxiety in, I allowed happiness to come in too. In a way, happiness had been just as scary. It was not *me*. I had shut it *all* out before this.

Depression and anxiety continue to arise. I am aware of them and all of the other feelings that come along with them. But even when things are hard, life is good.

I wake up in the morning. I meditate. I brush my teeth, get dressed, go to work or linger over a cup of coffee. I’m a singer and songwriter. Sometimes I perform. My songs make people laugh. I can laugh at myself and at life. I know love, friendship, sadness, tears, fear and joy. It’s not a big deal, but in a way it is. I’m just walking my path.

I have not been cured, but I am healing. When people are cured, their illness goes away. For me, healing means that I have the same feelings, the same biochemistry I’ve always had, but I am becoming congruent. I am who I am.

I do not dwell in sadness or happiness, but I have opened the door and invited them into my house.

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 1/2 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 lithium. 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 adequate 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? Allright, 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 medi-

cal 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 Army 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!

Be Clean, Be Clear, Be Healthy, Be Free

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 that 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 I have made them my strengths. Mental illness does not define me, it complements 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.