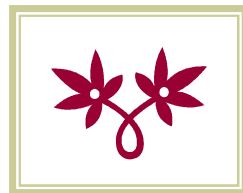


THE COLORADO
PSYCHIATRIC SOCIETY
AND CHARG RESOURCE
CENTER PRESENT:

MENTAL
HEALTH
STORIES
2013



MENTAL HEALTH STORIES 2013

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 nine 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.

Special Thanks to Anna Polovin, 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

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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 insomnia. 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 stu-

dent 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* hap-

pened, 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.*** Hmmm – 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 un-

controllably 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 7th floor at St. Mary's hospital on Memorial Avenue in Richmond. This was just about 2 miles east of Virginia Commonwealth 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 top 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 lead 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.