

Mind, Body, Spirit

An Anthology of Stories about Recovery from Mental Illness and Substance Abuse

Western Connecticut Mental Health Network

- Danbury Area
- Torrington Area
- Waterbury Area



FORWARD

This book of Recovery Anthologies is dedicated to Mary Talcott Fitzpatrick who brought the idea of a book about recovery to the Western CT Mental Health Network Recovery Committee many years ago.

As a person in recovery, she understood the importance of sharing her experience with others and she took part in encouraging people to write their stories for this book.

I am so excited this book is finally available. The individuals who shared their experiences, strength and hope are making it possible for others to gain a belief that recovery does happen.

Everyone's journey is unique, but we all share some similar experiences. Please allow these personal stories to penetrate into your soul and aid in your own personal recovery.

Colette Anderson
Chief Executive Officer

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BEING BELIEVED

Anonymous

I have schizophrenia. I was diagnosed a year after my father died. The doctor said the Trauma from my father's death caused me to get sick with schizophrenia. In the beginning, I heard voices and didn't understand what was happening to me. I would drink alcohol to escape from the voices, but I would just get drunk. I stayed up for many days, unable to sleep because I was afraid of what these voices said.

I finally was hospitalized and spent two months in the hospital. I was put on medication. I had lost everything - my apartment, I was flunking out of college and I had no money. About a year and a half ago after my hospitalization, the voices went away. I was very happy. Imagine hearing someone talk to you and not be able to see them. The voices teased me, made fun of me and scared me. I have been discriminated against because of this diagnosis. For example, I had a job at a restaurant. My boss knew I was a member of a psycho-social club, a place where the psychiatrically disabled got jobs, socialized and trained for work. The Director got the job for me at the restaurant. The owner wouldn't let me wait tables, even though I had experience. So I bussed tables and didn't get any tips from the other waitresses for helping them. None of the other waitresses were friendly and they all hung out together and ignored me. The way I have coped with this illness has been to take my medicine, eat well, get enough sleep and make sure to structure my day and not isolate. I also go to therapy and talk about what is bothering me in order to learn how to cope with situations.

The way the mental health delivery system has helped is through therapy and work. Going to therapy once a week helps me discuss what is bothering me and relieve stress. Having a therapist who believed I could hold down a job and reach my goals, helped me. Being on medicine has helped control my symptoms and cope. My new job in behavioral health has helped in my recovery. I have gained more self-esteem and learned a lot.

Tips for coping with Schizophrenia are to take your medicine, go to therapy, get enough sleep and eat well. Work with your doctors and therapist. Tell them what is going on and how you feel. Also, stay away from street drugs and alcohol.

A suggestion I would make to a professional who works with people who have schizophrenia is to listen to what the person says, have patience and educate the person with the illness, about the illness. This will help the person know what they have and how to deal with it so they can recognize symptoms and have a better quality of life.

PERSONAL STORY

Sheena Maynard

Hi! My name is Sheena L. Maynard and I am from Waterbury, CT. I would like to tell you my personal story about what recovery is. When I first thought about getting help in the early '80's, I was brought up never to disappoint my family. It was a shame. But, I decided that I need to get help anyway. On my first hospitalization I was admitted to a Hospital I didn't like and had many bad experiences there.

Then I left that hospital and looked for another one and found one I liked. They believed in helping you work out your problems along with some medication. This is where I started my recovery. I was in and out of hospitals a lot. My father was always a positive figure in my life. Then I had some relapses and on December 25, 1986, my closest sister passed away. That's what made me realize it was time to wake up. I started to believe in myself.

I had some rough marriages and so forth. I was working at a part-time job in the beginning of the '90's but I wanted to do more. I was always teased a lot and made fun of. At this moment, I had blamed my mom for what was wrong. I didn't know what was wrong until my daughter had a baby that lived for 18 days and we found out we had a disease called "Di George Syndrome" that had many side effects. This is why I have facial, speech disorders from it. Even though I was teased and made fun of, I was going to work and not let this bother me. I didn't care for this job too much. But, I made the most out of it. Then in the late 90's I met my husband. He was and will be the most inspired thing that has happened in my life. He is my husband, supporter, care giver, friend and so forth down the line. I also started another job in February 2003 and enjoy it fully. I have a great supervisor and boss that works with me. I am an advocate and peer support coordinator.

I lost a grand daughter in June 2003 and that was very hard to cope with. But, I stood near and helped my daughter be strong. My grand daughter lived only for 18 days. But, she was a miracle baby for us. I am 49 years old and I am a go getter. These days I try not let things stress me out. In August 2006, I will be going for my license and if I don't pass I will try and try again. I wear many different hats as one once said. I speak to people about my life growing up, hoping they will learn from my experiences in life. There are many bumpy roads to travel on. But, once you are off those bumpy roads, you will go on and reach for your dreams just like I did.

I am a working person who has been in recovery from depression for 20-years and very happy. Thanks to my husband, daughter, grand-daughter, grandson, friends, co-workers who supported me I feel so lucky to be able to have this in my life. I am still following my dreams, day by day. One day at a time one minute at a time. Please don't rush recovery. Also, I have God in my life. He is a wonderful person. I love going to church and doing the right things. Hopefully one day, I can tell everyone that I got my license. Also, I am taking sign language and Spanish to help my area's of work. Thank you so very much for letting me put this in the book.

(Note: Sheena got her license on her first try!)

MY RECOVERY

Anonymous

“10 years of opiate pain medications, from Tylenol-3 to OxyContin turned my life into a fast paced life of emptiness.”

My addiction began when my boyfriend's father died of cancer in May 1991. I gave birth shortly after that and my father, whom I truly adored, died of lung cancer 6 months later. With my own surgeries, and with mental as well as physical pain, I found there was plenty of pain medications around.

I was arrested for opiate abuse and found myself in all kinds of trouble. But, my recovery began when in court I was introduced to a wonderful person who worked in Jail Diversion. The Jail Diversion person took me right from the courthouse to a huge hospital where I was evaluated by mental health. I spent one evening and almost a whole day there. It was total chaos and I have to admit I was scared half to death the whole time, truly missing my daughters and at the same time I was sicker than a dog.

I was then ordered to go to Conn. Counseling for help with my drug addiction. First I was taken to RESPITE where I shared a room. I am 51 years old and felt very shy around the people at RESPITE (If you knew me you would think that possibly couldn't be true). But, I met some great women and staff who were for the most part truly fantastic. Jail Diversion took me every day to Conn. Counseling where I received medication and attended meetings. I saw a staff psychiatrist and talked to a private counselor once a week. At first it wasn't easy to talk openly about why I thought I wound up in this predicament. After three weeks there I had a court date and went back to court only to find out that I was not ready to leave and that I would be staying another 3 weeks. I cried all the way back to RESPITE. But, after talking to the woman from Jail Diversion, I realized I truly wasn't ready to go home. I couldn't take care of myself let alone my children. I didn't realize that I had so much to take care of. And I needed to get better myself.

I learned more and more each day and was very grateful for everyone who made it possible for me to go to Connecticut Counseling; people who listened to me and helped me get through each day. I felt stronger and my depression started alleviating. I was told I was looking like myself again. I didn't stop thinking and worrying about my girls even for one day. But as I started feeling better I knew it was time to start fixing, healing, and growing and to concentrate on making me better.

When I left RESPITE I went home to the town I grew up in. Unfortunately, everyone had read the papers and were very cold. I did not have an easy time of it: sleeping in my car and occasionally staying with people I barely knew. But, I went to AA meetings and remained drug and alcohol free all through this.

I give a lot of credit to Jail Diversion and Connecticut Counseling for giving me that chance to prove I can do what I have to do. I also want to thank the Judge, my Public Defender and the prosecutor for giving me the chance to prove that I truly am a good person just making wrong decision.

I'm still with Connecticut Counseling and attend outside meetings as well as having a great bunch of support people outside of the clinic. You have to have people you can trust and someone to call in your time of need.

I wish I could name those of you who were truly my saviors. But I hope you know that without you I couldn't have done it.

RECOVERY JOURNEY

Robin L

Spring is my favorite season with the earth valiantly recovering from the harsh New England winter. Spring inspires hope. Spring brings Easter and, twenty years ago, my first born. The promise of summer and all its pleasures and, twelve years ago, the birth of my second born. While I love bright October skies and foliage that is so brilliant it boggles the mind, autumn makes me sad. Because the trauma of winter will soon be upon us. As a person with mental illness, there is always winter in my life: the icy fingers that caress a razor blade when it is all I can do not to cut myself; the cold air of major depression that leaves me unable to do anything productive; the flashbacks that pelt my body and mind like sleet and freezing rain. There have been so many traumas, that I cannot bear to look at it all. Years ago I was diagnosed with schizophrenia. Now I am told it is Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and major depression with psychosis. Who knows? Who can really step into my mind and say, "Ah-ha! This is what is wrong"!

How did I get sick? I think I was born with the predisposition, and unfortunately, the wrong buttons were pushed. I have hallucinated since the beginning of my childhood memories. When I was 9 I stopped talking and tried to kill myself. I have been under the care of some psychiatrist or therapist almost continually ever since. I was abused and neglected by my parents. My mother had her hands full with my alcoholic father. My older brother terrorized me, leaving me in a corner, in a fetal position, catatonic. My father, who stopped drinking when I was four, was an angry man. There was no love between my father and me and it opened the door to sexual abuse by a surrogate uncle. No matter how far I go, the trauma never goes away.

I married an extremely abusive man. All his rage came at me. My daughter, at the age of three, would try to stop him, she would say. "Look at what you are doing to her." And I could not say a word. I was too far gone to protect her. I was, in therapy. But it just held me together enough to function. Medication helped, but there was never really any recovery. My life was a nightmare. I was swimming in baggage and my husband kept pushing me under. And it was always my fault: my hospitalization, my illness, my lack of recovery. He, like my parents, only wanted to see a smile on my face and hear no complaints. And then something terrible, yet ultimately wonderful happened. My husband had an internet affair. On Thanksgiving, he told me he wanted a divorce. This nearly destroyed me. All I could do was repeat the Serenity Prayer and the Lord's Prayer over and over.

One day, as I sat in my car at the red light praying, I felt this incredible warmth surround me. I was surrounded by the love of God and I knew I would be okay. I have an extensive support system ended up at the Independence Center. Here was a place where I could feel safe. It was a place where I didn't have to explain myself. Where I could learn the skills I needed to get a job, it was another place to help me along on my road to recovery. Recovery, like life, is a journey, not a destination. I have to remind myself of that every day. I can take that journey if I chose. It's up to me. Believe me, it's worth it.

A NEW LOVE POEM

David Anderson

Feather Head, Beyond destiny, I continue on the line...

...I do...

Changing with the wind, When my interest is close, As a kiss

Never in danger, As the inside glows dim.

Another feather on the mountain, Feeds my nest

Outside for a double zone...

The hot sand, When the light

Is never lost...

Over facts, Like love becomes, For everybody

As an old record sings, Like forest trees, Grow with new patterns Of peace

With every new day

...still within touch...

Explanation confirmation, We are master guessers

In the recreation, Moments we love...

We weave, Our attention seeker

...of tunnel torch flames

Heightening heat again...For another tender touch

For days remain forward Recovery process...

Peach the plants, Pure task never lost

To the continuing pleasure

We all endure Like a fulcrum To a balance beam...

We scale the walls blind, Easing into virgin space

With every new moment secured, Like horses drink

With purity...

Blinders of gold

...spirit awareness intact.....

Forever yours eases the taste

Dust molecules gone

For the love of head food...

Pure energy when the time is right

Again

Almost leaving the fire for light

I count on my reservoirs

Of emerge and love

When the tears of joy

In my soul

Moves my pen further toward you

For pleasures abound

As the snow lessons

The body heat I dig for reason...

Sweat on the brow

Hesitating for time

Zones of love

Heals paradise

When heaven sent...

... remains peace ...

A LONG AND WINDING ROAD

Alexis V. Gruden

My abuse and thus my psychosis, started very early, at age 4. I went through a procession of doctors who prescribed various medicines to “help” me, but didn’t. When I was 13 I began to long for the release of death. This frightened my parents badly, even though I hadn’t actually tried suicide, and I was sent off to series of treatment facilities in Connecticut, New York, Maryland, Tennessee and Georgia. In New York, I tried to kill myself, with negligible results. Tennessee was hell; but, when I was in Georgia I was turned around and placed on the path to recovery. A caring therapist, her cat, and quite a few walks in the woods helped me realize that people cared, and they wanted to help me.

I “graduated” from the facility in Georgia when I was 18, and came to Torrington. I was angry and reclusive at first, but amazingly the staff still cared, and I began to come out of my proverbial shell. The last 2 ½ years have been slow, but I have made much forward progress. I now have an apartment of my own, a loving cat, friends, and a great part time job. Were it not for the staff of the Western Connecticut Mental Health Network-Torrington Area, God only knows where I would be.

Aloise Buckley

When growing up in the Northwestern corner of Connecticut, Torrington was the “big city.” One of my earliest memories was going to Torrington with my mother to buy a fur coat; which made her look like a brown bear. We (my brother, sister and I) would stop over at Scarpelli’s (in Torrington) for breakfast.

For twenty-four years I lived and worked in Manhattan. I was a publicist for CBS and Newsweek and a press secretary on a number of political campaigns. It was a fascinating career. But, I suffered from a very serious upset and I am now living in a transitional group home where I am fairly content with my life here because I am only a half an hour away from my family.

The residents at the group home “pass their time” by doing different activities and attending groups. The subject matter of these groups is often relapse prevention, symptom management, and social skills. While the groups sometimes seem repetitive they are sometimes very helpful. Living in a small house often causes a lot of tension because of the close quarters. Right now, I’m the only woman living in the group home with male housemates. While the men often do “annoying men things,” they can be very helpful and kind.

Although I miss the excitement of New York greatly, I have found some satisfaction in working as a receptionist at Primetime house, (a psycho-social club for the mentally ill) and being literally close to my family. I now know the most important thing in life is to have the love of others. I can truly say I am happy with the love of the staff and people who live at the group home and go to Primetime.

A CHILD'S CRY

Cynthia Clark

It all started in early childhood
I grew up being the middle child
One older brother one younger sister
My house was always in an uproar
My mother was always angry and depressed
I was traumatized at the age of 8 I was always so full of pain
So I drank my mother's booze

I didn't know that I was starting a life of destruction
Fearing for my life I ran away
Only to find more chaos in the streets
I was trapped in this addiction with no way out

One day I saw a friend
That I drank with years ago
She kept acting different like she was so happy
I envied her as she showed off her key chains
I wanted one so I took her invitation
and went to NA meeting

Upon arriving at the meeting every one welcomed me with open arms
They asked if I knew how to make coffee and I
said yes little did I know it was a commitment once I started
everyone said the coffee was good
so I kept coming because I found a part of the fellowship
I got a sponsor and was doing really well

Somewhere down the line
The bills got overwhelming and my relationship
With my boyfriend got ugly needless to say i
Relapsed once gain running the streets smoking crack
Sniffing heroin being selfish once again putting my children
Through hell with no way out I ran my self crazy
I violated my probation the judge sentence me to 5 years

June 7, 2003 I was sent to Niantic prison for Women
Once there I sign up for Marylyn baker program
I learned about recovery, and a higher power who
Help me through the process after graduating
I was transferred to McAuliffe Manor I found my self today
I work on my anger resentments and feelings
During my stay here the doctors have discovered
HEP/C and DIABETES I was scared and with the love
From staff and my peers I am feeling much better honestly
Speaking I LOVE RECOVERY when I feel discourage
I look back at how far I have come!

ANATOMY OF A BREAKDOWN AND RECOVERY

I have experienced a year and half of hell and back again that I thought could never happen to me.

I have always been the type of person who not only solved my own problems, but other people's problems too. Friends and relatives depended on me to always help them and I did. This all changed when I fell down the cellar stairs. I was unconscious for six hours. Upon awakening, it was so dark, I didn't know where I was. Then, looking around I saw a glow above my head – the upstairs nightlights! My body suddenly made me aware that I was hurt badly and I was lying on the basement floor! At first, I couldn't get up. Then, I oriented myself by the light at the top of the stairs and crawled to a support column to pull myself up. I knew there was something very wrong with my right wrist, head, left chest, right toe, back, and buttocks.

I managed to get up the stairs and into the bathroom. Looking in the mirror, I saw blood in my hair, on my face, and down the front of my nightgown. I took a shower and realized I was very hurt. But, I felt it was too early in the morning, 3 A.M., to call anyone to take me to the E.R. I didn't have insurance and knew an ambulance would cost too much. I had fractured my right wrist and thumb, my left rib, needed eight staples in my head, had a concussion, a sprained right toe, all the skin from my neck to my mid-back ripped off, and lacerations and contusions over my entire buttocks, arms, and legs. Also, I had broken my front teeth off the bone. I had to pay out of pocket for the hospital, the orthopedic doctor, x-rays, and the dentist, over \$8,000.00.

A few months later I lost an excellent paying job. I was the director of a massage therapy school. The owners had spent money on a swimming pool, a hot tub, and their horses. They had multiple law suits from students and instructors and owed several years of back taxes on the school. They were in trouble with the State Board of Education. So, I was fired for losing them money. I found another job, but I just could not make enough money to recoup my losses. After, I sued my landlord for not having a railing on the cellar stairs and he evicted me. Without help from friends or family, it took me a few months to find another apartment. My hand was still not functioning well and I didn't have everything packed when the movers arrived. I had to go back every night after work and on weekends to pack. In the meantime, it had snowed followed by an ice storm and I had to cancel the movers because the driveway and stairs hadn't been shoveled and sanded. After, a friend said she and her friends would help me pack and move I rented a U-haul and waited. They never showed up. I had to pay for the truck and re-hire the movers. Meanwhile my old landlord would not return my money. I was getting in over my head with bills despite getting a second and later a third job. I was in financial trouble. Then I got sick, didn't work and didn't get paid. Then a few weeks later my friend died of breast cancer. A few weeks after that, my significant other died.

I continued to work, but I didn't feel right. I would go to work, but I would have to leave because I was dizzy, nauseated, and almost passed out a couple of times. This is when I started to drink because I couldn't sleep and I needed to go to work to support myself. Then I couldn't go to work. I had a virus. I had no money to go to a doctor or get medication. Someone from work brought me her antibiotics. I knew I shouldn't take them, but I had to get better to go back to work. I had a virus and couldn't shake it. The next night I had chest pain, an irregular pulse, and couldn't breathe. I knew something was very wrong, but I couldn't afford the medical bills. Two days later, thinking I was going to die, I drove to a friend's house so she could take me to the E.R. I had to park my car in her driveway so it wouldn't be repossessed while I was in the hospital. I was there for five days and after being diagnosed with Cardiomyopathy (a heart muscle disease), I went home. But, I couldn't walk ten feet without getting dizzy and short of breath and couldn't work. My boss came to visit because the friend who gave me the antibiotics told her what a mess my house was and how depressed I was. My boss contacted my cardiologist and got the VNA to come in. People from work brought me food, money, and cleaned my house. I was spiraling out of control, but I couldn't tell anyone how depressed I was. I had bills to pay and no income. Besides electric, telephone, cable, and car payments – I had doctor bills and hospital bills.

My cell phone had been shut off for non-payment, then, the cable was shut off, and so was my telephone. Next, the company came to repossess my car. I watched from the window as they towed it away, thinking it's okay I can take the bus to work. But, I was still too sick to go back to work. The final straw came when I was sitting in the living room and noticed how quiet the house was. I got up and went to the refrigerator. It was off. I turned on the kitchen light and it wouldn't go on. My electricity was shut off. I knew then that I was never going to get out of the mess I was in and I couldn't fight anymore. A few days later my boss came to the house with the social worker from the VNA. My boss told me that she knew I was severely depressed and she was afraid that I was going to commit suicide. Oh, yes. I was going to die on 22 April'05. I had a lot of medication left over from my fall down the stairs. I couldn't take any more stress. Admitting that was hard enough, but I knew there was more to come.

I went to the hospital and was admitted to the Psychiatric Unit. I just couldn't fight anymore. I was angry, tired, disappointed, and frustrated. I didn't want to live anymore, but I didn't have the energy to kill myself or help myself. It took several days to catch onto the game of the Unit. The psychiatrist comes into the room, leans against the wall, and asks how I'm doing today. I answer "depressed and I can't sleep". His response was, "it takes the meds a while to work." Then in group I was asked to rate my feelings on a scale of 0-10. After eight days of this, I wised up and realized nobody was going to talk to me about my problems, the way I felt, or how to get help. What I needed to do was smile at everybody and lie about my rating scale. I had to go up slowly on my numbers and make the staff happy by smiling at them. It took me four more days to get to 10 and be discharged.

(CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE)

I was to go to Greater Waterbury Mental Health (GWMHA) and get help. Home in my non-functional apartment, I had to face that I couldn't pay my rent and I had more doctor and hospital bills. I had no place to go, no money to get there, and an appointment with an intake worker at a place for "crazy people". In order to get to my appointment, I needed to take the bus. I hadn't been on a bus since I was twelve. I didn't know where the bus stop was, how much the bus costs, or where GWMHA was located. I called for the bus information on the cell phone my boss gave me. It's the type that is filled with minutes that are bought at gas stations and mini-marts, etc. The bus stop was on the corner I could spit to from my living room. GWMHA gave me directions. Later, sitting in the waiting room, I was scared to death. These people surrounding me were "crazy". I breathed a sigh of relief when I was finally called.

After I went home and in the days following I became more and more depressed, I received a letter from my aunt telling me my cousin had died. She also wrote that she knew something was wrong and to write back to her. I couldn't. I was mortified that I was such a failure. My appointment with the psychiatrist was a week after my intake. By then I had run out of food. The intake worker got a bag of food for me. I wouldn't have been able to cook it or keep it in the refrigerator. She went in with me to see the psychiatrist. The doctor was no fool. She knew I was still depressed, still had the pills, and I had picked another date – 8 June '05. She asked me if I would agree to go back to the hospital. I said yes. She told me she was glad I said yes because if I said no she would have to commit me. So, back I went by ambulance. Back to the same routine – the psychiatrist leaning against the wall for three minutes, my saying I was depressed and couldn't sleep, and 0-10 how do you feel.

When I was admitted I saw two coat hangers on the back of the bathroom door. Immediately I started to figure out how to hang myself. On my second day there I realized I could put my head through the hanger, stand on the wastebasket that was supposed to be bolted down, but wasn't and hang from the closet door. Everything went according to plan until my weight hit the hanger and it snapped. I sat on the bed contemplating my failure for about twenty minutes, examining the hanger, when the nurse popped her head in the door and left. I called her back and told her I needed help. My help was her grabbing the hanger and yelling at me. Then I got to sit in the lounge for the rest of the day. At night I had to lie in a recliner in the lounge and watch the night staff sleep. On Monday I begged the doctor to let me sleep in bed because the chair hurt my joints. He agreed, but said the nursing staff didn't. He let me sleep in my room. On Tuesday, I was discharged to Respite. On Wednesday, I had an appointment at Grandview Adult Behavioral Health where, I was told by the hospital, I would receive individual help. Finally, someone to talk to! Wrong! It was group therapy. I tried to tell people I needed individual therapy, but they don't have that there.

There was no way that I was going to discuss my problems in front of strangers. I figured out the system to get my days cut down from four times a week. I played the game and saw my psychiatrist who wouldn't know me from a hole in the wall because he never looked up from my chart during my months of med review. I finally "graduated" from group and now would be seeing a nurse clinician for med review and counseling. I really thought finally I would get help for my depression – WRONG again! There was more chart flipping without eye contact and assembly line writing for med review. There were two things that saved my life. I was staying at Respite and Dialectic Behavioral Therapy (DBT). At Respite, I met some truly wonderful people who really cared what happened to me. If it wasn't for them, I would not be here writing this. My only other alternative was the shelter, and I knew I wouldn't survive staying there.

Another major help was DBT. It was a year's commitment to learn how to manage, identify, and understand emotions that may get out of control or hidden deep inside and given tools and ways to deal with this emotion in a non-destructive manner. Along with the last two, a lot of self work went into my recovery. Along with these tools I was also given medications – some helped and some didn't. One that I knew was not helping and making extremely dizzy and fat, I had to stop myself. My nurse practitioner would not listen to me. She also did not order blood work which should have been done every month because this drug was so toxic to the liver. After being on the drug for eight months without a blood test, I discontinued the drug. I felt much better. The dizziness went away. The feeding frenzy went away. The extreme tiredness I felt every afternoon also went away. I do not recommend for people to stop their meds. It can be dangerous. I know my body and I knew this drug was not good for me.

I was homeless for six months and thank God every day that I met the people at Respite and that they took care of me the way they did. I wish I could give back to them half of what they have given me. I really believe that if they hadn't taken me in I would be dead today.

Another rescue was being selected for the DBT classes. I learned different techniques and methods to help cope with my emotions. Also, I learned how to stop a crisis from developing and not to judge myself and others. I came to the realization that, 'Everything is as it should be'. One very important lesson I learned over the past year is about my attitude toward clients in the mental health system. I went from shunning away from "crazy people" to accepting that they are just like everyone else. We have problems both medical and mental. It is just that we are different. I now have many friends "in the system". In the past year I have found people with mental disabilities are kinder, more intuitive, more sensitive, and will take care of each other much better than the so called "normal" people out there in the "real" world.

So, after losing everything – my care, my apartment, my belongings, my special people, and my cats – I now feel better. I'm collecting SSI, I have my own apartment, a new kitten, a job helping people like myself, and I'm back in grad school. This past year has been quite a learning experience. I have my colors back. It was strange, but I noticed when I was depressed that the world looked colorless to me. As I got better the pastels appeared, the primary colors, and finally gray went back to black. I am so glad I had this experience. Although at the time I couldn't fight my way out of a paper bag, I really didn't want to live and I didn't want anyone to tell me, "Oh, you'll get over it and feel better real soon". I now have a psychotherapist and a psychiatrist I like and trust. I no longer go to Grandview Adult Behavioral Health. I feel now that yes, there is a future and I can now look forward to life.

SEARCH

Carol Gesner

Several years ago, I began my search to obtain treatment. I needed help with my recovery journey. I was diagnosed with anxiety, depression, mood disorder, PTSD, and a history of substance abuse. During my search, I discovered a few helpful organizations, but I felt each lacked the total support for my needs. However, with determination and patience, I eventually found medication, therapy, group support, and also wellness classes at Western Connecticut Mental Health Network in Torrington.

I gained knowledge and found support in a safe environment. Classes like "Anxiety No More," "Mood Swings" and "Free to be Me," just to name a few were extremely helpful. But, the real turning point was the Wellness and Recovery Action Plan (WRAP) class and Trauma Adaptive Recovery Group Education and Therapy (TARGET) group which allowed me to increase self-awareness and esteem, and develop new coping skills. One day at a time.

I began to get involved in self-advocacy, peer support and social interaction, not to mention having fun. I feel I have given back by working on the Warm Line, which is a peer to peer telephone service, than working as a Rehabilitation Specialist at CT Mental Health Association, and finally employed as a Peer Support Specialist at WCMHN, the very organization I initially utilized.

I am empowered and inspired to attend provider/consumer seminars and trainings and assisting with the enhancement and improvement of state of Connecticut's mental health system. I am eager to learn more as I get involved with helping others and myself.

MANY TRIALS

Anonymous

I have lived through many trials. Some of them concerning my mom are very disturbing to me. My mom was a "control freak". One time I was burying my dead pet cats in the yard, my mom got angry at me and made me dig them up and threw them in the trash. When the garbage truck came I had to watch them take my cats away. When I was out on my own, I was happy. I lived in Tucson, Ariz. and rented a trailer. It was a 1969 model and very beautiful. I had a job working at a convenience store and I took care of many homeless cats. Then one day it all came crashing down when I was hit by a car while crossing the street. Once again mom took control; she killed most of my cats and threw their bodies in the garbage.

I am now in Northwest Connecticut and have been taking classes to recover from all I have been through. These classes included writing a Newsletter class that helps me being to write again. I also worked the warm line which helps me stay focused on helping people with their problems. I take gardening group which allows me to relax and am taking vocal expression which helps me be more outgoing. I am doing well now and I want to thank everyone at Northwest and MHA for all their support and caring.

RECOVERY AND RELAPSE

Robert Kimball

It has been almost four years since my last hospitalization. Before that, I was in and out of the hospital a lot. I used to gauge “recovery” by how long I was out of the hospital. Now, I have a much different view of the meaning of wellness in my life.

Recovery for me isn't something that can be measured by time away from the psychiatric floor of a hospital or facility; rather it is a change in my whole life. I lost my house. My dad had died a few years back and my mom had received an almost certain diagnosis of Alzheimer's. I learned to grieve and shared a lot of my grief in group therapy that lasted for nine months. I was stubborn in my recovery and I believe that I still fight against change while recovering even today.

Recovery is something that has involved hard work and honesty in therapy with my counselor. Taking medication is a big part of recovery, and my doctor monitors my medications and my overall progress. But my counselor is the person I meet with to sort out the events of my new life in recovery as they unfold.

I used to live by my emotions, my lifestyle was very visceral, and my thinking was full of delusions and psychotic wanderings. I was living in a nightmare all of the time, and I didn't even realize it. I tried to use religion to put a band-aid on a problem that required open heart surgery. I had low self esteem and very little self respect. Even my parish Priest pointed out to me my lack of self-respect.

I still have a very strong attachment to my religion, but I also have an idea of certain graces that comes from living life in a wise-minded way. My counselor used to speak of “monkey mind” versus “wise mind”. Who wants to live life in “monkey mind” and make decisions based on too much emotion and not enough right-minded thinking? At the same time, I am not a “robot” who engages in too much thinking and no real feelings for anything or anyone.

Even though I cannot recite the DBT (Dialectical Behavior Therapy) training skills word-for-word, I still am confident that my recovery is uniquely my own. This ownership of my recovery has allowed me to make my own mistakes and celebrate my own small victories in self-management and wellness. There is a certain spirit or grace that comes from being tempered by fire; I feel my recovery has been and still remains for the most part a walk in the “fire” of exorcising past dysfunctional ways of thinking and behaving and replacing it with my own band or mold of being and behavior that is based on my own moral code and my own nature. At first I was grasping at wellness through the use of wise-minded behaviors. Now I try to stay in wise mind throughout my days and nights.

Every day I struggle with negative target behaviors in my life and I still continue to struggle with the mastering of “wise mind”. Being in “wise mind” to me is similar to accepting and living with the graces that are available to me through the practice of my own religion. Spirit and religion are different entities for many people, yet for me there can be no spirit without organized Sacraments and Tradition. I remind my counselor I have been in therapy for a very long time – many years. This time, my life is my own; my therapist is not a life-manager who micro-manages every facet of my life that I feel I can't manage alone. If I screw up, I own my mistakes, and when I am skillful in my behavior I know that I have changed and become more aware and have practiced “core-mindfulness” in some manner that is part of the DBT model. I used to be a people pleaser, however, my recovery has taught me this is not useful for wellness in recovery.

- Having a sense of humor and not taking myself too seriously all of the time also is an important component of keeping my mind well.
- Taking time out for reflection and pausing now and then so I can soak up the serenity that is available to me, also aids me in remaining stable, balanced, and focused.
- Having a good support system is important. I would not be the person I am today without the supports that have either been provided for me or I have sought out.

I cannot make my way alone in the world; I need people, and hopefully I will always feel needed by others.

Lynne Aubert

The sun split the sky this morning bright orange trimmed in red. As I walked to trim some weight off to start my day, I was grateful I was up earlier to see the sunrise and think about my story!

My story began before I was conceived; it began with my mother's illness and a long family history of alcoholism and mental illness. I was brought up to be quite curious and to be a creative artist. I went to New York City from California for a Master's degree before I moved to Connecticut. I always had depression. But, I didn't get treatment until I was in college. I didn't get or ask for medication. I stuck to sobriety and laid off drugs in 1985. But, in 2005 I had a mini-stroke which set off what was diagnosed as bipolar disorder. I was already on leave from my job of 15 years, as an activity therapist helping the mentally ill in a hospital in the South Bronx, New York. But, with my stroke, I lost my benefits and came to Greater Danbury where I received help.

I took my case manager's group "Steps for Recovery" and got help with a court case for something I did when I was very psychotic that never happened before and to help me as a trauma survivor. Today, I count my blessings. I'm clean and sober 25 years and grateful to be alive and working the steps for all of my recoveries.

Denise Lapp

I have been a consumer of the Northwest Center for Family Services & Mental Health for over 19 Years. I was diagnosed with Bipolar Disorder at the age of 22. In the beginning I suffered tremendously and I was very happy to find the Center. Everyone at the center was right there to help me and I have been able to learn so much about this major psychiatric disorder and how to manage it effectively. From the very beginning, I felt safe and I knew not only did those working directly with me, but other staff members had my best interest at heart. This was important to me then and it still is! Besides individual therapy, I have been in a variety of groups the Center offers such as: the Bipolar Support Group, the Film Group, and the group Community Support Program.

Each of these groups has proven to be most rewarding. For example, in December of 2001, I was diagnosed with cancer. From the beginning of my battle with this diagnosis, staff and consumers alike were supportive and there for me. I don't know if I would have come through this difficult time without people's support, kindness, and compassion.

My life has become extremely rewarding and I finally "have a life". I am not anxiety ridden on a constant basis and no longer have all consuming crying jags. I can look people in the eye and carry on a fascinating conversation; and I have two part-time jobs. While I still have days when I hide beneath the covers, those days are few and far between. For a long time I remained stagnant; never coming out of the pain and suffering. But, I don't think that way anymore. The people at the Center told me I work extremely hard on my recovery. Sure, I do work hard, but, so many people (Staff and consumers alike) are right by my side. I feel so blessed to have found the Center and I always know help isn't far away.

LIFE

Princess Karen Gill

I was young and small in an abusive life under State conditions. Then in my young teen and woman years, I started to see aspects of depression and suicide which had me go through drinking and abusive ways.

My drinking days vanished when my children came into the world and were taken from me. I was diagnosed with manic depression. Now, as I grow into my old age, I'm back under State conditions. I keep life alive doing projects like recipes, beading, working on the computer, reorganizing my place.

It makes my depression better to work on each day of my life. When I am depressed, I make a difference or I cry when I'm down. Depression is a big part of my mental illness. I take life each day with ADD and depression.

To grow, I make a better way to be happier than I can be from all the world's sadness. I make my life better every chance I can. I put on positive attributes, good thoughts and keep life a better way. My WRAP recovery plan sustains my life in a normal way.

With my children around talking to me, it keeps me going to a normal way of life, without imprisonment around me.

To have a good, free, way of life is all I want. To be a normal human being with my illness, and to be loved by and cared for evermore. My goal is to get my finances in my own name, and free to be myself again.

Heather Han

My name is not important, it could be any name you choose but what is important is I am an addict with mental illness. I'm diagnosed with PTSD, Bipolar II, and Borderline Personality Disorder. It frightened me to be ill, yet look so normal – whatever that definition may be.

Before I became an addict my life was filled with longing. I was aware of how I only used a small fraction of what life had to offer or live close to what was in me. Sometimes, it took all I had to take another breath and not close my heart to the world.

Before my recovery, most of my life was in chaos long before drugs played a part. I was exhausted; it wasn't doing that exhausted me, it was trying; to be present; to be better; to be aware. I inherited other people's view of who I should be, and made countless deals with life, trading pieces of myself and my dreams for safety. I turned away from places of sorrow, deep in my soul and could not allow myself to feel joy or pain. I was numb and my addiction cultivated this emptiness.

I've begun my self-healing. I no longer run hard, staying one step ahead of pain. I no longer have to bury it with drugs and alcohol, I no longer have to be afraid.

Michael Pesce

“You have a mental illness,” were the words I heard in Cedarcrest Hospital in spring 1983 when I was 19. I had been suffering mood instability with depression being the prominent symptoms since I was 10 years old. I was told I acquired bi-polar disorder after almost dying from e-coli poisoning with a temperature of 106. Whatever the cause, I rode the bipolar coaster for 23 years. What a ride it has been. Since being introduced to Psychiatric hospitals in 1983, I was in and out of hospitals every 7-8 years. The most recent was a stay at Danbury hospital in 1998.

In 1998 my life was ok, I was not taking meds or been in therapy for years. I thought I could handle it all on my own. But, I was wrong. I was in denial. I had been working in the Human Service field for 11 years, giving it my all and I had a wife and 2 little boys. I became symptomatic and was scared to death. It began with mania and ended with a suicide attempt. After a 2 week hospital stay and med changes, I was stable and started in the Waterbury Partial Hospital Program. I was devastated in a holistic way, mentally, spiritually and financially. My supervisors at STS did not want to bring me back, they were reluctant to have someone in recovery work with the MR population, so I lost my job.

I went on SSDI and Medicaid after exhausting my pension and insurance. It was humiliating but now I am grateful I had it. I began medication and regular therapy with a very good therapist. One day in session we were discussing the possibility of my going back to work part time. She had heard of a state program called The Peer Companion Warmline program at The Greater Waterbury Mental Health Authority. It was a pre-vocational stipend program she said.

I decided I had nothing to lose so I went to the intake meeting and began attending class at GWMHA. My teacher was Steve Zoccoli and after 12 weeks of training I was ready to work the Warmline. I worked as a Warmline operator for 16 months then Steve came up to me and asked me if I ever wanted to return to state service, boy did I, but how. Steve saw the helper's heart in me and said I had to take small steps. I felt energized. I began slowly. A return to Human Services can not be rushed. I applied and got a job in the private sector with SELF Incorporated. I became assistant peer support coordinator of the Warmline Program. I worked closely with the Coordinator of the Warmline. When that person left I interviewed for the Coordinator position and I got it! A competitive part time position of 20 hours a week working for SELF at the GWMHA helping to run the Warmline I had so grown to love. I was very satisfied with this but Steve saw more. He remembered my desire to at some point return to full-time state service. He told me of a Mental Health Assistant position available full time in Torrington at the Northwest Mental Health Authority. I took a shot and after many interviews and waiting I returned to full time State service on January 4, 2002. I still can't believe I am back at doing what I enjoy the most, helping others. That is victory.

MY RECOVERY STORY

Heidi Nute

When I was a young girl, I lived in Germany and heard bombs go off all of the time, which made me very nervous and sad. Then, my family and I moved from Germany to America in 1950 where I got a job baby sitting. Later I got a job as a sales clerk and then worked for a Hartford insurance company. I was there for 5 years and became friends with a co-worker. Her passing away was the beginning of my nervous break-down. I met my first husband who was mentally abusive and we were together 8 years. During that time, I had a baby named Ronald who was pretty healthy although he was premature. When my husband died in 1975 my father felt that since I was 30, he could travel and I could take care of my son alone. But, I was scared and not feeling capable of taking care of my baby on my own. The doctors told me I had post partum depression and schizophrenic reaction.

I was sent to Fairfield Hills and my father took care of my son while I was getting better. After 6 months, I left Fairfield Hills against medical advice and I returned home to live with my father where we both raised my son. Later, I went to Charlotte Hungerford Hospital and they told me about Prime Time House. I went to Prime Time for a couple of years and met my second husband. But he didn't father my son, so even though I was married I had the stress of being a single mom.

I was depressed and saw doctors at Western Connecticut Mental Health Network-Torrington. They helped me a lot and it felt good to talk about how I feel. They prescribed me medication which helped me deal with things better. I was able to take classes there. My first class was Art and Crafts, I had good teachers and painted a picture of Pinocchio which my grandson really loved. I really enjoyed two other classes; Creative Expressions and Brunch. In Creative Expressions I worked with wood and made a Bird House. It made me happy and glowing.

When my husband was diagnosed with lung cancer. I was really sad. But, I talked to my Doctor and he helped me deal with it. My husband became very ill and had to have chemo and radiation treatment. When he died on September 9, 2006, I continued my counseling and classes to keep me busy. My classes bring me joy and peace of mind, even through difficult times.

I have come a long way and I feel a lot better than I did before. I take one day at a time to deal with each lovely day. Even though I'm alone I have WCMHN-TA and my aids and homemaker to talk to me and to help me. I appreciate and want to thank WCMHN-TA for all they have done to help me feel better.

UNLIMITED DETAILED RECOVERY

Kimberly Sullivan

When I divorced the father of my daughters, I was depressed and on tranquilizers. I waitressed on weekends and then went out drinking and occasionally used marijuana. One afternoon, I received a call from the children's father and became upset listening to him. I reacted by overdosing on my tranquilizers and started drinking. The next day I told my doctor that I was thinking homicidally and that there was a .22 caliber gun in my bedroom. I agreed to get psychiatric treatment and my daughters were put in the custody of their father. I believe this started my journey into recovery. In treatment I was told I was not crazy, as I thought. They told me I was verbally, physically and mentally abused. I attended women's support groups and started an antidepressant they suggested. Later, I began to go to AA meetings and EA meetings.

The following spring I was told I was ready for relapse. I admitted I wanted to drink and was soon admitted to a crisis intervention program. While I was in the program, I had a daily schedule that included classes, AA meetings, speaker meetings, medical and research information. We were given assignments and recreational options. When I left, I had a better understanding of the program and disease and agreed to go to a Continued Care program. I found a sponsor who was understanding, loving, trustworthy, and very spiritual. Today we are still close. I call her my surrogate mother. However, that fall, while I was helping someone deal with a sexual abuse crisis, I had my own realization. I was very likely to have been sexually abused as a child. I then started intense therapy which continued for three years. I was also connected to women's support groups and learned about red flags, (warnings of abusive relationships), signs of controlling, insecurity, dependency, and dating safety.

At AA, I worked the 12 steps and felt self aware. People told me they could see changes in me. I learned sobriety is just not drinking yet it included becoming a better citizen with changes in values, thinking, behavior, and vocabulary. AA is more than attending meetings and I went to events like AA dances and camp-outs. A few years later my depression increased. I was not well. I was achy all over; in my joints and muscles. I was always fatigued and never felt rested. I learned I had fibromyalgia and I learned how to properly care for it. I took a less physical demanding part-time job which I enjoy, and met new friends. I found exercise helped and I learned how to make my own gardens. This not only helped physically, but it also relaxed me mentally. Gardening, with the colors and growth seems to be spiritually uplifting.

Six years went by and I was feeling much better, more active and outgoing. Then one day I received a phone call from my daughter's therapist. She suggested I take in my daughter; to get her out of the city, and let her get to know me better. My daughter was not attending school. So, I took her in for about 6 months and she was diagnosed with dual mental illnesses. Caring for her was emotionally and financially draining and I had to send her back to her father. That same year, I returned to a previous full time job. But, that job ended after two years because of a back injury. Because of the injury, I had to take pain medications, go to doctor appointments and physical therapy. I found myself severely depressed, angry and withdrawn. I'd cry not knowing why. One night, outraged by the end of a relationship, I drank. I reached out to AA the next day. Four months later I had another overdose attempt. I was put on medication to help my concentration. I was easily confused, full of fear, overwhelmed, and moody. I had my sisters intervene to help me. The medication worked, my racing thoughts stopped. I went back home and soon got my checkbook balanced, my rent paid up, and got another used car. I worked on the Warmline. I did this for one and a half years and learned a lot.

I am a NAMI consumer/family member and co-facilitate a NAMI support group. I've attended two NAMI conferences at Yale University. I've also been to meetings at the Institute of Living in Hartford. I have learned a lot which has helped me understand myself as well as others, and has helped me with my daughter. I got off the medication that put my weight on, I am doing ok without it. I drink mostly water with a good nutritional diet and I have a YMCA scholarship. I swim and use the treadmill a lot. I mediate and bathtub spa with candle-light along with many nature tapes to mediate with. I have been journaling since 1989 and it has included most of my recovery journey.

There are obstacles in everyone's life. The solution to our problems is the willingness to ask for help to carry on the best you can.

I DON'T HAVE TO SUFFER SILENTLY

Joanna O'Neill

When I was 2 years old, I endured what no child should have to endure. I was molested by family members. The abuse continued on for the next 11 years during this time I lived a peculiarly sheltered and isolated life. Everyone and everything silenced me. I was not allowed to say no. I was secretly and painfully punished for saying no. I had been beaten and raped at a time when I should have been playing with toys. I had to be perfect and couldn't fail. I slowly descended into a black depression and eventually, turned all that anger inside towards my family. I had learned to cope with these intense feelings by cutting myself. I had to minimize the experience in order to survive it and had to stop feeling a lot of things. The only way I could find to survive the horrific abuse and see the next day was to live exclusively in my mind and not feel any emotions.

To survive, I created different alters to help me deal with the abuse. For me, my alters and my razors were my only sense of security. I became dependent on them for many years to survive the abuse. After hospitalizations, foster homes, juvenile facilities and residential programs, I asked myself to focus on recovery. But the therapists I saw were unable to deal directly with the sexual abuse, anger, and rage. Then, I found an excellent therapist who works with clients who have Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID), once called Multiple Personality Disorder. It helped me tremendously to deal with the anger and shame that I held in for so long. While I no longer work with this therapist, I moved to Interlude in hopes of starting my recovery and allowing myself to have a voice I never had. I had to learn to trust and Interlude gave me the chance. I was able to start my recovery and reach my goals. Trying to find my voice at any given moment in my life and recover was and is incredibly challenging. I know it takes a long time. It is a process that unfolds at its own pace. I can't rush it. I am learning I am a valuable person and I deserve to have a voice in my recovery.

I don't have to suffer silently. I don't have to ever struggle again with the question of where to go to get help. It's been a long and difficult road but knowing help will be there with me helps me to move forward. But, I must stay strong and be honest with myself. I learned regardless of how low and depressed I can get things can get better. I am very appreciative to Interlude for helping me in my recovery, for their support in

I CAN REMEMBER

Kevin Flaherty

I can remember the day as if it were yesterday. I was in a speech class at the local community college and I prepared to give my talk. I began to tremble, sweat, and my heart felt as though it would beat out of my chest. I did give my presentation that day, but that would be the start of a fast descent into a prison of my own fears. I dropped out of that speech class and eventually out of school as my fears spilled over into other social situations. I began to avoid eating, drinking, and writing in front of people whether I knew them or not. I worked as a security officer on the third shift to minimize social contacts. I began to avoid using the telephone and attending any kind of meeting or group as the same feelings of dread and panic would appear in virtually any type of performance situation in front of people. My mood began to drop as my social contact disappeared. My friends would confront me about my overall health, but eventually I would also shut them out of my life. I was not prepared for the two deaths that would hit me back to back, my mother and my father.

I had hit rock bottom. The lack of social contacts and the death of my mother and my father had backed me into a corner where I had to decide if I wanted to live or die. My sister-in-law happened to call me the afternoon of March 07, 1991 and easily sensed my distress. She convinced me to go for help. I then started along a slow climb back to the point where I wanted to live again, and actually began to enjoy life again. The disorder that plagued me was social phobia, also known as social anxiety disorder. This anxiety disorder is not as well known or researched as panic disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, post-trauma anxiety disorder, and obsessive-compulsive disorder. I was very fortunate to have a psychiatrist who would prescribe that is very effective in treating social anxiety disorder. I had an excellent clinical psychologist who worked with major cognitive restructuring, changing irrational beliefs into rational beliefs. I would also work on a hierarchy of fears, as I put myself into my feared social situations. I practiced relaxation and breathing exercises.

I was also fortunate to have a great case manager and job coach who encouraged me to return to school and begin to think about gaining a meaningful employment. I returned to Gateway Community college and graduated with High Honors and received my Associates Degree. I graduated from Housatonic Community College with a mental health certificate from the merge program with academic excellence. I then transferred my credits to UCONN and graduated with my Bachelor Degree with a perfect 4.0 grade point average in human services. As I write this recovery story I have completed the Step portion of my courses at the UCONN School of Social Work and I have maintained a 4.0 grade point average.

I would like to close this recovery story by noting that I have worked as a Social Rehabilitation Worker at the Greater Waterbury Mental Health Authority's Discovery Drop-In Center for over ten years. I have enjoyed watching the progress that people with other psychiatric disabilities have made, and although there is still much work to be done, it is most gratifying to see the strides that the Connecticut Mental Health System has made. If I have helped even one person to think positively about school, work, or moving toward mental health, then it has definitely been well worth my struggles through good times and bad.

Mental illness is certainly a tough opponent to overcome, but mental illness can be a disability that you can learn to live with. Medication, support, cognitive restructuring, and competent and sensitive mental health workers can go a long way toward a successful recovery. I am quite hopeful that the future for people with mental illness will become a future of mental health.

EXTREME MAKEOVER-INTERIOR EDITION

Lee Anderson

In the 1930s, Rex Stout, a famous mystery writer who considered himself an architect and builder, designed and built a fourteen-room house for himself in Connecticut. He then invited the famous architect Frank Lloyd Wright to come give his opinion. Wright examined Stout's house and after a long silence said "beautiful spot, Rex, someone should tear this thing down and build a house here." At a crucial time in my early adulthood, I felt about my life much the same way Stout must have felt about his house.

In the spring of 1972, during my second year of graduate studies in Dallas, Texas, I experienced a complete mental breakdown, for reasons I didn't completely understand at the time. Leaving my studies behind, my wife and I moved to Connecticut, where my parents lived, and I began five weeks of medical treatment and several months of recovery. My brain wrestled with what is now believed to be a genetically-influenced condition called bipolar affective disorder. Its symptoms, in my case, may have been precipitated by the stress of my graduate-level studies. However, my doctor encouraged me to continue to prepare for my chosen profession, with the aid of psychotropic medication.

Then, in the summer of 2004, I was hit by stroke which was complicated by a severe toxic reaction to a medication I was taking at the time. My daughter and son-in-law had moved to New Jersey from San Diego just in time for my daughter to help my wife with the demands of my care. My daughter shaved me and she and my wife fed me, because severe tremors prevented me from feeding myself. My son flew in from Houston and stayed with us for a while to comfort me and to help my wife move much of our furniture from our second-floor bedroom to the first floor. My wife and daughter thought they might have to put me in a nursing home because of their physical and emotional inability to care for me any longer. But after a stay in a local hospital, rehabilitation, change of medicine, and the efforts of dedicated physicians, my brain adapted to the injury it had sustained. The tremors disappeared, and I was able to speak and walk normally (although with some weakness). But since the toxic reaction to the medicine I had been taking had damaged my kidneys, I had to retire from my profession early, and live on a limited income. I finally received a Social Security classification as "totally and permanently disabled." I confess that at times, I felt bewildered at the physical, financial, emotional, and spiritual challenges I faced. No amount of planning could have prepared me for them. I have sometimes wondered about that warm vision of aging described by Scottish poet Robert Browning:

*Grow old along with me
The best is yet to be,
The last of life, for which the first was made.
Our times are in His hand
Who saith, "A whole I planned,
Youth shows but half
Trust God: see all, nor be afraid!"*
(*Rabbi Ben Ezra*)

Since moving to Connecticut, my wife and I have settled into several comforting rhythms. One is to watch the television program Extreme Makeover-Home Edition. Seldom do we make it through the program without crying for joy at what is accomplished to change a family's life. This seems a fitting metaphor for our lives right now. As the dust settles after our own "demolition," we now wait with expectancy for whatever lies up ahead.

THINGS GOT BETTER

Justin M

When I was 16, I was diagnosed with bi-polar disorder, better known as manic depression. I thought it would make things better but it didn't. As a matter of fact, things got worse. You see, I was bullied and always had anger issues. During my high school years my anger evolved into the kind of hate, like I wanted you dead. It was during the time of the Columbine incident and most people thought the shooters were evil, while I thought of them as heroes. I know that it sounds sick, but that is how I felt at the time.

I was hospitalized at the end of my summer vacation before my senior year and it was then I was diagnosed. I went home and my senior year of high school was a mix of fights with my mother, and substance abuse which lead to my expulsion from the house I grew up in.

When I turned 18, I was placed in the Torrington Young Adult Services Program. In a new, strange environment, I turned to substances. I tried to be a bad ass like the main character in my favorite movie, "Good Will Hunting." But I missed the point and after a while I began to have violent panic attacks, which I named Mind Storms. Things got so bad that I returned home to live with my mother, but eventually went back to Torrington. After a few months in and out of hospitals, I was sent to Cedarcrest where I was tormented by the other patients.

After six months, I returned to Torrington determined to clean up my act. I was set up with employment and I received guitar lessons. I know now I am a person, not a diagnosis and it has been years since my last hospitalization. Just like Will Hunting, I am good too. I can deal with Mind Storms when I have them and have made amends with my past. Now, I am looking forward to a bright future, full of promise.

STORY OF RECOVERY

Dorie

My illness started when I learned my mom was diagnosed with cancer of her breast. I was only sixteen when she died, and later I was taken to different doctors and therapists. Finally, I was taken to "Day Treatment" where I was supposed to have a tutor, but I didn't get one. So, I went back to high school and received a diploma without one. After I graduated High School, I tried to get a secretary job, but no one would hire me. I went to a place where you get help to find a job and was given a test to see what job was best for me. They found a place where I learned about food service, including making cake, bread, brownies, main meals, sliced meats, salads, and serve. They then helped me get a job at Friendly's. After two years, my dad wanted me to get a better job so, he told me about a dietary aid job at Holly Hill Convalescent Home in the paper. I applied and was hired there. I stayed at Holly Hill for two years.

Then, after having problems at work and home, I went to the hospital and was there for a while. While at the hospital, I heard about a Bridgeway home where people went to learn about what was needed for having a home. I left home and I left my job and went to Bridgeway. Later, I was accepted to Cooks Vocational (which is now Prime Time House). I did several jobs including a factory job in Winsted putting parts together, "Bradlee's department store, and then to Forman School in Litchfield making sandwiches for people at the school. When my job there ended, Prime Time House helped me look for a dietary aid job. I found one at Wolcott Hall near my home. There were a few rough times after that. My grandfather died, and because I was having problems with my illness I went to a hospital in Hartford. Later, after returning home and working a full time job along with a college course, I was hospitalized again. For a while I had a nurse and health aids helping me with my apartment. Then I was hired by Friendly's and have been there part-time over 12 years as well as out of hospitals for the same time. Recently, I have gone to college for some courses, earned an advocate certificate and a certificate in food service.

THE DARKNESS, OVERCOMING MS

Kurk M

Around the time I was 18, I had a bad earache, the pain was so intense I banged my head against the wall in my room. My mother told me afterwards I was screaming in agonized pain on my way to the hospital. I do not remember any of this. What I remember is waking up in a hospital room. When the hospital staff asked me if I knew who I was I responded with, "Kirk Douglas" (the actor). I then learned I had been in a coma for 6 months!

I was told I had Multiple Sclerosis. When I woke up I did not know how or had the ability to eat, drink, or walk. I could barely talk. I didn't know who I was or who my family was. In the hospital, I had the choice to give up or to relearn everything. My mother gave me the strength and the support I needed, and during the next six months I started the long journey to recovery. I felt like a newborn baby. To me this experience was the hardest thing I have ever been through. I was once a "normal" teen who drove, had an active social life, had girlfriends, and friends. After waking up I had none of this, I couldn't drive and my "so-called friends" were gone.

I went to Gaylord Hospital for rehab. Due to not being able to afford to pay my medical bills, my mother sold her house. I left Gaylord and went to live at the nursing home my mom worked at for about a year to finish recovering. After the nursing home, my mother and I decided I would live at Wynnewood. Without my mother's strength and support I would not be here today. I still struggle to this day with memory problems, and some days I cannot even remember where I am. Once, it took me one whole month to remember how to get upstairs to my room. After all the rehab, living a "normal life" seems like it will never be within my reach. It's a struggle to me because I feel no one can relate to me or know what I have been through. Some days I feel depressed, bitter and very angry. But my sense of humor keeps me going. I have met some great friends at Wynnewood, including great staff members. I try everyday to cope with my issues, and will for the rest of my life.

MY RECOVERY

Louise Osgood

I was born in December of 1947 in Milo, Maine. While I was being brought up I was physically abused. I was abused most of my life. I did not know that I had a mental illness until I became homeless. I had lost my mom in 1997, and my dad in 1999. That is when I found out that I had a mental illness. I was put into a residential home until I was accepted into an apartment on my own.

When I was in high school I had to leave in my senior year because I was going to have a baby. In those days you could not go to school in that condition. So I waited a very long time to go back to school and get my GED. I raised my 3 children and then decided to work on my recovery. I graduated the Advocacy Unlimited class and from WRAP (Wellness Recovery Action Plan) class. With the help of my vocational case worker I went back to school to finish my high school diploma. At the time I told my son Kyle I just as well go through school, now or never, and I graduated in 2002.

I really enjoy my recovery. I have spoken at the Service of Hope at St. John's Church in Waterbury for Mental Health Awareness Month and have volunteered at the Discovery Drop-In Center. At the Drop-In Center I completed the Warmline/Peer Companion classes and work as a companion. I have 3 children and 6 grandchildren who I enjoy very much. I wish to offer special thanks to my son Kyle, family, and friends for supporting me in my recovery. I want to dedicate this story in memory of my mom, dad, and all the rest of my beloved loved ones.

THE LONG HARD ROAD TO RECOVERY

Samantha Sullivan

“The journey of a thousand miles must begin with a single step.” (Lao Tzu)

I can distinctly remember the age I was which changed my life until now, a negatively defined moment in time which still haunts me today. I was twelve years old, a happy contented child on that fateful day when I was with my family, sent out to get candy bars only to be hit by a car, an accident which altered my mind, body and soul. This occurred on a warm Summer day in 1954. I was seriously injured sustaining broken bones and Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI). But the greatest injury was that I was totally blamed for this accident; i.e., it was my fault that I stepped in front of a car. I was living during a time when pedestrians did not have the right of way and were at the mercy of inconsiderate, ignorant drivers. Another severe injury was that my family did not support me in my side of the story. Though I emphatically related how I looked both ways before crossing the road, I was scorned with disbelief and disenchantment. When I was released from the hospital five weeks later to recover at home, the rejection and isolation continued to the point of shame, guilt and questioning why I was ever born. This event was pivotal in generating a distain for my family and friends leading to a more pronounced series of emotional issues.

As I became older, my emotions and thoughts became more irrational and scattered. With no help from my family, it was this gut wrenching loneliness and rejection which created a kind of distrust and even hatred projected at my family and the few friends I had. Since I had almost died from that car accident, I thought about suicide and how no one would miss me or even care that I was gone. Again, what bothered me the most was this indifference I faced: nobody cared about how I felt, what I thought and only blamed and criticized me when negative events occurred. I felt like a transparent object, alone in a World of dispassionate people who would clear their collective consciousness by ignoring me. Also during this time there was multifaceted abuse which I dared not expose out fear and retribution. Besides, nobody would care and even if they did, I would not have been believed and probably even blamed for such. I lived in utter pain, in a *no-way-out* World.

To ease this personal pain, I experimented with this drug that was cheap and easily available called Alcohol. I realized very early on that with this drug I could make the pain go away, even for a short time, this was seemingly long enough for me at that time. Life, family, friends, horrible events all became so much easier for me to understand and accept with this magic elixir. I was using Alcohol as a kind of “medicine” to make “bad things” go away not fully (or even partially) understanding that I was living a lie: the subject and predicate of a bad joke on me. The problems, and the personal pain I felt, never really went away because they all came back, most times worse, when the elixir wore off. I never understood – or even cared – that Alcohol had a terrible “hook”: all I needed to do was drink more to sustain my fantasy world, a painless world, one in which I was able to function in even for a short time, it was better than the constant, agonizing pain I felt when I was sober.

At 17 years old, I married a man that I did not love (or faked myself into believing I did). This was done with the “blessing” of my parents because I would be “out of sight, out of mind” which was perfect for their own empty, cold-eyed lives. During a short period after my marriage, I stopped drinking because I wanted to embark on this new life style with dignity and grace and to enhance my own self-esteem. Besides, I wanted a family and I knew I would have to give up Alcohol to protect the forth coming pregnancy. When I was 24 years old, I gave birth to a beautiful baby girl (Terri), who was the light of my life. Despite the fact that my marriage was falling apart, I still envisioned myself as a changed individual, now a Mother. When my marriage dissolved six years later, I found myself (again) alone and rejected, not receiving any kind of support from my family and few friends. Their lives were disasters and, unfortunately, I made the conscious decision to make the pain go away (again) and the only “learned” way of doing this was to resume my drinking.

(Continued Next Page)

“That which does not kill us makes us stronger.” (Friedrich Nietzsche)

After my divorce, my life resumed as a negative whirlwind, fast tracking on a road to nowhere. For the next ten years, I worked two jobs, long hard hours, raising my daughter as a single parent, all under the influence of alcohol. The stress and strain of even the simplest things in my life became overwhelming for me, and the drinking carried on. This continued until 1987 when my life totally bottomed out, unceremoniously crashing and burning. I was in a terrible state of disrepair and with no one to turn to for help or even listen to me, I just wanted “out.” I decided to take my life. I was convinced that this was not only the right thing to do, but the only thing to do: to remove myself physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually away from the demons of my Past and the projected ones of my Future. I did not want a Future of any kind and the only way to rid of it was to rid myself. I could not see beyond this reasoning:

*“None so blind as those who will not see;
None so deaf as those who will not hear.”*

I am told that when one door closes, another door opens. I can apply this to my earnest, but failed, attempt at ending my life. Because I did not die from this act, upon awakening, I was given the help to start me on my arduous road to recovery. In other words, this suicide attempt was (again) another negatively defined moment in my life but in this case led me to a positively defined moment which was the recognition that I do have affective disorders and needed professional help. Up until this point, the situation was hopeless and helpless but with this awful attempt at self destruction and subsequent resurrection, the clouds parted and a beam of sunshine broke through, thus penetrating and destroying this ugly iron curtain of self-hatred. I was saved.

I was admitted to a psychiatric facility to start this long process of self realization and self esteem. This was not an easy task. It was like raising the Titanic to a floating status again; however, the success arrived in the form of a diagnosis. I WAS MANIC DEPRESSIVE, exhibiting all the symptoms, acting out all the behaviors. Because of this, a plan of treatment could be devised and medication available; but allow me to clear up some things: this diagnosis was not like I found a golden treasure. It was like a hidden demon inflicted on me because of a dysfunctional childhood via conflicts, hurt and abuse, and then suddenly popping out from Door Number Three winning a prize. Though I was still angry, sad, lonely and depressed, at least I was cognizant as to WHY my life, since the age of 12, culminated into the train wreck I managed to find myself in at that time.

My treatment consisted of seeing a Psychiatrist and a Therapist on a regular basis; however, I was still addicted to Alcohol. Upon the recommendation of my Therapist, I enrolled into a recovery-based group (group therapy) and I felt a pronounced difference in the way I looked at things, both past and present, and, for the first time, truly realized that there was a light at the end of my nightmarish tunnel. There was still, however, this distrust of “other” people, complete strangers at first, who managed to make me see my misalignment with the World and how unhealthy that truly was. I reasoned that how can anyone truly know what is going on in another person’s mind if they did not have the same mind set. When I joined a group which practiced DBT (Dialectical Behavior Therapy), I was able to face this issue successfully thus eliminating another demon. But as time went on with groups ending, and changes in psychiatric “personnel” this feeling of abandonment and distrust would arise again and it took some time for me to get used to “new” people who wanted to help me.

As with any profession, consolations and compromises must be made ... some work, some do not work, and it takes a few tries in finding the right person, and group, to continue a successful recovery. I persevered but I was no stranger to the fear and anxiety I faced when someone “new” came into my life, almost like an intrusion at first, but I was well “educated” in the alternatives of not having any help (professional or otherwise) at all. I adapted and molded myself into the person I wanted to be thanks to all of the help I received from my current Therapist and Psychiatrist. I was steered to enroll in classes at the Western Connecticut Mental Health Network which have been a positive influence in my life and helpful in my recovery. I am very thankful and grateful for the patience and understanding of those who have touched my life in a special way as to see life – my life – as a beautiful, loving adventure, one that I plan to have for a very long time.

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The Western Connecticut Mental Health Network's mission is to provide a comprehensive and effective recovery-oriented system of mental health and addiction services that promotes self sufficiency, dignity, cultural sensitivity, and respect. Western Connecticut Mental Health Network is committed to the following values:

- **C**hoice
- **H**ope
- **A**ccess
- **N**ew Opportunities
- **G**rowth
- **E**mpowerment



