

Determined to Live After Decades of Struggle

by Barbara in Louisiana

Unbeknownst to me, mental illness has shadowed me all of my life. I looked at a picture taken of me at the age of three and compared it to one taken at the age of twelve...the comparisons were shocking. What happened to the adorable child in the taffeta dress; the one full of promise and life? How did she become the sallow, skinny teenager with the darkened, haunted eyes?

At twelve, I stared back at the camera emotionless, lost in an empty existence. Mental illness robbed me of joy, excitement, first kisses, and self-worth. My odd behavior prevented me from 'fitting' in at school, forming lasting relationships with my peers at school, and ended my participating in the all-important social whirl of a teenager. I DIDN'T BELONG!

Since I didn't have a niche with my age group, I emulated adult behavior long before it was appropriate for me to do so. This continued through my first attempt of attending the university. I had to wait twenty-three years to have the opportunity to return and work towards my degree. The first time around, I partied myself straight out of the university gates. All night parties, bizarre behavior patterns, and broken relationships got in the way of my goals...I didn't have any. I drifted like a feather in the wind, never feeling settled in anything or belonging to anyone. I hurt precious men during this time; gentlemen any lady would have been proud to call their own. I acted cold and uncaring. Thank goodness I was able to rectify that situation years later. None were bitter and spoke to me with gentleness and warmth in their voices. They had seen 'the real me' under the wild exterior. Unfortunately, I have two failed marriages under my belt, both alcoholics. I thought I could save them when I couldn't save myself.

Schoolwork and jobs suffered because I became 'bored' after a while. It was as though life was there for my entertainment. I could focus; I just had trouble completing tasks. It was a struggle to do so. The only reason I did so well was through covering up my faults (what would people THINK?), acting charming, and 'faking it' until I made it. It was exhausting! The lying and trying to outmaneuver got the best of me.

I finally sought help in my thirties when situations at home became unbearable. Two people with untreated mental illness living in the same household, both wearing badges and carrying guns, was a bit much. A 'fortunate' accident with an 18-wheeler ended my law enforcement career and opened my eyes. My priorities changed drastically, and I had a lot of 'down' time to re-examine me...and something wasn't quite right with that picture.

I was granted a full scholarship back at the university, so off I went. I spent a lot of time with the counseling services on campus, a private psychiatrist (pain management), and scores of friends who were psychologists. NO ONE noticed that something was wrong. I was covering up and just being charming. I was soooo in trouble.

After twenty years of marriage, my husband divorced me. I gave him a choice: we BOTH go for counseling and medication or he could STAY at the fishing camp. He chose the swamp and a beer bottle. It shattered my heart and broke my spirit. I returned to my hometown and went to work as a surveillance officer. I told myself that the divorce, my mother's death, losing the only home I ever had, and finally my car, all

within six months, didn't affect me...I could handle this little situation just like all the rest. I WAS WRONG!

A year later, I had a breakdown and ended up in the state psychiatric hospital. Without private insurance at the time, I received a vacation in care of the state. I had gone from living across the street from the local country club to being homeless in one year. It took me forever to say the 'H' word...I still can't; I disassociate myself from it. Memories of snippets of whispered conversation about my paternal grandfather, 'asylum', and shame flooded my being. He became a suicidal statistic...I was determined to live!

From the hospital, I was sent to an assisted care facility. I was told it was transitional when I arrived there, I found out that some of the 'clients' had been there for decades. I shut myself off from life completely: staring aimlessly, overmedicated, nonverbal. There was a therapist who did outreach work on Wednesdays. She noticed that I didn't fit in with the rest of 'the group'. She had me enrolled into a community living day program until she could get me transferred to a different group home. Within six months, I was back substitute teaching, visiting with my family, and looking forward to a new life. I am now the state co-director for the BRIDGES program at the Mental Health Association. Now I offer a hand to others.