

Loves being a mental health advocate and volunteering

by Terri in New Jersey

I've been affected with mental illness since the age of 12 when my brother died. I began having difficulty in school and at home. My friends started calling my mother and telling her that I was acting strange in school and when I spent time with them socially. At home, no one noticed anything different, but that's when I started having problems. In school, I started falling behind in my class work and began failing most of my classes. That's when my family starting seeing a difference in me.

I often ran away from home because of emotional and physical abuse in my family. I wanted to take all my sisters and brother with me to get away from the turmoil at home. I went to a youth shelter because I didn't want to be at home. I was then sent to a foster family where my foster father sexually abused me.

After I left the foster home because I was abused, I was sent back to my original home. That's when I first went into the hospital. I was diagnosed as schizoaffective and having a borderline personality disorder and was put on medication for the first time. I then went to live in a residential facility for youth with mental illnesses. I then lived in a halfway house and went to a rehabilitation center. I tried working, but at the time, I couldn't handle a job. I then went to live on my own and a short time later I became suicidal and tried to overdose on medication more than once. This resulted in me being committed to a state psychiatric hospital.

For the last 20 years I have been living in Community Hope, an organization that houses mental health consumers.

I have gone in the hospital a few times, and my diagnosis has been changed to bipolar disorder, which I've been treated for over the last 10 years. I've been and tried many different medications, and I think the medications that I'm on now have been working quite well. It's just taken a long time to find the right meds and support that I've needed. I'm on Medicaid and Supplemental Security Income and have been on that since I became an adult.

I am now trying to go to school to become a medical assistant and hope to get a job working in a doctor's office or hospital. To get into school, I had to take a very hard test and did so well on it that I was offered the opportunity to be a professor's assistant.

I have worked in the hospital as a volunteer for the past few years and loved every minute of it. My interest in medicine started when my brother got sick with cancer as a child. I decided, at that time, that I would like to become a pediatric nurse. I m starting slow but that's my goal. I read medical books on my own at home and am active in educating myself on this topic.

I do volunteer work for the Mental Health Association where I've become a consumer advocate. I'm on three different county committees, and belong to the Coalition of Mental Health Consumers Organization, COMHCO.

I cherish the fact that I'm a mental health consumer advocate because of my experiences as a consumer. I want so much to help other people. It makes me feel really good to contribute to other peoples' lives and make their lives better. I saw what others have done for me, and I appreciated their help. I want to do the same in return.

The two proudest activities that I have done as a consumer, which have made me feel like a contributor to the community, are being on the COMHCO board and being appointed to the committees that I'm on. I can speak for other people now to help them. I know mental illnesses have stigma, but I think that over the years that I've been an advocate, things have definitely changed. Unfortunately, things have got to change even more to make our system better.