

A mother's heartache, fears and loss

by JoAnn in Illinois

I am one of the few people with a mental illness that did the unthinkable. I became clinically insane and committed a crime. I was found Not Guilty by Reason of Insanity for hurting someone; my own child. My childhood was, unfortunately, a common one. I had a violent, abusive, alcoholic father. I came from a large family where I was the oldest. There is a long family history of depression, alcoholism, and anxiety disorders on both sides of my family. So genetics gave me a major depressive disorder with psychotic features, and I suffer from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

I tried to do well in school and did pretty well because my mind learned to disassociate. I could concentrate on my school work, lose myself in it, and not even be aware of the chaos around me. I do not remember most of my childhood. I had my first major depressive episode in college. I slept for 16 to 20 hours a day for over a month. I would go for days without eating so I became skin and bones. I went to the school health center and was told there was nothing wrong with me.

One night I tried to kill myself by slitting my wrists. After being stitched up (one wrist took ten stitches) and spending four hours in a psych ward until a psychiatrist could see me, I was again told there was nothing wrong with me and was sent home. The college did insist that I not return to school until I got a note from a mental health professional that I was no longer a danger to myself, though. This was 25 years ago when mental illness held even more of a stigma than today and people didn't often see therapists.

Finding help was difficult, but I found a therapist through church that saw me once a week for eight weeks. He told me my problem was I had a lot of anger toward my father. He said don't keep it bottled up inside of me, talk to friends and he could do no more for me. He gave me my note and back to school I went. The depression didn't ease for a year.

I graduated with a degree in engineering. I have no idea how I did that and remember very little of my senior year.

I muddled my way through life the next few years. I got a job, met a man I thought I loved, settled down and started a family. I had my second major depressive episode after my first child was born; Post Partum depression on top of what I already had. I saw a therapist for a year and a half. Slowly I came out of the depression a second time without medication even being suggested. My third and most tragic depressive episode happened after my fourth child was born. I couldn't sleep and when I did I was haunted by nightmares of my childhood, I couldn't eat. I was having constant flashbacks and intrusive thoughts. I started seeing a psychologist twice a week who sent me to a psychiatrist. I was having problems, I was told, so I was given anti-anxiety medication. But I kept getting worse. I was becoming psychotic. I was having hallucinations. I was exhausted all the time but still could not sleep. The medication was increased.

My slide into insanity took five months. I was losing all touch with reality. Dreams and hallucinations seemed so real. The colors were so intense. I could feel them, taste them, hear them more clearly than what was real. The voices in my head were my constant companions. I thought they were aspects of myself telling me things I had

never remembered about my childhood. I could not tell if I was awake or dreaming. Again the medication was increased.

I saw my psychiatrist less than 24 hours before my crime. I was given a low dose anti-psychotic that I have been told since was the equivalent of taking a baby aspirin for a migraine. It was far too little, far too late. That night the voices became very mean and loud. I found myself doing all sorts of strange things. I told my husband I thought I should go to the hospital. We called the psychiatrist and she told me to take my meds and go to sleep. I thought the voices controlled my body. I tried to rip my uterus out of my body. I believed that the voice of my father would take over my body and his voice said he was going to do all sorts of horrible things to my children. I had to save them and in my insane mind that meant harming one of them, but not badly, just enough to get DCFS to come and save them.

I assaulted my oldest child. My husband came running downstairs from the spare bedroom and screamed. I sent the child to her room and fell asleep. The police woke me up. I spent almost a year in jail; a nightmarish, disgusting hellhole. My husband put a restraining order on me so I could not be bonded out. He put me in a mental hospital, placed an order of protection against me, and served me with divorce papers while I was there. I was allowed no information about my children, not even pictures. My family and friends were not even allowed to see my children.

When I was found Not Guilty by Reason of Insanity I believe my public defender and judge meant well. My public defender didn't fight the charge because she said it didn't matter. I was going to be found NGRI and she wanted me to get out of jail and into a mental hospital as soon as possible. She was wrong. My judge believed I was going somewhere where I would finally get help and be well. He was wrong.

I believe he meant the words, "I find the defendant not guilty by reason of insanity and therefore shall not be held liable for her actions." But this is not the movies. This is not Perry Mason. I spent the next three years in a state mental hospital. My case worker told me within the first five minutes of meeting me I would be there three to four years because of my charge. That is the sentence I would have received had I been sent to prison so that is what I would have to spend locked up, period. She did not believe in the insanity verdict. Insanity, yes, but if you committed a crime while supposedly insane that meant you were just an evil person deep inside you and it was her job to protect society from you for as long as possible. But at least I finally, in that time, got on proper medication. After that, I had a wonderful psychologist and psychiatrist. After 2 1/2 years of no contact with my children, I started getting letters from them and was allowed one hour visits with them at the hospital once a month. I was released six years ago.

I do the best I can with what I have. I see my teenage children as often as I can afford the visitation supervisor after paying child support. It isn't very often, but I cherish every moment. It rips me up to know they deserve so much more than what I am allowed. I am haunted everyday by flash backs of a past I wish I could change but can't. The last 10 years have been tough but maybe when my children turn 18 and I can walk down the street with them unsupervised I will be free.