

## Writing has provided an outlet, and ultimately, a life-saver

by Denise in Minnesota

In retrospect, my illness was noticeably present by the time I was eight years old. I would project myself into a different realm and take no consequence for my behavior because that was the other Denise. Then I would "sulk", as it was put to me. As a teen, it became mood swings, which finally manifested themselves into a move to the attic. I became isolated from my family. I had two groups of friends: the popular girls, when I felt 'normal' and the girls who ran with the fast crowd when I did not feel "normal." When I was depressed I had my good close friends.

As a young working adult, I ran a very upbeat creative classroom, not always the quietest on the hall; unless I was in a depressed mood, then nothing went right and my students could do nothing right. I'm not sure they ever quite knew where I was coming from. My night life was filled with parties to feed my mania as it escalated out-of-control. Then I would crash. Sometimes the other Denise would take over and do things the teacher would never be caught doing. In 1998 the world came to a crashing halt when, locked into my room, curled in a ball, crying, I pointed my fingers at my head like a gun and realized that if it had been real I would be dead. I called a mental health counselor. She recommended a psychiatrist in my medical group. I began with a diagnosis of depression but my psychologist suggested it might be bi-polar. They began treatment for bi-polar and my illness seemed to be getting better. However, there was still the time when Denise would disassociate from her body and watch while this other person would fly into a rage. The calm Denise could do nothing to help.

They tested me for schizophrenia; I had it too. Medicating both became a challenge. To this day, 10 years later, I still have breakthroughs. Sometimes they tweak the meds, but usually I can get control back due to the help of my medical team. I have learned what triggers my episodes and how to deal with them. I took early retirement because of the stress of teaching. My psychiatrist has me on full disability. I do not work outside the home. I have been able to change my life though due to my writing. I went from teaching mathematics for 32 years to becoming a full-time writer. I publish a newsletter once a month. I've published poetry, and I am about to have a novel published this year. Writing has saved me. The other thing I do when I can't cope, things pile up and I need a time out, is a puzzle. They keep my mind active. I also belong to a book club and a walking club. They meet my social needs. Fortunately, I have had insurance throughout, and family and friends who support me. I live in a state that does not feel the need to discriminate. If I could help change one thing, it would be to give each person that has a mental illness in the 11 states that still discriminate the chance to have the health coverage that I have had.