

Carrying a Torch of Hope

by Michelle in Virginia

Mental illness has affected my life in that it has changed it forever. The things I aspired to do before I got ill have been hard to achieve. I always have a tougher obstacle to climb than others. Sometimes life seems so impossible and other times it seems too easy, until I crash.

My relationships are another matter. People come and go. It is hard to keep friends. Most of my friends now are like me and we help each other. I cling to my church family because they love and understand me and let me be my quirky self. I can not hold a job no matter how much I try because I forget too much, or I get overwhelmed or depression keeps me from getting out. It is troubling, so I volunteer. With this, I have options.

My experience with mental illness outside of medication is scary and frightening. I can see things spiritually and hear things spiritually, and I do not like it all. When I see angels I am grateful but when I see demons, well, that is a different story. Sometimes I do not know whose voice I am listening to and I get scared. The medicine deafens the problem.

I don't think we were made to see the other side because our fragile minds can not handle it. I was young when I realized I could see and hear what others can not, but I was 16 when I had my first breakdown and 19 with the second. My parents did nothing but use threats and abuse to control me. My first husband did the same.

I was diagnosed in 1999 after a major car accident. They diagnosed me with schizophrenia and PTSD. Later it was changed to schizoaffective bipolar with PTSD and agoraphobia. I have received treatment at a community service board. Care has come hard because most doctors want you to stabilize with high doses of medication, go to adult day group and collect a check. This is not a good quality of life and depression for me got worse at one point. I was told I would digress, I could not aspire to anything and I would be cared for. This is not life. So I took things into my own hands. I found my medication that works for me at the dose that works for me. I use psychotherapy along with jazzercise to keep my spirits up. Plus, I live by my WRAP plan.

I am a mother of six, a new wife to a peer like me. I am a WRAP facilitator and a certified peer support specialist. I lead wellness groups at the clubhouse and the drop in center, and I am preparing to do one at the horticulture building. I am working on my associate's degree and I sing with my choir, as well as sing solos. I am a motivational speaker for REACH and VOCAL, and I love to sing for them when they give me a chance. Finally, I am a poet and I publish in the VOCAL magazine online.

My life now is full of hope and dreams and great support. But I still have many obstacles to overcome. If I could change one thing about how people view mental illness is that you can recover from mental illness and live a productive life. What has been most helpful to me is the support I receive from my church family and the support I get from the recovery movement. It is a torch for me that I carry to others like myself. Please do all you can for us who have mental illnesses. We do not want to go back to the hospitals and we do not want to be captives of medication. We want to work, we want to take care of our own, we want to dream, we want to live.