

Empowered by Understanding the Disorder

by Anita in St. Louis

I believe that I have had bipolar disorder all my life. As a child, I was considered a tough kid, just as soon fight than say hello. I had a few friends. My siblings perceived me as a hero for them, righting all wrongs and fighting their fights for them. School was not my thing, being bored and misunderstood; I spent a lot of time in trouble. I finally graduated, married and ran away and joined the Army. In the Army, I married a second time, not being divorced from the first.

After my four-year enlistment, I was honorably discharged. However, I was not allowed to re-enlist because I had sought psychiatric services. My marriage was not necessarily the worst, nor was it the best. It lasted for 14 years. I had two beautiful daughters born to that marriage. Four years after that marriage ended, lost custody of my daughters, who were then six and seven years old.

I was super woman for a long time: juggling a job, working at a local hospital on a third shift and sleeping when the girls were at school, then taking care of them until it was time to go to work again. After a while, depression stepped in and the downhill spiral started. I was misdiagnosed and treated for schizophrenia, leaving me unable to function at all. My sister, fearing for my children's lives, decided that I needed to have my kids taken from me. To make a long story short, the judge told me to come back in the coming summer to see him, because he felt that I wasn't on medication long enough. The Judge was killed in an auto accident before I got a chance to be in front of him again. I had done nothing wrong. I just had a mental illness and needed some help.

My daughters went to Virginia when they were six and seven and now they are nineteen and twenty. I spent years going through the legal system and know that the stigma attached to mental illness doesn't help matters. It took me five years to get on my feet after my girls were gone. I was treated with electroconvulsive therapy along with endless bottles of medication. I think what I really needed was grief counseling. I lived on social security disability that was next to nothing. I had to become a different person, afraid to make decisions or stand up for what was right because I would not be allowed to see my daughters.

I knew if I did not make some changes in my life, I would die. I started by getting involved with the Missouri Mental Health Consumers Network. Then BRIDGES was introduced into Missouri and I was talked into taking the classes. From there I was trained as a teacher. I wanted to be a nurse and decided I could do that. I was discouraged because I had bipolar disorder. "Did that make me stupid?" was my question. I snuck around and applied for nursing school anyway and was accepted. It was a challenge for me because stress exacerbates my disorder, but I persevered. The person who told me I had a bipolar disorder tutored me in math and was sitting in the audience when I graduated.

I now work for the Mental Health Association of Greater St. Louis as the program director of BRIDGES for the state of Missouri. I still struggle with bipolar and most likely always will. Learning as much as I can about the disorder and helping others learn about their own has re-empowered me. I never got my children back, but I was lucky; I at least got to see them twice a year. I have learned that we are capable of being good parents and having a good life if this is what we choose for ourselves.

Having someone who believes in us even when we are at our lowest helps more than words could ever say.