

The Voices Project: Mental Health
(Broadway Bound Theatre Festival version)

edited by

Alicia Nordstrom

stories written by

Alicia Nordstrom, Ian Anderson, Kelli Crockett, Ryan Davis,
Zachary Davis, Mario Delker, Taylor Harnish, Brittney Lahr, Nick
Lynch, Sarah Mihalka, Sean Morris, Lexi Sasso, Faith Sinclair,
Kyra Spencer, and Carmelina Tringali

7 New Lake Drive
Drums, PA 18222
570-762-6809

anordstr@misericordia.edu

©2018 Alicia Nordstrom

Characters

Alicia

May/Ana

Maria/Ruth

Tony

Lydia/Patient

Catherine/Gloria

Ashley/Sierra

Michael/Isaac

Christopher

Joel

Alex/Son

Melissa

- **Alicia** - early 40's. Passionate yet diplomatic psychology college professor who is tired of society's stigma bullshit. Views mental health as just another aspect of one's personality.
- **May** - mid-20-30's. Generally happy and effusive person. Feels resentful but not bitter about her childhood being raised by a mother with schizoaffective disorder.
- **Maria** - mid-to-late 60's. Wife of Tony who has Alzheimer's.
- **Tony** - mid-to-late 60's. Muddling his way through life with Alzheimer's as best he can.
- **Lydia** - early to mid-40's. Kind-hearted advocate for her sons who have Tourette's Syndrome, Michael and Christopher.
- **Christopher** - mid-teens. Older brother of Michael and son of Lydia. Friendly, upbeat, and confident. Has Tourette's Syndrome but it doesn't seem to bother him.
- **Michael** - early-teens. Younger brother of Christopher and son of Lydia. Appears more affected by his Tourette's Syndrome than his older brother. Likeable and genuine.
- **Catherine** - mid-40's. Recovered alcoholic and mother. Has a positive and witty charm sprinkled with dark humor and light sarcasm.
- **Ashley** - mid-late-20's. Competent professional who is still struggling with her eating disorders. Uses social media to reach out for help when her ED rears its head (which is often).
- **Sierra** - late teens/early 20's. Highly intelligent college student who needs to be academically challenged in order to remain motivated.

- **Ruth** - late 60's. Has been depressed her whole life and found out only three years ago that she also has bipolar disorder. Soft-spoken woman who is ready to share her story publicly so that it might help others.
- **Ana** - mid-20's. Has a strong but broken spirit.
- **Joel** - early 40's. Average, friendly guy. Nobody would know what he has been through by just meeting him.
- **Alex** - mid-late 20's. Veteran with a bruised spirit and body from his tour in Iraq. Left on bad terms and still trying to find his new career path outside of the military.
- **Isaac** - 9-10 years old. Spunky and intelligent boy on "the spectrum" with above average math and music skills who also has ADHD. Happens to be Alicia's son.
- **Melissa** - mid 40's. Intelligent and loving mother who is strong of heart but still processing the death of her teenage son.

Author's Note

I started The Voices Project in 2009 as a classroom project to examine difference in society. I asked my students to interview people from stigmatized and misunderstood groups that crossed different races, religions, ethnicities, social classes, and more. My students wrote stories of their interviewees' lives and a faculty writing team integrated the stories into a staged reading program that was performed at the end of the semester to an audience of 300 people.

I did the project again in 2012 with a focus on physical disabilities such as deafness, blindness, spinal cord injury, stroke, cerebral palsy, spina bifida, and more. The stories were integrated by a faculty writing team and performed at the end of the semester to an audience of 400 people. The program was recorded and aired on our regional PBS station (a link to the program can be found at www.misericordia.edu/voicesproject).

This past fall, I conducted The Voices Project: Mental Health with my colleague, Dr. Amanda Caleb. This time, 60 students interviewed people and family members of those with mental health conditions and their stories were integrated into a script by the original writing team including Rebecca Steinberger, Taylor Rupp, Melissa Sgroi, Amanda Caleb, Patrick Hamilton, Matthew Hinton, and Allan Austin. A cast of 21 actors performed these stories as a theatrical production at Misericordia University this past April to an audience of over 600 people.

This summer, with the guidance of dramaturg, Chris Phillips, I went back to the original stories and completely rewrote the script to provide a more in-depth portrayal of 14 stories capturing 9 mental health conditions. I am grateful to Peter Jensen and this cast for bringing these stories to life.

Schizoaffective Disorder (This is My Life)

written by Kelli Crockett

*(MAY sits and talks to
ALICIA)*

MAY

I don't consider myself lucky enough to have a mother. There was a woman who gave birth to me, but I do not consider her my mother. My childhood and life are far different from most people's.

ALICIA

How so?

MAY

My mother was diagnosed with bipolar disorder and schizophrenia at the age of eighteen. She ended up having 3 children; me, my sister, and my half-brother. She has had approximately ten breakdowns throughout the course of my life.

ALICIA

Tell me about the first one.

MAY

I was four or five years old. We were living with my grandfather and it was around the Fourth of July. Something in my mother's mind told her that it was the second coming of Christ. She was fully convinced that we all had to go outside and lay naked on the ground and wait for him to come. Being only four or five, I thought nothing of the odd nature of this plan. At this point, I still thought of her as my mother, so if mom said something was going to happen, then it was going to happen. In the end, however, mom wasn't right and Jesus didn't come. Rather, the local police came to investigate what on Earth was going on. My mother described exactly what she believed to the

police and for the first time that I can remember, she was taken away and put into a mental health facility.

ALICIA

How did it affect you growing up?

MAY

We moved around a lot, which meant that I didn't have many long term friends. When I would make friends, they never came over to my house. It was so much easier to go to their houses because I wouldn't have to explain what went on in my own home and expose my friends to it. I also enjoyed going to their houses because it was almost like a vicarious experience. I lived a normal family life for a few hours and saw what it was supposed to be--like an actual traditional family that I wished I had.

ALICIA

When was the second breakdown?

MAY

I was around eight years old. It was a few days before Christmas and it was the year that Cabbage Patch Kids were the most popular gift of the season. We were never very wealthy, so getting all three of us Cabbage Patch Kids was simply not in the picture. Instead, my mother got us an off-brand type of doll and we could not have been more ecstatic. However, my mother told us that the reason we were getting our gifts early was because we needed to run away from home. We packed up our things and left that day. We walked about nine and a half miles in the snow down the side of the highway. Only being eight, I thought of it as a sort of adventure in a winter wonderland. We ended up at my aunt's house who then called the police and my mom was sent to yet another mental health facility.

ALICIA

When did things hit rock bottom for you?

MAY

I was fourteen. It was three days before my birthday and my friends were supposed to have a birthday party for me. My mom came home with these strangers and decided that we were going to go away to the beach with them. I was old enough to know that this wasn't a good situation, so I did what I felt was right. I picked up the phone and called the police on my own mother. After the officers showed up, she was taken away to the psychiatric hospital and, since we did not have any family living around us at this time, we were put in a juvenile detention center. It felt so surreal and traumatic. Throughout the two days we were there, we were treated just like the other kids who were actually there for illegal things. The guards didn't care what your story was or why you were there. I felt like I was being punished for calling the cops. After two days, my aunt came to pick us up. On my birthday.

ALICIA

How are things now?

MAY

My mother met people from a church group and they listened to her tell her stories of how my sister and I were mistreating her and how awful her life was. She then showed up on our doorstep with two police officers escorting her so that she could pack up her stuff and leave. I have not seen my mother since then and I don't know where she is today.

I have had to be the adult for almost my entire life. When she tells me to do something or to justify something she says, she'll use the phrase, "Well I'm your mother". She has never been my mother. I do not wish ill will on her, but I don't love her. I hope that she is getting help and treatment for her illness, but I cannot be a part of that equation anymore. I can't change anything, and I can't change the way I feel. This is my life, what are you gonna do?

Introduction

ALICIA

Everyone has a story to tell. My name is Alicia Nordstrom and I'm a college professor at Misericordia University located in northeastern Pennsylvania. As a psychology professor, I'm interested in how we think about people considered "different" in society and why we judge some people as "normal" and others as not. So, I created an assignment for my students to explore these questions and capture the voices of people from social groups that are stigmatized, misunderstood, and ignored.

I didn't realize how much I would learn and how much this project would change me. The people who were interviewed and their stories are now a permanent part of my consciousness and I hope they can become a part of yours, too.

**A Day in the Life of an Alzheimer's Patient and his
Caregiver**

written by Lexi Sasso

TONY

Buzzing, static what
Was I doing?

ALICIA

Before the Diagnosis. Stage One.

TONY

Ask my wife and she says,

MARIA

You were getting your briefcase

TONY

She says, "You were getting your briefcase"
She looks at me strange, I ask again-
She says

MARIA

. . . honey, you asked me already

TONY

Hmph
Buzzing, static
I go to work

MARIA

The sun rises and I smile. I rested well last
night. I get up and make breakfast for Tony: the same

thing I have been doing for thirty years now. He seems disgruntled, and is pacing around a bit. After a few minutes he asks me

TONY

"What was I doing?"

MARIA

"You were getting your briefcase."

TONY

"What was I doing?"

MARIA

Puzzled, I repeat myself, and he huffs again, as if he doesn't remember talking to me beforehand. He finds his briefcase after twenty minutes, in the same spot it has always been. He leaves abruptly, and he forgets to eat breakfast. I dismiss it. He must be having a bad day.

TONY

I can't find my damned glasses.
Ask Gloria and she says

GLORIA

They're on your head Dr. Evans.

TONY

Hmph
Next patient comes in, she sits down and I
Turn on the machine like I do
Every day
I tell her to look through the lens
I forget what happens next

I tell her to look through the lens
She says

PATIENT

I already am, and I can see well.

TONY

I go to write it down and it's there already
I wrote it down three times

MARIA

I hear the car engine rumble. Tony must be
home. After a few minutes, he comes in the door, sits
on the couch and says,

TONY

I quit my job.

MARIA

You what?!

TONY

I was getting too confused.

MARIA

But you love your job!

TONY

Can't love it when I'm confused.

MARIA

He turns on the TV and that's that. He doesn't say
anything more for the rest of the night.

ALICIA

After the Diagnosis. Stage Two

TONY

The buzzing is louder now and it makes me want to
Scream, and I can't
Focus. I am eating breakfast and I keep missing the food
on my plate
Maria is listening to an audiobook and
the words meld together and
I tell her to shut it off. She asks me

MARIA

Why?

TONY

and I say
"Just shut it off." She says

MARIA

No.

TONY

and I lose all control
I throw my fork at her and scream
TURN OFF THE GOD DAMNED MUSIC NOW!
It misses, she has fire blazing in her eyes
She shuts it off and runs out of the room
I pick up the fork and continue eating

MARIA

I am scared of my own husband. He almost seems like he is
possessed. Tony has never raised a hand to me in all the
years we have been together, and now he is screaming at me
and throwing forks at me. He makes me so angry, and
sometimes I am tempted to fight back, and sometimes I
do. I have to force myself to remember to slow down and be
patient, to bring him back to earth with a hug or a squeeze
of the hand. I am trying hard to find new ways to care for
him. I have reached out to the Alzheimer's Association,
and they have given me virtually nothing.

TONY

She said to sign my name

MARIA

Tony, sign your name.

TONY

What does she mean, sign?

Like a street sign?

A stop sign?

My name is not a stop sign! I say

They look at me and say sign anthonyevans

I said there is no sign called anthonyevans

They gave me paper to write on and I was confused

They give me a pen and tell me to write

Write what?

They say write an "A"

I say A what?

They say "A" the letter A

I say I am not sending a letter

Maria writes a word down and tells me to copy

I try and I can't and I want to break the pen and

Maria tells me to write it again and I say

Who do you think I am, Babe Ruth? But

I don't know why I did.

She holds my hand and helps me write Anthony

Whatever that means

MARIA

Today we had the Elder Lawyer come to the house to transfer some of the money in his name into accounts in my name. He had to sign only a few papers, but I had no idea just how much of a nightmare it was going to be to have him write down his own name. By the time "Anthony" had been written on the paper, two hours had passed and the lawyer had left before I could give her the papers. He didn't know what I meant when I asked him to sign his name, and he began ranting about stop signs for five minutes.

TONY

My name is not a stop sign!

My name is not a stop sign!

My name is not a stop sign!

MARIA

I have never seen him quite like this before. He could hardly print his name, let alone sign it in cursive. I spelled his name out to him letter by letter, and even then he was unable to translate the letters onto the paper. Finally, I gave up and guided his hand to write his name over and over again on a scrap piece of paper until his name was readable. Even with my hand guiding him, his handwriting looked like that of a first grader. I was so fed up by the end that I considered having my son pick me up a bottle of wine at the liquor store, even though I hadn't touched alcohol in twenty years.

ALICIA

Stage Three.

TONY

She told me to take a shower and I say
I can't find it
She turns me to the bathroom and I say
I can't find it
All I see is white, no dimensions
All flat, no shower, no toilet, no sink
I go to pee and guess where the toilet is, but
I miss
She cleans up my mess
She guides my hands to the invisible shower and tries
to help me in
I say NO! NO SHOWER! NO SHOWER!
I try to refuse, but it's no use
I sit on the stool and she washes me

MARIA

It has gotten to the point that I have to force Tony to go in the shower. Whenever I lead him to the bathroom, he mumbles about not seeing the toilet or the shower. I have to lead him to the toilet, but he often aims wrong and urinates on the floor. I finally broke down and ordered a catheter today. I have to lead him to the shower and help him in. He sits on a

shower seat now to avoid falling. I have to wash him, and when I do, he just sits there with his eyes blank. Sometimes he will talk, but it is mostly nonsense. Getting him to shower is one of the hardest things I have to do each day. He hates it more than anything; he doesn't care how dirty he is. It is like I am taking care of a child.

TONY

It's Christmas day, the lights on the tree are too bright
 Everyone is happy and opening gifts. I am not. I am tired and tired of everyone
 I say I'm going to bed, I walk up the stairs and I can't open the door,
 I hit it and try again- open dammit!
 This man comes up and approaches me raising his arms-
 DON'T HIT ME! I scream, terrified, cowering like a useless child, the man says

SON

Dad, I was just trying to give you a hug.

TONY

Oh I say,
 Ok.
 It's only Jacob, my son Jacob (Hug.)
 He hugs me and tucks me into bed
 I sleep.

MARIA

It's Christmas day, and Tony is slumped low in his chair with a blanket wrapped around him. His eyes lack the sparkle that the man I fell in love with had. I force myself to remember that deep under the cloud of his Alzheimer's, he still lives. I look into his eyes every day, and sometimes I can see a glimpse of him in them. Today, I cannot see him anywhere. The kids don't really know how to approach him. They tiptoe around him and they speak to him almost in a whisper, as if afraid of awakening his internal beast. They don't understand it, and honestly I can't say I know that much more than they do. He lives in a different world now, one that takes him away from me. Every day I try to reach

him. Every day it gets harder.

TONY

I am going to bed!

MARIA

A minute or two later we hear him cursing furiously and banging on the bedroom door. The kids look at each other with concern, and I can see their hearts breaking. If only they knew what I have seen him do. Jacob says that he is going to check on him, and he quickly walked up the stairs. As soon as Jacob reaches the top, Tony starts screaming at him, pleading for him not to hit him. A few moments later, I hear Tony calm down as he let Jacob lead him into his bedroom. After he comes downstairs, I ask him how he got Tony to stop screaming.

SON

I told him I just wanted to give him a hug.

MARIA

To this day I am not sure if, in that moment, I was leaning on him, or if he was leaning on me.

Tourette's Syndrome (The Suspected Truth)

written by Taylor Harnish, Sarah Mihalka & Sean Morris

*(LYDIA stands with her
two sons, MICHAEL and
CHRISTOPHER)*

LYDIA

My husband and I have two handsome boys, Christopher and Michael, who were diagnosed with Tourette's Syndrome. When I was a new mom, I had trouble coping with the fact that no one could figure out what was going on with my little guy, Chris. The eye doctor prescribed glasses for his excessive blinking when he was four years old. A year or two went by and he began to cough and throat clear. Our pediatrician sent us to an ENT whose findings were inconclusive. We took trips to the dermatologist for excessive head scratching. The allergist tried a bunch of things including exclusion diets where we cut out dairy, gluten and then both. So, I kept pestering the pediatrician. I felt belittled when I was in his office. He treated me like I was one of those overbearing mothers, when I wasn't. I had a gut feeling and couldn't put my finger on the source.

CHRISTOPHER

Tell them about the weird noise I made in my nose.

LYDIA

Right! So, Chris began to make a crazy noise through his nostrils. I can't even explain what it sounded like other than exhaling forcefully. So, I made our second appointment with the ENT. I said to the doctor, "I know I sound crazy but please, please, please see if there is something stuck up there." His check-up found nothing. He said. . .

CHRISTOPHER

It's probably just a tic mom, it will go away with time.

LYDIA

I went home and googled Tourette's and found a website that was perfect. I saw how early onset is six years

old, more common in boys, begins in the eyes, then nose and eventually head and neck. In that moment, I sort of freaked out because who would think that their children would have Tourette's?

MICHAEL

Then I started showing tics, too.

LYDIA

After I began googling, I noticed that Mike was doing unusual things, like repeating himself a lot. For example, if I said "we are going to the store", Mike would say

MIKE

We are going to the store.

LYDIA

And if I said, yes, he would say,

MIKE

We are going to the store.

LYDIA

I tried to discuss it with the pediatrician but he blew me off again, thinking I was the neurotic mom. Finally, a neurologist diagnosed Chris with Tourette's Syndrome when he was eight years old. I felt relieved that someone finally heard me and the mystery was solved. He sent me on my way with his business card and the Tourette's association website on the back. A week later, I realized that Mike had it, too.

CHRISTOPHER

(to the audience)

Okay, so you might be wondering a little bit about my Tourette's. I guess I could tell you a little bit about it but you have to make sure you don't freak out. To me it's very normal and hardly noticeable, so I would appreciate if you don't treat me any different than you would if I didn't have the condition at all.. Having Tourette's basically means that I get tics involuntarily. Which means they just kind of happen without me telling myself to do it. Some things that my tics cause me to do are blink my right eye or

sometimes my eyebrows will go up and down. I guess it can get a little annoying sometimes but I don't care that much. Honestly, there is nothing I can do about the way I am but it's really okay because I like who I am.

MICHAEL

(to the audience)

With my symptoms, I do things like head nods where I shrug my shoulder and nod my head to the side. As I got older, those symptoms went away and I mainly just tap my foot on the floor or tap my fingers on a table. Sometimes I wink my eyes randomly.

CHRISTOPHER

I love to play sports like basketball, baseball, soccer, and flag football. There are only two places where the Tourette's comes into play with sports. When I play basketball, I always have to fix my jersey, like when I'm sweating and it's sticking to me. I have to pull the fabric off my chest and I never notice or realize that I do it. The other time was when my dad was my flag football coach and yelled at me when I wasn't focused on the plays. Other than that, Tourette's doesn't affect any of the sports that I do.

MICHAEL

I had a few times when my Tourette's made me feel weird. Once, I had one humiliating experience with a teacher. I was sitting in class and was tapping my pencil on my desk as a part of my tics and marks were left on the desk. The next day, even though the teacher knows I have Tourette's, my teacher called me out and made me clean the marks off the desk in front of the whole class.

LYDIA

The hardest part with it all is having to explain to other adults that they cannot control what they are doing.

CHRISTOPHER

Mom, do you remember the time with the sleepover? When you told my friend that I had tics, and the next morning, my friend told his mom and his mom made him check himself for ticks, like the insect. That is one

of my favorite stories--I just think that it is really funny.

MICHAEL

Another time that I felt weird is when my classmates found out. My friends treated me like I needed help with everything, no matter how much I told them that I was just a normal kid. The first week everyone found out, they would try to carry my books to class and tell me things like,

MICHAEL AND CHRISTOPHER TOGETHER

"It will all be okay,"

MICHAEL

and

MICHAEL AND CHRISTOPHER TOGETHER

"Things will get better."

MICHAEL

This frustrated me because I knew that everything is fine. They stopped after a few weeks.

CHRISTOPHER

When I get tics sometimes, I cover my face with a book or hide under my desk. Sometimes my teachers get mad at me, mostly when I don't pay attention. I lose my focus much easier than other people. And now that I'm older I can tell when they are coming. Sometimes I will go to the water fountain or bathroom when I know I'll get a tic, that way people don't look at me. I try to contain myself more at school or I go to the bathroom. But at home I'm able to just be care-free, since it's my friends and family and I don't have to hide from them.

LYDIA

When I started researching Tourettes, I got to a list of tics. I was always yelling at Michael for cracking his knuckles, grabbing his private area, picking a wedge, and picking at his nose.

MICHAEL

Mom!

LYDIA

I'm sorry, I know that these are all things that boys do, but they were also on the list of tics. I didn't know humming was a tic which you do all day long. I went through a phase of "mommy guilt" for yelling at you when you couldn't help it.

CHRISTOPHER

None of us are completely normal and if that were the case it would be a pretty boring life. We all have something that makes us unique. For me, it's Tourette's. Yeah, I'm different but I'm not weird.

Transition (Danger)

ALICIA

Everyone carries some form of stereotypes and prejudice in their mind. They are not reserved for "mean" or "bad" people. I encountered some strong prejudice against people with mental health conditions from very kind, well-meaning and educated people.

I was told that putting my students alone in a room with a person with a mental health condition was risky and dangerous. I wasn't surprised to hear this stereotype which is quite pervasive--I was just surprised to hear it from this particular person who is a big advocate for social justice.

What this person--and most people--don't realize is that people with mental health conditions are US. They are not some outsider or rare person you see in the movies. They are your friends, your family, your coworkers, your parents, your kids, and you. The risk of talking to someone with a mental health condition is the same risk as talking to your aunt or your yoga teacher or the person standing next you in the grocery store. People with mental health conditions are just that. People.

Alcoholism: Catherine's Journey

written by Carmelina Tringali and Alicia Nordstrom

(Catherine speaks to the audience as if in an AA meeting)

CATHERINE

Hello, my name is Catherine and I'm an alcoholic.

ENSEMBLE

Hi Catherine!

CATHERINE

I'm married to a brilliant man, I'm a mother of two and a history teacher. I didn't start drinking until my first week of college. I took care of my friends. I was the designated driver, the person holding back their hair, the one making food at 2 am. I would go months without drinking no problem.

I was living a great life! I had my husband, my baby, my house and a great job as a teacher. What more could I ask for? I received the answer to that question; I was pregnant again. I didn't realize I had an undiagnosed depressive and anxiety disorder. A friend at work noticed something was wrong and I got help. I was put on anti-depressants and continued with my pregnancy. After I had the baby, I stopped the anti-depressants so I could breastfeed. I absolutely loved my baby boy; he was amazing. I just could not handle the post-partum depression--it was a monster. I turned to alcohol. If I couldn't fall asleep, I would drink. If I was stressed after a long day, another drink. Soon this problem became weekly, and then every other day, and soon enough... daily.

I thought I was clever. I would alternate which liquor store I went to. I even went to different cities, and used different credit cards. I hid the bottles everywhere in my house. Between my clothes, in the bathroom, in the back of cabinets, in the laundry room.

Around Christmas, my husband started to notice that I had a problem. I drank before work, after work, I drank and drove, even with my children in the car. I am still upset that I even thought to do that.

In February, I was in a car accident because I was drunk behind the wheel. It was absolutely terrifying, waking up... not knowing how you ended up there and surrounded by the smell of the airbag. The thing was... I knew how I got there. I was told that my blood-alcohol level was 3 times over the legal limit.

My husband picked me up and sat me down at the kitchen table. That's always where the bad stuff goes down, in the kitchen - specifically at the kitchen table. I bawled my eyes out and begged him not to leave me. We decided that I would get some help and fix my problem.

Two weeks later, at work, I spiked my lemonade and drank it during club meetings after school. Some kids noticed and I was caught. I taught there for over 10 years and I was called down to the principal's office where he called my parents. That was the single most mortifying moment of my entire life. On the drive home, my parents screamed at me and I cried in the backseat. My father told me to suck it up and stop crying. They told me that was the last straw and I needed to get help for real this time.

The school required that I attend the partial program at DATS (Drug and Alcohol Treatment Services). Everyone there looked at me funny because I was a teacher which made me feel like a freak. I didn't belong-or at least that's what I thought at the time.

I had to find another option. I decided to go to the 7:00 morning AA meeting, thinking it would be the least crowded one. When I walked into the basement, there had to be at least a hundred people there. I watched about 50 other people stand in front of everyone and tell their stories. I remember thinking: "I'm not above this after all am I?" I finally let go of my ego.

Or so I thought. The truth is, for the next year, I never actually quit. It was the first day of spring and I was still going to AA. My kids were playing

outside and I was hammered by 10:00 in the morning. I told my kids that I needed a nap, which is alcoholic code for "I need to pass out". I woke up to the sound of a door slam which was the sound of my husband taking my kids and leaving me. I laid in bed sobbing and had horrible suicidal thoughts that "I just want this to be done. I just want to die". I knew that stuff needed to change so I called my sponsor and my mom. They both came to the house and yelled at me--I deserved every awful thing they said, every word. They decided that I needed to go to the hospital to detox.

Detox was terrifying. I was strip searched and given scrubs to wear. It was locked so I couldn't leave and there were bars on the windows. I felt like an inmate and just wanted to disappear.

I met a psychologist who told me I had done irreversible damage to my liver. My drinking had become sneaky to the point that I was drinking Listerine which is what caused the liver damage (ironically, a trick I learned from the DATS program).

There was a pay phone in the middle of the hallway. My mom would call, but I heard nothing from my husband. I thought he was done with me. They wouldn't let me out until he came in to talk to me. They forced us to talk to each other and look each other in the eyes. At the end of that session, I asked him to say three reasons why he should keep me. Hearing what he said gave me hope that things would be okay when I got home. If I knew he was on my side, I knew I could do it.

It's been since then that I've finally been sober. But it is hard. The struggle is real every day. I still feel so ashamed of myself. I have to hide so much, at work, boy scouts, everything. There's only a small handful of people that I don't have to hide around. But I don't feel like I have the right to say anything because I'm just a drunk. I don't have diseases that other people consider important. I didn't chose this. I still don't think even my family understands that. But I still have a problem and it is a valid problem that deserves acknowledgement. Because it is hard. It is really hard.

What You Don't Know About Eating Disorders

written by Ian Anderson and Alicia Nordstrom

ALICIA

August 6th, 2015

ASHLEY

I'm lying down and I hear ambulance sirens, devastating cries from my mother, and the medics talking. There is an IV implanted into veins in each of my arms. My blood pressure is around 80/40, my body temperature is at ninety-three degrees, and my kidneys are failing. I'm almost flatlined. There is no more fat in my body, and the cells are getting their only energy from tearing away at my muscles. I'm getting weaker every minute. My mother is calling my husband, my father, and my stepfather, but they're all at least two hours away. The doctors told me I had days to live.

ALICIA

August 7th, 2015

ASHLEY

The doctors are doing tests on my heart. They are prepping me for the surgery I'm about to have. My heart is so weak that it cannot pump blood throughout my body. They want to install a pacemaker, because they say it is the only way I will live. I do not remember the surgery. The only thing I can recall is that only five percent of me wanted to live.

ALICIA

This is Ashley. She is going to tell you about her experiences with bulimia. Are you ready?

ASHLEY

Yes. I am not the stereotypical bulimic. Instead of vomiting, I exercise to burn off all the calories I gain from eating. No one can tell because I am very good at hiding it. It's much easier to hide than throwing up the food that I ate, although I do that too. It's like an addiction, but to food and laxatives and exercise instead of drugs and alcohol.

ALICIA

Do you want to tell everyone how it started?

ASHLEY

My parents had me at an extremely young age. My mom was sixteen, and my dad was twenty-three. My mom and dad got divorced because my dad wanted nothing to do with me. I was alone for years while my mom was working, and I was not close to my step-dad. The thought that no one wanted me was branded into my head, mainly by my step-sister and her friends. They bullied me all the time, telling me things like, "you're fat," "lose weight," and "no one loves you."

I loved to dance because it was a way for me to escape from my step sister and her friends and relieve stress. Then one day my dance coach said, "You are very good, but not skinny enough." I became bulimic at age twelve.

I spent six years doing this before people discovered my illness when I became anorexic. It was my first year of college. I was in incredible shape, making the competitive dance team and the cheerleading team. The only problem was that I was losing weight rapidly, which made it obvious what I was doing. All of the staff at college and my friends were worried. The college kicked me out for six weeks so I could get help and recover.

ALICIA

Where did you go for help?

ASHLEY

My parents sent me to Hershey Medical Center alone. I had to go to treatment for six hours a day for six weeks. I had to go through group counseling, individual counseling, and meetings with a psychiatrist. No one lived with me; my parents were two hours away. After six weeks, I was put into Intensive Outpatient Care. It was the same activities that I had done before, except now I met with people three days a week for three hours each session. After two weeks of this, I was allowed back into college. As soon as I was back, I changed my major from nursing to psychology.

ALICIA

How did things go after that?

ASHLEY

Unfortunately, after my treatments and the meal plan ended, I relapsed. I was living off of apples and peanut butter. I was working out five to seven hours a day. My caloric intake per day was about four hundred calories and I weighed eighty-five pounds. My stepfather told me, "You look like someone from a concentration camp." I needed emergency heart surgery it took six weeks at a hospital to recover. To be considered healthy again the doctors told me I had gain thirty-six pounds. One of the hardest things I had to do was buy all new clothes because my old ones did not fit me anymore. I wonder how I could ever fit into the clothes that I had previously worn. To this day, I cry when I see a hospital because that time of my life was so hard for me.

ALICIA

What about your relationships?

ASHLEY

A lot of my relationships are ruined because of it. Most of my friends walked away because they did not understand. They would tell me, "All you have to do is eat. . . Why will you not eat?" Even my in-laws walked away from me and my husband. They do not think that he should have to deal with my eating disorder. He no longer has a relationship with his family because he stayed with me.

ALICIA

What do you want people to know about eating disorders?

ASHLEY

Eating disorders are not about wanting to be pretty or skinny. They are about taking control back from the all the bad things that have happened to you.

I became a mental health counselor and am now going back to school at age 26 to become a chef. Because of having an eating disorder, I enjoy food and appreciate it a lot more. And I understand that life is a gift that could be taken away from me any day.

Bipolar Disorder

written by Brittney Lahr, Faith Sinclair & Kyra Spencer

RUTH

My sister used to ask me to play when I was little, but all I wanted to do was sit in my room and cry. I tell people that, "I came out of the womb this way." Early on in my life, I was clinically diagnosed with depression, but deep down, I knew there was more. It took another 40 years before I was diagnosed with bipolar disorder.

SIERRA

Bipolar disorder affects my life from the moment I wake up to the moment I fall asleep. My day starts off by trying to convince myself to get out of bed. This semester alone, I probably skipped more classes than I attended just because I couldn't get myself up and moving. Anything throughout my day can bring me into a low, like if I don't meet my goal at work or if I get a bad grade. When I am in a low, I just want to seclude myself.

ANA

I noticed that I started to change at the age of 19 years old. I had just graduated high school and had no idea what was happening to me. I did some bad things. I was sent to jail for taking credit cards and sentenced to six months. No one knew that there was something wrong with me and that I needed help.

RUTH

When I'm on a high, I spend it shopping. I spend all my money on purses I will never use. I have rooms in my house just filled with purses. The purses do not make me happier or fix me, but I can't get myself to stop buying them. It is like a drug, the highs are good while they last, but when you crash, it hits you hard, like when I get the mail and there is a credit card bill for \$1,500 worth of purses.

SIERRA

One evening, I told my mom that I was going to go for a walk. She said, "Okay honey. Be careful." That night, I attempted suicide for the first time by jumping in front of a truck. The truck swerved and

missed me. I went home and didn't tell my parents what happened.

ANA

Ten long years I suffered undiagnosed until the age of 29. Once I was diagnosed I felt relieved. It took three years of awful side effects and a hopeless number of pills before my doctors finally found the combination of medicines that worked for me. The only terrible side effect really is how much weight I have gained. But I always tell everyone, I would rather be a fatty than a crazy.

SIERRA

A few months later, I was hospitalized for two weeks because I tried to commit suicide three more times. It broke my mother's heart and I will always hate myself for that. The psychiatrist told me that I had bipolar disorder. I was relieved. There was an explanation for all of this.

RUTH

Nobody gets it; one of the most important people in my life, my sister, does not understand me. I tried to explain it to her for years and years, but she does not grasp what I am feeling, she always thought I was just jealous of her. Part of that was right, I was jealous that she did not have my brain.

SIERRA

Having bipolar disorder doesn't mean that we're not "normal". One day my mom shared a video on Facebook, it described bipolar as the brain is not able to produce the needed neurotransmitters to make me "normal". To fix that, I take my medication. I am normal, I just can't produce the same chemicals as everyone else. When I finally realized that, I wasn't ashamed anymore.

ANA

Not many people know about me. I am scared that they will treat me differently, as if I am fragile and broken. I also don't want them to think that I am some crazy maniac because that would upset me if someone I really care about said that to me. I've been diagnosed for three years and I have barely told anyone until this year.

SIERRA

I will sometimes call one of my friends to hang out when I am in a low. And just being with someone and doing something helps. In my group of friends, I am the "therapist." Everyone comes to me for advice because I have been through what no one should have to. I help my friends because they have helped me through some of the darkest times of my life. I have no idea how to repay them but I will try for the rest of my life.

ANA

Entertainment perceives someone with bipolar as clinically insane and dangerous. They also think we are just too lazy when we are too depressed to even get out of bed. I am not going to hurt someone when I am going through a manic episode and I am certainly not lazy when I am in a depression episode. The media saying that I am crazy is not only rude, but completely unfair.

RUTH

I do not think it is fair that we have to go through depression and bipolar disorder. I know other people are going through it and people have it worse than me, but it is not fair. It is not fair that we have to deal with something so physically and mentally painful, every single day. It is not fair.

Transition (Secrecy)

I received a phone call from a colleague who is a trauma specialist. She was relaying feedback from some therapists who thought that sharing stories of sexual abuse survivors was "too much."

I thought about what it means to say that sharing these stories publicly is "too much". I thought about the impact that this message sends to trauma survivors who are already so aware of the stigma of PTSD that they rarely talk about it anyway. It says that the victims need to keep it to themselves because we don't want to tolerate the uncomfortable feelings that come with hearing the truth. It assumes we are so emotionally weak or superficial that we can't be bothered to spend 10 minutes in their world.

These stories convey real experiences that happened to real people. They deserve to be heard not just for the sake of the people who experienced them but also for the rest of us who might not have come this close to the dark side of humanity.

In the spirit of healing, let's find our courage and release these survivors from the secrecy of victimization. Let's enter their worlds and hear their stories, if only for a moment . . .

PTSD

written by Ryan Davis and Mario Delker

JOEL

When I was younger, nobody really talked about things like PTSD... you normally hear about it with the war veterans, like my wife's father. After I started school, the teachers and staff noticed something was wrong. I would dissociate and become disconnected during class, until teachers tried to get my attention by poking or tapping me, and I would be so startled they thought I was having seizures. They contacted my parents to have me visit doctors, but no one found anything physically amiss. Then the visits to psychiatrists and psychologists began, but I could never verbalize what I had been through. Even if people had asked me, I probably wouldn't have told them anyway.

ALEX

I joined the marines when I was eighteen and wanted to be a driver because of the bonuses they were offering. I later found out they were offering bonuses because previous drivers were losing limbs and being blown up from IED's and other explosives. I was sent to combat training in North Carolina and was told right away that we were being shipped to Fallujah, Iraq. As you can imagine, I just about pissed myself. They gave us a month to say goodbye to friends and family. It was the most grueling 14 hour flight of my life, from North Carolina, to Denver, to Iraq.

JOEL

At age four, my parents took me to an uncle's house. I thought I was going to help my uncle pick up walnuts from the front yard, but once my parents left, my uncle took me down to the cellar and raped me violently. When my uncle was done we walked back into the yard, and his son and daughter saw what I looked like. I must've looked horrible because the expressions on his children's faces were a mixture of shock and sadness, and it seemed they knew what had just happened. When my parents got back to pick me up, my father and uncle were talking, and I walked by them hearing my uncle say, "He took it like a man." I saw my father take money from my uncle, and at that point I knew my parents had sold me for a few hours. My

mother also sold me, but kept me at home while men came in from time to time like a brothel. Trafficking is the illegal movement of people, typically for the purposes of forced labor or commercial sexual exploitation. That is exactly what my parents did to me.

ALEX

I remember walking into a house in Fallujah—there were four of us clearing a house together. I go in first, “door,” give the initial “clear” “clear”. Walk down the hallway and right as I turn to the left, my barrel is staring him in the face. He’s screaming at me, freaking out, I don’t know what the hell he’s saying, I’m yelling at him. He’s digging around in his clothes, like he knows exactly what I’m saying. You have a gun in your face and you’re fooling around in your clothes, so. Decision was made, boom, clear.

Next room I find his wife, and child, my guys come in behind me. She’s holding the child, as I’m looking at the kid, he’s crying and she pushes him behind her. And I look at her, and then at her clothes she’s wearing, I saw her, I could tell, how big she was and I could tell her clothes were bigger than they needed to be. She was thick around the top, as if a bomb was under her clothes. The next thing she did was look at a cell phone on the counter. We’re trained to know that a cell phone triggers IED’s, my next thought is that if she is a suicide bomber, me and three other guys, along with the kid are gone. Then she reached for the phone, decision was made, boom, clear.

JOEL

Also at age four, my father took me to hang out with him and some older people. In the evening, one of the women told us to take our clothes off and another boy (about my age) started crying hysterically. The men and women were drinking and talking as if nothing was wrong. All of a sudden I heard a gunshot from outside the house. The other boy stopped crying and a man walked in the door, saying, “That should shut him up.” The adults all laughed and went back to drinking and talking. I felt nervous and scared and was hoping he wouldn’t shoot me so I just kept quiet. The man with the gun took the other boy somewhere where there were less people. He then sat me on his lap in a quiet

corner of a room and showed me the gun, holding it next to my head. He raped me while I was on his lap, then took me to a room with no one else in it and told me to get on my knees and wait. One by one, men entered the room alone and forced me to perform oral on them. I cried but it was quiet crying, and I counted each one as a way to avoid the panic I felt. I focused on the numbers until the eighteenth man had left the room, and seeing there were no more, I cried myself to exhaustion and passed out. When I regained consciousness I was in the car on the way home and was put into bed. Even after extensive trauma therapy, I still hear the gunshot in my mind sometimes when I'm sleeping, and it makes me sit straight up startled in bed.

ALEX

I got out in my last deployment after we were back in Ramadi. Water was super scarce so our day to day job was to drive about 200 miles a day and get water to everyone. When you take the same route every day, they start studying your patterns and movements, and they got you down. They waited about a month before we left on our route, and I was in the second truck. Now the lead truck had an attachment pretty much like a rake, and it dug through the sand to find IED's and detonated bombs without harming the truck. But the lead truck had missed the IED and it went off under my truck. My truck went into the air and flipped completely over. My gunner died instantly. On both side of the road, there were abandoned houses and shacks and we started getting shot from both sides. My best friend was the gunner for the third truck, and he noticed that no one was getting out of my truck. He jumped from his gun, shots flying everywhere, and ran to my truck and dragged my unconscious body back to his truck. The next thing I know, I woke up in Kuwait with a patch over my eye. I had broken both knees, both ankles, and was half a centimeter from losing my right eye from a piece of shrapnel. Within 24 hours I was in Germany for surgery and then I was flown back to the states. It took me about seven to eight months to learn how to walk again.

JOEL

Before I was ten years old, I had only been abused by men. One day a woman, who was my neighbor, convinced

me that we would play a game. She had me lay down, tied my wrists and feet to furniture, and raped me. There are a lot of misconceptions that go along with sexual crimes that happen to boys or even men. It was confusing to me that this could happen to guys. I somehow mistook this women's action for love instead of abuse. I didn't feel afraid, which was a complete 180° from what I felt when men would abuse me. That set the foundation for a lot of problems, as I got older. I could never fully understand what was sexually appropriate and what wasn't so I would never question things.

When I got older, things started to go well for a while. I had a job at a high school as a janitor and I had a daughter and newborn son. I started to have nightmares that people would come and hurt my children. I became obsessed with the sex offenders around the area to the point where I would print out the pictures of them and give them around school so everyone could be aware of them.

ALEX

I know what you mean about the nightmares. I can't close my eyes to go to sleep at night because I have them constantly. My wife will wake up and see this and want to wake me up but knows she can't because I'll wake up and think it's an attack. So she lets me be until it goes away.

JOEL

The year my dad died is when I realized that I truly had PTSD. With my dad dying and with my wife threatening to leave me I started to have a breakdown. My wife didn't understand what was happening to me: she didn't know who I was. I didn't open up to anyone until then. When I kept getting flashbacks, she convinced me to see a therapist. So I started a special counseling called Eye Movement Desensitization Reprocessing. Eventually I worked through it; my medicine helped me with my depression, anxiety, and my anger. My wife was my rock. Because of her I'm moving past everything and becoming a stronger and better person. My life is getting better little by little every day.

ALEX

I don't think PTSD is something you just get over. I live in a hypervigilance state, always combat ready. As I sit here in this Starbucks, I can tell you what every single person in here is wearing, when they came in, how old they are, and what they're drinking. I can also tell you 10 different way to escape this building without getting shot or killed. The downside of this is, I'm always ready to fight. I've punched my wife in the face before, I've punched my kids in the face before. Not on purpose, but they snuck up behind me and I reacted. I have to be careful when wrestling with my kids because I may be too rough with them and they may start to cry. Most people when they get angry, they are at a 5 or 6, but I am always at a level 10, it never changes. My with and I are learning to live with my PTSD. It's tough, but we love each other. And she has to know that the guy she married before I left for the marines, will never be the same guy ever again.

Transition (Normality)

ALICIA

Who do most of us think of when we hear the phrase "mental illness"? People who are sick, mentally inferior, incompetent and emotionally weak. People who are homeless, can't keep a job, and neglect their parental duties.

What if we thought of our mental health as just the way our brain works, as more of a description than a judgment. Is it possible that having a mental health condition could be considered "normal"?

Autism Spectrum Disorder is a great example of this. The condition formerly known as Aspergers has been folded into this spectrum so that people considered to have high and low functioning autism are now called the same thing. So where do we draw the line on this spectrum between normal and abnormal? What would someone with ASD say about that?

(calls offstage)

Hey, Isaac! Come here a second!

(Isaac enters from offstage)

ISAAC

Yeah, Mom? What's up?

ALICIA

Can you tell everyone about your brain?

ISAAC

Sure, no problem!

My Cool Brain

written by Nick Lynch and Alicia Nordstrom

ISAAC

So, my name is Isaac. I am 10 years old. My birthday is May 30 which makes my half-birthday November 30. I love asking people when their birthdays are (although I get in trouble for that). They are interesting to me.

I love math and numbers. My mom always jokes that I'm her little personal calendar because I know the dates of all our appointments. I'm also very interested in "since" years, like when something was made. Like Snyders, the people who make the pretzels, was since 1909 which is really old.

Another thing I've gotten into is sports, mainly football. I would record all of the games on Sunday just so I wouldn't miss any of them because a lot of them are on at the same time. My favorite teams are the Philadelphia Eagles and Boston Red Sox because my grandparents live in Boston. I used to like the Patriots but they won too much and that got boring. My least favorite teams are the Washington Redskins and the New York Yankees. When I see someone wearing a Yankees shirt I say, "Oh no! Not the Yankees!" but that gets me in hot water because my Mom reminds me that isn't polite.

I also play piano. I like playing up-tempo songs and composing my own songs. I prefer major chords because the minor chords sound sad and gloomy. I can tell you the name of a piano note with my eyes closed and I can also play a song if I just hear it one time (but I don't mean to brag).

Another thing I like to do is to play videogames on my iPad. Mostly I play Candy Crush and Nibblers. I'm on level 1451 in Candy Crush and 1537 in Nibblers, but I've been playing it so much it's starting to make my iPad crash because it's really old.

Sometimes I have trouble being impulsive or getting distracted. My mom talks to me about my brain and

tries to teach my brain to follow directions so I won't get in trouble.

I get rock brain with the weather. Rock brain means you get stuck on an idea and get really rigid. It's like when there's thunderstorms, it makes me get very worried. The sound distracts me and it's really loud. When I get worries, my mom has me write them down and put them in a worry box. The worry box is really an index card holder, but we pretend that the box eats up the worries so they get out of my brain.

I love going to school because of my friends. Sometimes I'm a little too social during school when I'm supposed to be doing work. The only problem is that my friends sometimes hurt my feelings, even though I know they are trying to help me. When people hurt my feelings, it makes me feel really uncomfortable. Like when my friends tell me to "stop" doing something without saying "please". That's kind of rude. My mom reminds me that not everyone follows all the rules all the time, so I need to be more flexible.

Sometimes I like to repeat things over and over which sometimes annoys my parents and friends. My parents call this "sound effects". I like the sounds of certain words. I try to only do that in the bathroom, bedroom, or basement so I don't bother other people.

I often have a hard time knowing when to stop doing things. If I do something funny, like tell a joke or a story, I want to keep doing it because people like it. My mom had to explain to me that things are funny once or twice, but they become less funny the more I say them. We call this the "wasfunnyonce" rule. "Was funny once. Was funny once. Was funny once." Just kidding.

My mom says that I have a cool brain, one of the coolest she's ever seen (and she's seen a lot of brains). Even though my brain works a little differently than others I hope that you can see that I'm just another kid. And after all, the world would be boring if everyone was exactly the same!

The last thing I wanted to say is... Go Red Sox!

Suicide

written by Zachary Davis

MELISSA

Although the rest of the day was just like any other, no normalcy could've prepared me for what I was about to discover. "Jared?" I asked to the empty house. Waiting, waiting. Did he go to a friend's house? Something just doesn't feel right. My pleas for Jared's response become more and more desperate. "Jared? Jared?!" I search the living room to his bedroom to the kitchen. My search continues until I find him. I find him, but not in the way that any mother would want. The rope had broken with the weight of his body and I found him on the floor. My boy, who I raised, loved, and nurtured for 16 years, was strangled by the Depression that I, his own mother, did not see.

"The typical American Family" was how I proudly described us, as we had everything our nation saw as an ideal household: a dog, a son and daughter. After just moving into our new home, Jared was given the promotion to "General" according to the fellow kids in the neighborhood. My house soon became a little congregation, as my little General began assembling a group of friends. I'm not going to lie; seeing a hoard of children running around the house was an amusing nuisance. But it was so nice seeing Jared acclimating well to the move.

Later over the years, I began to notice how Jared became more reclusive. My husband and I thought that the private school was having a negative effect on him, so we transitioned him into a public school. But still, he was not as outspoken as before. That's okay I thought, maybe he's just finding it better to stick with a few friends.

He was always a naturally bigger kid. I figured, there was less of a chance of him getting hurt in football that way. But with his size, there came bullying. In 6th grade, he could've been mistaken for a high school student based on his size alone, and that drew a lot

of attention towards bullies who wanted a quick laugh. Eventually the bullying died down, but as a result Jared seemed different.

I never really noticed it until we went to a trip to Myrtle Beach as a family. After the vacation, I took Jared to a psychologist. Turns out he had Social Anxiety disorder. After the diagnosis, I tried harder to place a better eye on Jared. Between 6th and 7th grade, he was home a lot, and it felt like he was really retreating into his own isolated world. My husband and I became more lenient on Jared; every time he asked to go out with his friends, we immediately let him. We constantly egged him to go out and do something. And I thought things were finally going to look up.

Two days before his death, Jared and I were sitting at the dinner table at 11:30 at night. "I'm sad, Mom" he said, looking up at me with these sad eyes. Thinking that things were getting better, I thought these problems only revolved around school and friends. So I talked to him late into the night, saying that everyone gets sad, and it's how we deal with it that changes things for the better. So I went to bed, thinking that our conversation helped him.

Being at my boy's funeral was the most unreal experience I could imagine. The household was never the same afterwards. My husband still went to work; he needed to be around other people to cope with the loss. Rebecca was about to graduate from college. The outgoing and charismatic daughter we loved died the day Jared did. As for me, I couldn't handle it. I failed as a mother, and that was the most difficult thing to process.

Jared was never diagnosed with Depression. I know many people initially think, "Oh, if someone has Depression it should be easily noticed and treated". I believe that his problems with Social Anxiety and his stress from being around people really hurt him and triggered the Depression. Looking back, the changes of his personality are so much more clear to me now. I wonder why I didn't see it sooner. If I did, I could have done something for him. I should have done something for him.

The Thanksgiving before his suicide, our family got together for dinner and each person put something we

wanted to happen in the next year into a jar. When Rebecca and I were looking through things in storage, we found that jar. We found the paper with Jared's handwriting on it. It said, "next year, I hope to be alive". And that hit me so hard. Knowing that he was having those feelings for so long, and I still never noticed it... My inner frustration and hate towards myself cannot be expressed in words. That feeling will never go away.

In those following months, I learned a lot about grief and how people deal with it. Either I can deal with it by wallowing in self-pity and suffering, or I can cope with it by helping others. So I dealt with it the best way I could: I share my story to everyone that will listen. I accept every school and auditorium that offers to have me speak about my experience. I've even shared my story to the high school that Jared went to, talking to his fellow classmates about the suffering he went through. I am now also currently on several boards that center around suicide prevention. I know that Jared would want me to be doing this, not only for his sake but also for mine.

Finale

*(Cast assembles on stage
during this scene)*

ALICIA

When I began this project, I was hoping to find 25 people with mental health conditions who were willing to share their stories. I ended up with double that amount and now have a waiting list. The need to be heard is so deep and powerful that it brought out people who had never told their story publicly before.

One such interviewee was the older woman with bipolar disorder. When I spoke with her on the phone, she told me that she had been depressed her entire life. She told me that she almost ended her life several times, but now wondered if she was meant to be part of this project so that her story might help someone else. She said that maybe there was more meaning to her life than just laying in bed and crying.

I get choked up when I talk about her because that conversation never would have happened if she didn't have the strength to hang on, even when she had no faith that things would get better. I hope that she knows she has fulfilled her destiny of changing how people think about bipolar disorder because she was brave enough to share her story.

This conversation illustrates so many lessons that I learned through this project, and one of the biggest insights I gained was how the stereotypes of mental illness are the opposite of reality. People with mental health conditions are more likely to be victims of crimes rather than perpetrators. They are also emotional superheroes, not the weak and pathetic images we see in the media. They have to deal with their daily lives while managing their mental health symptoms AND simultaneously pretending like they don't have any.

We also tend to believe that mental health conditions are THEIR problem, when in reality, it is a shared experience. EVERYONE is responsible for the stigma of mental health that prevents people from opening up and sharing that part of themselves. We don't talk about mental health as openly as we do our physical health and it would be such a relief if we did. So, let's stop the bullshit and just begin to ask. How's your depression? How is your PTSD? Our mental health is one part of our identity, like our personality or intellect. It's part of who we are.

My favorite aspect of this project is how the stories get passed from person to person. The stories are told by an interviewee and then retold by my student, then integrated by a team of writers and performed by actors. Each person who touches these stories invests a piece of themselves into them. These stories are now yours to keep – what will you do with them?

Everyone has a story to tell. What will you do with yours?