



Janie Simpson, Chair,
 SC Mental Health Planning Council

I never thought I'd have a mental illness. It wasn't something that would have occurred to me. Once I was accepted to Erskine College my biggest concern was decorating my dorm room.

But that was a few decades ago and even though I still care about bed spreads and matching curtains, they don't carry the same weight they used to.

Many of you know I have a long history of Bipolar disorder - that's been frightening to me, my family and friends. Through the years it's been managed through medication, therapy, and coping skills.

I've stabilized and maintained a wonderful life. Being married and enjoying advocacy that I feel honored to be able to do.

But it does come with a price. People know how I am. "A symbol of recovery" yeah, right.....more of someone, like many I know, who hides our symptoms out of fear of being judged. Fear that we are no longer seen as of value in the recovery world because we are now ill.

Those were my thoughts a few months ago in the midst of a depression so deep I knew I was about to lose control of my ability to keep myself safe. Many think being suicidal is a pathway to inpatient care. For me it's a warning sign that I must act before it's too late; too late to save myself.

So I sought help and was placed in partial hospitalization. Careful – so as to get the help I needed without being locked up.

But then I was faced with a decision. Would I hide in the shadows again, hoping my secret of the symptoms bearing down on me in another cycle not be revealed or did I take a chance that could blow up my world of advocacy?

I told myself. "I can't live this lie anymore that I am always doing well when I'm not."

So with a bit of fear, I sent an email to four men in this Agency. Four men replied, supporting me, with encouragement and compassion. I was told I was needed - to get better. I was given more understanding than I could have ever imagined.

In this Depression - confessing as Chair of the Planning Council, a supposed advocate - a person supposedly in recovery, these four men did NOT judge me in my "weakness"; they applauded my

strength in seeking out help. They were State Director John Magill, Deputy Director of Administrative Services, Mark Binkley, Deputy Director of Community Mental Health Services Geoff Mason, and our SC Mental Health Planning Council Liaison Stewart Cooner.

I heard someone a while back after hearing a man had been saved after jumping off a bridge that he couldn't believe, after the man's life had been spared, he could sink back into depression, getting to the despair of feelings of suicide – once again.

To this I say.... When a person fights cancer, we don't know the causes. But we admire the courage and fortitude of strength it takes to beat back the disease and hopefully find remission. If health is achieved, it must be guarded, more so than others, and there is a chance of the cancer overtaking the body again. Just like depression and other mental illnesses, it's a battle. Sometimes we fight it hard. Sometimes it is only having to be maintained but most of the time it's in the background and we have to make sure we are doing all we can stay well.

Today, I come to you with a grateful heart; for this Agency, for its leaders, but especially for State Director, John Magill, who is setting a standard of acceptance. Understanding that mental illness is a disease we are fighting together as individuals, family members, clinicians, and advocates. From administrative assistants to lawyers on the fourth floor, I see people who CARE. This is not a job to the people who work here. This is a mission. It's a passion. It's their hope for better outcomes.....I feel so honored to be part of this organization.