Connections: Stories of Recovery from Mental Illness

Sponsored by
SCDMH Recovery Steering Committee

The Recovery Steering Committee of the South Carolina Department of Mental Health is collecting stories of recovery from clients served in hospitals and centers. Stories will be collected and distributed throughout our 17 Community Mental Health Centers, Hospitals, on-line and with members of the advocacy community.
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Forward
By
John H. Magill, Director
South Carolina Department of Mental Health

What does it mean to recover from a mental illness? Is it even possible? Are mental illnesses different from other physical illnesses? If recovery is possible, who decides how to define it? Is it the person with the diagnosis; the mental health professionals; the family members; the courts; perhaps the community or some combination of all of these?

A great deal of attention has been given to this topic because the truth for many with mental illness is that it is not like having any other medical disorder. The stigma associated with having a mental illness has, for years, led to discrimination and disrespect. It is a major reason people delay or refuse treatment.

In 2005, the South Carolina Recovery Steering Committee of the South Carolina Department of Mental Health adopted a definition of recovery. "It is a process by which a person overcomes the challenges presented by a mental illness to live a life of meaning and purpose."

The decision of the individuals in this book to share their personal stories of recovery demanded careful consideration and thought. As a recovering person, they can offer insight and hope to others struggling with a mental illness in ways that no professional can. They give hope and inspiration to others who are experiencing similar issues while, at the same time, celebrating how far they have come. Their willingness to publicly disclose their mental illness and triumphs associated with recovery go a long way in dispelling the stigma of mental illness and prove that treatment works.
She laughed. “What saved me was that I had bad credit,” she said. Bad credit saved Vicki Cousins life. Not many of us can say that.

But how many of us can say we once took a bag, filled it with every sharp and dangerous object, every medication within reach, and set off to kill ourselves? How many of us can say that we one day called all our family, our friends, and offered a cloaked “goodbye” to them, before we drove to the hotel five miles down the road? How many of us kissed our spouse, patted our dogs on the head, and walked out the door, planning to be dead by day’s end? How many of us have been so detached from our emotions that on the way to the hotel to kill ourselves, we stopped to visit a hospitalized colleague, even bringing an apple to cheer him up?

Not many of us. Not many of us then locked ourselves in the hotel room, and proceeded to swallow crushed glass, stick knives in electrical outlets, cut ourselves in a bathtub and sit to watch the blood flow, then gulp every pill we could painfully, to kill ourselves. Not many of us have felt so unworthy, so driven to eliminate ourselves, so full of ideas yet empty of feelings. Not many of us have ever felt like Vicki Cousins, who survived Hodgkin’s disease, depression and bipolar affective disorder, and just knew “God did not want me to be here.”

Still, maybe we can understand why Vicki laughed about the bad credit saving her life. It makes as much sense as anything else did that day. For as Vicki went about hurting herself with her bag of killing supplies, a clerk at the front desk ran her credit card for verification. Her payment was denied. Soon the hotel staff were at her door. When she wouldn’t come out, police knocked the door down. And Vicki Cousins was pulled out to begin her walk of recovery from mental illness.

At the time this story was written 17 years had past and Vicki Cousins was now working as Director of South Carolina Department of Mental Health’s Office of Consumer Affairs. She helped consumers across the state learn to take part in their recovery, stand up for their rights and privileges, and powerfully live with their illnesses and contribute to their communities. Vicki Cousins helped consumers serve as self-identifying staff with mental illnesses within SCDMH’s facilities, bringing consumer voices to the ears of DMH decision-makers and the public. She is helping people seek treatment, stay healthy, and then -- help others do the same.
Vicki Cousins was better now. Even her credit was better! And many players deserve credit in her recovery story. After the suicide attempt, Vicki met her friend Jane, a fellow mental health patient in the hospital. Jane, diagnosed with Depression, was beautiful and strong. Vicki, weak from chemotherapy for the Hodgkin’s, was thin and had no hair. But Jane insisted, “You’re going to get better.” Jane made Vicki take a role in her recovery, and get a grip on her illness. Jane taught Vicki that one must take the illness head-on, learn about it, read about other’s experiences, and work toward one’s recovery. Later, Jane became Vicki’s employer at the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill in Minnesota.

Years later, working for the Mental Health Association in Minnesota, Vicki worked with Andrea, who had Dissociative Identity Disorder (formerly called Multiple Personality Disorder.) Andrea was chair of the board of MHA in Minneapolis. Andrea was a fighter, who would not back down. “What an inspiration! ... Before meeting Andrea, I never thought to fight for myself,” Vicki said. Andrea, like Jane, helped Vicki identify the biggest weapon she had: her own story. “Through them, I saw the power of self-identification, and its effects on people,” Vicki said. When a person publicly owns the sickness, something begins to happen. Seeds of recovery take root as a person with mental illness begins to share her story, to understand her disease, and help others start that process.

At SCDMH, Dr. Joseph Bevilacqua, former State Director, with his deputy Director John Morris, was leading a group of employees in developing and defining the position of Consumer Affairs Coordinators (CACs). One of these individuals was Billy Brown. He would become the agency’s first Consumer Affairs Coordinator. CACs are self-identified mental illness survivors who work for SCDMH as advocates, mentors, movers and shakers in the centers and hospitals. Bevilacqua, Morris and Brown saw how CACs epitomized the healing process, indeed serving as healers themselves. They also saw the power of Vicki’s story, and her commitment to helping people with their own stories. They helped bring her into SCDMH as the statewide director of Consumer Affairs Coordinators.

Vicki gave her mother credit for immersing herself in learning about mental illnesses and how to treat someone with a mental illness once she got sick. But her mother was searching in old texts with clinical approaches and definitions. She was scaring herself (and Vicki). Vicki simply needed love and support. Then her mother found the Journey of Hope courses offered by NAMI. NAMI’s classes are designed for family members of people with mental illnesses. Vicki always assumed her brother was told about the events of her life, but had never discussed them herself with her brother. And five years after her suicide attempt, she surprised him with a comment about it. She couldn’t help but wonder if her parents had been too ashamed to tell her brother about it all. Did they think he couldn’t handle the news? Were they worried that something similar might happen to him?

Finally, some credit for Vicki’s recovery should go to “God’s little greeting card.” What’s that, you ask? Vicki said that lying in the hospital bed one night after her suicide attempt, “I start to see this amazing, shimmering gold light floating in the room.” She was not asleep and
not on medication. And she was certainly not alone in that room. There was a presence, a
force, a spirit ... a friend. "I call it God's little greeting card," she said. Vicki knew then she
had a lot more living to do and God wanted her here, after all.

Those who knew Vicki would say she was staying with a vengeance. Every decision she made
and every program she implemented at SCDMH starts with the questions, "How will this
affect mental health consumers? How can this empower people to move forward in their
recovery?"

Empowering others empowered her. "Before I began working in this field, I was in
commission-based sales, chasing after a buck every day. Now I'm zeroing in on helping
people," she said. "I feel blessed that I have a job where I can help." She worked at a job
she loved, and she was surrounded by people she admired, "smart folks, driven to help
people." A graduate of Bowdoin College, a part-time graduate student in USC's Rehabilitation
Counseling program and a 10-year veteran of advertising sales, Vicki said that working in the
mental health field is the best way for her to monitor her own walk with mental illness.

And she still had down days along with her up days, but she's never been as low as she was
that day at the hotel. Never even close. Her illness still occasionally flashed a symptom, but
Vicki knew she made life choices that would keep it in check. She knew that 17 years ago she
was in an environment that contributed to her illness: an unhappy marriage, her own family
hundreds of miles away, a competitive job as a sales executive in the big city, drinking and
partying ... and mostly, smack in the middle of aggressive chemotherapy. Cancer treatments
that stunts reproduction of diseased tissue, can also depress the spirit - this added to her
vulnerability. All things considered, Vicki could see how she landed in that hotel room.

But that landing led to a takeoff, a takeoff that on June 2, 1994 put Vicki in the director's
chair of the Office of Consumer Affairs. "Now after nine years, I am still reeling," Vicki
said, describing the accomplishments of consumer involvement in the mental health system.
"We've proven that we need a consumer-run Office of Consumer Affairs ... I'm very proud and
almost surprised at the way my role has been accepted by this agency," she added. Vicki was
also proud that there are quantitative, measurable outcomes pointing to the success of the
program.

Since 1994, Vicki had helped put a Consumer Affairs Coordinator in each center of SCDMH,
and played a role in guiding South Carolina's former Governor to name a consumer to the
department's state commission. Vicki hoped a self-identified consumer may someday serve as
director of the South Carolina Department of Mental Health.

Vicki saw the future of mental health treatment including more and more consumer-led
initiatives. Medicaid-billable peer support services, peer-run learning centers, all operated by
consumers, and could serve to help people before it gets too bad for them to help
themselves. A program where a recovering person lives with an individual or family could be
run by consumers. Consumer retreats and trainings, focusing on recovery, would go a long way toward meeting SCDMH’s new Mission Statement: To support the recovery of people with mental illnesses.

Vicki Cousins dreamed of improving the lives of others, as well as her own. A woman, who once tried to take her own life, now gave hope to others. “I’m so lucky,” she said, to work at a job I love.” She’s was lucky for the people in her life. She’s was lucky for her own strength. And she’s especially was lucky for her own bad credit.

Vicki Cousins passed away on June 28, 2005 following complications of a brief illness. The opportunities she created for people with mental illnesses in South Carolina were one of her biggest accomplishments and her greatest legacy. We were proud to know you! Rest in Peace…

My Life Journey through Mental Illness
Ann Marie Browning

In my life the long journey of mental illness seems to be a road. Mental illness is a pathway to follow that few people seem to understand. As a healthy young child; growing up in the town of Anderson, people could say that my life was normal. My laughter filled up a family’s heart of joy and happiness. My mother once said to me “Ann Marie you always had a smile on your face when you were growing up - to me your life seemed happy”. When the journey or road began my life seemed promising. During the fall of ’92 I began a struggle within myself. My thoughts and chemicals in my brain were broken like the hard drive on a computer. My parents took me to see a doctor and the doctor asked me, "Does your head feel like a tornado?" I said "Yes". At the time my mind was confused, disoriented and sometimes very scary. The thoughts my brain produced and the voices I heard were not of this world. When I was at my worst my mind could not rest, my body could not sleep, I was losing weight, I couldn’t talk about my problems, I had thoughts of dying, I thought the hospital was Hell and that I was being disciplined. My doctor realized there was a problem and for almost a year I received help from hospitals and Anderson mental health. Those were trying times for me as well as my parents.

Although mental illness is hard to overcome, my biggest supporters were my family and my doctor. My doctor was pushing me, and at the same time holding my hand, while also teaching my parents how to support me. My doctor is my hero and I will always have fond memories of her. Mental Health is an agency that should get more credit for what they do.

The road of recovery seemed to be an uphill climb. The turning point came when I went back to school. Many people whom I thought were friends did not want to have anything to do with
me as if mental illness was something they could catch. They distanced themselves from me when I most needed friends. Still, I graduated from high school and attended Tri-County Technical College. Although I went for 2 years I didn’t get a degree - I was more interested in getting a job and making some money.

My first real job was at Walmart - they hired me after I worked with Vocational Rehabilitation for 2 years. Getting a job has been one of my greatest achievements and working for Walmart has been one of the best things that has ever happened to me. The long road seemed to be smoothing out. As I worked I got more comfortable with myself, I realized the voices were becoming quiet and I became willing to talk about having a mental illness. One day at work a friend told me that some people thought having a mental illness meant I was retarded, but then she told me that she knew from how I expressed myself that I was very intelligent.

Having mental illness has made dealing with life’s tragedies more difficult - my mother died during the first year I worked at Walmart. It forced me to grow up a lot faster than most. Even though I had to be a big girl I clung to my Aunt and friends at Walmart. My mother’s death forced me to be more open about my illness. Facing her death forced me to take responsibility for my illness. I had always blamed her for my illness. This was because she had it too; she had bipolar disorder.

While dealing with all these changes during the last few months I came across a book, *The Road Less Traveled* by Scott Peck. Reading this book helped me realize that having a mental illness was not my fault but that I had to take responsibility for it. It helped me to realize that if my parents had known more about mental illness they might not have done some of the things they did. My parents overprotected me, thinking it was the right thing to do. If they had known more they would probably changed not trying to keep me in a box or shadow me for the rest of my life.

Some of the other things I have learned about mental illness go deep. One of the main problems I have to deal with is the stigma. People with mental illnesses are so misunderstood. We still walk, talk, and breathe like everyone else. We also have feelings and deserve respect for what we are working to overcome.

As I travel on this road to recovery I stand tall. I have discovered that writing poetry and art help the most. Taking this journey seems like it is my life’s true calling. When I am down and out these help me see that recovery is possible and that I am not “less than” because of my illness, I just may have to work a lot harder to get down the road.

*Ann Marie*
I was employed in a high profile job in SC State Government and my behavior, due to the mental illness, affected every aspect of my job duties and my personal life as well. The diagnosis I now have, Mood Disorder, which I believe should have been Bipolar Disorder, due to the destructiveness of my life, gave me a new personality - another identity.

I allowed my worries to fester inside of me. I suppressed my feelings to cover up hurts and pains. I believed I had to be strong and there was no one that could help me or would honestly understand what I was going through. I believed that I had to fix my problem; but I did not know how. My situation only got worse.

I did many destructive things that hurt me badly as well as my children. I lost my home; the place that I was trying to save for myself and my children after I was divorced from a marriage of 24 years. I even lost all of my worldly possessions and became one of the homeless. All of my miserable life stories pertaining to this mental illness are documented in my book, (Redemption from Sin: A Memoir), I compiled from letters written during this period. This is the only way that I was able to heal myself. I was driven during my manic episodes to write and write and write; among losing my values and beliefs during this period.

I believed that the stress I endured on my job, which caused me to have a substantial amount of depression-ultimately led to angry and hostile feelings; along with more anger because of the dissolution of a marriage family. Why me? Is what I asked. This was not supposed to happen.

From 2000 to 2009 I lived a destructive lifestyle. I cried a lot. During this period, it appeared that I had many friends but in essence I was alone, a very lonely person. My children, whom I dearly loved, were alienated by me because of my behavior. They could not understand the changes that occurred in their mother's behavior. I could not understand the changes that occurred in my behavior. I knew that I had always been that way and wondered how I got to where I was. It appears that it just happened overnight. I could not get back to that place where I once was. My children began to distance themselves away from me. However, they tried relentlessly to get me to see a counselor and said that they would go with me. They said they wanted to help me because they knew that I needed help. But as far as I was concerned, I was fine; there was absolutely nothing wrong with me—the problem was them badgering me. I had many out of body experiences and would go into trances, unable to concentrate or focus for any extended period of time. My speech (dialect) was affected, my memory was affected, and I was filled with anxiety and had severe panic attacks for well over five years. I was also about to give up on life when I turned to God and began to see his
Word. It was the Word of God that kept me from going insane. It was his Word that brought peace and calmness back into my life.

That was in 2005, but then it would be another four years before I would accept what my daughters had been trying to tell me and seek professional help. December 2009 is when I went to a facility for an assessment. I had to admit that something was wrong with me. I was in complete denial. At the age of 55 I received a diagnosis of "Mood Disorder" from a psychiatrist.

The counselor/therapist and psychiatrist have been nothing but supportive, uplifting, encouraging, and open-minded thus far. People need encouraging words when they are going through a crisis and not words to put them down or bring them down.

I am joining in to "break the silence" so that more of the word can get out about mental illness; especially in the African American community where seeking therapy or counseling is taboo. When you do not seek counsel for a mental illness, destruction will definitely follow, even to the extent of homelessness. Mental illness is said to run in families and is believed to be inherited. Therefore, it is extremely important that the silence of this disease be broken. There are too many people suffering silently and being cast aside in this supposedly civilized, caring and compassionate society in which we live in who shun the mentally ill.

I made poor choices and decisions but it is difficult to make the right choices and decisions when you are not in your right mind and do not possess the required critical thinking skills that necessitate being of sound mind. I was confused with racing thoughts and unable to concentrate or focus. I have a mental disease which is no different than having any other disease (heart disease, diabetes or cancer). It is a mental disease (disease of the mind).

I believe that I am highly intelligent, but that did not prevent me from developing a mental illness, nor will it prevent anyone else-it has nothing to do with it.

I quit two state government jobs (between March 5, 2007 and January 5, 2209) because something in my brain told me to do so. My finances did not have me in a position that I could satisfactorily quit any job and maintain an independent lifestyle.

Never in my wildest dreams did I ever believe that I would be where I am today. I was gainfully employed for 34 years. A productive citizen of this society, paid my bills, budgeted within my household, well educated; but the illness struck me anyway. There was nothing I could have done to prevent it.

Today I can say that I am not where I want to be, but I am so much further along than I was. At least I have a roof over my head and I am not living out in the cold with no food or shelter where I once was. The panic attacks, anxiety and depression have drastically decreased. By
the grace of God and with continued medical treatment I know that I will fully recover to self sufficiency once again through gainful employment.

Marjorie

Asking for Help

Cindi H.

I have bipolar and a substance use disorder and was in the hospital many times. I experienced early signs of depression and mania. I could not easily make decisions. Both the depressive and manic episodes got so bad I could not stand it. I cried all the time when I was depressed and was promiscuous and would steal when I was manic. I could not get out bed, or shower when I was depressed and could not sleep when I was manic. I isolated all the time because I did not feel like I belonged anywhere. I drank and abused prescription drugs to escape.

I got to where I am today by listening to doctors and therapists who knew more about my disorder than I did. I stopped drinking and using drugs. I took my illness seriously and learned about my triggers and warning signs. I talked to people about how I was feeling. I learned to trust myself so I could begin to trust others. Fortunately, my friends were supportive and patient.

I had to learn to overcome some painful obstacles; abuse, addiction and denial and start believing that I was worthy of recovery. Today I believe that with everything that I am.

I learned some really important things about myself. I learned that I am a very strong woman emotionally. The journey was hard but worth every minute. I can face problems without relapsing. I learned to love myself and that I am worth it. That was the most important lesson.

The things I do to stay on the right path are not to use alcohol or drugs, no matter what to take my medication and to not let things build up too high. The hardest things I had to learn was to ask for help.

Today, I hope to help others learn about bipolar disorder, addiction and to learn to love themselves. I did and it saved my life.

I would not trade my recovery for anything. While I still suffer from depression, it is manageable most of the time even though occasionally I have to return to the hospital. I now see asking for help when I need it as it as a step forward. I hope my story helped you and thank you for reading it.

Cindi
LeRoy Simmons - Walking the Road to Recovery
By Bryan Kost

In 1991, LeRoy Simmons did not show up when the family got together for Thanksgiving. In fact, he just disappeared. His family had noticed his recent strange behavior. But he’d never just vanished before.

Instead of at the Thanksgiving table, LeRoy was walking restlessly in downtown Columbia, lost on the streets and lost in his mind. The next day, he ended up in G. Werber Bryan Psychiatric Hospital, a short-term, emergency care facility of the South Carolina Department of Mental Health. As his family began looking for him, LeRoy was looking for himself, too. How could he have a mental illness, as his doctors were claiming? He was a former college athlete with a master’s degree and experience in banking and real estate. He was a volunteer softball coach, engaged to be married, a born-again Christian.

He was also a man with Delusional Schizophrenia. LeRoy was a man who was seeing things lately. Things like a flooded road on a dry day, blood in the eyes of his fiancée, beer cans in the trash though no one in the home drank alcohol. LeRoy noticed these creeping little alterations in reality, but he told no one. When he thought of the people who knew him, he told himself, "I can’t tell these folks because they’ll think I’m crazy."

But the one who really knew him already saw the signs of the mental illness. LeRoy’s fiancée could see from the outside that something was changing on the inside. "She had noticed something," LeRoy says. "I was becoming real irresponsible. I wasn’t dressing right, not keeping my appearance up."

And neither LeRoy nor his fiancée sought help. Perhaps this would pass, its small stuff—mind tricks, just a slump maybe—nothing to worry about.

Then there was a voice. "I think the thing that really scared me was the voice," LeRoy says. That got his attention. One night, while deep asleep, LeRoy was awakened by a male voice. He was alone in the house, but the voice was real and loud. "It just called my name."

That was all the voice said, but that was enough. LeRoy knew he was struggling. He knew that hearing voices could be a symptom of a mental illness. And though he had not resolved to seek help, he stumbled upon assistance indirectly. He was not always thinking clearly at this point, but his confusion essentially led him to the professional care he needed. Shortly after the voice, LeRoy drove his car to a parking lot in West Columbia. He left it and walked to a local police station. For some reason, he was going to report his car stolen. (Looking back, LeRoy clearly remembers all of this, though he can’t explain why he did what he did.)

At the police station, LeRoy’s story was received with hesitation. The police noticed his incoherent speech, his disheveled appearance, and his confused state. LeRoy didn’t mind that
there was no police report filed. In fact, LeRoy didn’t mind a thing. So he just stayed put. “See, I was like on the borderline,” he says. “But I just stayed there all night.” He just sat at the station. "I was there until about eight o’clock the next morning."

LeRoy remained sitting at the station until the officers, suspecting drug abuse, took him to the hospital. The staff at Lexington Medical Center sent LeRoy to Bryan Psychiatric Hospital for evaluation.

Being admitted to Bryan was a good thing, since some people with mental illnesses face a more life-threatening situation before they’re brought to help. But LeRoy was taken in without incident. He says he’s glad they took him to Bryan.

At Bryan, though, LeRoy began to resist. During the intake process, he was told he would be able to go home shortly, since he was not in a crisis state. They simply asked him to sit. But for some reason, LeRoy didn’t want to. And then they wanted to give him a shot. He wouldn’t have it. "They had to wrestle me to the ground," he says. "They had to fight me for that one."

For most of his three weeks at Bryan Psychiatric Hospital, LeRoy’s biggest battle was simply accepting that he was sick. He never needed psychiatric help before, so this was certainly a mistake. Certainly, they had it all wrong, he thought. He was 35 years old. His doctor told him that males will usually see the effects of Delusional Schizophrenia at earlier ages --and his was an uncommon case. And though he didn’t buy their diagnosis, LeRoy was impressed with his doctors at Bryan. He said they pieced together many elements of his life for him, helping him see how he got to this point. Maybe, just maybe, there was a reason he was at Bryan.

LeRoy’s theory for his illness is that in addition to the chemical imbalances in his brain, stress helped usher in the disease. In the few years prior to 1991, LeRoy had struggled with his career, facing setbacks beyond his control. LeRoy describes himself as someone with high professional goals, and he felt he wasn’t reaching those goals. He was juggling two careers, he had a marriage on the horizon, and debts were building. If the biological, brain-based chemical foundation for a mental illness had been established, now the environmental elements were present to build on that foundation. And it all added up to an unhealthy mind.

LeRoy’s unhealthy mind did come to grips with the reality of a mental illness. And that realization didn’t make him happy. At Bryan Psychiatric Hospital, LeRoy understood that now, for the rest of his life, he could be labeled as someone with a disorder, someone with psychiatric problems, and someone "crazy." So LeRoy wanted to kill himself. At the hospital, he came across a butter knife. In a quiet moment, he took off his shirt. He put the knife to his chest and pushed. He tried to cut himself open. But he didn’t finish the cut, he didn’t go deep enough, he didn’t end it all. He bled, he broke the knife, and he resolved to get out of
there. He flushed the knife pieces down the toilet and covered his cut. No one ever knew he tried to die.

LeRoy’s family, especially his fiancée and her family, visited him daily at Bryan Hospital. He says it’s a rarity for a patient with a mental illness to have the amount of visitors he had. Maybe some families can’t face the shame of a mental illness. Maybe some families feel like their loved one failed them. Maybe some families simply don’t know how to support someone with mental illness.

Medication and counseling stabilized him, and he left Bryan after three weeks. He was no longer suicidal, but he was not at peace either. Now he would forever be a “former mental patient.” He was okay with himself, but would the world be? When he was released from the hospital, he says, "I cried like a baby." He went home and tried to figure out how his dreams would ever materialize now. Hopelessness set in. And though he would never try to end his life, he still, figured "my life was over."

Except life went on, one week later he was married. Now LeRoy could turn his attention to other aspects of living, and he slowly felt good again. And like many people with a mental illness, LeRoy decided that he was probably healed now. He thought he no longer had a sickness. "I didn’t think I was mentally ill so I went off my medicine." But, he adds, "I wasn’t dumb, either." LeRoy had seen what happens to people with mental illnesses who go off their medicine. So he told his counselor and his wife, and they helped him monitor his condition without medication. LeRoy thought he could prove that he was not really sick, after all.

At first, without medication, his body took some transition time and LeRoy felt no different. But soon his illness returned, and he noticed the creeping signs that his chemicals weren’t right. He wasn’t sleeping, and he felt urges to injure others. And he was ready for these signs, aware from experience what the symptoms would be. So he immediately went back to the medication. He’s followed his prescription for nine years since.

Today, LeRoy doesn’t see any doctor for therapy. He sees his doctor simply to refill his prescription when needed. His treated Delusional Schizophrenia affects him as much as treated diabetes or high blood pressure would. He takes responsibility for it, and life goes on. "I take my pill at bedtime. I haven’t really had any side effects," he says.

But perhaps there has been a side effect — his job. As a survivor of a mental illness, LeRoy realized he now has a responsibility not only for his own recovery, but for the healing of others. So he’s made a career of it. LeRoy helps other people with mental illnesses, called clients, as they walk their own road to recovery. He says he may be making less money than he set out to earn, but he’s helping more people than he ever thought he could.
In addition to mentoring and supporting people with mental illnesses, LeRoy tries to teach the public about mental health issues. He speaks to churches, schools, and practically any group or individual who wants to hear about the bravery of those who battle mental illness.

It’s easy for LeRoy to talk about bravery, because it’s bravery that helps him accept himself, accept his diagnosis, and go forward. “You can’t deal with your mental illness until you can agree with yourself that, ’Hey, I have a mental illness so I need to be responsible and take care of it.’ “

He’s brave. He’s responsible. He’s taken care of it. LeRoy Simmons is a survivor.

Getting Through the Day
Michelle Hayes

Michelle Hayes has a lot to be proud of. At twenty-eight years old, she’s been living in her own apartment for six months. She’s learned to cook her own meals, do her own laundry, and, most importantly, “stick to a budget.”

Michele has schizophrenia and has been receiving mental health services for almost twenty years. “I spent all my teenage years living in a (community residential care) home. It depressed me. And some of the people there scared me.” So she sees her new apartment as critical to her recovery. “I LOVE it!” she says, eyes wide with enthusiasm.

The hardest thing about Michelle’s illness is her auditory hallucinations. She hears voices all the time, even on her medication. “I cope by keeping my brain and my thoughts clear. This is how I get through the day. I don’t hear the voices when I’m talking with other people.” She says the best thing about her current medicine is that it helps her sleep. “If I can’t sleep, and I lie awake staring at the ceiling, well— they talk a lot then.”

When asked what helped her recovery, Michelle is quick to credit the Insights (young adult) program: “THIS program; this treatment team. They know my weaknesses they know my strengths. I’ve learned a lot from them because they know about the world.” She attends Insights almost every day, attending groups, seeing her psychiatrist, and getting the skills training she needs to live on her own.

Michelle has clear plans for the future. She’s working with the Work-In-Progress employment program to get a job. “I want to work at Food Lion. I can WALK there from my apartment.” She also plans to get her drivers license and a car. “But I have to keep saving my money.”

The staff sees how far Michelle has come over the past several years. This once timid young woman has matured into a responsible adult. As her case manager says, “It shows in how she
voices her thoughts... how she keeps her apartment, in the pride she has when grocery shopping for herself... things that most of us take for granted. Michelle exemplifies that recovery is real and true.”

Michelle

**Look at who I am, not what I have...**

Donna Lynch

I ask that you take a close look at who I am, not what I have. My name is Donna Lynch. Who I am is a loving sister, daughter, aunt, and friend among other things. What I have is bipolar disorder, Dissociative disorder, and post traumatic stress disorder. My life is good now but that has not always been the case. A huge part of who I am now is because of Berkeley Community Mental Health Center.

Where I have been has at times been a living hell. The things that I am about to share with you I do not tell you in order to make you feel pity for me or for shock value. I tell you these things to give you a reference point on where I have been and where I am now.

There have been times that I have tried to take my own life. I have been in and out of the hospital more times than I can remember and there have been times when my family has been called in to say good bye to me because the doctors didn’t think I would make it through the night. Because of my illness there have been times when I lost faith in God. I remember thinking that there is no way that God can love me or all of this horrible stuff would not be happening to me. Through all of the turmoil, hurt anger and despair there has been two constants the mental health center, and even when I was angry at God or was having my doubts He has been there. My mental health journey began when I was around 24 years old. It really began earlier than that when I was a young child in foster care, but back then no one really thought about children when they thought about mental illness heck no one really thought about mental illness at all unless it affected them or a loved one. So without help I struggled through life dealing with things the best way that I knew how, which in all honesty wasn’t that great.

As I was saying when I was around 24 I started going down hill really fast, I could not get control of any part of my life. Everything seemed to be too much of an effort and I began acting out in ways that I had never done before. I just didn’t care about myself or anyone. I was involved with the man that was to become my first husband and he had the unenviable task to decide what was to be done with me. I had been in the emergency room at County Hospital many times over a period of 2 months with major headaches and nothing was helping them go away. One doctor finally told me they thought that I should see a mental health professional. I made an appointment at MUSC IOP (Institute of Psychiatry) and saw a doctor there. Many test ensued. I continued on my down hill slide at a frantic pace. My life was not
worth being in. So I decided to end it. I didn't have a plan at that time I just told the doctor that I was going to quit. With in a few hours I was hospitalized for the first time.

I was beyond terrified I had no idea what to expect or how to act. I was out of my element. The only thing that I knew about mental illness came from the movie "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest". I cringed as the door shut behind me and I heard the door lock. With in a few days I was doing a bit better and wasn't so scared. When I was released I was given the phone number to the local mental health center. I followed up there and the care that I got was good. The people that I worked with were nice but I was given the idea that the best that I could hope for was to be on meds and attend treatment all the time. I had no hope and no aspirations. I was crazy who would want to be around me. They might catch what I had or I could hurt them.

The years that followed were hard and long. I would slide into depressions so bad that it was like being swallowed by a black hole. My whole being felt as if it were in a pit of utter blackness and when I tried to climb out of the pit it was as if the sides were covered in thick black oil and my fingers would loose their grasp on anything good and I would slide deeper into the abyss. No light would shine for me during these times. I would see nothing but darkness, death, and madness. I had psychotic delusions of hearing voices, and seeing things. Then my meds would be changed and I would feel better for a while. I would start on the upwards swing. I was happy for a while but then things would tilt in my mind and I had more energy then I knew what to do with. I would spend money and stay up for days on end. In fact one time I stayed up for 7 days straight and no matter what sleeping pill I was given I just went higher. I have never taken drugs so I know that wasn't the problem. The problem with feeling this good is you have to come down and the higher you go the further you fall. Thus the cycle would begin again.

In 1998 my husband and I moved to Berkeley County and I was given the information on how to get in touch with the Berkeley Community Mental Health Center. I did shortly after we moved and my life has never been the same since.

My first meeting there was different then any place that I had ever been. The people that I spoke with understood that this was hard for me to do. They were kind and took the time to listen to what I had to say. At the time I refused to have a male therapist because of my trauma issues. So they found me a wonderful lady to work with. She met with me for a few moments and we set an appointment for a few weeks away. The staff made sure that I had plenty of medications to last until I could get into see the doctor and they knew that I was having a hard time so they gave me a number to call after hours if I was in trouble. I will not tell you that my life suddenly was perfect because it was not. I still had horrible things to go through, but I was treated with respect by every member of the staff here, no matter how goofy I got. After working with my therapist for a while she made the choice to move on and I was given another counselor. Her name was Rhonda Baicco. She made a huge break through with me although it was a long time coming. She was one of the toughest people that I have
ever had the pleasure to work with. She read me like a book. I am very good at distracting people from things that I do not want to talk about and she would nail me on it every time. She always got back to the real issues at hand no matter how hard I tried to weasel my way around them. I asked her one day why she wanted to waste her time on some crazy person like me. Didn’t she realize that I was a lost cause? I have never seen any one get so mad so quickly. She jumped up and told me that I was not crazy that I had a chemical imbalance and that I was only a lost cause if I decided to be. She let me know that she had faith in me and that she didn’t think I could do anything that I wanted she KNEW that I could. We began butting heads every week over who was right and who was wrong.

Around the time of the first Andrea Yates trial, she proved to me just how right she was. I have always found it difficult to deal with anything where children are hurt or abused because of my past history. Something in this story shook me to my core. I was in her office and I was the last client of the day. We had begun talking and I mentioned how upset I was about all of this. She asked me why, and for some reason I flipped out. I dissociated to the point that I was on the verge of catatonia. When I came back to myself I was curled in the fetal position behind the door and my head was in her lap. Her supervisor at the time was there also and both were beside me trying to get me “back” in the room, needless to say that neither of them went home at 5:00 that night. The supervisor told Rhonda that she could go home and that she would wait with me until the ambulance got to the center. Rhonda told her no that she was staying also. Neither one of them left me during the wait for the ambulance. They did an amazing job of keeping me calm and focused and “in” the room. I went to the hospital and had a med adjustment but something that day changed in me.

A while later I was sitting in the lobby and a lady who I had seen around the center came out and introduced herself to me, she told me her name was Esther Caison and that she was the Client Affairs Coordinator she asked me to join a group called SHARE. I decided to join but I didn’t actively participate at first. In 2001 my husband and I split up for about six months and during that time I moved out of state. When I came back home I began coming back to the center to maintain my mental health. I requested and got to have Rhonda as my therapist again and again she stayed on my case about all the things that I could do. In fact at one point she had me talking into a mirror in her office at the start of every session to help build my self confidence. As my self-esteem started to grow so did my need to do something. It was at this time that Esther again asked me to become a part of SHARE. This time when I joined I participated. A few months later I was asked to be the liaison for clients to the Quality Improvement Team at the center since Esther was usually out of town on those days. I took the job and found that I enjoyed it. One day I woke up and realized that I had not been in the hospital for over a year. I realized that by getting out in the community and doing things I was rebuilding the positive things in my life. I started volunteering here at the center helping Esther with things and soon I was here almost more than I was home. I continued to stay out of the hospital and to thrive.
Several years ago my husband was told by his doctor that he should move to a place that was cooler and that did not have as much humidity as we do here in the low country due to the fact that he had an advanced case of emphysema. We had planned to move on July 20th however my youngest brother who had been diagnosed with leukemia lost the fight and he passed away on July 19th. With my brothers passing we had to put off moving until I got back from the funeral. The day after I got back from the funeral we moved lock stock and barrel to a town a little bit out side of Asheville, North Carolina. That December my husband had to be rushed to the emergency room as they thought he was having a heart attack. During this hospital visit they found a black spot on his lung. A few months later he was diagnosed with a rapid growing form of lung cancer. On the one year anniversary of my brother’s death I was hospitalized. I had not dealt with the grief and sorrow that I had over loosing him. During this time I was hospitalized several times. I had no support system and nothing that would give me any hope. 

On September 17th a little over a year after losing my brother my sister who was living with my husband and I, passed away unexpectedly. It was a complete shock I had spoken with her only the night before. A little over a month later on October 25th my husband passed away from the lung cancer that had spread through out his body. I was left alone in a town that I did not like and where I hardly knew anyone, raising my two nephews that my sister had left behind. The strain got to be too much for me and I began to dissociate. It got progressively worse, it was at this point that I lost my faith in God, and I was hospitalized one last time. When I came out of the hospital I put my house on the market and I knew that I was coming home to the low country. The day after Thanksgiving the year before last my home sold and I moved back to the Low country. Within a few weeks of moving back here I was back volunteering at the center. The position for Peer Support Specialist and Client Affairs Coordinator was open and I applied for the job. I was thriving here at home and at work. I have my symptoms under control and am stable now. Don’t get me wrong it took a lot to get to this point. It took people believing in me. It took a huge effort on my part to want to learn how to get better and an even larger effort on my part to do it. No one ever told me that recovery was going to be easy but they did instill in me that it would be worth every ounce of hard work that I put into it. Every day I struggle with keeping my symptoms under control. I know that if things are going bad I can go to my supervisor, or any one at the center including the director Debbie Calcote and let them know what is going on and they will do what they can to help. The center has played a huge part in not only my life but my recovery. I know in my heart if it hadn't been for the staff there I wouldn't be here today. I know that I did the work to get here but they are the ones who helped me put it in drive and when I got stuck they helped push me, heck there have even been times when they had to carry me through the dark times. In fact when I think of the people there at the center I am reminded of that wonderful poem Footprints in the Sand. Because there have been times when I have needed someone to carry me and they have always been there and they continue to be there for me even today they offer encouragement and tell me when I am doing a good job or even when I mess up, which is just as important to hear. If it weren't for this center and ones like them around the state people like me would continue to languish in darkness, fear, and self loathing.
It is evident on so many levels that Community Mental Health Centers are a vital part of helping people with mental illness recover, as well as the support that they receive from family, friends, and members of their church. I would not be able to do my job or live the wonderful life that I have now if I did not have the support and understanding of the staff here at Berkeley Mental Health Center, my family, friends, and my faith in God.

Donna

No Wrong Way
Katherine Roberts

When you’re small you dream of all the things you might do when you grow up. At times I wanted be a veterinarian, join the Air Force or be a famous anthropologist and archeologist. I never thought that a major portion of my early adult years would be spent trying to survive mental illness.

I entered college at the age of 19, hoping to become that anthropologist. By the age of 22 I had an anthropology degree as well as one in history and by 25 I had acquired a master’s degree in Public Health. I thought I had the world by the tail and all the insecurities and dark feelings that had lingered in shadows while I was growing up would finally go away. Little did I realize that things have a way of coming back to bite you.

I had barley made through graduate school when I realized that the sadness I had always experienced was moving beyond my control. I was 26 years old working at a State Agency as an HIV/AIDS health educator and I was in serious trouble. I reached out for help - maybe I should have done that a lot sooner. My depression was way beyond my control I was admitted to a hospital for psychiatric evaluation. To make a long story short before I was 28 I had lost my apartment and had to move home with my parents, resigned from my job – losing my benefits in the process, experienced 4 additional inpatient admissions for mental illness - which led to bankruptcy, applied for disability and lost my sense of adultness, dignity and hope. I truly believed that any hope of having any semblance of normal adult life was over and I would forever remain an adult-child dreaming of the life that could have been. I wouldn’t be able to hold a job I was told this was to stressful, I would need to either live with my parents or better yet in a community residential care setting and could expect to live out my days attending various types of day programs. I would have to accept that my life for what it was - a person with a serious and persistent mental illness. Most of those predictions came true except for the acceptance part. I had no problem accepting I had a mental illness, I didn’t accept that some way some how this “illness” could not be “fixed” or “controlled”. I desperately wanted to at least be at a point where I could rejoin the adult world. Fortunately, at day hospital program I was attending (my third and now 15 inpatient admissions) someone saw some hope for me that I couldn’t find for myself. I was placed in a DBT (Dialectical Behavior Therapy) program and slowly my life began to turn around.
After about a year in DBT I remember sitting in the canteen/waiting room of my local mental health center when I saw a small flyer, it read something like “Have a College Degree and Want to Work?” I took it, read it and was hopeful and terrified at the same time. I had spent a lot of energy learning new skills to manage my emotions but I still didn’t really have a life - at least not one that I wanted and now here was this flyer offering me the possibility of returning to the adult world, the working world and one where I could actually use my education. Don’t get me wrong, all jobs are valuable but I really wanted to work in fields and arenas that suited my education. I hung onto the flyer for a while. What if I went back to work and got sick again? What was I going to say about my long absence from the job market “Oh, I have spent the last 8 years in and out of psychiatric hospitals but I’m better now, do you want to hire me?” Eventually I called the number on the flyer. It turned out to be a support and mentoring group. Through that group I found my first job, one that didn’t work out, but I survived the experience and moved on. It was during that first job that I met my future employer, Vicki Cousins, Director of the Office of Consumers Affairs at the South Carolina Department of Mental Health. Not long after leaving my previous position I was doing volunteer work at the Mental Health Association in SC when I got a call from Vicki, asking me to participate to train as a surveyor for what was then called the Customer Satisfaction Team. I completed in the training in February of 1998 and volunteered to do some surveying later that year. By the fall of 1998, I had been hired as a part time temporary employee at mental health. In May 2001, some funding became available that provided the opportunity to work full time and once again my life took another giant leap forward.

In the summer of 2005, my supervisor Vicki Cousins passed away after a short illness and I was hired as the new Client Affairs Director in January of 2006. Now it’s 2010 and I never once thought back in those early days that my life would turn out the way it did. Recovery is possible for most everyone because it is defined by the person doing it. There is no right or wrong way to recover - rather it is about living a life that has ups and downs, successes and failures, dreams and hopes - one that is fulfilling. It is about building or rebuilding a life in spite of being diagnosed with a mental illness. I never thought that I would be able to take most disenfranchising event in my life, being diagnosed as seriously mental ill, and turn it into one of the most empowering.

Katherine

Maria Patterson

Now that I am in recovery, I know how to stay in recovery. I used to hold my head down all of the time, and I cried a lot too. I also used to have many relapses. I did not know I had a mental illness, and I did not care about myself. I used to have risky behavior and always let guys treat me very badly because that is all I
knew. Before I was in recovery, I used to have a real bad problem with anger. I let it take over my life. I used to not live independently. I lived in a staff-assisted living facility. I had no self worth. I had no self esteem. I felt like I had no power over my life. I also felt like I was not in control of my life. I used to need help with my medication. I used to not have any respect for myself. I used to not want to talk to the doctor or want to see him at all. I did not even want to see my case manager.

Now that I am in recovery, I take real good care of my life. I don't have any risky behavior, and I now live independently. I now hold my head up. I have respect for myself. I now know when I see the doctor or other members of my treatment team that I control my recovery and I am confident enough to verbalize my thoughts, opinions, and my needs. Mental Health Services, especially Peer Support has helped me get my power back. I now have a positive self-image. I feel that I am worthy. I have great self-esteem, and I am someone with value. Without Mental Health Services, I would very quickly return to that insecure, ashamed, young women who wanted to hurt herself, did not know how to take her medications, was unable or unwilling to control her anger, and I have worked too hard to ever go back to that person. To sum it all up, every time we lose services at mental health someone like me gets lost also.

Maria

My Recovery
Christine Ford

When I was hospitalized, I would act up a lot. I was very violent. I would act like that because I did not have the skills to control my illness. Now that I am in treatment, I have learned coping skills and have become more sociable and get along with others better. I have started using these skills in Peer Support and in everyday life. Things have become easier for me because of programs like Peer Support and other groups. These programs help me out because they teach me more recovery skills and better ways of living life. If I didn't go to Aiken Barnwell Mental Health Center, I would be sitting at home doing nothing for my treatment, and in the long run I would have to be hospitalized again because I would have too much time on my hands. I would become more symptomatic and inevitably be hospitalized. When I become isolated, it seems like trouble follows, but with Peer Support and other Mental Health Services, I am now sociable, able to access resources in my community, am outgoing, and ready to seek employment. If budget cuts continue, these programs that have helped me in my recovery will no longer be available. I am finally a productive member of my community and am taking an active role in my treatment. If I were to lose these services, I would once again become ill and a burden on the state. This would not be good for me or the taxpayers.

Christine
Becoming Independent  
Daniel Robinson

When I was first diagnosed, I thought it was fake and not a problem. They put me on medication and at first I wouldn’t take it like I was supposed to. Seeing things and hearing things seemed like a regular part of my life or so I thought. I did not recognize that certain places, things and people upset me and worsened my symptoms.

I was hospitalized once in a state institution and again at a local mental health facility. This facility referred me to a local agency DMH program called Peer Support Services. This service offered support, hope, stability and I became more involved in my recovery. Peer Support Services taught me the importance of treatment compliance and skills to deal with my illness to reduce my symptoms and increase my desire to become more independent of my family.

I now take my medications; I am treatment compliant and attend a program daily at a local mental health center. I now know that seeing things and hearing things no longer control my life and that I am in control. Through continuing programs like this, I hope to progress in my recovery, stay out of hospitals and become more independent of DMH.

Daniel

Doing Time in My Mind  
James Morgan

Before I got into recovery I didn’t know anything about mental illness, much less how to deal with my serious and troubling symptoms. It felt like I was doing time in my mind everyday of my life. I self medicated to deal with my mental illness by using drugs and alcohol. When I got to Peer Support Services at Aiken Barnwell Mental Health Center, they showed me how to cope and also research my mental illness. They also taught me how to help others as well as myself. Living with mental illness is hard, but I survived and developed a desire for happiness and a desire to show other people that you can live a fulfilled and happy life as a person diagnosed with mental illness. Knowing what I know now makes me be a better person than I was and gives me a chance to be an example to others among us, so that they too can know that a happy and fulfilled life is possible. Through the help of Aiken Barnwell Mental Health Center, we can help more people in society to reach their goals today.

James
Willing To Try
Stephanie Street

I got sick when I was a teenager. I saw a doctor. I went to the hospital. I was fifteen-years-old. I stayed until I was older, maybe three years. I feel better about myself. I am on the road to recovery. I come to group everyday. Hoping I will soon be over my illness, I try real hard to get better. I hope I can recover soon, and I hope that my recovery story will be even better and better because I am willing to try.

Stephanie

Learning to Care
April Dixon

My name is April Dixon. I go by the name Dashown. I have been a client at Aiken-Barnwell Mental Health Center since October 2009. I have been hospitalized many times and have since made excellent progress since I have started the Peer Support Program. I know now that I need my medication more than anything as it plays a big part in my life. I am a much happier person and feel better about myself. Instead of crying like I used to, I now listen to music which uplifts my spirits. I used to be a cutter and now have stopped cutting on my self because I have learned to journal to express my feelings. I used to never care about what happened to me but my self-esteem has improved and I am happier than I have ever been. Thanks to Peer Support Team cause I could never have done this without them.

April

Making It by Myself
Dexter Lindsey

I went to the PSS program and they helped me with my mental illness, hearing voices, and they also helped me with my reading ability. PSS helped me realize that I can make it by myself if I really put forth the effort to try. ABMHC helped me know how to take my meds when I am supposed to take my medication. They are teaching me how to learn to read. I haven't yet but I am ready to start. Before I cam I was so strung out and hearing voices. Then ABMHC got me on my medication and my voices eased off and I don't hear them as much as I used to. It's much better than it was. Working with Peers Support was beneficial because they can self identify. Since I got down her and got started I've gotten along really well with people.

Dexter
A Good Life
Horace Johnson

I haven’t smoked or drank since I have been at PSS at ABMHC. I learned how not to get so angry anymore by going to group on a regular basis and how to take my medications on a schedule. I take them at night and in the morning. I also learned how to make appointments with my doctor and to go see him on time every three months. I now go to church out in the community and I really enjoy it. I also spend more time with my mother, talking to her. I also do not fight with my brothers anymore. Today I get along with my peers. I have a good life in recovery.

Horace

I Am Learning
Ms. Josephine Williams

I used to cry a lot and hit the staff and throw temper tantrums and I used to get out in the street and try and get hit by a car and I used to get angry and get upset and I used to talk back to the staff and I used to walk away from them when they were talking to me and I used to get mad and very angry. I used to not go shopping by myself. I used to not be able to buy groceries by myself but I can now. I was not able to count money and today I handle my own money and do all the shopping for me and my mother.

Today my life is going real good, better than before. People don’t pick at me or call me names, calling me stupid, crazy, or lazy. Today I have better friends in Peer Support, I have many best friends. I can go to the store by myself. If I want an outfit, I go to get it, and I know if I have enough money to get it. I am trying to learn how to cook for myself today. I am also learning how to pay my own bills by myself at Tri-Development and couldn’t do that before. I got over my anger by learning coping skills at PSS like counting to ten. I’ve learned how to not have a bad attitude. I’m learning how to do things on my own.

Josephine

I Am Stronger Than I Thought
Cynthia

Some of my early indications that I was having difficulties were hearing voices telling me to do bad things and I thought they were watching me at all times and listening to my phone conversations. I also
thought my family and friends were against me. At my worst, I thought people could hear my thoughts and tell people bad things about me. I also thought people were out to get me. What helped me move from where I was to where I am now was talking to my family about my symptoms. They suggested I come home and get mental help. So, I moved back home and began receiving mental health treatment at Abbeville Mental Health Clinic. My family took me to the appointments and showed they cared. I was hospitalized and diagnosed with schizoaffective/bipolar disorder. I began taking my medications as prescribed. Other people helped me by getting me back into the community by encouraging me to volunteer and encouraged me to talk about how I felt. I then began working at the clinic where I was receiving treatment as a volunteer. Then it turned into a full-time position as an Administrative Assistant in another county. Eventually, I came back to the clinic where I was receiving treatment and was offered a position there as a clinical staff employee. The Clinic Director and his staff were supportive and shared their stories of mental illness and recovery. I felt needed and at the same time received invaluable experience. I began learning of other mental illnesses and treatment practices. After about a year, Waymon, the Clinic Director shared information about the Certified Peer Support Specialist Program. I was excited and accepted the challenge of exchanging my current position. I had to get over feeling angry at myself and blaming others for my decisions in life. I also thought I would get better sooner and return to my previous life. I had to learn how to solve problems in a healthy way and to have patience. I also had to start believing in myself and stay focused on my goals.

What I have learned about myself is that I am stronger than I thought. I also can accomplish anything if I work at it. Some of the strengths I gained were finally obtaining my MBA this past January, becoming a town council member and helping others solve their problems. I learned how to be sympathetic to others and not to judge them in their current circumstances. I can now face my fears without relapsing. I learned healthy ways to reduce stress and to limit the number of stressful situations I put myself in. Some of the things that I do to keep me on the right path are take meds regularly, exercise 3 times a week and I try to get enough sleep even if I have to take naps during the day. I try not to let things build up and express my needs more freely. I also ask for help when needed and offer help to others who do not feel that they need help.

I have been receiving services going on 10 years and have been hospitalized several times. My hope is to continue to work in the health care field as an administrator or in a management position. I also enjoy helping other mentally ill persons solve their problems and sharing my story to help them know that recovery is attainable.  

Cynthia
I remember vividly the first time I had a panic attack. I was only 12 years old, at school, playing softball. It was an ordinary school day, but suddenly my heart started to pound, I had trouble breathing, I became dizzy, I thought I was going to faint, actually I thought I was going to die, and being somewhat dramatic anyway, that is what I told my teacher. She seemed skeptical, but knowing something was wrong, she sent me to the school nurse. I do believe the nurse was worried about by palpating heart beating 150 beats a minute and called my mother who took me immediately to our local small town doctor.

The symptoms ended as abruptly as they started, which what is made it seem so odd. After a brief examination, the doctor said I was healthy as could be, and that maybe I wanted attention, or even worse just wanted to get out of school, as he patted me on my back. I was totally invalidated and angry. I felt no one believed me, especially my family. A panic attack is really scary, and while it is happening you do think and feel, as if you will die.

Panic disorder was not yet recognized by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. Therefore, no one ever put an actual name on what was happening to me. Although, I had these terrifying physical symptoms, it was all just in my head. Well, yes, I later learned.

So occasionally, without warning and many times without a "logical" reason the symptoms would recur or perhaps something really stressful was happening, and I experienced unusually severe anxiety or a panic attack. I believe I was often depressed, but now I think it was my normal at the time.

Yet, I lived in a pretty chaotic home. Both my parents struggled with alcoholism and mental illness. I never knew what to expect when I came home. It was an invalidating environment for my sisters and me.

Sometime in my early teens, I began to experience a more serious depression. Although the panic disorder make me think I was dying, I remember I wanted to die at one point and took some of my mother's pills, but a friend put me in her car and drove around with all the windows open and the air blowing in on me to keep me from going to sleep. I never told anyone about it. My depression did keep me in bed sometimes, but I made it through school, and married young; mostly, I believe to get away from home.

I still had panic attacks and depression, but taught myself some ways to manage it. At the very least, I knew I wasn’t dying of a heart attack. I know I avoided certain places.
if I could, like big parties or events, because I was afraid I would have a panic attack. I'm sure now that, I also had social phobia. Many people thought I was just shy or on the other end, a snob, nether was true. I think I probably go out of my way, now to be "A People Pleaser" as I have been called, and I don't think that is a bad thing, but I realize certain aspects of my personality was shaped by an actual illness.

Anyway, after I married, my husband, and I had a nice home and two babies, I believe that was the happiest time of my life. My mother and stepfather, gained their sobriety, and became active in AA. I thought I now had the family I had always wanted. This relative calm didn't last long. Unfortunately, I was only in my twenties when my mother died and shortly after that, my stepfather completed suicide. All this was very traumatic, and I faced depression again, but it didn't completely debilitate me, but depression was definitely becoming a way of life.

I continued to care for my family and worked as a manager at a department store. Some years later, my husband died tragically in a car accident. Even with this, I somehow pulled myself up to go to work and raise my two children who were teenagers by this time. I decided to move from the upstate to Columbia and my company transferred me.

Then, at seventeen my son was diagnosed with a terminal illness. My daughter and I cared for him for ten years, but knowing the end was near for him, and the stress of the situation, I went to my room and took an overdose of medication, I was now taking for my depression and panic disorder. I had second thoughts, and ran to a neighbor's house for help. They called an ambulance and after being stabilized, a few days later, still in the hospital, I wrote out the plans I wanted for my son's funeral. He died a few weeks later. I don't think even those close to me knew I was beginning a fight for my own life.

I went back to work. I thought I could go on like before, but in the next few years the battle with depression I had before, was nothing compared to the deep, dark, devastating depression that began to grip me. I was lost, and I could not find my way back. I was being treated, but nothing seemed to work.

I could not control my emotions any more, small things made me angry, or I became hysterical and would cry all day or for days. Whatever coping skills I had before, were gone. My behavior increasingly became erratic. I was increasingly irresponsible. Know one knew how to deal with me. I was very ill. I began to lose friends and relationships. I lost more than one job. I lost my house, my car, really everything. I had to move in with my daughter and son-law. I didn't get out of bed, and would sleep hours and hours everyday, and now I truly wanted to die. I attempted suicide six times and each time I ended up in Bryan Psychiatric Hospital. I was not in a good place literally or figuratively.

Medications were increased, I was in therapy, my family begged me, cajoled me, nothing worked. It was the lowest time of my life; I was in hell and still had suicidal ideation.
I made one more attempt at taking my life and the doctor in the hospital did not give my daughter much hope I would live, but I did, thankfully. While in the hospital this last time a psychologist, who talked to me, asked me if I wanted to live or die, and I said I did want to live, but only if I had a life worth living. She referred me to Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT). I wanted to try it. I was in DBT for almost a year, and I credit that with saving my life. The DBT therapist and a great psychiatrist helped me, understand myself.

I heard about an organization called the South Carolina Self Help Association Regarding Emotions (SC SHARE) and began to take every class they offered. I had to take the bus, because I no longer owned a car. I had become very humbled. SC SHARE offered me hope, encouragement, and I began to feel I could get a real life back.

I also learned of the peer support program, I called and took the training. I got a job as a Certified Peer Support Specialist (CPSS), and I loved it. I also felt the mental health professionals I worked with, believed in me. I had a life worth living again, helping others’ fight their mental illnesses. I believe completely that recovery is very real. I know that others helped me. I know that everyone at SC SHARE helped me, but when it comes down to it... I believe recovery begins when you have an “aha” moment, when you get it. I realized only I could do it for myself. It was up to me to learn how to deal with my illness and my life. I still miss my son, I always will, but the grief is not so raw, and I have gained coping and stress tolerance skills. I simply didn’t know; what I didn’t know. I diligently try to live in the here and now. I don’t let the past rule my life. It isn’t like I never have a bad day or my anxiety/panic disorder doesn’t rear its’ head, it’s just I’m capable of coming out of it fairly quickly. I’m more resilient.

It was a long way back; it did not happen over night. It was hard work, but I now have my own apartment, car, my two kitty cats, good friends, and a good job, I love, and I know that I grow each day. To stay well, I follow a daily maintenance plan, pray, meditate, journal, exercise, and I am still very involved in SC SHARE, and use my DBT skills. I have taken many NAMI trainings, and the one most dear to my heart is a connections support group I co-facilitate. Most importantly, I have my beautiful daughter who has always been there for me. I have two wonderful grandsons, and I’m very close to the rest of my family, and fortunately they and the friends I have now, understand mental illness and its’ consequences.

I have spoken publicly many times about my illness and my recovery, because I have been there, I want to dispel myths, and reduce stigma. I advocate for recovery based treatment.

Now, I work for the SC Department of Mental Health coordinating and training others to become Certified Peer Support Specialists. I have a purpose on this earth. I am blessed and I am extremely lucky.

Bobbie
Recovery Day: September 11, 2009
Judy Hassam

To verify a much over-worked joke...It is not uncommon for a client to come out of their therapist's office shaking their head, and proclaiming loudly to anyone who will hear..."that guy is crazier than me!" Can you believe what he (did or said)? Believe me - he's NUTS! No wonder I don't get any better! They're all crazy in here!

And the client walks away convinced that no one is "healthy" enough to "cure" him... and the therapist hasn't got a clue of what just happened.

It's been said, many individuals enter the helping professions, because they are sick. I know early in my training.... I devoured textbooks for clues, to unravel the mystery within me. As a young psychology major I had no idea what was going on! I only knew I was miserable, depressed and in great torment. I didn't know things were going to get a lot worse before they got better. The idea of ME having a mental illness NEVER crossed my mind ... not even while I sat... week after week, in the lobby of the mental health center.... waiting to see MY therapist! I couldn't have a mental illness! I wasn't like them! All I needed to do was read more books ... figure things out... get my degree... get a job and start my life as a psychologist. I had not a clue!

Nether less to say... things didn't work out as planned. I was a fractured, human being ... drowning under stress, anxiety, depression and strange thoughts... and barely holding on. When I couldn't go on any further ... I collapsed one evening in the awareness ... Yes - I HAVE A MENTAL ILLNESS! It was the most devastating day of my life!

I doubled my efforts to "get better". More school... more books... setbacks and hospitalizations followed. Still, I managed through it all, and hold onto my job. My job? I was a mental health counselor... freshly minted... fresh out of training... full of book learning .... I thought I knew everything - in reality, I knew nothing!

It took years to learn my craft. It took even longer to realize I was a "wounded healer". The symptoms of my mental illness played havoc with me... the more I worked... the more I pushed back, and tried to hide my symptoms. I was very sick... still ... I pushed on, to work even harder! The more symptomatic I got ... the MORE I drove myself be, not only a competent therapist... but also the very best therapist at my workplace! I could not allow any weakness... or failure!

Many years later... after I got into the consumer movement... I discovered there were more therapists, "like me" - Therapists who also had screwed-up lives, were depressed, and suffered from intense anxiety and fears. I was not alone! They, like me...lived two lives...
The public, “I’m o.k. I’m a therapist. I know what’s best for you”, and the “Oh, my God! What if they (work) finds out?”

Like them, I was afraid if I showed any weakness (i.e. symptoms), I would be “found out” and fired. Little did I realize my life as a therapist revolved around fear, I was treating myself... more than my clients! Any set-back my clients had- I perceived as a personal failure. Technically, I was a very strong competent therapist.... But I was an EMPTY therapist. As I sat with my clients... I knew I had to practice what I taught.

And so, I befriended my mental illness. I did not run from it. I embraced it... and found it did NOT destroy me. The more I accepted and made peace with my illness, the greater my sensitivity and confidence became. I learned to listen to and with my heart. I began to speak the truths of what my illness had taught me. My mental illness taught me how to be fully human... to love myself... and not let the illness be the “fall guy” when I screwed up. I learned I was not defined by my illness. I had much more health in me than I thought. And you know what? I saw Health in my clients as well! My treatment focused on wellness, instead of pathology.

I saw health, where others focused on symptoms and sickness. I became not only a good therapist... But, also a compassionate guide for others on their recovery journey. I finally got it!

You might be surprised that a person with mental illness could make a good therapist. Or maybe... you might be thinking...why did it take her so long to: (1) first figure out she had a mental illness, (2) or how to use it as an asset in her therapeutic work, (3) or why did it take her forever, to get over the stigma attached to being a “wounded healer”?

We, who are wounded healers, have much to offer. It is from our personal experience of living with a mental illness that we can communicate with ABSOLUTE certainty... the triumph of the human spirit over ANY adversity! We have overcome the stigma of the workplace, and stigma we have done to ourselves. We are strong! Our wisdom and authority come from our resiliency.

Therapy isn’t about just becoming a “better” person. Rather, it is about allowing yourself to experience you unique inner core... without distortion, expectation or limitations. It is about seeing yourself as you REALLY ARE: Complete, Whole and Beautiful” Mental illness does NOT define who we are! Mental illness is simple what it is.... an illness... nothing less... nothing more. We are not the illness! We have an identity that is separate and apart from any biological illness. This is our gift and our strength. This is who we are, and what we have to offer. We know Recovery is REAL! We ARE living examples! Thank God for wounded Healers!

Judy
Becoming Me
Susan Reilley

In the beginning of my Manic-Depressive labeling several thing were going on. I was having trouble in school, while trying to write a paper I started to get delusional thinking that the storm that was going on outside was actually going to end the world. Being infatuated (obsessed) with an older man, who did not reciprocate my affection, also contributed to my emotional state of confusion. My obsessive thinking was getting me into a lot of trouble!

When I first started to experience “wellness” I realized that I was being very practical and that was very important. I could not spend a lot of time thinking about life I had to live it.

For many years trying to change and discipline myself constantly was how I spent my life. I realized mental illness was my problem, and I had to take responsibility for myself. No longer could I sleep all day and get out of the bed in the middle of the night to eat. I had to learn to exchange my nights for days and it was not an easy thing to do.

I was lucky; I had supportive friends who would call me every morning to wake me up. I learned to frame my day to bring me structure. There was also always some family function I had to go to that helped keep me from isolating.

I found that my low self-esteem kept me from being honest about my feelings. For example, I had known this guy for a long time and for about three years and acted as if he were my boyfriend. The relationship wasn’t real and in the end I was devastated. But the one thing I did have going for me was resilience. I sought help not wanting the fear I was experiencing to take over my life.

I credit the Wellness Recovery Action Plan in helping me achieve my goals. The daily maintenance plan helped me establish a solid everyday foundation from which to work off of. I journal every day, stick to a routine and have allowed more people into my life. I have found that others can be objective where I can not.

About eight years into my illness it became apparent to me that I was going to have to be the one who makes choices for my life. For thirty-six years those choices were influenced by my diagnosis and people who took care of me. The responsibility, however, was mine and I was going to have to assume it. I was the one who was responsible for getting up, getting cleaned up, and caring for me. I was one the one who was responsible for taking my medication. I was the one who had to learn to trust. It wasn’t easy or quick but it happened. There is so much that recovery has brought to my life.

Susan
**Doing Good**  
Richard Stabell

Photography used to be my life. You would never see me without a camera. I always went to the camera club meetings. I loved it! I couldn’t picture "Me" without my photography. Then I started having a lot of problems with mental illness and the camera club began to fade away. I wasn’t happy anymore. I lost interest and stopped taking pictures. I stopped going to the club meetings – I felt like I did not belong there anymore. I didn’t fit in – I felt lost. Then a friend told me about a place called Bridges – it was a mental health program and I began to get treatment there.

Several years later I ran into an old friend from the camera club who asked me where I had been. I didn’t know what to say, so I told her I was sick. She talked me into coming back to the camera club. Going back was very hard. Members were asking me where I had been and I didn’t know what to say. How did I explain the problems I was having?

I began experiencing problems when I was 15 years old. I started hearing voices and having visual hallucinations. Once a hallucination robbed me at knife point telling me that he would kill me if I did not hand over all my money – I was so scared! I hid under a truck for four hours. Then I went to a bank and tries to type in secret codes into the ATM machine to summon the police. I thought I saw the cops have a shootout with the bad guy but it was a hallucination. I was very shaken up. Hallucinations used to chase me home and the voices in my head nearly got me fired from jobs.

I received many diagnoses from chronic depression to schizophrenia. I was hospitalized four times. Today I know that taking my medication and keeping appointments help keep me stable.

With the treatment I received at bridges I have been able to get my photography back. Today my photos are on display in public buildings in South Carolina and Connecticut – they have traveled all over the US. I have had my own shows and one photo was published in a magazine. I’m doing well.

*Richard*

**Half-Full**  
Leslie Holmes

My recovery began three years ago. I was admitted to the Baptist Hospital in Columbia and stayed approximately three months. During that time I a wonderful support group of doctors, nurses, and case managers. I
had music, art, pet, and exercise therapy. The doctors were very successful about getting me on the right medications. Before long I was released.

When I left I went to a "providers" home. They are people who open their homes giving you a room, food and some help with transportation. The first two homes didn't work but this third one is better.

I know I never be truly happy until I have my own apartment, a job and car. I am working towards that goal. I have been very happy being a part of the clubhouse program at Lexington. I have a lot of friends, people who support me and counselors that I can talk to if I have a problem.

I have learned about all phases of recovery during our group discussions. I enjoy the new knowledge I have gained. One thing that I have learned and will never forget is that I have to stay on my medication and tell someone when the medicine isn't working. I have bi-polar disorder and my disposition is pretty stable right now although I still have some highs and lows. They don't last long and I know now that they will pass and the next day will be better. The glass is half full.

Leslie

Success Story
Lloyd R. Cheek Jr.

Speaking on the subject of success I hope this story helps someone who is going through anything like what I have. First I want to tell you my story before I came to success.

I thought something was wrong with me; I was hearing voices I did not know anything about mental illness and I was too ashamed to tell anyone. At one point I heard voices that told me to steal a car. I went to jail. When my court case finally came up I broke down crying and told the court about the voices and delusions. I was found not guilty by reason of insanity and sent to the state hospital where they taught me about mental illness. I was told I had paranoid schizophrenia and that I was not alone - many people had mental illnesses and could relate. I now know it was the illness that kept me from eating, from sleeping, why I isolated from family and friends and heard voices. When I got to the hospital I was very shy and for a long time would not speak to anyone. The staff helped me a lot; one told me I had to two different people a day. I ended up making a lot of friends. After ten years I got out.
Today, I don't live in a group home or any kind of institution but with my family in the community. I have overcome my shyness with a lot of practice. I can now speak in front of crowds.

So, I would like to thank God and the staff members, friends and family that helped me. I have come along way.

Lloyd

Finding Hope
Norman Brannon

My name is Norman Brannon. I am 44 years old and attend the clubhouse, Our House, at Lexington mental health center. The clubhouse here has helped me a lot. I have made new friends and thank all the people who have what I have achieved in my recovery. I give God all the glory for what he has done in my life. I was once very sick but now I am doing well.

When I was 21 years old, I began to have problems. I was hearing voices and seeing things. I was at work one day and my boss said that I did something, I don't remember doing anything, and he fired me. I was really scared and took off. My family had a hard time finding me. When they did I was taken to the state hospital. I learned that I had schizophrenia. I was in the hospital for about 20 days. When they let me out the first thing I did was to get a job. Funny enough that job was at the hospital where I worked with machines. I left the hospital because the pay was not good and got a job at the farmers market. Unfortunately, some things were happening in my life to cause me to be depressed, my grandmother was real sick and passed away. I quit taking my medication and ended up in the hospital again. I didn't take care of myself, I didn't wash, I was hearing and seeing things again and thought people were trying to hurt me. I was there for about five months before I started to feel well enough to go home.

When I did get out I went to a clubhouse. It was called New Horizons and was part of Columbia Area mental health center. Then my family moved to Lexington and I went to a different clubhouse. While I was there I got a part-time job working for Goodwill. I stayed at that job for a long time, from 1997 to 2002. I was laid off because of money.

Today, I attend Our House. I like coming here because I think if I just sat at home doing nothing I would get sick again. Here, I meet new people, have made friends, I exercise and have learned a lot about my illness. I really like working with the new members making them feel welcome.
I have had to overcome a lot. When I was real sick I isolated myself and didn’t trust people. I
didn’t understand what having schizophrenia meant and though my life was over, I lost hope.
But I am lucky, my family is very supportive especially my mom. My family along with the
staff and members of the clubhouse help to motivate me to stay well. My faith has also
played a big role.

A few years ago my mom got really sick. She needed a heart transplant. My sisters and I
raised a lot of the money. This was something I never thought I could do but I did it. I have
learned I am capable of doing a lot of things I didn’t used to think were possible. When you
work to help others it is amazing to discover what you are capable of doing.

Today, I know I am a good listener and a good, hard worker. I have learned to face the fear
of having schizophrenia. I have learned that if you take responsibility for you recovery you
can get there. I have learned that one of the best ways to help your self is by helping
someone else. I hope to some day work with kids who are in special education classes like I
was. I want them to know that can do and they can be. I share my story in the hope that I
can help others.

Norman

Working My Recovery
Christina Salmon

Hi, my name is Christina. I am twenty-eight years old. When I was
17 years old a man named Sodom got into my room. He made bad
things happen I prayed he would go away. It was scary because I
don’t know how he got in there and no one believed me when I told
them about him.

What did happen was that I got admitted into Bryan hospital, more than once. I also got put
on a lot of medicine. I didn’t like taking it because of the side effects. It took a long time to
find ones that help me.

When I first got out of the hospital I lived in group homes. The first was in Charleston, then
Columbia and Hopkins. I didn’t really like them. Now I live in a group home in Gaston and I like
it there.

One of the things that helped me get better was a therapy dog at one of the homes I lived in.
Being around animals makes me happy because they help me clam down or make me laugh when
I am upset. Staying in close contact with my family helps me too and so do my friends. It
helps when people understand what you are going through because they have similar issues –
they don’t judge they just accept me. My faith also has played a big role in my recovery.
About two years ago I started coming to Our House at Lexington mental health center. I like it here and there have been a lot of things that I benefited from. I have made friends and have a job. There is a clothing store here. We can get clothes that we need and they don’t cost us any money. I help keep track of the inventory and stock new items that come in. Working in the store makes me feel good, having something meaningful to do is helpful.

I have learned a lot of things about myself as I have worked on my recovery. I realize what an important role my faith is for me. I learned that I am a lot stronger than I thought I was and learned to face my fears. I also had to learn to trust people and now I know I have people in my corner who are rooting for me.

In the future I hope to get a job working with animals, dogs and cats, maybe as a veterinary assistant. Looking back, I realize that I have come along way.

Christina

Never Give Up
Edmond Dowling Jr.

I came from a small town and grew up thinking I could be a teacher. I went to college and wound up working in the management field instead. That took up a lot of my time. I married at an early age, 21. I realized that I wasn’t happy; I was having a difficult time feeling accepted by family and friends from church. I wasn’t able to achieve what I thought were healthy relationships.

To comfort myself I turned to alcohol and drugs. I thought they could help me deal with personal issues and my deepening depression. It only resulted in job loss. I recognized that I had a problem and being a resourceful guy I got help and went to rehab to help me move forward with my life. The problem was that I didn’t deal with either my fear or anger and I relapsed moving on to even harder drugs. I thought they could help me deal with my anger, pain, fear and shame. I went to programs but didn’t work them. Fortunately, I didn’t give up on myself and through faith, and help from the mental health system and alcohol and drug abuse programs I began to improve. My relationships with both my biological and church families were strengthened. I understood that I had an addiction and needed help and understanding in how to deal with life.

Today I attend 12-step meetings, have a sponsor, a good support network, and go to recovery meetings at my church. I have recently returned to the workforce after a two-and-a-half year absence. I have a good outlook on life and know with the help of Christ and my family and friends that I can not only face my own fears but also help others around me. I currently have 7 months and 26 days of recovery and I am just taking things one day at a time.

Edmond
Making Changes
Leslie Dukes

When I was 16 years old started to hear voices and feel very paranoid, I cried lot and did not want to get out of bed. I was hospitalized, many times. I slowly realized that if I was going to get better I was going to have to make some changes in my life.

I realized that I was spending too much time looking for an “ideal family”; one that did not exist. I think this is because the house I grew up in was a scary place - there was a lot of abuse. I kept thinking if I looked hard enough I could find that loving family I so wanted as a child. Then I realized that it was up to me to make myself happy.

Learning to make myself happy wasn’t easy. I had to learn to solve my own problems and learn to do things on my own - not wait for someone else to tell me how to fill up my time. I also learned that I could not run to the hospital and expect that they could fix things for me. Finally I had to learn to be patient - it took a long time and many different types of medications before I got the combination that was right for me. I had to learn to trust that if I took them could help me.

With the support of family and friends today I live independently in an apartment with a roommate. I buy my own groceries and get to choose what I want to eat. I can go bed when I want and sleep late if I want. I got a part-time job this and working has my recovery a lot. Everyone deserves to have a purpose in life and now I do!

Leslie

Taking Control
Lisa Faye Bauer

I had been suffering from crying spells and isolated myself in my room. I often had periods of being extremely hyperactive and had many anger issues. I did not have control of my life and my self-esteem suffered. I have been receiving services from Aiken Barnwell Mental Health center for several years now. I learned to take my medications, talk to the doctor effectively and begin attending groups that were offered including anger management, music and assertiveness.

I was promoted to another program and I learned more about depression and how it affected me on a daily basis. I learned skills to reduce my anger and deal with my sadness. I learned to manage symptoms of my illness to keep me out of the hospital. I learned to communicate openly with peers and to deal with life issues. I began to feel better about myself and gained
confidence to continue with my recovery. I have found friends who have things in common with me and we have bonded and talk about our problems.

If it were not for this program I don’t know where I would be now. I hope to one day have a job and to be more independent of my family and the department of mental health. My goal in life is to learn to live with my mental illness, be a productive member of my community.

Lisa

Recovery Now
Willie Ross

This is my recovery story. I’m in recovery now. I use to use alcohol and drugs. I don’t use alcohol and drugs anymore. I’ve been clean a long time. I also take my medication on time. I better handle my stress without getting angry. Handling my stress is hard sometimes. I’m married and have a stepson. We spend a lot of time together. I want to get my GED but it’s hard. I’ve been married 3 years. I live independently. I graduated from Peer Support Mentoring class. I am now a RAMP volunteer which means I help others in their recovery. I love my family very much. I can talk to my wife when I get lonely and depressed. I learned to do a crisis plan. I also learned my triggers.

Willie

Dealing with Mental Illness
Dianne Miles

I use to be in and out of the ER but now I don’t go to the ER. I use to throw chairs. By coming to group I have a better way of handling my problems. I didn’t know that I had a mental illness. Now I know that I have a mental illness and I can deal with it. I use to not ask the doctor any questions but now I ask the doctor questions. I use to not go outside of my door but now I come outside to get on the van to come to peer support. I use to not keep my doctor appointments but now I keep my doctor’s appointments. I use to not have a wellness toolbox but now I do. I used to be a patient at the Aurora Pavilion at Aiken Regional Medical Center but now I have not been in Aurora for about 5 years.

Dianne
Stories in this edition were submitted by current and former clients representing the Aiken-Barnwell, Anderson-Oconee-Pickens, Beckman, Coastal Empire, Columbia Area, Lexington and Pee-Dee mental health centers.

If you wish to submit a story to be included in the next addition please contact the SCDMH Office of Client Affairs at 803-898-8304 or go to http://www.state.sc.us/dmh/client_affairs/client_home.htm