

EZORIA'S STORY

I am just a few months shy of seventeen years of age and while life hasn't been so bad, it hasn't always been on my side either. I was born to the big city of Los Angeles, California: bright lights, movie stars, so much opportunity, and so much identity in just this little part of this huge world. I never thought I'd feel so lost, alone and completely oblivious to who I was.

Growing up started out simple; both my mom and dad worked. We had a house, cars, food: all the necessities of living. We were the typical middle class family. But my dad's anger became out of control. He would go on a rampage for no apparent reason. Things that would make him angry would be physically taken out on my mom at home. He was very controlling and wanted everything his way, until my mom got tired of it and we moved to the "dirty south": Jackson, Mississippi, a place where we were surrounded by family and friends and where I developed the famous southern drawl. For a while we stayed with my grandparents and from what I understand everything was fine, but being a child it wasn't quite possible for me to understand everything completely.

Shortly after moving in with my grandparents, my mom bought a house and finally we were in our own space, just my mom and I, but a new house came with new responsibilities. With my mom being a single mom and all, we struggled a lot and I couldn't help but think that it was my fault. I couldn't be the daughter my mom wanted me to be; I couldn't be as social or make friends like she wanted. I was always the quiet one, trying not to be noticed, but that didn't keep me from being teased by kids my own age. I was very tall and towered over everyone in my grade and that was not accepted.

At that point in time I was in a very vulnerable state. I was an only child so it got very lonely at times. I really depended on my cousins to keep me company. But this one particular cousin had another agenda in mind and I was sexually abused by him at age six. I was so shaken up but I couldn't tell anyone. I didn't know how my mom would react or what would happen to him.

Fast forwarding to eighth grade; middle school had already been hard for me. It was a new adjustment and now I was getting ready for high school. One day I exploded! Everything that I hid, everything that I suppressed came out, not verbally though, but on my arms. I had heard about self injury but I never really thought about it until then, and at that very moment cutting became my life. When I was angry I cut, when I was lost inside my thoughts, I cut, when I was depressed, I cut, when I was frustrated, no problem, I cut. It was a way of life, an art; it was my best friend. It knew when I needed it, it was there whenever I wanted it, but it had a darker side to it. It hurt my loved ones to see me like this. That was the last thing I wanted to do. I really didn't care what I did to myself; I just didn't want to hurt anyone else, especially my mom. That's why I hid my cutting.

My friends didn't understand why I cut, and they thought I needed help. I begged to differ. They dragged me to the counselors, who called my mom. She was so angry at me but I couldn't understand why. I kind of didn't care as long as I could cut after she was done talking (more like yelling). After she was finally done, she asked for all my tools; honestly I feel like you can never take all of a cutter's tools. I found it kind of funny that she actually thought that I was going to give her everything.

A few weeks after my secret was out, I was admitted into an outpatient program where I was diagnosed with depression. It was so great; I made friends and had someone to talk to, but I wasn't ready to give up cutting. Then I developed an eating disorder. It wasn't a substitute for

cutting; it was more like an addition to harm myself even more so. After six months of treatment I was discharged. From there I was admitted into another therapy program but after a few months of being there the staff suggested more intensive care. So then it was off to inpatient. There were people there that were just like me, people I could relate to and vice-versa. But when I said I needed help they rushed to get me meds; when I wouldn't eat they isolated me from the rest of the group; they threatened to put me in inpatient long-term, which made me not want to talk to them. It was horrible. And then the meds made me gain so much weight and that didn't help my eating disorder. I was still self-harming, but I guess I showed improvement because I was discharged within 15 days.

My mom thought everything was good – but I knew better. I had gotten better at hiding the scars and plus it was winter so that made it easier to hide my body under clothes. The clothes and climate didn't keep my doctor from seeing my scars though. She told my mom that I needed to be back in therapy. At that point I was done with everything – the therapy, the meds; I just wanted to keep harming myself and I didn't want anyone in my way. I told the therapist what they wanted to hear and I was discharged. For a while, it was the same ol' thing; cutting every day, purging everything I ate. It wasn't until May, 2010 that I met my mentor who really helped me and I started trying to better myself. She accepted me for who I was; she was always there for me, and not like the others who left when they thought I was alright. She never told me to stop, which I think is very important when dealing with a self-injurer, because most of the reason that I cut was because I mistakenly thought it gave me more control over my life. She loved me for me and all the baggage that I came with. I began to value my life, which was a major change considering that I didn't care at all before. I began to "try." I no longer sat in my sorrow. I tried to better myself because at the end of the day I am all I have. Yes, my mentor was there, and my mom and family, but they couldn't take away the pain that I wanted so desperately to go away. I had my own mind and I had to take the first step and try for my own good. And although sometimes I slip up and resort to old ways, I know better now and so I do better.

AUTHOR

Ezoria Aisuan is a 17-year-old senior with plans to attend The University of Southern Mississippi. Her goal for the future is to become an adolescent psychologist.

2012 STAFF OF THE RESEARCH AND TRAINING CENTER FOR PATHWAYS TO POSITIVE FUTURES

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PROJECTS AND STAFF:

CAREER VISIONS tests an approach to career planning and employment for young adults, ages 21-25, who are receiving SSE or extended special education services.

Jo-Ann Sowers, Principal Investigator; Jared Tormohlen, Project Manager; Casadi Marino, Graduate Research Assistant.

BETTER FUTURES tests a comprehensive intervention to assist young people in foster care with serious mental health conditions to prepare to participate in post-secondary education.

Sarah Geenan and Laurie Powers, Co-Principal Investigators; Pauline Jivanjee, Project Advisor; Lee Ann Phillips, Project Manager; Adrienne Croskey, Graduate Research Assistant; Stephanie Raffaele and Isha McNeely, Student Research Assistants.

ACHIEVE MY PLAN studies the efficacy of an intervention to increase young people's participation and engagement in their mental health treatment planning teams, and to build organizational capacity to support youth engagement.

Janet S. Walker and Laurie Powers, Co-Principal Investigators; Celeste Moser, Project Coordinator; Amber Athenien, Jared Best, Precious Bodel, Mauri Castle, Katrina Friedrich, and Celina Kishna, Research Interns.

TRANSITION POLICY CONSORTIUM will develop an inventory that assesses the level of community support for transition services with a specific emphasis on measuring collaboration and continuity of care between the child and adult mental health systems.

Nancy Koroloff and Janet Walker: Co-Principal Investigators; Martha McCormack, Graduate Research Assistant.

FINDING OUR WAY furthers the development of a culturally specific self-assessment tool for American Indian/Alaskan Native young people. Developed for youth ages 13-19, the tool will be modified to include issues relevant to transition.

Barbara Friesen and Terry Cross, Co-Principal Investigators; L. Kris Gowen and Pauline Jivanjee, Researchers; Abby Bandurraga, Graduate Research Assistant.

EHEALTH LITERACY is a developmental project that will contribute to a knowledge base about the ways youth and young adults use the internet to find information about mental health care, conditions, symptoms, or medications. The information will be used to develop and test an eHealth literacy curriculum.

L. Kris Gowen, Principal Investigator.

RECOVERY OUTCOMES is a secondary analysis of large national data sets. This project will analyze data from the System of Care National Evaluation related to young people's recovery outcomes.

Eileen Brennan, Principal Investigator.

MEDIATORS OF STIGMATIZATION will analyze data from nationally representative samples of youth and young adults, and use this information to identify potentially effective anti-stigmatization strategies.

Janet Walker, Principal Investigator.

TRANSITION TRAINING COLLABORATIVE will develop graduate and undergraduate course modules appropriate for individuals who plan to work with transition-aged youth, as well as modules for in-service delivery.

Eileen Brennan and Pauline Jivanjee, Co-Principal Investigators; Claudia Sellmaier, Graduate Research Assistant.