

MY GREATEST ALLY

After arriving home from a hard day's work, I slip off my jacket and boots. I look out the kitchen window to glance a peek at the snow-covered ground on a beautiful December day. The lawn is all dressed in white. As I look across the street at a cozy yellow ranch home, I notice the evening sun reflecting off the icicles growing from the roof's drip cap. Suddenly, my eyes begin to fill with glee and my heart fills with joy as I reminisce fond winter childhood memories of a small city off the shores of Lake Michigan where my family used to live.

In those days, the snow was my dreamland. My two sisters and I would eagerly come home from school to hot chocolate and a tasty snack mom would prepare for us almost daily. A little snack was essential after walking five blocks in snowy conditions, or at least that was what we led mom to believe. After happily consuming our treats, completing our homework, and viewing some television, we would venture outdoors. Since we lived on a city block, the only hill available to slide on was the snow hill in the front yard that dad created from the snow he shoveled from the driveway. We would slide down our snow hill until our boots were soaked and our little fingers were numb. Then we would return indoors where mom kept warm as she prepared our delicious hot meals. After our meals and kitchen duties, it would be bedtime. Bedtime was also an anticipated time, as mom and dad together would snug-

ly cover my sisters and me in our beds. Throughout the night I would dream of how exciting the next day would also be. But, like the night, the dream did not last much longer.

When I was 9, my father left us. Consequently, things were never the same, My hero, the one I most ad-



mired, abandoned us for a new life. What he did not realize was that the lives of my mother, my sisters, and me were taken away because we were no longer good enough. For the first time in my life I felt horrific pain, like a stab to the heart. This is much more difficult to heal than average pain. The anguish would grow for years to come. At this point, my behavior started to change. It began at school. I would leave my class briefly to visit the restroom and then scurry to the main office where I would claim to be ill, adamantly requesting to go home. This was routine for several months. Later, my conduct developed into acting out in class and skipping school. These actions were unlike me. Teachers were beginning to become concerned with my transformed behavior.

My mother soon arranged therapy for me at Catholic Social Services. Nonetheless, I refused to comply with the several therapists who had seen me. Meanwhile, my negative actions continued as time progressed.

When I was 11, my mom, my sisters and I moved 55 miles away to a small town. Here would be a fresh start. My mother even remarried. Eventually, regardless of the changes, my conduct resumed. Then my behavior escalated at full throttle. This led to my involvement in the court system. My mom worked with the school system and community mental health in search of a solution to my behaviors. I was started on medications.

Then I was often hospitalized for medical changes as a result of having my diagnosis altered. The process was draining for my family and me, and it lasted eight years. At home my mom made many efforts to keep safety a priority. She provided a safety plan at home in case I lashed out or attempted to inflict self-harm. She also arranged a support system with wraparound, a family strengthening process to keep me from out-of-home placement and to strengthen family values.

When a child with emotional challenges is going through behavior changes, a support system is vital. Not only does the child benefit from the support system, but their family does as well. The support system I believe in most is provided through the family focused planning that is at the center

of wraparound. This was more beneficial than one-on-one therapy. In fact it was not therapy at all. My entire family would meet for discussion in the comfort of our own home. Friends and other family members would also join in for many of our meetings. We discussed our family and personal issues in a strength-based way. This allowed us to better understand one another and the full spectrum of the issues surrounding us so we could target them together. There were moments of tear shedding, and hugging was common. During this process I grew closer to my family members and my relationships with friends also grew stronger.

In my time of need, it seemed as though everybody who had worked with me tried to be a therapist. But this was not what I needed. I needed a friend; someone who would sit down with me, listen to what I had to say

and give me friendly advice, not lecture me. And I was fortunate enough to have many who would offer this type of positivity throughout the wraparound process and thereafter.

The toughest part of this family-focused process for me personally was realizing how badly my issues had affected those whom I love the most. Up to that point, it was hard for me to think of anyone other than myself. However, this process opened my eyes in the greatest ways. I began to realize that everybody's heart aches just as my own, and my behavior had to change, not only for my own good, but also for the good of my family, especially my loving sisters. All they knew is that I had problems, and because of that I had to be the main focus. So they felt as though they had to put their own feelings aside so I could get the help I needed, and that makes me feel sad. Their understanding was sincere. I am

blessed to have such wonderful sisters. They are very dear.

I now realize that throughout these hard times in my life, I had a wonderful family who loved and cared for me. They will always be my greatest support system. And now at 23, I am no longer involved with Mental Health, and I am no longer on medications. I am trying to lead a positive life with a positive future to inspire those who feel as though hope is out of reach.

And so I glance another peek out the kitchen window. These snow-covered hills are once again my dreamland. Glorious and content, they've withstood my pain and forever they will stand as a symbol of my priorities, to stay sound and pure with my soul.

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