

INSTILLING HOPE

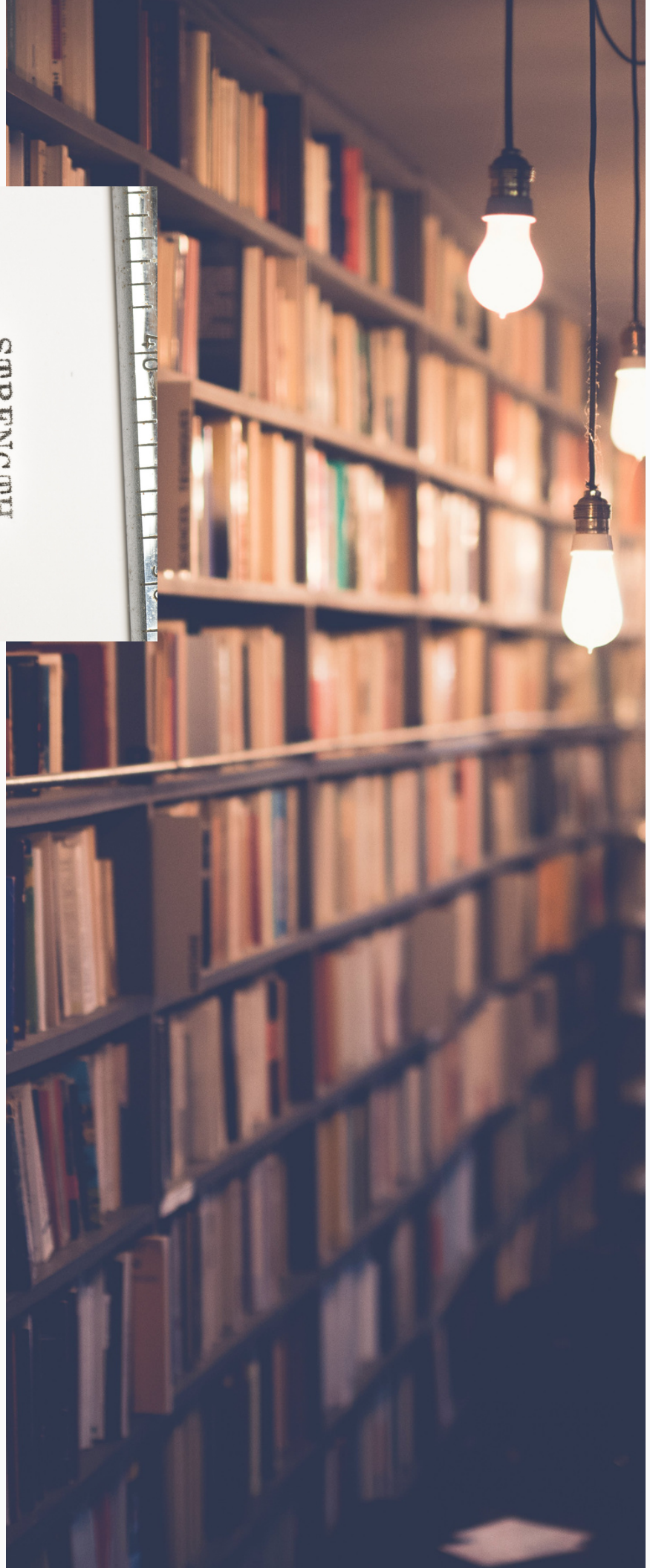
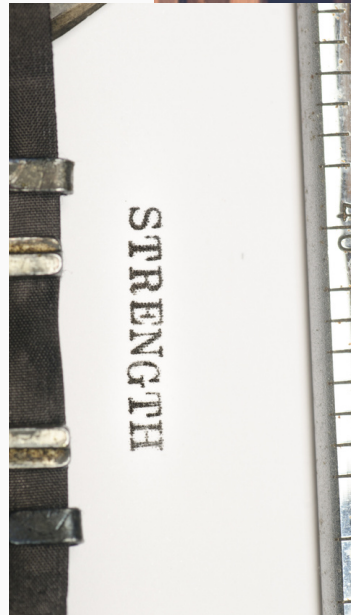
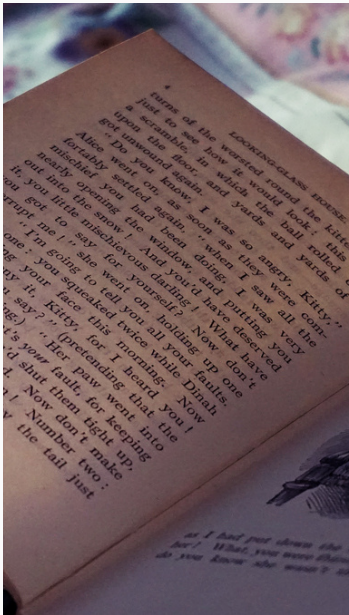
STORIES OF RECOVERY

Dedicated to the resilience of
people living with mental illness



Second Edition

PLEASE TAKE
with our compliments



The intricate relationship between mental illness and the art of storytelling is a captivating exploration of the human mind's capacity for creativity and resilience. Throughout history, countless artists have harnessed their struggles with mental illness as a catalyst for their storytelling prowess. By delving into the depths of their own psyche, people are able to tap into a wellspring of emotions and experiences that resonate with audiences on a deep level.

Through their art, these storytellers provide a platform for dialogue and understanding, challenging societal stigmas surrounding mental illness and fostering a sense of empathy and connection among individuals. The art of storytelling becomes a powerful tool for both the artist and the audience, allowing for the exploration and expression of the complexities of the human condition.

Moreover, art can serve as a therapeutic outlet for those struggling with mental illness providing solace and a means of expression. The exploration of this complex relationship continues to captivate researchers, shedding light on the profound impact that art and mental illness have on one another.

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One in five people experiences a mental illness each year. Mental illness refers to a group of conditions that impacts a person's emotions, thoughts, behaviors, and mood, affecting their ability to manage daily life. The spectrum of mental health disorders varies from common conditions like anxiety and depression to more serious conditions such as schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. Unfortunately, these conditions are often misunderstood and stigmatized, leaving individuals feeling isolated or ashamed.

Through sharing our stories, we raise awareness about mental illness. Our goal is to reduce stigma, foster empathy, and enhance understanding for those facing mental health challenges. Shedding light on mental illness is essential to encourage open dialogues, provide support, and ensure access to necessary help and resources. By increasing awareness, we can dismantle barriers to treatment and cultivate a more inclusive and supportive environment for individuals dealing with mental illness. Education about mental health is key to building a compassionate and accepting society where individuals feel safe to seek assistance and discuss their struggles without the fear of judgment or discrimination.

THE TIMES I SHOULDN'T HAVE SURVIVED, BUT I DID



My name is Jon Bauer. I was born Oct. 18th, 1983. You can say I grew up in a great family and with an amazing mom and a younger brother. The only problem was that my father was very physically abusive and a perfectionist. He would beat my mom, brother, and me for no reason, or if something wasn't done right or was out of place.

This went on for years, and finally, my mom divorced him and married my awesome new dad, which also added 2 stepsisters to my life. Of the 4 of us, I'm the oldest.

I remember the first time I broke down, but I didn't realize or understand it was happening. When I was 17, I moved out of my parents' house and got an apartment with some friends because I didn't want to live by my parents' rules. I was still in high school.

I partied, drank, and smoked weed without a care in the world. Then, one night, I had some friends over and we were drinking, and one of them had brought over some cold and cough pills. They were Triple C. I took the whole box and drank on top of it.

I remember feeling high, dancing around to the music. Then, at 6am, I fell and blacked out. I remember waking up some time later, not realizing where I was. I was hooked up to machines, covered in a black substance called charcoal. Seeing my mom walk in, I asked her where I was and what had happened. She said I took a lot of bad pills. I didn't remember anything after falling.

It turns out 2 days had passed. I had no idea how I had gotten there. I was told that one of my roommates carried me on his shoulders all the way to the hospital because I only lived a block away.

Later that day, I was told I would have to be in a wheelchair for a few days because I couldn't walk because of the pills I had taken. I started to remember some things, but the scary part was, I remember being in a blue room with dark figures moving around my body. I was shaking and convulsing.

It turns out, it was all the doctors running around me, trying to save my life. I didn't want to be in a psych hospital. I was scared and I thought it was for crazy people. As soon as I arrived, I begged my mom to take me home and she said I needed to be here to get help.

After 2 days of calling my mom and begging her to get me out, she finally did. I went back to live at my parents' house but soon I was back to my old ways, staying out late, getting into trouble, disrespecting my parents. Then I got kicked out of my parents' house, living in and out of friends' houses or being in homeless shelters, still refusing to see doctors to get diagnosed and getting medications to help me with my depression. I was still thinking I didn't need the meds and that I could do it on my own.

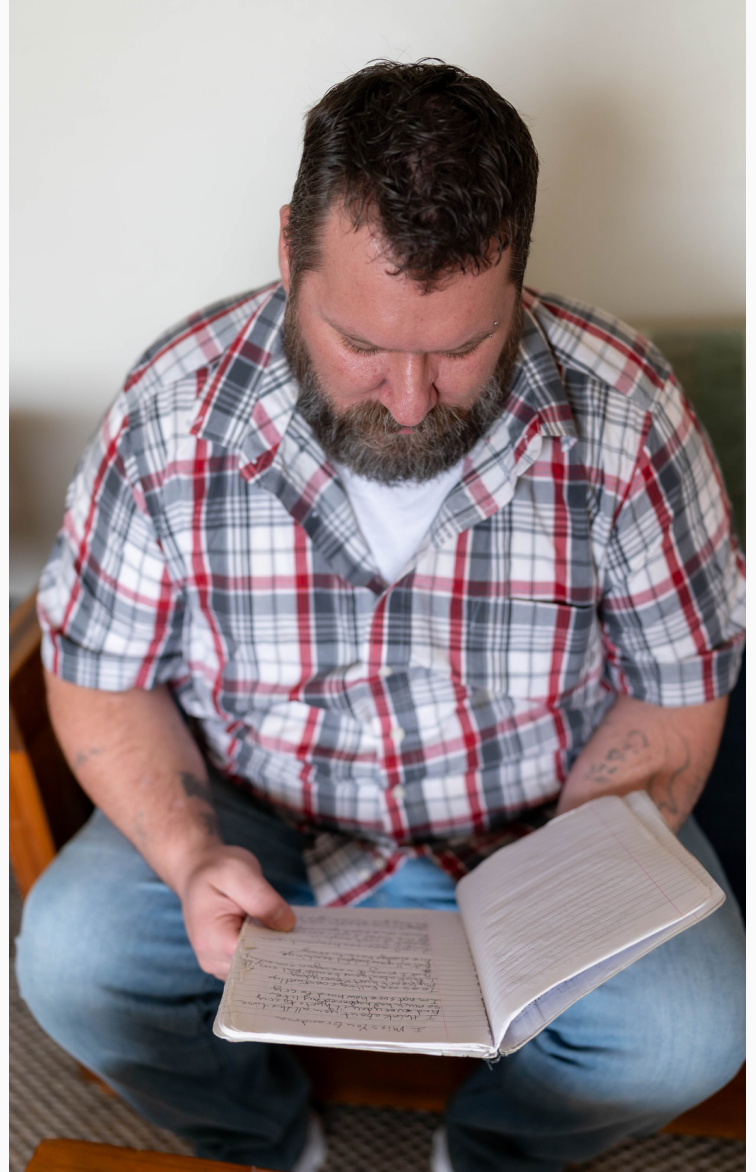
Eventually, I ended up being in a psych hospital because I was depressed and suicidal. They started me on medication which I stopped taking because I didn't think it was working or I didn't want to be a "crazy" person taking meds. So, I was in and out of hospitals and if I was on meds, I would start taking a lot of them to overdose. This went on for a number of years. I came close to dying so many times that the doctors told me they were very surprised that my body hadn't given out.

At the age of 19, I became a father to a beautiful baby girl. Her name is Morgan. Her mom and I thought we were ready to be parents, but as it turns out, we thought we knew everything because we were teens. It was hard being a parent, but we did make it through.

I then went back to using and being on and off my meds and overdosing and being back in hospitals and coming close so many times to losing my life.

Then one day, I started self-harming. At first, I wasn't sure why, but I started to feel better. I felt relief because of being emotionally numb at times. Then that got out of hand really quick and I ended up being in a nursing home because of it. This turned into three different nursing homes during these years because I was so sick. I lost so much weight; I was skin and bones. It was disturbing and scary being in those places.

Finally, in my fourth place, my social worker said she found a place that she thought would help me even more to get my life back. This place was called Stepping Stones. I had no idea what they did. Someone from Stepping Stones came to the nursing home and interviewed me. They said I would make a great fit with their program. A month later, someone picked me up and took me to one of their group homes. When I got there, it was scary, but I pushed through. I worked through their programs.



I still have my ups and downs but I'm doing great now. I work for the company in the prevocational work program. I work in buildings and grounds, where I do painting and yard work and many other things. I love it and I'm happy. I work with some great people that treat me great. They show me things so I can learn. I also have a great staff and case manager that help me manage the things I need to do. I've been with Stepping Stones for 7 years and have worked for them for 5 years and I'm still very happy with where I am with my life right now.

Thanks, Stepping Stones!





My name is Becky DiDomenico-Richter. As a child of physical and sexual abuse, I have become very familiar with trauma's lasting effects on mental health. Years of abuse caused me to self-harm and self-medicate at an early age. Recovery was much hard work that took many years. And my faith played a big role in that healing. Today, though no one's life is perfect, I have obtained the tools that help me live a balanced, grounded life and a positive role in my family and community. Getting to where I am today took hard work, faith, forgiveness and understanding towards myself and others. I often teach this in small groups and when speaking in the community. But when it came to my own daughter's mental health and recovery, I still had much to learn.

When she was a child, my daughter, Paige, and I were inseparable. She was the baby of the family, and because of my divorce, she took it very hard. Because of my limitations as a mom, I overcompensated by giving her whatever she wanted, even though Paige was a very depressed and self-harming child. She was in and out of several psychiatric hospitals as a child, and I watched as she slowly grew into a person I barely recognized.

As I was getting healthy and stable, Paige's symptoms seemed to be getting worse. On the day of my engagement to a wonderful man, Paige tried to take her own life. It was my husband and I who broke into her house, found her lifeless body, and began CPR while waiting for paramedics to arrive. Paige's mental health made it impossible for her to care for her children, so I received guardianship of them. Paige and I have many differences and disagree on many things, such as faith, lifestyle, and parenting. And though I may not agree with her lifestyle or choices, and I may not always understand her symptoms, I can relate to her trauma. I can relate to her pain. I can relate to the stigma placed on people who have a mental illness. And **THAT** gives us a common ground to build on. I also had to realize

COMMUNITY OF CHAMELEONS

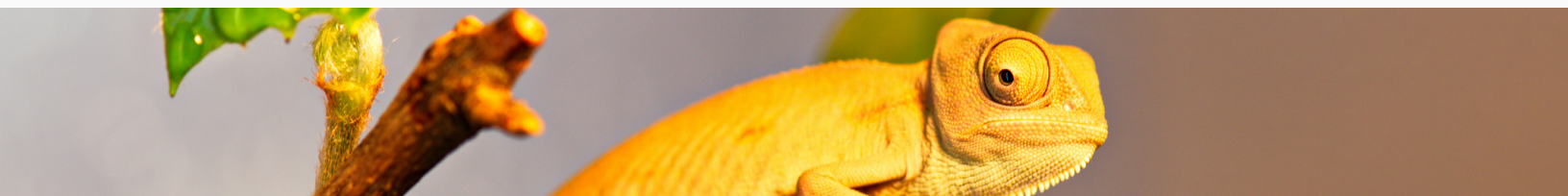
that Paige is on her journey to wellness, and no matter how fast I want her to heal and be well, her journey is not mine, and I need to give her the credit that is due for how far she has come.

In another story I am writing about my journey, called "MEMOIRS OF A DEAD CHAMELEON", I talk about how using my faith that practices "dying to my desires and my own problems and focusing on the needs of others" has helped me recover. I call myself CHAMELEON (doctors would label this borderline personality disorder) because, like many, I became who everyone told me I was or wanted me to be (even to my detriment) instead of being who I was born to be. A chameleon changes colors to fit into its surroundings, much like many of us have learned to do. But when a chameleon dies, that's when we see its true colors. Whether we die to our desires and focus on others or who and what others label us to be, we become free to be ourselves, and true healing begins. When writing this story with my daughter, I entitled it "COMMUNITY OF CHAMELEONS" because, in a community, chameleons communicate through three types of messages: territorial, receptive, and nonreceptive. And if we can, through empathy, be willing to accept that others learn, grow, and heal at different paces than we do, we give them the time and space to do so. We listen with empathetic ears, even when we disagree or don't understand. Suppose we are willing to accept someone for who they are, even if it goes against what we believe in ourselves. In that case, we can find common ground and open lines of communication within our families and communities.



My name is Paige. My struggle with mental illness began at an early age and has shaped me into the person I am today. Growing up with parents who were fighting their demons, like mental illness and addiction, is never easy, but combined with the struggles of secret childhood sexual abuse and feelings of abandonment, my mental health quickly became an uphill battle. For me, early childhood seemed pretty great. I was a spoiled child, and onlookers would probably say I had all a child could ever ask for. What people did not see early on were my mother's battles with her mental illness and the fact that I was experiencing sexual abuse that even my parents knew nothing about. When my mom got divorced from my stepdad, life, as I knew it, changed. We moved from Wisconsin to Rockford to be closer to family and left everything behind; everything I had come to understand home, including a family and father figure. After the divorce, my mom's depression and mental health worsened. I struggled to come to terms with our new life and the abandonment issues I felt. It was shortly after that that I began to withdraw. I was raised in a strong faith in Christianity, but very quickly, my faith began to falter. I became very depressed and hypersexual because of my trauma, and I began to self-harm. I became sexually active and started experimenting with drugs and alcohol. Though my parents tried numerous times to get me the help I needed, it was not always consistent and did not have a lasting effect. My lack of coping skills led me to get pregnant as a teen.

Though I never set out to get pregnant, ultimately, I viewed it as my only reason to stay alive. I did my best to bury my mental health issues and give my kids the best life I could. In the end, abandoning myself was my downfall and I realized that you cannot pour from an empty cup. I now realize that my children struggle with many of the same issues I did growing up. In the years before my suicide attempt, my children watched as I struggled with mental illness, had a cycle of toxic and abusive relationships, experienced unstable housing, and feelings of abandonment. It has been two and a half years since my last suicide attempt when it was agreed that I was not mentally stable enough to care for my children, and my mom took over guardianship of them until I could properly care for them on my own. I used to hate it when people told me my parents did the best they could with what they had. I have now come to know the true meaning of those words. Because of our differences in lifestyle and parenting views, my mom and I struggled a lot initially. But finding common ground through mutual struggles, we have come a long way. We have come a long way and made much progress, although our relationship can be strained at times. We rarely see eye to eye. We now take time to view things from the other's perspective and take accountability when unhealthy thoughts hinder healthy communication. Ultimately, we want to be better, healthier people and for my children to be happy, healthy, and well-rounded.





DON'T LET THE SUIT FOOL YOU

My name is Maurice West. I am the State Representative of the 67th District in the Rockford region. I am also a lifelong resident of the Rockford region - the region that I love dearly! I have lived in the city of Rockford since I was 5 years old. My family moved here because my father accepted the position of Assistant Pastor of the West Side Church of God In Christ, which is on Hinkley and Chestnut on the west side of Rockford.

My whole life I have been a Preacher's Kid, which makes me a subject matter expert in the ways of church. All of my life, my parents have been preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ. All of my life, I have been heavily involved in not only the West Side Church, but a host of churches in Illinois and Southern Wisconsin. All of this was a reality before I even considered becoming a state representative.

In 2011, I accepted the call of ministry and on July 24, 2011, I preached my first sermon and received my license to preach. It is one of the best days of my life so far, ranking up there with getting married to my best friend, Leslie, and her giving birth to our miracle girl, Brein! In 2016, another memorable day happened in July - I was ordained by the late Bishop Sedgwick Daniels as an Elder in the Churches of God In Christ. I am so honored to have been called to preach!

Once again, a reality that happened before even considering becoming a state representative. In 2018, I became a Preaching Politician when I won my election to become the State Representative of the 67th district. If you have heard me speak at an event in town, I am known to say that giving this preaching politician a microphone and a crowd could be dangerous - you never know how long I may be!



Expect Great

“As we know, sometimes you have to deal with things on a personal level before you can fully appreciate the struggle of others.”



Growing up in the church, mental health was not always top of mind in conversations and/or sermons. Depending on where I was, the struggle of mental illness was considered a “spiritual attack” and your relationship with God was questioned. I never embraced this posture for myself, but when I had my own personal experience with struggling with my mental health, AS A PREACHER, I realized that this is deeper than just focusing on the spiritual component to the situation.

Shortly before becoming ordained as an Elder in 2016, I struggled with suicidal ideations on Mother’s Day. I remember not only dealing with these ideations, but also dealing with the guilt of having these thoughts that could break my mother’s heart. It helped me to quickly realize that mental illness has no respect for persons; it does not care if you are a Democrat or Republican; Black or White; or male or female.

It does not care if you are a Christian or not; or a preacher or not – mental illness can affect anyone and everyone.

That is what I learned from my personal experience; and that is why I am so passionate about mental health and ensuring that it plays an integral part in our society. As we know, sometimes you have to deal with things on a personal level before you can fully appreciate the struggle of others. Now, I’m a firm believer that one’s mental health is more important than physical health. I know it’s a bold statement to say, but it is something that I learned as a legislator and a preacher. Looking back on my life, I am thankful that I was able to come back from the ideations and now I’m able to empathize with people who are dealing with mental illness. Now, I not only have the energy needed to be a champion for mental health, but it is my calling.

NEVER GIVE UP

My name is Billee Jo Schmidt. I'm the middle child of four with two older brothers and one younger sister. We grew up with my dad and stepmom.

My struggles were many. When I was thirteen I was out of control. I was angry and rebelling against everyone. I started seeing guys behind my parents' backs. My boyfriend was controlling. He told me what I could wear, where I could go and who I could go with. He was older and we were sexually active. His parents decided they wanted grandkids. I didn't want to have babies; I was a kid myself. When I said "no", he tried to get me put in custody with his parents. My parents took me to a psychiatrist who thought they should let me live with the older boyfriend and his parents and have babies. My parents said "over our dead bodies" and the boyfriend threatened to have a man blow up my mom's car and have her beat to death. I didn't want them to hurt her.



We went on a vacation as our family. The first thing I did was call my boyfriend when we got home. Mom told me to hang up the phone and I said "no". She hung up the phone and I got extremely angry and hit her with the receiver. I hurt her and Dad got upset and pulled us apart. I was angry and out of control. Dad tried to control me but I got away. I tried to run away but Dad and my brother came after me and brought me home.

I decided I wanted to live with my birth mom. So I packed all my belongings in brown paper bags. My siblings helped me take my stuff to my father's truck and they cried when I left. My dad and mom drove halfway to my birth mom's and then I wanted to come home. I tried to be better behaved so I didn't get into any more trouble.

When I was sixteen I met the boy I eventually married two years later. He was in active duty in the navy. At age 20 I got pregnant with our first daughter, Jenny, who was born at seven months with a brain bleed common in premature babies. Jenny was only 3 pounds 5 ½ ounces and 15 ¾ inches long. She had trouble breathing; her lungs were weak and not fully developed and I was scared having my first baby at seven months. Because we were in active duty in the navy we were far from home. Jenny was discharged from the hospital when she was a month old and my mom came to help with her. Jenny has cerebral palsy and is now wheel chair bound.

At age 23 I got pregnant with our youngest daughter, Amanda Jo, who was born at full term. I had my tubes tied after her birth. My grandmother died and my sister had a traumatic experience so she came to stay with us. I started having panic attacks. I was having hallucinations and delusions. I saw and talked to loved ones who had died prior to my illness.

Extreme stress didn't help me at the time. I was hospitalized the first time for one week and I was put on medicine that wiped me out. I couldn't function in daily activities like caring for my daughters but with therapy and better medicine I got healthier and took care of my girls. I was diagnosed with schizoaffective disorder, depressive type. I had to go through therapies and medicine changes until I was able to care for myself again.

The doctor put me on some other medicine. I was not able to function. The medicine made me sleep; it knocked me out for hours at a time. I saw a psychiatrist through my husband's navy insurance.

We separated and later divorced. I got on public aid and went to Janet Wattles Mental Health Center where I was placed in therapy in the intensive day treatment program. I saw a psychiatrist who changed my medicines again. I became more stable on the new medicines that seemed to work for some time.

I was under stress in excess of normal motherhood. My medicine stopped working. I started having hallucinations and delusions, seeing bad people who I thought had hurt me in my past but who were not those people. I became paranoid they would hurt me again. Fearful for my life. I was having delusions that my oldest daughter had a seizure disorder and was in the emergency room and I thought she was going to die. The doctors checked her over and said if she has another seizure she could die. I said I wanted to take her home anyway. I called all of my family so she could say goodbye. I thought I could talk for the characters on the TV and that I could sing on the radio. I thought I was an angel and I could heal my disabled daughter when we woke up in her hospital room. I ended up in Singer Mental Health Center for a week.

I decided to give up my daughters because I felt I was going to hurt them and if I hurt them, I couldn't live with myself. They were five and seven at that time. I ended up hospitalized again. I was put in intensive day treatment again. I turned into a child, carrying my blanket everywhere with me to feel safe. Their DCFS case manager came for them. My youngest daughter went with her father and her stepmom to Florida. Jenny, needing special care, stayed here in town with my sister who cared for her special needs while waiting for an opening at Goldie Froberg Children's Home. Two years later, Jenny went to live there where they could care for her special needs.

I had worked most of my life off and on until I became mentally ill. Then my illness kept me from being able to work. I applied for Social Security and I was approved. I live in supported housing on my own. I am in therapy and work on my skills. The Stars of Light are part of my recovery.

I visit Jenny every Saturday at Milestones where she resides. Jenny does come to my parents' home to visit once a month for a day visit. It takes four of us to care for her while she is home on a visit. That's team work. My second daughter, Amanda Jo, is married, lives in Missouri and has a stepson.

I pray each morning and say positive affirmations throughout the day. I exercise each morning and I go to the gym five days a week. I read, do word puzzles, read my Bible and I love to sew.

If you feel helpless and hopeless having a mental illness, don't give up. You have the chance to get the help you need. God bless you. Pray and never give up on yourself. Thank you for letting me share my personal story with you.





BE A LIGHT IN SOMEONE'S LIFE

My name is Julie Cavallaro. I experienced many years of childhood physical, mental and emotional abuse growing up, right up to the day I moved out. I was 18; two weeks shy of high school graduation. In my mid-twenties, I went to a counselor for the first time for depression. In the years since I was first diagnosed with depression, I got married and had two children. I ended the marriage and lost the relationships I had with my children who no longer acknowledged me as their mother. I lost several jobs either being fired or quitting when the stress became unbearable. I was single for several years and finally remarried. But due to my still undiagnosed

conditions, this marriage also ended in divorce. As the years went by my mental health struggles increased until my late forties. I attempted suicide 3 times. At that time, I saw no way out of the extreme fear and depression I lived with. By this time, I had pushed everyone out of my life. I became a recluse seeing no one except my counselor. I was no longer able to maintain employment due to my mental health struggles. Major anxiety had set in by this time which led to an inability to retain what I learned and a complete erosion of whatever confidence I may have had, not a great combination in an employee.



I became more fully involved in counseling and group therapies at Janet Wattles Center which later became Rosecrance. I took a year-long DBT group (dialectical behavior therapy) which was very impactful and resulted in positive steps toward improved mental health for me. My years at Rosecrance were life changing. With the help of encouraging, dedicated staff, I began to stop believing the lies I had learned in my past, which were that I was no good, defective, useless. I began to see the positive realities all around me. I started to believe that I mattered. I graduated from the program after several years.

I now needed to find someone to prescribe my psychotropic meds as I no longer had access to the psychiatrist at Rosecrance. Once again I was blessed to find a not for profit to provide counseling and the medications I was taking to maintain my mental health stability. I now have an accountability team to do life with. I have a

sponsor to talk over life's hurts, habits and to add to my support network. I was blessed with a support team at Rosecrance and subsequently at Crusader Clinic. Now I have my forever family at Celebrate Recovery and I have my family at Stars of Light. I want to give back as so many have given to me.

And so, I am sharing my story in the hopes that one person may hear something that will positively impact them or someone they love. Help us remove the stigma attached to mental health. And if I may add one personal request - don't give up on your friends and loved ones who struggle with mental illness. Sometimes it takes a long while for the change, but somebody's miracle is waiting to happen. Be a light in someone's life. Be a person to make a difference in the life of someone who may be a little different than you. None of us knows the battles the person right next to us is facing. Be kind. Thank you for allowing me to share.



My name is Arthur Timberlake. The age of 19 is when I first started experiencing symptoms and had to be hospitalized. I have just turned 40, so I've lived through 21 years of trying to balance my life with a mental illness. At first, I experienced the symptoms of grandiosity; thinking I was some sort of higher power, that I was the first spirit ever created. I was delusional. I was confused as far as religion and spiritual goals. I also heard things and saw things, so, I had auditory and visual hallucinations.

Upon release from the hospital, I began to self-medicate. I continued to abuse the drugs—alcohol, marijuana and cigarettes. That is when I moved to Waukegan, with my mother.

I worked several jobs, still having symptoms and self-medicating. I wasn't seeking help at that time, so I wasn't seeing a doctor or a counselor and I wasn't able to pay for the medication that I needed for my sanity.

These things led me to committing a crime as I was still thinking that I was some sort of higher power. So, this was rock bottom. That hurt me inside and out. I knew I had to buckle down on this mental illness and do something about it. It

was time. I was locked up in a cell in the Lake County jail and was eventually transferred to Elgin. I was fortunate that I was in a psych ward with other people that had mental illnesses as well. Just seeing my life already having gone down the drain, I had to beg for forgiveness from first, my mother, then God, of course, and then myself. And part of getting that forgiveness meant that I had to shape up and act right. I had to change my ways. I had to use the second chance as a building block.

The hope I had came from God first, letting me know I still have a second chance in life. I'm alive, so I have the opportunity to do something about my life today. Once the correct medication came along, I called it a miracle worker. It helped strengthen my decision-making skills. It took away my symptoms as far as being delusional or grandiose and it had no side-effects other than a little drooling.

Exercise was a huge stress-reliever along with talking to my counselor when I was in Elgin. I attended groups: Moral Reconciliation Therapy, Mental Illness/Substance Abuse, Wellness Recovery Action Planning. These things helped put life in perspective for me. It helped me realize that I could do something from here on out, that I do have a second chance. If I just take that opportunity and use it, this uphill battle will be successful.

**THIS
UPHILL
BATTLE
WILL BE
SUCCESSFUL**



I finally made it to the final stage of Stepping Stones, which is the apartment program. I am currently maintaining the things I've learned along the way including house maintenance, hygiene, honesty, trustworthiness and work ethic. I now work a real job. I'm maintaining my household and keeping it clean and paying my rent on time. All of these things I've learned from Stepping Stones staff and from watching them.

I work at the Dollar General, doing retail, both cashier and stock and have been there for 6 years. Before that, I had been doing volunteer work for Moral Reconciliation Therapy and my supervisor at the group home told me that if I was capable of doing volunteer work, then I was capable of doing a real job. That motivated me.

I balance my mental illness and my addictions by staying in recovery and remission and I deal with people on a daily basis, developing relationships in the community. I continue relationships in my support system as well, as far as friends and family go. I maintain my relationship with a higher power.



Stepping Stones of Rockford, Inc. is a private, 501 (c) (3), behavioral healthcare organization dedicated to serving children (aged six and older), youth and adults with serious emotional disturbances and serious mental illness. The organization was founded by a small group of dedicated people who saw the need for residential care for adults with serious mental illness and opened our community's first Halfway House in 1969.

Since then, Stepping Stones has grown to become northern Illinois' leading provider of twenty-four hours a day supervised group homes and supported housing programs. In response to the needs of our community, services have been expanded to include a full array of outpatient mental health services. All facilities are located in Rockford and primarily serve people from Winnebago and the surrounding counties.

Stepping Stones has a proven history of helping adults with serious mental illness avoid hospitalizations, homelessness, criminal justice system involvements and related consequences. It is recognized that early intervention and a variety of outpatient mental health care interventions are effective in helping those who seek services live as independently and successfully as possible in the least restrictive community settings of their choice.



Stepping Stones is a trauma-informed, person-centered comprehensive mental health treatment provider. Services available include but are not limited to: Comprehensive Assessment and Individualized Treatment Planning, Crisis Intervention, Tele-Psychiatry, Case Management, Symptom Management and Related Didactic Education Groups, Full Payee Representation, Medication Management, Individual, Group and Family Therapy, Pre-vocational Job Training, Linkage and Referral. Opportunities for personal artistic expression are available by participation in Stars of Light, the organization's dramatic and visual arts program.

The organization is accredited by the Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities (CARF) and is funded in part by the Illinois Department of Mental Health, DCFS, the Winnebago County Community Mental Health Board (WCCMHB) with the ½ cent tax, Medicaid, Managed Care companies, foundations, private donors and other resources.

Referrals are accepted from all sources and program acceptance is based on an individualized assessment. Admissions to residential programs are limited by facility capacity. To schedule an appointment, please contact us at Phone: 815-963-0683, Fax: 815-963-6018, Email: referrals@steppingstonesrockford.org, or visit steppingstonesrockford.org.

"The only difference between stumbling blocks and stepping stones is the way in which we use them."



SCAN



Stars of Light is a program of Stepping Stones that uses dramatic and visual arts to promote recovery, educate the public about mental illness and reduce the stigma that surrounds it. They enhance the quality of life in our community and across Winnebago and Boone Counties with artistic products that educate as well as entertain.

Through the artistry of the directors and participants, public fear of mental illness is alleviated and barriers are broken down to understanding and acceptance. Participants include people with mental illness and other community members.

The Stars of Light began in 1995 as a travelling theatre troupe, a program of Janet Wattles Mental Health Center. The group has evolved for many years under the direction of Mary Gubbe Lee and Steven F. Vrtol III. The Stars have gone from being a live theatre troupe to a comprehensive program that includes all artistic venues and promotes recovery from mental illness through inclusion in the arts.

Artistic Director, Steve, is a professional actor and psychosocial rehab professional. Steve directs tour shows and radio shows, writes material and conducts client groups using the expressive arts. The Stars are his inspiration and his teachers. Mary has been with the Stars since 1995. She serves as stage mom, producer, driver and actress. The people in the troupe are her inspiration and provide her with the fortitude to work in behavioral health.

The Stars of Light regularly collaborates with NAMI Northern Illinois, Rosecrance, Shelter Care Ministries, churches, clubs and organizations on their projects. Make sure to check out the Stars of Light YouTube

Channel featuring personal stories, tour shows, musical pieces and art galleries: tinyurl.com/18o96325

Like us on Facebook: tinyurl.com/16sp5xkv



What started as a small group of families gathered around a kitchen table has blossomed into the nation's leading voice on mental health. Today, NAMI, the National Alliance on Mental Illness, is an alliance of more than 600 local affiliates and 48 state organizations who work in your community to raise awareness and provide support and education that was not previously available to those in need.

Since 1984, our local group has served Winnebago, Boone, Stephenson, and surrounding counties in our region. Our affiliate was created by a small group of families that were passionate about improving care for their loved ones living with mental illness. This small group of people has grown into one of the most vibrant NAMI affiliates in Illinois. Their dedication to improve services has led to better housing, crisis intervention training, funding, and an award winning mental health court. To date, hundreds of people have gained valuable knowledge and improved coping skills through our signature education courses and many more have participated in one of our many support groups that have been meeting for forty years.

We educate. Our education programs ensure families, individuals, and our community get the resources and information they need.

We support. We host support groups and offer one-on-one support, for both those with mental illness and caregivers, so that no one feels alone on their mental health journey.

We advocate. NAMI shapes national and local public policy for people with mental illness and their families and provides leaders with the tools, resources and skills necessary to save mental health in all states.

We listen. Our local HelpLine (9AM-5PM, Monday-Friday) allows us to respond personally to hundreds of requests each year, providing free information and support—a much-needed lifeline for many.

We lead. Public awareness events and activities, including Mental Health Month and Mental Illness Awareness Week, successfully fight stigma and encourage understanding.

DEPRESSION IS A LEADING CAUSE OF
DISABILITY WORLDWIDE

SUICIDE IS THE 2ND LEADING CAUSE OF
DEATH AMONG PEOPLE AGED 15-24

50% OF ALL LIFETIME MENTAL ILLNESS
BEGINS BY AGE 14, AND 75% BY AGE 24

AT LEAST 8.4 MILLION PEOPLE IN THE U.S.
PROVIDE CARE TO AN ADULT WITH A
MENTAL OR EMOTIONAL HEALTH CONDITION

21.1% OF PEOPLE EXPERIENCING
HOMELESSNESS IN THE U.S. HAVE A
SERIOUS MENTAL ILLNESS

37% OF ADULTS INCARCERATED IN THE
STATE AND FEDERAL PRISON SYSTEMS
HAVE A HISTORY OF MENTAL ILLNESS

70% OF YOUTH IN THE JUVENILE JUSTICE
SYSTEM HAVE A DIAGNOSABLE MENTAL
HEALTH CONDITION

ONLY 47.2% OF U.S. ADULTS WITH
MENTAL ILLNESS RECEIVED TREATMENT
IN 2021

Untreated mental illness has many effects on our society. Stigma surrounding mental illness often leads to individuals feeling isolated, ashamed, and reluctant to seek help. By reducing stigma, individuals can feel more comfortable discussing their mental health concerns and accessing the necessary support and treatment, improving their overall quality of life.

On the other side of that coin, early intervention is key to managing mental illness effectively. When stigma is minimized, individuals are more likely to recognize the signs of mental illness early on and seek help promptly, leading to better outcomes and a higher likelihood of recovery.

The whole community plays a vital role in advocating for access to appropriate mental health resources and support services. A community that prioritizes mental health benefits everyone. By reducing stigma and promoting early intervention, our community can create a culture of wellness where individuals feel supported, connected, and empowered to take care of their mental health, leading to healthier and more resilient residents.

STORIES OF RECOVERY

Each year, millions of Americans face the reality of living with a mental illness. If you're impacted, know that recovery is possible and there are people ready and willing to help you on your journey.

SPECIAL MENTIONS

JOANNA SHILLING PHOTOGRAPHY

Photography produced by Joanna Shilling Photography



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MARY GUBBE LEE, STEPHEN F. VRTOL III & THE STARS OF LIGHT

The project was driven by The Stars of Light and their leaders

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STORYTELLERS

Bravery, awareness, and hope-filled messages provided by State Representative Maurice West, Billee Jo Schmidt, Arthur Timberlake, Julie Cavallaro, Becky DiDomenico-Richter, Paige Hessong, and Jonathon Bauer

DANIELLE ANGILERI

Design by Danielle Angileri

