

Recovery Support Specialist News

March 2014
RSS Institute 38



Graduation Address

By Gina McGrath, CRSS

I must admit that when I started my journey to become a Recovery Support Specialist (RSS) I had preconceived ideas of what an RSS's role would be. I imagined eagerly sharing my vast experiences with others and thus they would begin their journey to recovery. This would be the first of my many humbling experiences. Little did I know that the less you say, the more you learn.

At this point in my speech I believe that I am supposed to cite an impressive list of facts, information and virtues that are necessary to be an effective and conscientious RSS, such as listening, hope, respect, compassion, patience, empathy etc., all of which are necessary elements that I have learned to achieve a goal of effectiveness.

I want to go in a little different direction with what I have learned. In the past several weeks I have experienced more revelations and humbling moments than I have in the thirty years prior to this. Never have I ever been surrounded by a more diverse, inspiring and courageous group of people. And never have I developed such a deep affinity for so many people in such little time. I have had the great fortune to watch the emotional become confident, the meek become empowered and the punctually challenged rise to that 8:30 a.m. goal.

I cannot put into words how sharing your life experiences with me, good and bad, have enriched my life. Through you, I have discovered me. I consider it an honor and a privilege to have been given this opportunity.

Thank you Beverly, Christina, John and Dan. I would also like to thank Cindy Greer from CPSA.



Saving Romeo

By Eric Coleman, CRSS

Before I was put inside the officer's police car I was inside my grandma's house reading a book by Dr. Phil and experienced an episode. I was thinking everything that I was reading from the book was supposed to happen to me at that moment. Suddenly I put on my best dress shirt, pants, church shoes, styled my hair with gel and put a tie around my neck but didn't tie it. As I walked out of my room I saw my grandma and she asked me a question but I, being under the episode, didn't understand her and then asked her, "will you marry me grandma." I didn't know why I asked it. I just felt at that moment it was right. My grandpa (her husband) had died a while before I started living with her. She would wake up in the morning and hug me and cry in my arms that she missed my grandpa and I would cry with her until she felt better. She meant everything to me and is still a huge part of my life.

I then walked outside and began to walk around the neighborhood knocking on people's front doors. It was really late at night and people were getting upset and called the police on me. Before I knew it the helicopter was shining a light on me standing in the driveway of a neighbor's property. Cop cars showed up on the scene and they began to approach me with caution, but I started walking toward their direction and politely shook the officer's hand and introduced myself.

The officer was surprised how polite I was and then asked me, "what are you doing out here?"

I then said to the officer, "I'm looking for my wife". Then the officer asked me if I was married and I said "no." The officers looked at each other and were not sure what they were going to do with me after I had said that. The officer put handcuffs on me and escorted me towards his police car, opened the door and I stepped into the car. The officers talked about what I had said and decided to take me to the hospital (instead of jail) to find out what was wrong with me. My story begins that day. I was handcuffed, put into the back of a that cop car, and taken to St. Mary's Hospital. The year was 2006, just one year after I graduated from High school.

At the behavioral health area of the hospital, doctors diagnosed me with a mental illness. As soon as I found out what my diagnoses was, I didn't know where my life was going or if I would live long enough to even become something. I remembered every stereotype I ever had heard about people with my mental illness and knew my life would never be the same. Not just in my eyes, but everyone who was part of my life at that time - especially my family. My younger brother wouldn't come to see me at the hospital because he had only seen me a certain way his entire life and wasn't ready to see me in my confused mental state!



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Life before my mental illness was probably someone else's fantasy. I mean too good to be true! My senior year of high school, I was in the best shape of my life. I weighed 215 pounds, was solid muscle and could squat 485 pounds (the most on the football team). I was awarded and chosen by my teammates to be the captain of our school's football team. I dated the homecoming queen and we had fun with each other. I was also named Prom King which I won from the votes from the whole school (we had about three thousand kids in the whole school). I dated the prom queen and was having the perfect life anybody could ever have their senior year. I had friends (a lot of friends), and admirers, girls wanted to be with me and the guys respected me because of what I did for the school.

So I went from having everything I ever wanted (my senior year of high school) to realizing that my mental illness would change my life. I saw my happiness turn into sadness and was able to see that, in my life, the people who I thought were the right people to be around are the ones I would now stay away from. Some people came to see me in the hospital and it was nice but they could see I had changed.

The only thing I ever liked besides sports in high school was media communications class and learning how to make films. It wasn't until I was at the lowest point of my life, lying down in the mental hospital, that I saw that I was here for a reason.

To keep motivated, I knew I had to find a way to inspire other people with my mental illness. The way I could do that was write a movie script about everything I had been through in high school. I chose to create a story that people could cherish.

I have been working on my film since that day. I even went to the Art Institute of Tucson for a while to learn more about film and communications. I have also taken film classes at Pima Community College and I have read books from the U of A. My goal is to create a movie that will show the general public the realities, physical and emotional challenges, and suffering so many people experience. I want to show the

seriousness of living with a mental illness.

A key component to my writing has been the help of a staff member who has his Master's Degree in screenwriting. I have been working with him on my script.

The title of my film is "Saving Romeo". It is a story about a patient who is writing a film while in the mental hospital to help other patients. He creates characters in the film to be the people in the mental hospital with him. However he is not the only person who sees these characters. The girl that the main character ends up with in the end also sees the characters in his film that he is creating. He begins to get caught up in the main character's script. She finds out that the people in the mental hospital with them are the people who the main character sees in his mind. But the stories he creates about each person are true leading up to the point where the main character ends up in the mental hospital.

The girl realizes that the story is based on Romeo and Juliet and the main character knows how his story should end because of the stories he had written about the people he had lost in his life. The girl knows where the story in the main character's mind is at and meets him at where the story should end. She saves his life in front of the tombstone where the love of his life was buried. Instead of ending his life, the girl saves him and helps the main character realize it isn't real and it's only part of his illness.

Every person that has been in my life since I was diagnosed has been part of my recovery. They have helped me become stronger and I have learned life lessons from them. Finally, I have accepted my illness and know that I am much more than that.

Thanks to COPE Community Services, the case managers, the doctors, the patients and my family support system, I will succeed in this career as an RSS. I wouldn't be the man I am today without my experiences, my mistakes, and my determination on becoming a great role model.

Endless Possibilities

By Erika Luna, CRSS

I struggled with drug and alcohol addiction for 10 years and for all these years I felt that I deserved to be unhappy. I had no hope and I did not believe in anyone, including myself. In 2007 I started to go in and out of 12-step programs and could not understand why so many people understood the step process and they now lived a better, happier life. I was in the darkest abyss and found no joy in anything. At the same time I was struggling with chronic back pain.

In October 2012 my lower back was fused and the surgery was a great success, almost 90% of my back pain was gone. Even though most of my pain was gone, I immediately started abusing my medication. My family came to see me at the hospital, but I was too medicated to be present during their visit. When I was released to go home my mother and two younger sisters came to visit me, and I was unable to stay awake during this visit as well. My family did not come to see me again. I resented my family and God for this. I dove into my addiction and continued to abuse my medication more than I had before.

Then something miraculous happened. Two family/friends by the name of Alice and her daughter Maite started calling me and asking if they could stop by to visit me. The first few times I simply answered the phone but I was closed off and not ready for them to come see me. I had grown up with them in my church where we practiced Mormonism. Alice and Maite were very persistent and always made sure I knew that if there was anything I needed, I simply needed to pick up the phone and call them. One day I told Alice that I would love to have them come over. Since the first time they came over, they brought a spirit filled with a sincere desire to simply spend time with me. This was the turning point in my life. I then slowly started looking forward to their visits and it helped me make the choice to not take medication in order to be alert for their visit. They would stay for hours and we would talk about so many things, laughing and sometimes crying.

On one of the days they came to visit me, I was having a day filled with more self-pity and unhappiness than most days. I thanked Alice and Maite for coming to see me each week and I expressed how much their visits meant to me. I started crying for the first time in months. Alice response was "Erika why would I not come, we love you?" We tend



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to forget whose example we are trying to follow. Who did Jesus visit? He did not visit the rich or the popular. He spent his days with the sick, with the low in spirit and especially with those that no one wanted to be around." After she said this I cried and cried with the sorrow that came from the deepest part of my gut. Alice and Maite started crying as well.

I had been struggling for years on the subject of God. I would cringe on both the subject of religion or God. Then Alice began to tell me about a book called "Life after life." She related to me that this doctor started listening to people with stories of near death experiences. These individuals expressed being greeted by their own understanding of God. Some called this being Jesus, some Angel, and others Allah. They shared a few things in common. They related that this was a turning inward of their sense of identity. When they were greeted by this heavenly being they described this as a brilliant, warm and accepting light that permeated peace and comfort. Two questions were asked of them. What have you done with your life? How have you learned to love?

In that moment I knew without a shadow of a doubt that I was not meant to be unhappy. I realized that

I wanted strive to live a life in such a way that if I died tomorrow I would be able to stand before this Greater Spirit and at least know that I did something honorable in this life and that I tried to learn to love the best I was capable of. I will forever keep in my heart the gift of Hope that Alice and Maite brought to me by their simple but loving company.

Soon after my experience I made special requests from my doctors to take me off all medications and started going to alternative medicine. I have been sober since then. Today I have a beautiful relationship with my family and I see my mother and younger sisters very often. Today I find the deepest joy in the 12-step programs of my community. There I have found a horizon filled with endless possibilities on personal growth. The fellowship has been a place where I have been loved in the times I've been unable to love myself. Alice and Maite gave me that gift at a time in my life when I thought I did not deserve to be loved. The Greater Spirit of my own understanding has blessed me with the gift and desire to be fully present today, and I cherish this blessing through both the happy and the difficult times.

The Real Me

By Gina McGrath, CRSS

I wish I could say that I had just one big “Aha” Hope moment, but I didn’t. Please understand that when my illness began in 1973, it was deemed everything but an illness. I was described as having “character flaws”, a “bad attitude” or was “going through a bad stage”, all of which I “would grow out of”. Well... I didn’t. By 1987 my “bad stage” had continued and my “bad attitude” had caused me to become self-destructive and self-medicating. I was barely in control and felt my moorings to sanity slowly slipping away. I sought help from more than one therapist but would only last a few sessions with each. In each instance I would disclose my anger, sadness and overall feelings of worthlessness then point my finger at a perceived source, only to leave with a gnawing sense that I just wasn’t getting it, I felt empty.

I decided to try a whole new tact, and if you knew me you’d realize that my next step was a considerable leap of faith - I decided to see a psychiatrist. I didn’t have a very high opinion of psychiatrists in general and on my first visit, when I learned that he had been practicing for less than a year, I was even less convinced of his abilities. However, during the visit I found his gentle and encouraging demeanor reassuring and grew comfortable enough to slowly reveal my feelings and moods. As time passed I eventually developed enough trust to divulge the terrible, high risk behavior I had been engaging in for many years and found that this information was a critical clue to my illness. When I finally was presented with an actual diagnosis I was shocked and saddened, I didn’t know which carried a greater stigma, the illness or the medication that he wanted to prescribe. Desperate to get off of the frenetic rollercoaster I was on, I agreed to take the medication. Many weeks passed before I woke up one morning and slowly realized that I didn’t feel the same level of intense anger that usually followed me everywhere that I went, I felt like I could breathe again.

I never deluded myself that medication was the end-all be-all for my illness but it was the first tool I had been given to fight my illness and thus, my first moment of HOPE. I shared that moment with my mother and, though entrenched in her own struggle with mental illness and substance use, she became my most fervent supporter. She continually told me “you’re not like me, you’re stronger. You can do this”. Sometimes, when you hear things long enough and often enough, you begin to believe it... and I did. She listened unfailingly and with her HOPE I, in turn, gained more HOPE. I wanted so much for her to share in the strength that she was giving me, however, by that time she had become severely agoraphobic and would no longer leave her house, she told me on more than one occasion she was very, very tired and that her greatest wish was to fall asleep and not wake up. I always made the same statement, “Mom, don’t say that.”

Less than one year later, on Thanksgiving morning of the year 2002, she would get her wish. Though she was finally at peace, I was heartbroken that I wasn’t able to give her what she had given me and frightened at the prospect



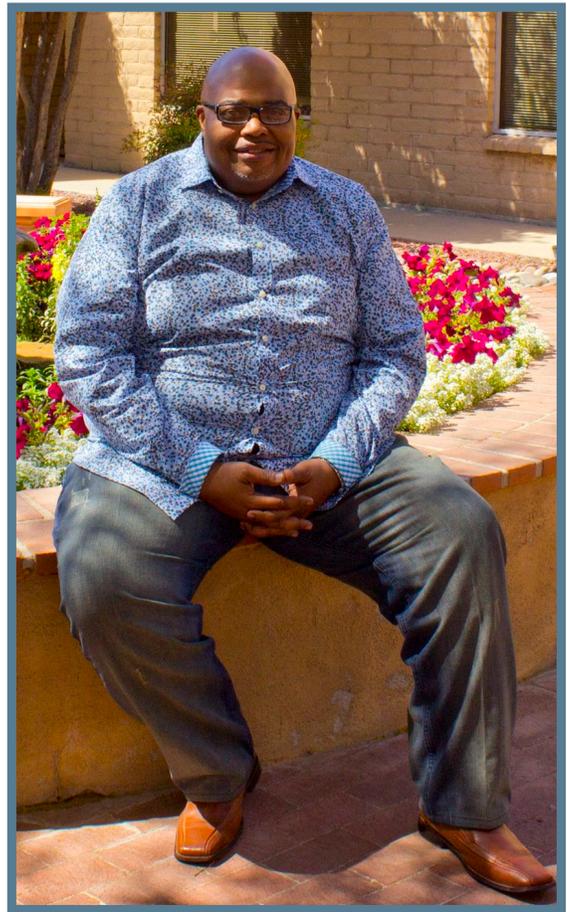
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Hope is Part of Me

By Matt Kearney, CRSS

Hope in my eyes. If I had to choose a theme for myself then HOPE would be it. There were times in my life where hopeless, hopeful and hoping were part of me like could of, should of, and would of. At my lowest point I felt hopeless not knowing where my life was headed, and then there were times where I was hopeful, where I finally had a grasp on life and was making the right choices. I was led to believe that hoping & believing kept me in touch with myself. I enjoy working in this field because every time I reach out and instill HOPE in others, it helps me to understand that HOPE is a part of me and has helped me become the person I am today.

I will keep HOPE alive!



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of living without her strong shoulders and big heart. The road to my recovery changed, other than professionals and my mother, other family members and friends either didn't know the true nature of my illness or didn't know I had an illness at all, I simply lied. However, from that point on I knew that I was, indeed, strong enough to face the challenges that my illness would present and to acknowledge that there would be setbacks along the way.

I continued treatment with my psychiatrist who encouraged me to participate in counseling or therapy and I soon learned that simple actions such as journaling or brisk walks were effective tools to use

in my recovery. Each time I discovered a new tool it increased my HOPE and with it my confidence. I am still seeing the same psychiatrist, it's been over 23 years, he has never given up on me and has stated many times that he never will. That kind of peace of mind has been priceless. I also have been with the same counselor for over two years and she helps me manage any changes in my illness. Over the last twenty three years I have amassed an impressive arsenal of tools to help in my recovery, so much so, that I've finally faced one of my greatest challenges, allowing friends to get to know the "real me," the one with the illness. I would very much like everyone's acceptance, but if that doesn't happen, I know I'll be just fine.

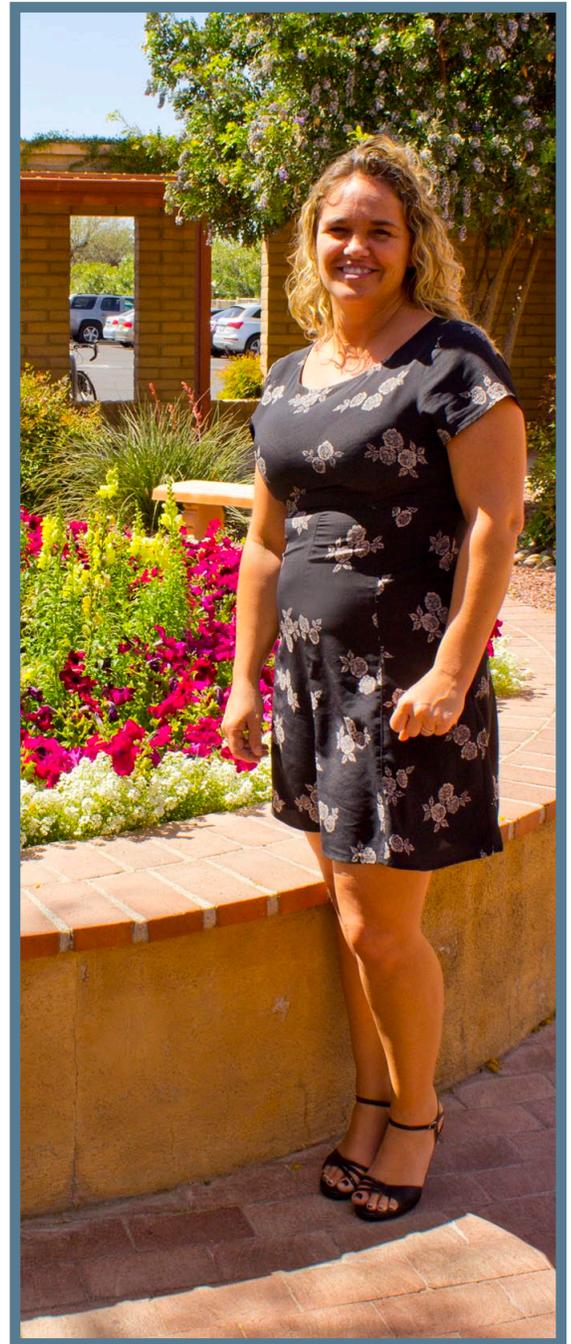
Keep Hope Everyday

By Jana Hunsaker, CRSS

Throughout my life, I have tried to keep a positive attitude. Even at the height of my addiction, I held on to a little glimmer of hope. Maybe that is the reason I stayed 'out there' for so long, or maybe that is the reason I am here today, clean and sober.

The day I did my fourth step was the first time in sobriety that I felt undeniable hope. My sponsor and I were sitting in a park and I was revealing for the first time all of the 'sins' I have ever committed. Everything that I had been stuffing down came out that day. Afterwards we wrote down all of my character defects and fears and set them on fire one by one. As we did this, I prayed to God for forgiveness and asked him to relieve me of all those fears. When we were all done, I looked around and everything looked clearer. The grass looked greener, the kids playing looked happier, my sponsors' smile even seemed brighter. Looking back on that day, I now realize what I was feeling was hope. That feeling of hope changed my entire attitude about being in recovery and I am so grateful. Up until then I was pretty miserable.

The next time I felt profound hope was when Christina called me and told me I had been accepted into the Institute. It took everything I had just to muster up the courage to apply in the first place. I was getting discouraged because I was not accepted right away. (I always seem to have to have an answer right now!) I talked with my sponsor and she told me to hand it over to God. So, I promptly put it in my God box and got along with my day. I continued to call once a month, but I was not obsessing over it like I was at first. A few months went by and I was starting to feel like I was never going to amount to anything, no one was ever going to hire me, etc. Then I did my fourth step and literally, five days later I got the call from Christina. What a wonderful week I was having! I now feel that if I stay on the right track and remember to keep hope a part of my everyday life, good things and plenty of opportunity will come my way. Thank you for giving me such a large portion of hope in my life.



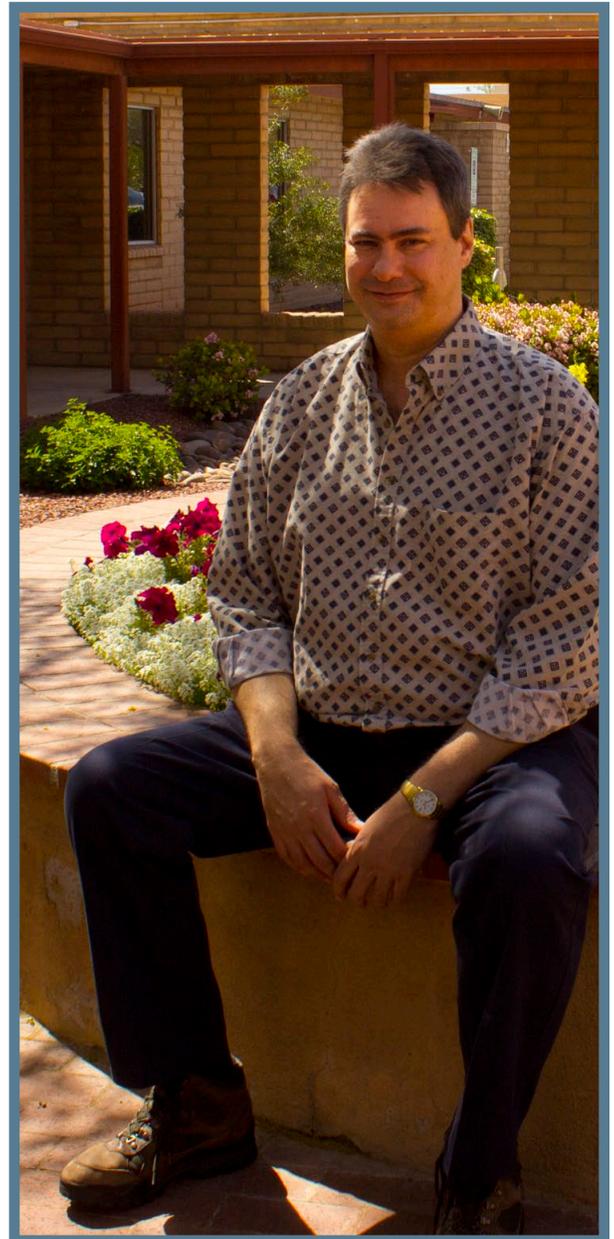
A Power Greater than Ourselves

By Jeff Hofer, CRSS

I have been drinking for thirty years and for fifteen of those years I have been in and out of Alcoholics Anonymous. About eight years ago I was at an AA meeting and was having difficulty with the second step, which states, "Came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity." For some reason I happened to bring my Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions book, that had my name hand written in it, to an AA meeting. Frustrated, I said a prayer that if there is a God I will get this Twelve Step and Twelve Tradition book back when I return to AA. I left the book behind.

I was seeing a psychiatrist for the fifteen years while I was in and out of AA. I would lie to her that I was only drinking a 4 pack of 16-ounce beers every few days. I grew tired of lying to her and by this time my mother was also attending the psychiatric sessions with me. For some reason my case manager offered to take me to an AA meeting. I was finally willing to look at my alcoholism again so I agreed and went.

I had forgotten the prayer that I had said eight years ago and went to the meeting with my case manager. Low and behold my prayer was answered. The meeting turned out to be a Step and Tradition meeting and someone handed me a book. I opened it up and to my surprise my name was in the book. I went to an Out Patient Treatment Program and sobered up soon after that. I have been sober for nine months now, the most I have been sober for thirty-some years.



Watch Out World!

By Karen Reynolds, CRSS

What is hope? Hope is:

- Healing
- Optimistic
- Peaceful
- Empowering

For a long time, I did not have much hope. I felt I was powerless over my moods and that I just had to accept the moods as they came. I did nothing to try to change them, despite encouragement from therapists and friends.

That all changed the last time I was hospitalized, which was in March of 2013. I took a serious look at how hard everyone around me was working to help me stay well and, at times to stay alive. I realized that everyone else was doing all of the work. I saw that I had to start participating in my own recovery. I could no longer let others carry me. Instead, I had to take responsibility and take my own steps toward recovery.

Over the last year, I have worked hard to stay well. I have begun to use the tools that others have been suggesting all along. Tools that are especially helpful for me are:

- Following through with my commitments, even when I'm feeling down, rather than going home and replaying the day's seemingly bad events.
- Looking for thought distortions, then reframing what I think and say into something positive.
- Distracting myself when agitated and coming back to the problem later when I've been able to step back, which gives me a different perspective on how to deal with the situation.
- Paying attention to the here and now by practicing mindfulness.

As a result of using these and several other tools, I have hope today. Having hope has been healing to me and to my relationships with others. As a result of having hope, I am more optimistic. I have a sense of peace that I have never known before. Finally, the hope I have is empowering. I have taken control of my life. I am using the tools I have and I'm reaping the benefits of participating in my own recovery.



Hope is the Light in Your Heart

By Melissa Ritchie, CRSS

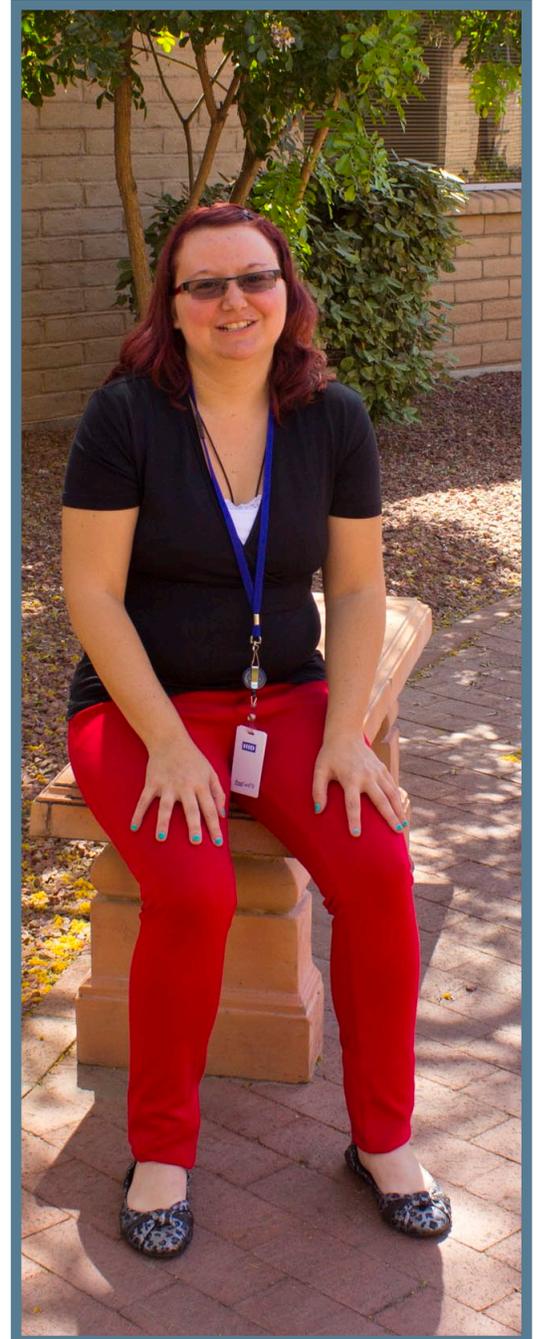
Rumi once said, "If there is light in your heart, you will find your way home." For me personally, the light Rumi is referring to is hope. As a child and into my teen years, it was all about survival. Many nights I would stay up late, locked in my bedroom and wonder "why am I still holding on?" I felt completely engulfed in darkness and I could not see a way out. Many times I contemplated suicide, but a little voice inside of me would always say, "Hold on for just one more day." I did not know it then, but that was the light of hope that was in my heart.

When I was old enough to get away from my abusive home, I ran as fast as I could and vowed to never look back. Adult life was a shock to me. I did not know a thing about how to hold down a job and keep a place to live. Once again I was just trying to survive. I realized that there was something about me that was different, but I did not know what it was. At the age of 18 I began to read about the same type of events that I had been through. It gave me hope to know that I was not alone, and that I could heal the brokenness I felt inside me.

One day I was at Bookman's looking at the books in the psychology section. I came upon a certain book called "The Other Mind." At this point in my life, I had no idea what I wanted to do with my life. I realized at this point that I wanted to become a therapist. I enrolled in school and I have been going ever since. I am now a year away from graduating with my bachelors in psychology.

When I first began my recovery process, I did not want to seek treatment in the behavioral health field. I wanted to do it all on my own. At a low point in my life, I began to realize that I could not do it all on my own like I wanted to. I sought treatment first with SAMHC and then transferred to COPE. I realized that there was a biological component that I could not fix on my own. Once my body adjusted to the medication, the depression I felt for many years finally lifted. Through Dialectical Behavioral Therapy (DBT) Skills group, I learned new skills that I have continued to practice in my everyday life.

Things are not perfect by any means. I have my good days and my bad days. I have my moments where I begin to relapse. The difference now is that I am able to catch myself when I begin to slip. Every day I hold on to the light of hope that is in my heart knowing that it will bring me back home.

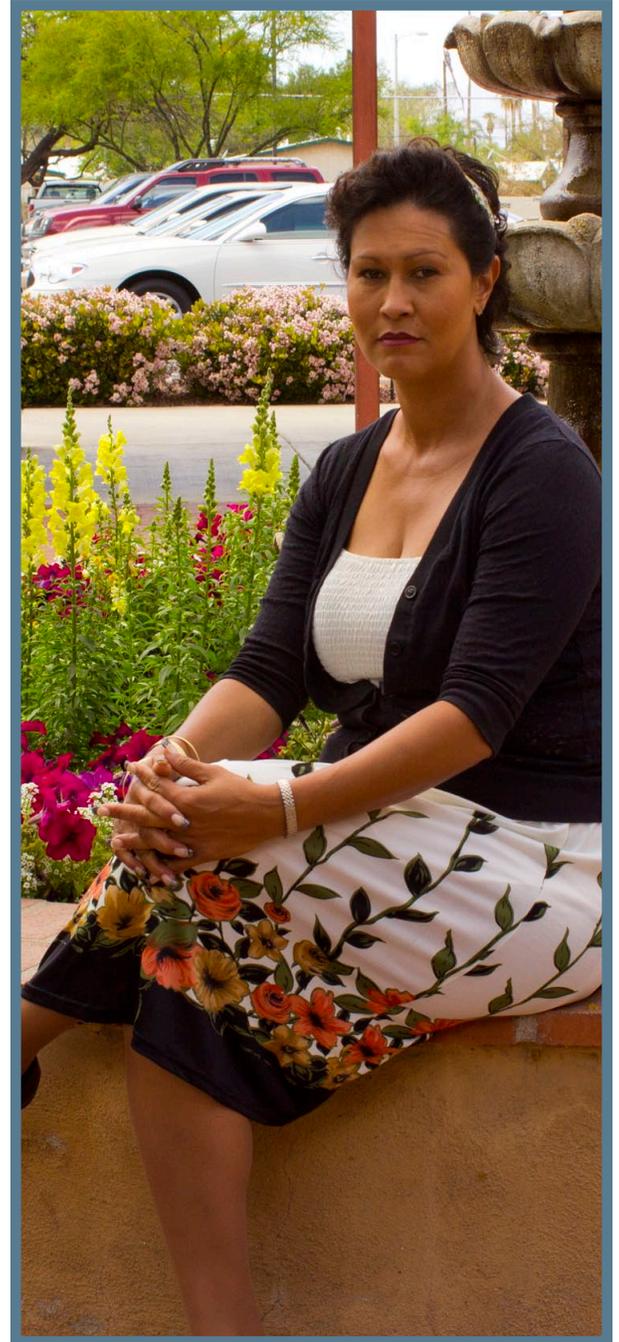


Forgiveness and Hope

By Yvonne Ridley, CRSS

The day that I felt hope for the first time in my life was when I stopped blaming everyone for my chaotic life. I had been sober almost one year. I had begun to remember parts of my life that I either had forgotten or intentionally blocked out for a very long time. As my memory was more vivid and coming back to me slowly, I felt shame, confusion, hurt and fear. I had always blamed the men in my past relationships, the men I chose to be a part of my life were the cause of my drunken miserable chaotic past. When I felt this way I would confide in my sponsor who would give me the tools I needed to help me learn how to forgive myself and others, such as, ask your God to remove the bad thoughts and always remember where my addiction took me and that I never have to go there again as long as I never drink.

As I learned to forgive myself, the pain faded and I learned to forgive every single man/person that I allowed to treat me wrong. When I felt the freedom of the weight that I had been carrying for years lifted from my body and mind, I smiled, I was happy, I was free and I knew I was not alone anymore. The most important thing I know was that I felt HOPE. Today I can honestly say if it wasn't for those bad relationships in my past that I would not have such a blessed life today. I am a great mother of four children and a wife for the first time. I have a daughter and a granddaughter and I know that my family is proud of me today. I found "Hope" seven years ago and I'm never letting it go.



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Back Row (L to R)

Eric Coleman, Yvonne Ridley, David Handler, Matthew Kearney, Kenneth Darthard

Middle Row (L to R)

Jeffrey Hofer, Darlene Gonzales, Erika Luna, Maria Woods, Carol Hemauer, Carmalita Tims, Brenna Romero

Front Row (L to R)

Eileen Sordahl, Gina McGrath, Jana Hunsaker, Melissa Ritchie, Karen Reynolds, Waleska Cardona

Not Pictured Ebony Rose Brooks

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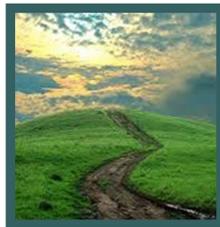
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