

Mental Illness: Lyn's Story

[Another Way](#) for the week of November 11, 2005

By Melody Davis

Lyn Legere is an amazing woman who is exactly my age but she has lived nine lifetimes in a little over 50 years. She was born in South Boston to a single mother in the 1950s when it wasn't very acceptable to be a single mom. Her mother struggled with self-loathing and tended to take it out on Lyn. She tells parts of her story in an upcoming religious special on ABC-TV, Shadow Voices: Finding Hope in Mental Illness (see <http://www.shadowvoices.com>) produced by Mennonite Media, the organization through which I write Another Way.

Lyn was put in a foster home until age four, then moved in with grandparents until she was eight. Her mother got married and had four children in quick succession. "I became a live-in second mother, which was less than enjoyable," Lyn understates. She was also sexually abused by a relative. "It was very rough; when I was 13, I turned to drugs as a way to cope. Drugs may have saved me [from suicide]." By the time she was 18, she was a full blown heroin addict, "doing whatever I needed to do to support my habit."

She was hospitalized for the first time at age 17 in a mental institution, Boston State Hospital. This was in the days before the reforms of the 1970s when many institutions were closed and community programs were supposed to fill in the gaps for the ill. The conditions there were disgusting and grim-pretty typical of the time.

Eventually, after stealing some drugs from a dealer, she went into drug rehab as a way to stay safe. Once she got off drugs, she continued to drink, and she was frequently hospitalized over the next ten years, very suicidal. "It was a miserable existence," she says.

Then she started going to Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, because when hospitalized you would get "extra perks" if you went to AA meetings. "You could go get ice cream, stay up later. I learned about alcoholism but didn't take it seriously," she recalled.

After a bad four-day binge, the AA slogans came back to her, mocking her. She knew what she needed to do, and she finally got seriously involved with AA, "which was life-saving." She became sober, and then her mother was diagnosed with terminal cancer. The next two years were rough as she watched her mother die. "A year after she died, "I was hospitalized again, which was my first time since sober. I still had mental illness to deal with. I felt ripped off. It felt like all the promises had been denied to me. I drank again, but only for one night. Then I went through a long, long haul of working through my issues, very

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suicidal most of the time. I felt like I was going to be a 'loser' all my life."

Then about 11 years ago, she found a great therapist who "doesn't coddle me, but believed in me. She said I would get a job, I would get my life back. I told her she was crazy, and then it started to happen. I left public housing, got my own apartment."

Next Lyn's brother was diagnosed with cancer. While she had a complicated relationship with her siblings because of having to "mother" them, Lyn later realized that this was not their fault and "We were able to patch things up beautifully. But then his death was even more devastating. I relapsed in mental illness. I was hospitalized several times, lost my job, my car, even my cat."

Her therapist helped her deal with overwhelming grief, but Lyn was afraid. "I would say to her, 'I know I can get up again, but I don't know that I can live through another crash. I just don't know if I can do it again. To set my heart on hope and then have it extinguished.' But she was able to hold the hope [for me] until I could begin the process."

Lyn not only copes with a major mental illness, depression, but is making a real contribution in her field. She works part time in the Boston University Disability Services office and is working with the University of Massachusetts medical center for implementation of the new Medicare prescription drug program. She received her Masters degree in May from the Sargent College of Health and Rehabilitation Sciences at Boston University.

She still struggles with depression at times, but has re-established relationships with some other siblings, including her youngest brother, who "played a major role in my getting better. When our brother died, he wrote me a letter and said he remembered all the things I would do for him when he was little; I never knew he had gotten that from me. He said 'The one good thing in giving up a brother to cancer was gaining a sister.' He was so afraid I was going to kill myself and he would lose me, too. I had to promise him I wouldn't do that, and give up my 'back door' out of here."

Lyn also has a niece who is "the love of my life. I never married, nor had kids. I had enough of them growing up. And then this little girl was born, and I remember holding this little thing and saying, 'It just doesn't get any better than this.' And that's when I began to get it. It's like, 'Oh, so this is what it's all about' and she is so special to me. And so that's something that pulls me up when I get hit with stuff."

To Lyn and all the millions of folks surviving and coping with this kind of illness every day, I can only say, you are amazing. You give hope and courage to everyone.

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