

***"Don't Give up the Fight!"***

## **Sharon's Story**



My name is Sharon and I have a mental illness. Don't be afraid, Mental Illness is not contagious. Don't feel sorry for me, because I don't require pity. Don't assume that I am not capable of being a productive member of society, because I am very capable of contributing to my community in a positive manner. There is a stigma attached to mental illness that is different from other types of disabilities. This stigma can be quite detrimental. Because a mental illness can't be seen, it is perceived as not being as "real" as an obvious physical disability. Believe me mental illness is real and it can be just as devastating as

having a physical disability, sometimes more so, because there are no splints or crutches or any other devices to help the individual adapt to their environment.

The story of how I came to Transition House is not unusual but it is unique to me. I haven't always understood my mental illness, in fact I haven't always even been aware of my illness. I was a single parent of two, the eldest daughter married and moved out and the youngest was left behind for me to raise on the salary from a job that paid \$3.50 cents per hour 20 hours per week. We were struggling financially and we were struggling emotionally with the rigors of life. At one point, my daughter disappeared for six weeks. I didn't know where she was whether she was alive or dead, and I had exhausted all means of finding her. It was very frightening and very frustrating period in my life.

One day I received a call from her boyfriend telling me that he had a problem and needed my help. While we were talking, he stopped in mid sentence and shouted my daughter's name. There was a pause and I said - "is my daughter there?" Then there was dead silence. Then he shouted, "Oh my God, she cut her wrist!" I lost it. All of the built up fear and frustration just overtook me and I went catatonic. When the emergency people came to my apartment to help me, I was rolled up in a fetal position on my bed unresponsive but sobbing. I was taken to the hospital and then was taken before the judge to be court committed to Griffin Memorial Hospital, an inpatient facility for the mentally ill, for thirty days. After about three weeks at Griffin, the fog was beginning to lift somewhat and I decided one day to make my way to the lunchroom. From across the room I saw my daughter. I ran up to her to embrace her because it had been three weeks since I had heard from her. I didn't even know if she was still alive, so it was quite a relief to see her. As I approached her, I was subdued by several staff members and taken back to my room and sedated. I later learned that my daughter had told staff that she and I had a death pact that I would kill her and then kill myself, so they thought that I was trying to carry out this pact when I went to embrace her. Later on, I found out more about the mental illness that she has and how this illness has affected her.

During the next three months that I was at Griffin, I decided that it was important to learn as much as I could about my mental illness and to begin to use the Vocational Program at Griffin to begin to build some sense of self-esteem. This was a minimal success. At the end of my stay there I was forced to move to a transitional living facility.

Upon arriving at Transition House I decided that I wasn't going to stay more than the three days I believed I had to. Everyday was filled with "well I'll give them one more day." I did everything I could to make myself invisible for the first six months and basically to avoid learning anything. I was stubborn and sullen and not willing to do anything but be depressed. Finally one day I found myself participating in a class and slowly I realized that I was learning a lot about myself. I began to realize that I had never played before and that I had never really known happiness and most of all I had never bothered to examine what I wanted or liked. The staff at Transition House helped me to explore all of these areas and soon I realized that I was happier than I have ever been in my life. When my year was up at Transition House, I felt that I was prepared to face the world on my own with a new understanding of personal responsibility for my mental health and maintaining myself as a worthwhile member of society.

Over the years that have ensued, I have had setbacks and have even had times of homelessness and despair. I've even had to return to Transition House on several occasions to refocus myself on what my goals are and learn new coping skills. I have applied for Social Security and finally received it in December of 1999. I now have a very nice apartment of my own and I have a newer model vehicle that belongs to me. Since my stay at Transition House, I have participated in the Outreach Program that is run by Transition House. Regular participation in this part of the program has kept me focused on my

continued healing and given me the opportunity to give back to my community some of the gifts that I have been given. We are fed by the ongoing efforts of the program and we are given the opportunity to feed others from our knowledge base.



My greatest fear for the future is that the community will lose sight of the crucial work that this program provides. Without the ongoing support of the community of Norman, the vital services offered by this program will be lost and so will the many lives that are touched by this exemplary program.

If we ever hope to overcome the stigma of mental illness, it is imperative that we have programs such as Transition House to help people afflicted with mental illness to not only have a safe place to come to regain control of their lives, but also to teach them to become better advocates for their own health and welfare. Asking for help is the first step to reaching our goals of healing. Finding hope gives us the courage to go on! Having a safe place to go

to receive that help is imperative. Transition House is that place and I thank God everyday that I was given the opportunity to come here and to discover who Sharon is and to learn to like her. My purpose in sharing my story with you today is to give you a better understanding of the stigma of mental illness and to ask for the community's continued financial support of Transition House.