

A SUCCESSFUL LIFE IN THE COMMUNITY AFTER LONG-TERM INSTITUTIONALIZATION

Issue 11 • [Month] 2017

The views, opinions, and content expressed in this presentation do not necessarily reflect the views, opinions, or policies of the Center for Mental Health Services (CMHS), the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), or the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS).



In this newsletter, we are honored to be able to share **Jennifer Vonbrandt's** story.



In Short

Today, Jennifer sees herself as a beautiful young woman with a lot of courage. Her courage is what enabled her to take steps towards recovery and she has now been living in her own apartment for four years. Jennifer overcame years spent cycling in and out of hospitals and group homes to successfully live on her own with the help of a crisis and recovery center and thanks to her bravery. Part of her motivation was the impact that her cycling was having on her

young daughter—who is now 17 and working on securing a job and a driver's license. Jennifer enjoys the freedom and independence of her current life.

Life Before

Jennifer experienced her first psychiatric commitment when she was a teenager. She was confined in a state hospital for approximately a year. During that time, she used to bang her head against a brick wall and sometimes would hit doctors. In an effort to kill herself, she would drink hairspray, rubbing alcohol, and cleaning solutions. Jennifer was desperate to leave the hospital, and constantly wondered “When am I going to get out of here?” She asked many times to be released, but was told that she was not ready. Jennifer experienced abuse during her hospitalization—part of a set of incidents leading to a federal investigation and media coverage. Visits to her family did not go well; in part, the medications that she was taking made her drowsy and listless. One Thanksgiving, she could hardly keep her head up, and her mother asked, “what’s wrong with my daughter?”

Jennifer was desperate to leave the hospital, and constantly wondered “When am I going to get out of here?”

Jennifer then spent another two years in and out of community hospitals, the state hospital, and group homes. Privacy was scarce. At the state hospital, she had three other roommates sharing one room. People would steal others’ belongings, and Jennifer even had her false teeth stolen. Staff watched her shower, watched her dress, and followed her wherever she went. The images she had seen of people being restrained and screaming haunted her. Abuse also occurred. During one incident, she was punched and had her hair pulled by staff, and a rag stuffed in her mouth made it hard for her to breathe. Three large men sat on top of her. A supervisor discovered what was happening and put an end to this behavior.

What Helped Jennifer

At some point, state hospital staff told Jennifer she needed to make a change in her life so that she would stop coming back. Around that time, she was sent to a crisis and recovery center, which she found extremely helpful and which linked her with supported housing. Her transition to her own apartment was not easy, as she was scared to leave the hospital and live on her own. She did not feel like she knew how to function on her own. But she was also excited about getting her independence. One of the things that gave her the courage to try living independently was thinking about the impact on her daughter—who was in pre-school or kindergarten at the time—of Jennifer’s cycling in and out of hospitals throughout her life. While she continued to have some

hospitalizations at first, medication changes helped and Jennifer eventually settled into supported housing.

She volunteers every week at an animal shelter; she loves her work there, and is particularly attached to one cat who loves to be petted.

Jennifer is very happy to be living in her own home. She has been living in her current apartment for four years. Staff comes to help her with medications, and to help her with grocery shopping and clothes shopping. Jennifer attends a Clubhouse, where she participates in groups. She volunteers every week at an animal shelter; she loves her work there, and is particularly attached to one cat who loves to be petted. She keeps a journal that she writes in every morning and night.

Jennifer’s Life Today

Jennifer enjoys the freedom and independence that she now has. Looking back on her life in the hospital, she observes that the environment felt like a prison, and her life felt hopeless. Now she sees herself in a different light—as a beautiful young woman with a lot of courage. She takes pride in being able to do the ordinary things for herself that “normal human beings” do, like bathing and cooking. While she was too scared to learn to cook or use a washing machine during her days living in group homes, she now cooks many different types of meals, and washes her own clothes. The most important things about having her independence are the ability to be herself without having people judge her, and the absence of bars on the windows and freedom to let air in. Jennifer’s daughter is now 17

and working on securing a job and a driver's license. Jennifer is very proud of her life now.

The most important things about having her independence are the ability to be herself without having people judge her, and the absence of bars on the windows and freedom to let air in.