

Pieces of Love

Sometimes I find it hard to reconcile my past with the present. Schizophrenia can be a cruel interrupter of life in all it entails.

*I found myself on a journey
I did not choose and
never expected to take.*

I never dreamed of not graduating from college in 2003, four years after I enrolled at the University of Southern California. I also never expected to become homeless, let alone for four years, and in the same city where I had once been a dedicated student. Prior to my psychotic break, life was filled with targeted accomplishments, friends and hope for the future.

Occasionally, I hear people with schizophrenia say that they have experienced the disorder their entire lives in some form or another. More commonly, however, schizophrenia presents as a ticking time bomb. Until it explodes, there are often no distinct warning signs.

While in high school, I was safe, happy, and thriving. Everyone in my life anticipated that as an adult, I would be successful. Sadly, because of my schizophrenia, it seemed that would never happen.

Stored away in a cardboard box, I found a variety of treasures from my childhood, and before schizophrenia changed my life. I found little figures made of rocks that had been glued together and painted. There was a green



Bethany Yeiser,
President of the CURESZ Foundation

frog and a bright blue creature with big eyes. Both made me laugh and remember youthful joy. The figures reminded me of church summer camp when I was a child, where we made a variety of interesting crafts. Each day, when summer camp was over, my brother and I would return to our house and go swimming.

In transferring these long-forgotten friends from the box to a place near my dresser, I blended them into my present life. Daily, I am greeted by love and joy from my childhood.

I also found old notebooks, t-shirts, badges and "olympic medals" from a girls' club that three of my friends and I had "founded." The materials were all painted with our club logo. The "olympic medals" were from a

competition we put together with multiple events including a biking course, a swimming competition and an obstacle course, running through our five acres of property. I remember the youngest girl, Annie, won gold. My medal was silver for second place. There was so much love in the friendships of my youth before schizophrenia interrupted my life. The tokens of days past fill out and complete the circle of my life from wellness, into illness, and then back again through recovery.

I found a dried-out pen from Israel, a gift from my first-grade teacher who had recently visited Israel. It fascinated me. I remember holding it and dreaming of going to Israel. Unfortunately, I never would have guessed that I would one day be deluded to believe that I would help secure peace in the Middle East, as my mind was failing me.

Near the bottom of the box, I found coins I collected as a child from all over the world. One coin, from Hong Kong, had a hole in its center, surrounded by Chinese characters. I used to hold the coin and dream of visiting Hong Kong one day. I never expected that I would indeed visit Hong Kong, but only while suffering from psychosis associated with schizophrenia. Now the coin is joined with my passport which contains stamps from all the places around the world where I have traveled.

As I look through these old treasures, I reflect on my years symptomatic with schizophrenia and isolated from love. The treasures remind me of the love I experienced prior to the illness. While I was mentally ill, homeless, and isolating myself from family and friends, I suffered from financial poverty as well as a poverty of love. Years later, I would once again allow their love to flow into my life.

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SCHIZOPHRENIA SURVIVORS



The Story of Carson

Carson was born in 2000 in Tempe, Arizona, and has four siblings. As a child, he was particularly interested in math and science. His mother, a chemical engineer, inspired him.

In high school, Carson enjoyed an active social life and excelled in track and football. As a junior, he traveled with his classmates to the state track championships. In his senior year, he was student body president, presiding over 1800 students.

Carson's first signs of a brain disorder began during his junior year of high school. He felt unable to focus. At that time, he dropped out of the track team, which had been his favorite sport. As a senior, he took a math class in differential equations for dual high school/college credit. He did well in this course and in other difficult classes. However, beginning at age 17, Carson started to smoke marijuana heavily, and became addicted. His psychiatric symptoms presented at the same time.

The day after he smoked, he would begin to suffer from paranoia. He felt he could not "turn off his brain." While smoking marijuana, he experienced euphoria, but also paranoia. The next day, though the euphoria was absent, the paranoia remained.

Carson remembers watching a teacher's hand twitch and wondering if that meant she was angry at him. In addition to the paranoia, he began to experience visual hallucinations. He noticed motion in his peripheral vision. He describes himself during that time as a "wreck." However, he kept his symptoms a secret.

As he was finishing high school, Carson scored high on his SATs and was awarded an academic scholarship to study biomedical engineering at Arizona State University.

In 2018, living in the dorm, life became more complicated. His roommate was a drug dealer. Because Carson regularly stayed up all night, getting high then acting erratically, he was kicked out of the dorm. He withdrew from all his classes. That semester, his parents petitioned the court to have him taken to a psychiatry ward. In October of 2018, Carson was picked up by police and taken to a holding facility.

Carson was hospitalized for a month. During the duration of his stay at the hospital, he missed getting high. The first court-ordered medications prescribed caused him to develop involuntary movements including abnormal muscle contractions in his shoulders. Unfortunately, the hospital staff thought he was faking these symptoms. He yelled at the nurses, demanding to be released.

After his release from the hospital, he consented to taking oral medication for schizophrenia, and voluntarily went to doctor's appointments every two weeks, but resumed getting high on marijuana regularly.

Finally, in April of 2019, Carson's parents took him to a dual diagnosis rehabilitation facility in Prescott, Arizona. He was expected to stay ninety days, but would end up in the facility for a year.

Carson didn't want to be treated, and felt his self esteem was crushed. He remembers going to support groups where he didn't fit. He felt patronized. However, in rehab, he eventually made several new and healthy relationships.

It took a long time for Carson to stabilize. Eight months after his arrival at the rehab facility, he was prescribed **clozapine**.

*For the first time in years,
his mind began to clear.
His visual hallucinations
disappeared, and
paranoia lessened.*

Most of the side effects he experienced on other medications disappeared. Carson began to feel healthy, as he used to feel in high school, before the onset of his symptoms.

While at the rehabilitation facility, Carson began to take online college classes. He started with an English class and moved on to advanced math classes. He also changed his major to math. After completing three courses, Carson left the facility to start a new life, returned to his parent's home, and enrolled again at the university. He decided to add a second major, Computer Systems Engineering.

In fall of 2021, Carson scored an A+ in each of his four classes, including courses in high level mathematics. He also recently began tutoring, which he hopes to continue in addition to his full time studies.

Today, Carson enjoys a loving relationship with his parents and family again. Symptom free, he thrives in full time college. In April 2022, he will mark three consecutive years of being clean. He has no desire to ever use drugs or drink alcohol again.

Carson is scheduled to complete his dual mathematics/computer science engineering bachelor's degrees in spring of 2024.



Carson is a dual mathematics/computer systems engineering major at Arizona State University.

TESTIFYING FOR TREATMENT

A MOTHER'S COURAGEOUS ACT OF LOVE

Today, I am thankful for my strong and loving relationship with my son, "Adam," who has been in treatment for schizophrenia for five years. Thankfully, my son is doing much better than when he first started treatment. He works full time, writes original music with friends and enjoys spending time with family.

However, while he was in the throes of his psychosis, with symptoms continually worsening, I once wondered if our relationship would be ruined forever.

In June 2017, I was asked by my son's medical team to testify in court about his need for treatment. This determination would enable his treatment team to force my son to begin antipsychotic medication. It took courage and strength to appear in a court room where my son was present and testify that he was in fact ill, had been for some time, and was in dire need of treatment for his schizophrenia which he was refusing.

There was nothing easy about the ten months when we struggled to support Adam who was struggling with the new onset of some sort of mental illness while a senior in college. As his personality changed and he withdrew from us, our hearts grew heavy. We walked a fine line between keeping Adam safe at school, respecting his wishes for us to stay away and let him continue to live at school while he finished his senior year.

We tried to bargain with him to agree to a psychiatric consultation to no avail, as he denied just how seriously ill he was feeling, and tried to heal himself with a restrictive diet, yoga, and meditation. According to state laws, we could not hospitalize him against his wishes since he was an adult, so we hoped that something would happen that would precipitate hospitalization without our intervention. In late May, our wish came true! Someone called the police because she saw a young man acting unusual, loitering outside of her home. Police found him uncooperative and disoriented. They called for EMS, who took Adam to the hospital and contacted us. We were so thankful that the process of getting the medical help he so desperately needed was finally beginning.

Unfortunately, things didn't go the way we had expected, since for three weeks Adam refused all medication. The medical director said they could not convince him to comply, and they could not force him to take medication that he refused without a court order. The doctor explained to me that the next step was to go before a judge, to

request a court-imposed order to medicate him. She also asked if I would testify. I immediately got to work preparing a statement that I could read in court and tried to emotionally prepare myself for this task.

Nothing that I had ever experienced could have prepared me for that morning. The court was located in the ground floor of a state mental health facility, which is not a welcoming environment, to say the least. My son shuffled in, with his escort from the other facility, and a completely vacant look in his eyes. An attorney introduced himself as the court-appointed patient advocate. I told myself that was a good thing, that the state tries to have someone on the "patient's side" looking out for their interests, but I wondered if this could possibly get any worse. I didn't like the feeling of "me vs. my son" at all, as we never had a contentious relationship before this illness.

I will never forget the details of that day, surely one of the hardest of my life. Before I addressed the judge, I looked straight at Adam and I told him that I apologize for anything I may say that hurts his feelings, and that everything I say was to help him, even if he couldn't understand it at that moment. I told the court that Adam had been suffering for many months with mental illness and was not able to make responsible health decisions for himself.

The judge ruled in our favor, granting the hospital the right to forcibly treat Adam's psychosis.

Going to court, which was a very difficult and scary experience for my husband and I, actually was the catalyst for Adam's road to recovery.

We are so very grateful to the state and the judge who were able to give power to the treating doctors so that they could help our son. My son is doing very well now, and we have hope that he will continue to feel even better in the future.

Today, Adam understands that my testimony was an act of love.



Families with a loved one who is mentally ill are often in a position where they are powerless to get their loved one into treatment. In order for treatment to be mandated, a patient often has to decompensate to a point where they are a danger to themselves or others.

The day Melissa went to court to testify that her son needed treatment was one of the hardest days of her life.

Melissa is the mother of two and has enjoyed successful careers in healthcare as a clinician and administrator.

Pieces of Love

(continued from Page 1)

As painful as it may be, I realize that my life is a composite of all the different chapters together, and every chapter matters and finds greater significance in a cohesive, ongoing story. When people are affected by a serious illness, a pause or gap is created. For me, difficult things and good things have joined to make me a more complete, and compassionate person.

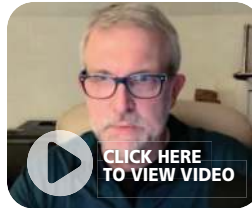
My porcelain doll, given to me by a friend, is now in my bedroom on display and brings me joy. She has been freed from the storage box.

Reclaiming the pieces of love from the past and bringing them forward has enriched the healthy life I now live.

Today, I am thankful for my antipsychotic medication which has enabled me to recover completely, returning to a thriving and purposeful life. My life took unexpected turns that were more difficult than I would have ever imagined. But the greatest surprise has been the little pills I take every day that brought me to recovery and enable me to work, volunteer, study, and revive meaningful relationships. I am thankful every day for the chance at a restored life I have been given on medication. When I look at the pen from the Middle East, I no longer aspire to help create world peace.

Schizophrenia can indeed be a cruel interrupter of life. But today, there is hope for a return to the things we care about most and help us define who we are.

I am a survivor of a brain disorder. I hope that others affected by severe brain disorders can also bring pieces of love from their past into their present in order to nourish and complete the story of their lives.



VIDEO HIGHLIGHT

Mental Health Risks of Marijuana

On February 28, 2022, CURESZ on Campus Clubs sponsored Dr. Erik Messamore from Northeast Ohio Medical University to present a lecture entitled Mental Health Risks of Marijuana. This video is a live recording of the event.

Marijuana, also known as cannabis, affects the functions of many different brain neurotransmitter systems which mediate communications across brain regions. Many components of the brain are affected by cannabis. Risks and benefits are two sides of the same coin. Notably, unlike the government regulations governing tobacco, alcohol or pharmaceutical marketing, there is no legal requirement to mention the possible risks of marijuana by companies that sell it. Lobbyists and industry groups often deny, downplay or discredit serious risks of using marijuana. The triggering of psychotic symptoms, such as paranoia or hallucinations, is one of the most serious risks, especially in young people with a family history of serious mental illness.

A long time ago, before scientific research was conducted, marijuana was regarded as medicinal, and textbooks from the 1850s through the 1910s described conditions that marijuana might be useful for, but also mentioned various risks, including what we refer to today as psychosis. During the same period, cocaine was also considered a useful medicine, instead of a dangerous substance of abuse as we now know.

Today, one third of US adults believe that smoking or vaping cannabis promotes good health. Two thirds of youth age 16-19 years are unfortunately not worried at all that using marijuana will damage their physical health and their brain. Marijuana has been found to cause loss of brain cells in the gray matter, and chemical changes in the brain including altered levels of dopamine, glutamate, anandamide, and serotonin, which may lead to long-term damage. The harmful impacts are even greater in on the developing brains of teenagers.

Please consider making a donation to the CURESZ Foundation online at CURESZ.org

Your contribution will help provide education and referrals to persons with schizophrenia, their families, and those who work with the seriously mentally ill. CURESZ informs the general public to better understand this serious brain disorder, and to provide scientific advances showing that there is hope for recovery, and a return to a fulfilling and normal life. The CURESZ Foundation is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. All contributions are tax deductible.

"We are committed to helping individuals to cope with and recover from schizophrenia."

You can now also support the CURESZ Foundation by signing up with Kroger Community Rewards and Amazon Smile.

