

## **The Best Advocacy**

There is a loss when someone develops mental illness, and with 4 mental health challenges, I was no different. Medications sometimes didn't work. Cognitive decline and dwindling opportunities as a twenty-something further depressed me. It took a reorientation of my life's expectations and goals. In the aftermath, I feel I was chosen to speak for the mentally ill; God gave me just enough awareness and expression to contribute.

Advocacy has taken many forms, despite not ever owning a car or driving. Today, it's helping at a Clubhouse and sitting on a mental health advisory board. It's taken me into the pages of "The Mighty," telling my story of homelessness and suicidal impulses. It has caused me to travel with a group of trained professionals to the Michigan House Appropriations Sub-Committee Hearings to help prevent the privatization of mental health funding in 2017. It helped me work two jobs for the better part of nine years after Disability payouts.

Those were big moments, but the best advocacy, I have found, is not hiding who I am. I still have responsibilities in relationships, at jobs, in the community; as I meet those expectations, it softens the image we see. Headlines otherwise would be the motivations of mass shooters & justifications for a celebrity's outlandish behavior. Someone annoying or someone to fear. Instead others might see "There's a kind person with mental illness and there's a hard worker with mental illness."

"There's my friend who has a mental illness."

It's not just me striving to teach. I have learned valuable lessons, especially when working. I learned when I need to motivate myself to maintain consistent progress and how to take smaller steps for the same goal. I learned when to change my motivational materials. I've learned stress busters and observation skills to know when I need to rest. I learned to let myself feel genuinely, even if I need to work towards emotional maturity and pliability.

My accomplishments are not others' accomplishments. It's the homeless man who drew my face because I let him warm himself on an overnight shift. It's the star a little girl drew for me when she came through my line at Meijer.

Power and prestige?

That was never mine before I got sick. And, at 41, I feel I've lived a rich life. I'm grateful just to be here to tell my story and the people who make that possible. Their story of advocacy is far superior to my own. It's a story I could never fully tell.

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