

The Journey Toward Diagnosis, Treatment

This is the third in a series of articles commemorating the 20th anniversary of Compeer Chautauqua and its service to the community. The article highlights the contribution that can be provided by a compassionate Compeer for Youth volunteer to a family dealing with a child's mental illness. This experience assisted Patti Ryczko, the child's mother, in her search for resources that have helped her daughter.

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BY PATTI RYCZKO

When Jann Ball called to ask if I would be willing to tell our story, our journey if you will, I said yes right away. No problem; I would be more than happy to do it in order to help this wonderful Compeer Program and maybe help other people to understand mental illness.

This wonderful organization is comprised of some of the most exceptional people you could ever meet, like Rosie. You see Rosie is my daughter Kim's Compeer friend. These two make quite a team, let me tell you! Such a friendship I have never seen the likes of and, sadly, many will never see.

Rosie has been the one true constant bright spot in our Kim's life. When all her friends had abandoned her, there was Rosie. When Kim was hospitalized and her friends from school couldn't understand her illness, there was Rosie. A lovely card, a daily phone call, a visit, there was Rosie. Through it all, a hug, a pat on the back, just a warm smile, there was Rosie showing Kim the meaning of true friendship. Rosie is still there to this day doing what she does best — friendship without judgment.

Before I can begin my story, I need to look back five years. This is one of the hardest things I have had to do, put words on paper to describe our long journey to today. It has been a hard, painful, sad and terrifying trip. Oh, forgive me, I almost forgot — there is a happy ending and new beginning.

One day when my daughter was 13 years old I got a call from her guidance counselor. Could I come to school for an important matter? Oh my, I thought, she got caught passing notes or failed to turn in a class project. If only that were the case! I arrived to find a sobbing girl in the guidance office. Kim had sent her favorite teacher an e-mail in which she described in detail how she was going to kill herself. That wonderful teacher called in the school psychologist to talk to Kim. How did I not



see the signs? Moody, angry, failing grades, the lack of interest in things that at one time had delighted her? Was I blind? There were so many thoughts racing through my mind that day. I sat at the table with my baby girl and held her and cried with her. Then I made her a promise: no matter what I had to do, I would get her the help she needed and things would get better.

In the beginning, Kim was diagnosed with depression. Medications were started, stopped and changed several times over. Some had side effects that she could not deal with, such as trembling, jerking movements and facial tics. The side effects made Kim self-conscious and she wasn't sure how others perceived her behaviors, compounding her feeling that there was something "not normal" about her.

After about a year of being treated for depression, Kim began to display new, terrifying symptoms. She thought I was plotting against her. She heard people whispering bad things about her. She felt everyone hated her and she was sure she saw people who weren't there. Money would come up missing. There were strange charges on her dad's credit card bill and missing bankbooks that were later found, depleted. She expressed extreme anger toward me. One day, as she sat glaring at me, she announced that she hated me and wished that I was dead. Who was this shrieking, trembling, wild-eyed monster? And, where had my beautiful Kim gone?

A trip to the emergency room at the WCA Hospital would soon give me a new diagnosis — that of Bipolar Disorder that had been untreated for more than a year. The latest medication that she was taking was actually making her go through a psychotic break.

After a week in the children's psychiatric ward at Jones Hill in Jamestown, we brought her home on yet more new medications. After a few weeks, my daughter started to brighten. Then side effects began to trouble her. She couldn't string together enough thoughts to form a conversation. There was another med change and another trip to Jones Hill.

Over the past five years, she has been hospitalized six times. The longest stay was 26 days. New meds mean four to six weeks of waiting to see if they will work for her. And we all sort of stand back and hold our breath.

After one terrifying day, I had finally reached the end of my rope. I needed so badly for things to be better. We had been getting services from SPOA (Single Point of Access, Chautauqua County Department of Mental Hygiene) and I called our family advocate. I was near my own breaking point. It was recommended that I send Kim to a youth group home in Olean for some respite care. Just a weekend to reenergize my batteries.

She would be well cared for, watched closely every minute and maybe I could breathe. But, how could I pass my child off onto strangers? These people in Olean dealt with children like my Kim every day. It was just for a weekend. So, off she went. And she had a wonderful time. They went on a day trip to Letchworth State Park and she loved it. She came home with a smile! She told us she had fun! Kim had fun?! How were total strangers able to do in one weekend what I had been trying to do for almost two years?

Kim stayed there three more weekends before I made up my mind to have her become a resident there. I learned that she would be able to have daily therapy there, especially cognitive behavior therapy, which worked wonders. She came home every single weekend and every holiday. I went there every time she had a psychiatrist appointment. She started a new school and loved it.

My daughter had come back! The moody monster was nowhere to be seen. She had friends again and discussed all kinds of things with us. After nine long months, Kim came back home for good.

The difference was night and day! My darling daughter graduated from high school this year, right on time. And, in fact, she has just begun training to become a licensed nurse practitioner. After that's done, she plans to go to college to become a nurse in the VA traveling nurses program to help our brave troops heal upon return from overseas.

One step, one day at a time; that's how my Kim lives her life with Bipolar Disorder. And the promise I made long ago? I'm still here, no matter what.

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For information about Compeer Chautauqua and its programs, contact Compeer Director Jann Ball at 487-2956.