



Hillary Kelly

Guest Speaker

North Country Out of the Darkness Walk – Lake Placid

Sunday, October 1, 2017

Seven years ago, I attended my first North Country Out of the Darkness Walk. I was only nine months out from a suicide attempt that gave me three days in the ICU and then seven more on the mental health unit. I was still finding my footing in accepting my diagnosis of bipolar disorder – a diagnosis I received as a teenager, but did not embrace as part of me until my early twenties. A select few people in my life knew about my attempt, but I was not comfortable sharing that part of me with most people. I still felt the shame and stigma surrounding my illness that I had felt for years, the same shame that had caused me to hide years of self-harm, medications, ER visits and short admissions to the hospital. I came to that first [walk](#) with my mother, and I remember us tearfully leaning into each other while listening to the words of the survivors of suicide loss. We didn't speak, but we were both thinking the same thing – how close I came to being a name on a sign instead of standing there, absorbing the pain and loss of those left behind.

Those first few walks, those early years in my mental health recovery, were about reminding myself that I was still here, and how close I came to the alternative. I began to speak openly both about having bipolar disorder, and about attempting suicide. Instead of the judgment and stigma I expected I was met with support, encouragement and most surprisingly – gratitude. The more I spoke about it, the more other people felt comfortable reaching out and sharing their own stories of struggling with their mental health.

When I was discharged from the hospital in 2009, I began to see a counselor, and I met one I finally connected with, who helped me process not only my illness, but

past trauma and encouraged me to develop a plan for the future. If I hadn't had her, I would have placed limitations on myself that I didn't need to. I struggled to find my purpose, and when I felt I was ready to return to college, I told her that I wanted to help other people with mental illness. But how could I do that, I said, when I have a mental illness myself? She said something to me that has stuck with me ever since, and has proven true time and time again – she said, “there are so many wounded healers in this field.”

It took work – and I want to emphasize that – to obtain stability, and then to *maintain* it. It took trying different medications until we found the combination that worked. It took working with some providers I loved, and some that I didn't, to find treatment that worked for me.

There are many kinds of mental illness. Bipolar disorder is a lifelong diagnosis and for me, recovery is an active choice. I will always be in recovery, I will never be recovered. I have to practice self-care, have a strong support system, and recognize when I am starting to feel unwell. But with all of this work I am able to maintain a life that I love. I am a mother to three beautiful boys – my three and a half year old, and my 15-month-old twins. I also have a career that I am passionate about that brings me the purpose I have always desired. Do you know what I do? I am a wounded healer.

I began my career in mental health two years ago, and this past summer I became a [New York State Certified Peer Specialist](#). A peer is someone who uses lived experience to help others with their mental health recovery. I specifically work in crisis stabilization – helping people who are actively suicidal or are experiencing suicidal ideation. I also help people as they are being discharged from an inpatient hospital stay and connect them to services to assist in their recovery. The same types of services that helped me. My own experiences allow me to have true empathy for the people I am trying to help.

I asked to speak here today because I know there are a lot of people out there wearing green beads who could benefit from a message of hope. I want you to know, from someone who has been at that lowest low, that you won't always feel

that way. And one thing to take away from being here – that I always take away – is that there are people who love you who need you here. And even if you feel like there aren't, you never know who you will meet tomorrow, or next month, or next year. I met my husband six months after my attempt. There are three little boys here today who might not have existed because of how I felt for a short time eight years ago.

There is a book my mother gave me for Christmas a few years ago by [Nancy Tillman](#) called [“You’re Here for a Reason”](#). I’d like to share a passage from that book with you now:

*“You’re here for a reason. If you think you’re not, I would just say that perhaps you forgot – a piece of the world that is precious and dear would surely be missing if you weren’t here. If not for your smile and your laugh and your heart, this place we call home would be minus a part. Thank goodness you’re here! Thank goodness times two!”*

If you are feeling suicidal, please reach out – whether it’s to someone in your life that you are close to, a medical or behavioral provider, or a [hotline](#), warmline or helpline. There are people out there who care. You matter. There are professionals here today who can provide you with resources and phone numbers, or if you don’t have access to those numbers in a crisis or can’t remember, dialing [2-1-1](#) can help connect you to local resources as well. There is a quote I go back time and again when I am feeling low or working with someone who is feeling suicidal. “No feeling is final”. Trust me when I say it’s worth it to see how the future feels.