

Through My Eyes:
My Life With a Mentally Ill Child

By
Sheryl Jensen

My name is Sheryl. I am the mother of a 10 year old child who has Very Early Onset Schizophrenia and is Developmentally Disabled. He has given me permission to tell his story. He wants other children to get help too.

November 23, 2005 was the pinnacle of a long journey into darkness for my son and me...or so I thought. Only days since his last hospitalization we found ourselves again in a psychiatric room in the Emergency Room of our local hospital. My son was almost 9 years old. I slumped to the floor sobbing as I listened to this little, innocent boy begging me to take him home so he wouldn't miss Thanksgiving and turkey and family. He was terrified and I had reached my deepest, darkest place as a parent.....acknowledging that it was no longer safe for me to raise my son.

My son's name is Gabriel. He was born in January, 1997 to a 16-year-old meth addict. I met my son for the first time in October 1997. He was tiny with big brown eyes and a shock of blond hair that stood straight up on the top of his head. He giggled infectiously. By this point in his short life he had experienced a lifetime of pain. He had been seriously neglected, malnourished and allegedly sexually abused and genetically endowed with a long list of mental illnesses. His eyes were distant, he was stiff, unattached and unable to be held or nurtured. He was 8 months old. In June 1999 we finalized our adoption of this beautiful child. By September 1999 our life had drastically changed. Gabriel began spinning out of control...attacking family members, destroying the house, not sleeping. He was becoming more and more unmanageable and I was becoming exhausted. My entire life revolved around him even though I had 4 other children to care for. My life consisted solely of keeping him from having one of his eight to twelve 30-45 minute rages each day.

By the age of 6 ½, Gabriel had exhibited altered voices threatening to kill family members, had attempted to jump from moving cars, and now was experiencing the

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separation of his parents. Only the strongest marriages survive the raising of these children. Mine was not strong enough.

I still get a sick feeling when I recall that day in August 2003. My son had spun so far out of control that I felt endangered. Gabriel was pried from my vehicle by 3 emergency personnel and strapped onto an ambulance gurney. He was transported and admitted for his first stay in the psychiatric unit of our local hospital. I cried all the way to the hospital.

In December 2004, after raging for over an hour, busting holes in his walls with his dresser drawers, drawing pictures of dead people on his walls and writing a "G" in blood on his door, Gabriel was heading back to the hospital. He was admitted to the Psychiatric Unit again. We again left the hospital without any additional supports in place, no references for services and notes stating that if our home life was less chaotic and if his father and I received co-parenting counseling that Gabriel would do much better.

March 2005 brought back to back hospitalizations and multiple emergency room visits. Gabriel entered residential care for the first time. His private insurance dictated his length of stay. At that time I was not willing to "sign my son over" to the state of Oregon to access this service.

October 2005 continued much the same as March with Gabriel being in and out of local hospitals. Our local police department knew him well. Gabriel had become a "runner" and they had had to search for him too many times by now.

So here's where we come back to November 2005. To admit my son this seventh time I had to agree to admit him to residential treatment. I had fought to keep him out of residential until the new Children's Initiative had taken effect. With this new program in place I was still in the driver's seat with my son's care....I was still the Mom. Gabriel was admitted to residential care in December 2005. He spiraled downward....deeper into his mental illness, raging almost non-stop and fighting the secure environment. He acted and felt like a caged animal.

In January while sitting in a room full of medical professionals and Geoff (Developmental Disability worker), I was passed a card by a man sitting on my left....Chris. He was Gabriel's new mental health case manager. A what? I had

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no idea what that meant. What I did know was that I was hearing a very disheartening consensus in this room....my son was not getting better; they had been unable to diagnose him and didn't really know what to do. Chris turned to me at the end of the meeting and assured me that he would be available to guide me through whatever process came next and begin helping me determine what services Gabriel needed.

For two agonizing months my son lived in this facility. We were all scrambling for services. His final day there was bleak and traumatizing. I could not take one more day of watching my son do so poorly. With the blessing of the staff and supervisory personnel, I discharged Gabriel to home.....no services, no plan, seriously unstable. I was petrified!

Chris and Geoff attended multiple meetings at Gabriel's local elementary school. Together we explored all the options available for Gabriel's care and education and my respite. I didn't know how to accept this assistance. I didn't even know how to ask for what I wanted because I honestly did not know what I needed. With the aid and advocacy of Chris supported by the assistance of Geoff we met and fought together as a team. With their help we received in home care, support fighting the school and their plans, respite, a wealth of knowledge and alternative summer care so I could continue to work.

When you live in this world of mental illness and isolation and survival it all becomes your "normal". It's not normal at all. With Chris' help we put together a support plan that covered all the bases....what did we need to maintain Gabriel safely at home, which agency would provide which services and where would the money come from.

How is Gabriel doing now? He is doing better than ever! Gabriel is attending his local elementary school with a highly individualized program and day treatment during the summer. He went to Disneyland, he went camping, he is home with his family and dogs, cats and guinea pig. Gabriel's medications are always going to need work but are affording him an incredible quality of life. The voices are quieter, the attention span is increased and the "tornadoes" in his head have decreased...for now. I want people to understand my son not fear him. Maybe, just maybe, he will become stable for good. Maybe. I know without a doubt that without the support services we would still be in survival mode.

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Future hospitalizations loom and the diagnosis of Very Early Onset Schizophrenia is daunting. We live each day with hope that just for today we can make it through without a rage and a spiral into the dark depths of his affected mind. We hope and strive towards progress and fight regression. We live one day at a time because just when you think everything is going okay....it's not. Just when you think you've got it all figured out....you don't. Each time his eyes glaze over and the rages begin there is a feeling of defeat...the mental illness wins again. IT will not win. I am determined to battle this beast to the bitter end.

This is not the end of our story. We have many more years of on again off again crisis. We will continue to fight for community understanding and services.... And I will continue to love and fight for this beautiful child with all of my might. And because of the changes in children's mental health care, I will not be alone in my fight. Thank you for the work you are doing for my child and others like him.