

## **TKC Client Shares her Powerful Story with Providence Journal: Part 1**

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By The Providence Journal's G. Wayne Miller

Katie Hart, 42, was a respected art teacher when she began to experience symptoms of serious mental illness six years ago. So began a devastating journey through Rhode Island's underfunded and fragmented mental-health system. If not for her mother and daughter, she might not have made it.

Things had become increasingly strange for Katie Hart during the month of October 2009.

Her cellphone was making odd noises and her radio was talking to her, addressing her by a whispered name. A high-pitched sound sometimes pierced her right ear. She heard Italian music and voices in her head. After dreaming her mother was about to die, she rushed to warn her. In another dream, a voice told her she was Jesus.

And now, on Halloween Day, the voices were threatening to kill her. She felt heat and pressure building in her body. Whether the government, the Mafia or something satanic was behind it, she could not determine.

"I thought, 'what if it's some cult or some vampire?'" she says. "It scared the crap out of me." She had never experienced anything like this before.

Katie drove to police headquarters in Warwick, where she lived, and asked to file a report.

Just in case something happens, she said, will you please write this down? Because it's all very real to me.

The officer suggested she visit a hospital for a mental-health evaluation. Katie, a respected art teacher in the Cranston public schools, said she might.

But Katie, 36 at the time, did not. As night fell, she brought her daughter Savannah, who was 11, to a friend's house for trick-or-treating. When they were done, Katie refused to go home: whatever was after her, she believed, was lying in wait.

So she began to pray, at her friend's house, with her daughter, who was crying and frightened — and angry that Katie had thrown away all of her Twilight series vampire books. They prayed until four the next morning, a Sunday, and then they went home.

Jean Hart, her mother, was worried. Katie's mania had come through the phone clearly.

You need a hospital, Jean said.

Katie ignored her. On Monday, she went to her job at Cranston's Oak Lawn Elementary School.

She didn't last the day.

Something's wrong, she told the principal. Will you please take over the class?

Meanwhile, Jean had contacted a psychiatrist friend who worked at Day Kimball Hospital in Putnam, Conn. The friend could admit Katie — and the hospital was far enough from Cranston that word was unlikely to get back to school. Jean, who had volunteered for more than two decades at Kent Hospital's psychiatry unit, understood the price of stigma. She did not want Katie to jeopardize her job over what hopefully was a one-time breakdown.

Two and a half weeks later, Katie was discharged. Her diagnosis: anxiety and bipolar disorder, also known as manic-depressive illness, with psychotic features.

Her journey was just beginning.

During the next four and a half years, Katie would return to teaching, have to quit, find another job to make ends meet, have to quit that job, lose her house, be repeatedly hospitalized and declared medically disabled. She would be treated compassionately by some police officers and neglectfully by others. She would experience the frustrations of Rhode Island's deficient and fragmented mental-health system, which at critical points failed her.

She would be thwarted by insurance companies and by state and federal bureaucracies.

And with the unwavering support of her mother and her daughter, she would show great resilience in the face of a debilitating disease. She would, in her way, triumph.

This is Katie's story.

In its essential aspects, it is the story of thousands of Rhode Islanders from all walks of life — and the story of millions of other people across America.

### Early family life

Jean Sharpe was working the soda fountain in a West Warwick drugstore when Brian W. Hart walked in one day in 1969. Hart had just left the Army after serving in Vietnam. He was 20; Jean was 16. Brian asked her out, but she refused. He's nice but too old, she thought.

But Hart persisted and in 1972, a year after Jean graduated from West Warwick High School, they married. Hart became a West Warwick policeman. In 1973, Kathleen A. Hart, their first child, was born. The next year, Brian E. Hart, their last, came into the world.

Jean worked part time at the drugstore and studied social work at Community College of Rhode Island, until an unusual early case of painful rheumatoid arthritis forced her to stay home, confined to the couch, or sometimes bed. Her husband helped with the children, but he had returned from Vietnam with post traumatic stress disorder, which gave him nightmares and internal anger. He was loving and kind, but did not seek treatment for his PTSD until later in life. He masked his pain with heavy drinking.

Katie was a bright and happy child. She was a good sister to her little brother.

"Brian and I had a wonderful relationship," she says. "We were very, very close."

But Brian was not destined for happiness. He had a temper. He had attention deficit disorder. He was dyslexic. A small boy, he was bullied at school. He was sexually molested by an adult, Jean learned many years later.

On Oct. 21, 1995, Brian drove to a parking lot across from State Police headquarters in Scituate, put a gun to his head, and pulled the trigger.

By then, the Harts had divorced. Katie, 22, an honors graduate of Cranston West High School who had won awards for her art, already had been seeing a therapist for anxiety. Now, something incomprehensible and devastating was locked into her mind.

"Brian's death was the real kicker," she says, tearfully. "That was the most horrific thing we had to experience. It was a shock to the system."

The shock remains, 20 years later.

"It doesn't go away," says Jean. "It's not supposed to happen like that."

Katie was already drinking and Brian's suicide moved her deeper into alcohol, but she kept control of her life. A dean's list student at Rhode Island College, she graduated in 1997 with a degree in art education. She was a shift manager at a McDonald's — latest in a line of jobs she'd held since she was 15 — when she met a man from South Carolina. She moved there with him, taught art in a county school system, and gave birth to Savannah. In 2001, the same year her father died, at 52, the relationship ended. Katie returned with her daughter to Rhode Island and took a job in the Cranston school system.

Things were good, at least on the surface. With her salary of about \$70,000 a year, she bought a house in Warwick. She paid her bills on time and maintained an excellent credit rating. She took pride in her teaching. Schoolchildren liked her and she got results: competing against almost 700 others, one of her Park View Middle School students captured one of the top five prizes in the 2006 Rhode Island Scholastic Art Awards.

But the demands of her job — floating from school to school, the exacting lesson plans, the unruly behaviors of students who were approaching or in puberty — gradually exacted a price.

"It was high stress," Katie says. "I couldn't handle all that chaos."

She kept drinking, apparently masking an underlying illness that by Halloween 2009 no longer could be contained.

Medication or nothing?

After her discharge from Day Kimball Hospital in November 2009, Katie enrolled in an outpatient program at Rhode Island Hospital, where doctors prescribed the anti-psychotic medication Abilify, for bipolar disorder. She completed the program successfully and she was lucky: Abilify seemed to work. Often, people living with mental illness must try two or more

drugs over extended periods before finding one that is effective. Brain chemistry remains a nascent science.

"[Patient] and her attending psychiatrist worked on a medication to suit her illness while she tried to better understand her confused thought, manic experience, and religious experience," the hospital wrote in its discharge notes. "Pt worked hard to differentiate between the psychosis and what she believed to be a blessing by God."

In January 2010, Katie returned to work. She felt better, though not entirely well. Like many people living with mental illness, she did not want to take drugs with potentially serious side effects. She did not like being beholden to chemicals. Believing that spirituality and inner strength were the answers, she went off her meds, even though Abilify had helped her.

"I just wanted to kind of struggle through the struggle," she says, " 'fight the good fight' kind of thing." She wanted to be treated holistically, but the psychiatrists she visited knew little or nothing of such treatments or anyone they could refer Katie to who did.

"It was medication or nothing," Katie says.

Katie began the fall semester, but the voices had returned and she had difficulty concentrating. Her behaviors at home reminded Savannah of Halloween the year before.

"I think I was the one who spotted things were going wrong," Savannah says.

In October, Katie took a leave of absence, but she found no peace. Believing she was being attacked by unknown entities, on Jan. 9, 2011, she drove to State Police headquarters, across from where her brother had ended his life, to report the attacks. An officer called for an ambulance, which brought her to Rhode Island Hospital.

Discharged after a week, she returned to teaching. Almost immediately, she was overwhelmed.

"It was pure torture," Katie says. "I could barely function. I couldn't even create an art lesson."

In August 2011, Katie resigned. Eventually, she would be granted a disability pension of \$820 a month, woefully insufficient for a single mother and daughter.

Katie found temporary work and then, in October 2011, an office job at Mohegan Sun, the Connecticut casino. It only paid \$10.35 an hour — but it was a job in a relatively low-stress environment. For more than two years, her life was in balance. She was not taking medication, but her relative well-being was proof to her that she had no need.

The year 2014, however, began in crisis: Katie had fallen behind on her mortgage, and rent from boarders did not close the gap. She couldn't maintain her house or pay her bills. After selling her house for less than the mortgage balance, she and her daughter moved in April to an apartment near Warwick Veterans Memorial High School, where Savannah was a sophomore.

Katie felt relief — until July, when the voices returned.

"I noticed everything was going wrong," Savannah says. "Mom was having full-blown conversations with somebody that wasn't there. I was like, 'oh my god, please tell me this isn't happening again.' "

It was. Katie allowed Jean to bring her to Rhode Island Hospital on Aug. 10, but she was furious when she was released four days later. She did not believe she had been treated respectfully while she was a patient, and she blamed her mother.

Jean, in turn, was upset that the hospital had discharged her so soon.

"I spoke with the social worker and explained that I was not comfortable with sending Katie home, as she was no better and still psychotic," Jean says. "Her response? 'Let's hope and pray.' Katie remained angry with me as she believed that I had caused the commitment."

As summer turned to fall, Katie's health deteriorated. No one but her mother and daughter seemed to really care. Even their love would be tested as she got sicker.