

TKC Client Shares her Powerful Story with Providence Journal: Part 2

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By The Providence Journal's G. Wayne Miller

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Katie's mother, Jean, kept a journal. In this entry, she expresses frustration with the "system" and its failure to help Katie struggling with mental illness. In a different entry, Jean wrote, "No one came, no one called, no one cared. I sat down with my child and cried. I told her that I would not leave her. I was not going to let her die."

Katie Hart remained furious with her mother after being discharged from Rhode Island Hospital, on Aug. 14, 2014. She resented her for bringing her there. Respecting her wishes, Jean Hart reluctantly left her alone.

Perhaps Katie would find health on her own terms. Perhaps she would remain on medication.

"I got to the point where she had to sink or swim, because there was nothing more I could do," Jean says. "So I backed off for three weeks."

Katie had quit her job at Mohegan Sun in mid-August, and now she was passing days in her apartment, daughter Savannah her only company.

"I was trying to tackle the voices in my head," Katie says. "I didn't understand what was going on, what to do about it."

"She was physically ill," says Jean.

"She pretty much spent the days drinking and reading the Bible," says Savannah.

"I was just in the midst of this crazy situation in my head. The world around me was like a secondary reality."

"You didn't want company," Jean says.

"I didn't have time for company," Katie says; the conversations in her head were exceedingly demanding. It mildly amuses her now, but the voices were debilitating then.

Following a report to the Department of Children, Youth and Families that drew a Warwick Police visit on Sept. 10, Savannah went to live with a relative. After learning Katie was not taking medication, the police persuaded Katie to let them transport her to Kent Hospital. She was evaluated and released with a diagnosis of "psychosis" and instructions to see a psychiatrist.

Now, she was living entirely alone.

Sleepless and worried, Jean began visiting Katie again.

But Jean had lost her patience.

She had wearied of a system that seemed unwilling or unable to successfully treat her daughter — a poorly stitched patchwork quilt of a system composed of too many parts with too little communication, she believed. She believed it was easier for the parts to pass the buck than to really help.

She was frustrated by privacy laws that required her daughter's permission to meaningfully intervene — even when she judged Katie incapable of granting that permission.

She questioned the definition of imminent danger in Rhode Island's Mental Health Law, which allows for involuntary commitment only when there is "an imminent likelihood of serious harm by reason of mental disability" to oneself or others.

She foresaw Katie's life ending in terrible tragedy. She'd already lost a child that way.

"I'm not going to let you die," she told her daughter.

'Do the right thing.'

A thoughtful and humble woman, Jean turned aggressive with providers, officials and the police. She began to meticulously chronicle everything she did, along with the responses of involved parties, in a detailed log. She kept copies of emails she sent and received, and summaries of phone calls that she made. She recorded her feelings and observations in a diary.

An examination of all of these and the records that she and her daughter released to The Journal — along with records The Journal independently obtained — reveals a torturous period from mid-September until now. It suggests that without Jean's advocacy and Savannah's support — and, this year, Katie's newfound strength — Katie today would be homeless, or worse.

Jean opened her campaign in late September, after concluding that her daughter's condition had deteriorated into a "dangerous situation," she wrote in her log.

"I received a call from Kate and she was very out of control," she wrote of the events of Sept. 24. "I called Warwick PD and they transported her to Kent Hospital."

Katie was treated for "alcohol intoxication," according to the hospital record, and released on Sept. 25 with instructions to "follow up" with the Kent Center, which provides community care. "AVOID alcohol, as it makes your condition worse," the hospital wrote.

Unsatisfied, Jean sent an email to Craig Stenning, then director of the state Department of Behavioral Health, Developmental Disabilities and Hospitals. She wrote to certain members of the media, who did nothing, and to advocacy groups, one of which, the Mental Health Association of Rhode Island, gave her the name of a lawyer with BHDDH. Stenning wrote back with word that he had asked staff member Stefanie Coia to help.

Jean spoke with Coia, who promised to intervene.

"There is now a hope that my daughter will not become another homeless mentally ill statistic," Jean wrote to BHDDH's former director. "I can't express enough just how much it means to both me and my granddaughter. You know, Mr. Stenning, I have lived my life with a simple philosophy: 'Do the right thing.' Wouldn't we have a better world if everyone felt the same?"

Coia arranged for Kent Center workers to make a home visit. The workers requested a police escort, but when the police did not show up, according to Jean, they left without seeing Katie.

Repeated hallucinations

October 2014, so reminiscent of Halloween week five years before, passed with Katie drinking heavily. But alcohol did not silence the voices — and it was poisoning her liver.

"Katie was isolated and had little contact with anyone," Jean wrote. "She remained in a state of intoxication and talked to the voices much of the time. She is still angry with me, as I keep trying to get her to a hospital. Her legs are swelling and she is having numbness in her hands and legs. She believes that someone is stabbing her and tells me that she continues to throw up demons.

"The apartment manager has sent letters about the noise coming from her apartment. Kate is yelling and fighting with 'people' in her hallucinations. The police have been called and she is going to lose the apartment ... She does not know what she has done from hour to hour ... Savannah is sad and I want to get her into counseling, also I want her with me as she needs to be where she can be the child that she is."

Katie remembers that her apartment itself had become an enemy.

"Weird things were happening," she says. "The screen door would pop off. There were weird scratches on the screen. It seemed like there was more going on than just me drinking the alcohol to cope with it. I was scared to be there."

'No one cared'

November was worse.

"I went to state police for help, they said there was nothing that they could do and referred me back to Warwick PD," Jean wrote of the events of Nov. 7.

"Kate went to Kent Center appointment," she wrote of Nov. 12. "She has another appointment for next week." Savannah was becoming depressed and Jean made an appointment for her to see a psychiatrist.

"Spent hours with Katie, she is very sad, and much crying," Jean wrote six days later. "She is constantly screaming at the voices and is seeing people in her apartment. She said someone has broken her finger when she was sleeping."

"Picked up Savannah and visited with Katie," Jean wrote about Nov. 21. "Savannah so upset with her mom."

"Crying and yelling," Jean wrote of Nov. 23.

"Katie sleeping on floor," she wrote of Nov. 25. "Ate burger and fries I brought her the previous day, cold."

The next afternoon, Jean went to the Warwick Police and asked an officer to bring Katie to a hospital. He agreed to send an officer to check on her.

"Female is fine," the officer wrote after his visit. "She was sleeping and confirmed that her mother was coming over later to help her pack."

But Katie was anything but fine: When Jean arrived at Katie's apartment, she says, her daughter's eyes and skin were yellow. She was suffering from alcoholic hepatitis, a dangerous inflammation of the liver, a doctor would confirm, which can kill.

Jean called the Kent Center, but was told that if the police had done nothing, there was little more they could do, according to Jean's log.

"No one came, no one called, no one cared," Jean wrote. "I sat down with my child and cried. I told her that I would not leave her. I was not going to let her die."

Jean telephoned a relative who knew someone on the staff of South County Hospital, and she convinced Katie to go there. She was admitted into intensive care. After a week's stay, Katie was discharged with appointments to see a cardiologist, a gastroenterologist and a professional at the Kent Center.

"Please remember that you do not have the luxury of drinking alcohol to quiet your voices," the hospital wrote. "If you start drinking again, you run a very high risk of dying from complete liver failure."

But it would take one more encounter with police and a stay at one of New England's best psychiatric hospitals before Katie would start back toward health.