

ALERT TOP STORY

HEALING CAYUGA

Healing Cayuga: Finding meaning in suffering (a local recovery story)

Ashley Moench Special to The Citizen

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Recovery was not and is not a singular event that happened to me but, in fact, it happened for me. I see recovery as a succession of eye-opening experiences that lead you to become who you actually are.

My formative years were marked by high levels of neuroticism and negative emotion within an environmental context of dysfunction and traumatic events that progressed over time. When I was in fifth grade, I was diagnosed with obsessive compulsive disorder. OCD for me was intrusive thoughts and ritualistic behaviors that I enacted to ensure the thoughts would never come true. Thankfully, I mustered enough courage to tell my mother about these thoughts. I was immediately put into therapy, which has continued to serve me well and provide me with the tools to save my own life. Dr. Path, a Peruvian woman with immense spirit, was the therapist I first encountered. She used exposure therapy to help me stand up and face my fears. Over several weeks, therapy changed my life's trajectory in a very positive way. Medications and therapy would prove to be effective until I turned 15 years old.

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When I was in 10th grade, I stopped taking my medications and entered a world of unknown introversion that manifested fully as an eating disorder. I attempted to fleece my weigh-in with my doctor by replacing the soles of my shoes with taped-together rolls of nickels. During this same time, I was abused by a trusted adult whom I confided in about the eating disorder because I was scared I was going to die. I was sent to a mental institution during my senior year of high school. Weighing 90 pounds, I was filled with malevolence in the face of suffering and how it was encountered. It was clear this was society's best response to my presenting problems at the time.

At 18 years old, I discovered that cocaine seemed to be bulimia's natural antidote because I was no longer hungry, focused on food or body image at all. I thought cocaine made everything better, but I found out by 22 that there was a better option: heroin. I felt that heroin was even more powerful than cocaine in numbing my pain and problems, until it wasn't anymore. I was sick and using heroin to merely survive to avoid withdrawal. Just above death, I existed in this condition of seeking and using for two years. During this time, I believe there were maybe three days I went without using. Those three days were a nightmare for me and anyone around me.

My first rehab experience was magical, but my second episode was marked with guilt thickened by shame. I lasted 24 hours before taking off. It wouldn't be long after this that I started realizing there was no running from myself. Addicted to heroin, and rehab not working, I considered suicide. I considered suicide to the point where I was spending time on the ledge that I was working up the courage to jump from.

At this time, I was told that I could go to New York City and receive methadone that day. On Jan. 12, 2009, I left home on faith in order to not leap to my death. I arrived in New York City with a backpack, a winter coat and \$40. I went directly to a clinic on the corner of Spring and Lafayette streets and was admitted into their opiate treatment program. I also became officially homeless. While in New York City, my father became sick. I knew I had to go home but to do so, I would be without methadone. After nine months of living on the streets to receive treatment I needed to save my life, I returned home on Oct. 6, 2009. What followed was a lot of pain — pain that I was finally ready to face. My saving grace was found in the many actions of others. One of many impactful actions by others I encountered happened when a former using associate reached out to me to ask if I would go to a meeting. For three months straight I went, listened and learned from the collective consciousness of those already in recovery. Humility goes a long way to reign in self-will run riot.



Ashley Moench

Not knowing what I was going to do, but knowing that I needed something productive to put my mind to or else, I enrolled on the last day of registration for the spring semester at Onondaga Community College. Education has always been important, and miraculously, I somehow managed to amass one semester shy of my undergraduate degree by taking classes at OCC. It was time to finish my undergraduate degree. Like therapy and methadone, college saved my life. Earning A's far outweighed developing abscesses, and my process toward empowerment began. In 2011, I received my Credentialed Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Counselor accreditation and started working in my current field. I found that the more responsibility I took on, the better my life and the lives of those around me became. Soon, I saw that this responsibility had limitless potential to help bring about resolve to what I understand as macro suffering.

I got married and purchased a home my father had started construction on, and I am still working to finish it. If you want to find some real meaning in life, build a home. On June 23, 2016, I gave birth to twins. From no kids to two children, I went from being at the pinnacle of my health before childbirth into another cycle of suffering — peripartum cardiomyopathy (pregnancy-induced heart failure). This was not in my plans, and invariably had negative impacts on my mental health and my marriage. My children went home while I stayed for two months, not knowing if I was ever going to leave. My heart was functioning at 20% of the normal rate, I had three types of arrhythmias and a leaky mitral valve. I was on 13 different medications and wearing an external defibrillator as I awaited surgery. My heart's electricity was repaired, then I was discharged with the external defibrillator and a slew of restrictions. Once home, I discovered the reality of post-partum depression. I was grateful to be alive but I was angry at the world. I couldn't care for my newborns in the way I wanted to. It took six

months of intense outpatient medical care and therapy to regain my physical and mental strength, and it also took six months to realize the far-reaching consequences beyond my control for what was to come.

In March of 2019, my marriage ended and the reality of single motherhood unfolded. 2019 prepared me for what 2020 was to bring, and this is no understatement. By the time the COVID-19 pandemic hit, there wasn't anything that could deviate me from my path. No amount of life suffering could prevent me from moving forward because I had found my purpose. My best life advice to anyone is to clearly define your aim, discover a mission that aligns with your values, and then work toward achieving longevity — because you will learn so much. Through this commitment, I was gifted the experience to manage programs and interface with community agencies and state government agencies/officials, all while developing my own influential voice and becoming a true activist. Recollections of recovery all have a similar likeness or pattern about them, and mine have become very clear. No matter how far down I fall, I always rally with the challenges and always rise above where I was before — and so can you.

Healing Cayuga, formerly the HEALing Communities Study, is a Cayuga County program dedicated to combating opioid and other substance use disorders through evidence-based practices. If you are interested in learning more, or getting involved, call (315) 253-1522 or email msalvage@cayugacounty.us.