

Reclaiming life

By Peter von Stackelberg

For those with a mental illness, hope is more than a platitude—it is a survival strategy. For Monica von Stackelberg, hope was a critical part of recovering from an illness that took everything from her: schizoaffective disorder with bipolar tendencies.

In the early 2000s, Monica had a thriving business and growing reputation as a skilled and creative photographer. A young daughter and a stable, long-term relationship were a source of joy in her personal life.

Beneath the surface, however, her illness was becoming increasingly severe. There were weeks when she would withdraw from the world. After each episode she would emerge with a burst of energy and creativity that helped her pick up with her personal and professional life.

Although family members expressed concern, Monica insisted that everything was fine, that the periods of isolation were just time needed to recharge her creative energy, or she simply needed a break.

“But after a while I just couldn’t keep it together anymore,” Monica says. “Every time I had an episode, rebuilding my life, having to start over again became more and more exhausting.”

As her illness deepened, running a business became impossible. “On more than one occasion I would be in the hospital when I was supposed to be doing a wedding,” she says. “One time I got a pass, but shooting the wedding didn’t go so well. The subjects would change into wicked, grotesque beings. They would change right before my eyes. It took everything I could do just to hold my composure.

“Eventually it would become too much,” she says. “I would snap and [end] up in the psych ward again. I was admitted so many times. I lost count at 20.”

Lapses in judgment and violent outbursts during psychotic episodes became a threat to her family. As the illness progressed, her world disintegrated.

“I lost custody of my daughter, suffered the heartache of lost relationships. I’ve been barred from coffee shops

and pubs because of my psychosis. I’ve been homeless, beaten up on the street. I’ve been escorted to the hospital by the police, I’ve been arrested, and I’ve had to...face a judge.”

But a spark of hope remained, and with willpower combined with family support, court-ordered supervision, and long-term psychiatric treatment, Monica began to recover.

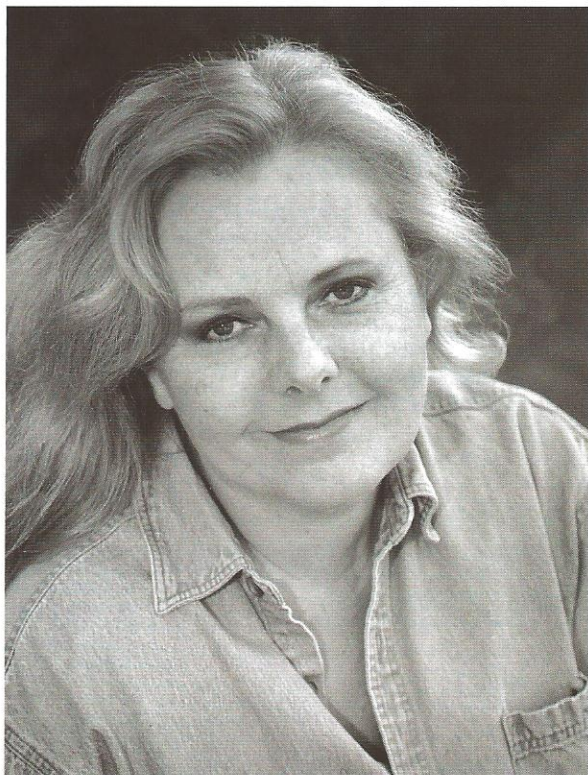
“Now I’m on an even keel,” she says. “I’m stable because of my medication. I have a loving and supportive family. I’m on medical disability so I don’t have the stress of holding down a full-time job right now.

“I want to get off disability,” she adds. “I have a counselor...who is great. She’s helping me regain my self-confidence and I’m able to focus on what I can do, not what I can’t.”

Monica is also rebuilding her personal life.

“I got joint custody of my daughter last year,” Monica says. “I still have occasional panic attacks—sometimes the stress gets to me—but I have a great support team. I know if I get sick again, it will pass.

“What’s important now is that I have so much of my life back. I can actually see a bright future.” ★



Monica von Stackelberg

Photo: Monica von Stackelberg

Monica's tips:

- Maintain healthy relationships and get out of those that are unhealthy.
- Do something creative. When she is creating something, Monica says she feels much better.
- Exercise. Being physically active has positive benefits for both the body and the mind.
- Volunteer. It helps you build and maintain productive relationships and keeps you from sinking into isolation.
- Develop a good support team. A support team of family, friends, caseworkers, mental health professionals, and others can alert you to the signs of a downturn before you experience a full-blown episode.