

Coming back from the brink

By Tracey Duguay - Peace Arch News - April 12, 2008



Debbie Sesula treasures time with Cashmere, one of her two feline roommates.

Brian Giebelhaus photos

Undertones of clinical detachment filter through Debbie Sesula's voice.

She narrates a tale told often.

It's a story of madness, self-mutilation and attempted suicide. It's also a voyage of discovery, recovery and ascent from despair.

It's her life; she can tell it how she wants.

ON A QUIET day, in the middle of the afternoon, the 27-year-old university student leans over the sink in the bathroom, a razor blade in her hand. As she slices through the flesh on her wrists, she's wary about spilling her blood on the floor.

"I remember thinking, I have to be careful and not make a mess," Sesula recalls, a single conscious thought isolated in the chaos of a confused mind.

Mired in feelings of despair and hopelessness, her self-worth takes another hit. The cuts aren't deep enough. She's failed. The pain will continue.

Wrapping her mutilated wrists to stop the bleeding, she gives up.

She won't die today but it won't stop her from trying again. And again.

MORE THAN 20 years have passed since Sesula's first suicide attempt. She doesn't remember exactly what set her off, just a vague recollection it had something to do with an essay she wrote for a psychology class.

Sesula did well on the essay. She received a good grade. It wasn't a big deal. But whatever the cause, Sesula's state of mind made her question whether life was worth living or if she was worthy of living life.

"I had really deep self-hatred for myself at the time. The slashing of my wrists, for me, was a form of taking that anger out on myself. It was not only a hope to die, but it was also a desire to say, 'I don't like you.'"

For the 48-year-old survivor, those troubled times are a distant memory.

Next month, Sesula will receive the 2008 Courage to Come Back Award in the Mental Health category. The awards, presented each year by the Coast Mental Health Foundation, recognize individuals for “the courage they have demonstrated in overcoming or recovering from illness, injury or adversity, and for inspiring others to do the same.”

SITTING AT the kitchen table of her White Rock apartment, surrounded by cherished books, knick-knacks and a fridge covered with magnet-shaped memories, Sesula has made peace with her past.

She shares her home with Sapphire and Cashmere, her four-legged companions. Like any good hosts, Sesula’s feline friends saunter to the door to introduce themselves when company arrives. They seem to understand their status in her life.

Living alone – or taking care of pets – wasn’t an option for Sesula during her dark days. She couldn’t even take care of herself.

“Things we take for granted, like showering or brushing our teeth, became a major effort,” she explains.

LIKE MOST STUDENTS, her third year at university was full of lectures, research and essay writing. After years of toil, her bachelor of arts degree in psychology was within reach. But something wasn’t right.

“It was interesting because even though I took abnormal psych in university, I didn’t put two and two together and think ‘hey, this could be a mental illness’,” Sesula says.

Her friends noticed when the outgoing and friendly woman became withdrawn and isolated. A deeply ingrained feeling of worthlessness shadowed her daily.

Chalking it up to burnout, she took a year-long sabbatical in Europe, but it didn’t help; the depression travelled with her.

Working at a gas station upon her return, Sesula’s heart started pounding, she broke out in sweat, her limbs trembling uncontrollably. Heart attack was her first thought, panic attack was the diagnosis.

Struggling through her studies, she managed to graduate, albeit later than most of her class, but her life was just beginning its spiral out of control.

SESULA WAS put on anti-depressants, to no avail. Her first suicide attempt took place shortly thereafter, followed by a period of hospitalization.

She didn’t understand what was happening and she was powerless to stop it.

She blamed herself.

After being admitted to the hospital the first time, she was given good advice.

“The doctor said to me, ‘this is an illness, it will do you no good to fight it on your own’,” Sesula says. “That comment switched me over from thinking I was burnt out to ‘hey, there is something wrong and I can do something about this’.”

But it would be seven terrifying years of depression, hallucinations, drug cocktails and even electroconvulsive therapy before she gained the coping tools to stabilize her life.

SHE TRIED SUICIDE again, another hospitalization.

Then a third try, this one nearly fatal.

“I couldn’t stop the bleeding.”

A friend brought her to the hospital. Stitches were needed to close the wound.

Long-sleeve shirts to hide her shame became a staple in her wardrobe.

“I remember looking at my scars and I saw them as neon lights. They were so obvious.”

An embellished tale about a childhood injury fended off the questions when people saw her wrists.

“I just used that story all the time. Nobody questioned it.”

ANTI-ANXIETY, anti-depression, anti-psychotic, sleeping pills, side-effect pills... the seemingly endless list of medication wasn't working, or at least not causing profound change.

Ending her life became an obsession. The knives in her apartment were hidden by her roommate. Her grasp on reality continued to slide.

As Sesula walked down the street, she heard cars talking to her: “You must destroy yourself, or we'll destroy you.”

Terrorized, she'd run home to the safety of her apartment. On the television screen, the newscaster, would taunt her with the same message.

“When a person is in a psychosis, it's as real as you and me sitting here talking,” Sesula explains.

There were no patterns to her breaks from reality. She'd slip in and out, moving between sanity and the world inside her broken mind.

LIKE A CHARACTER in a Ken Kesey novel, back to the hospital Sesula flew, a date with Nurse Ratched on the horizon.

“As a last resort, they gave me shock treatment, also known as electroconvulsive therapy.”

During ECT – after a patient is anesthetized and given a muscle relaxant – electrode pads are placed on the head. Electrical currents are sent to the brain, resulting in a non-convulsive seizure.

While still not widely understood by medical professionals, the process is thought to alter brain chemistry, alleviating symptoms for those suffering from severe depression.

Sesula's suicidal thoughts were diminished, but her descent was unabated.

“That did take away the obsession to end my life, but it didn't take away the psychosis, anxiety and depression.”

HER WRIST SLASHING continued. Death wasn't the goal anymore. Cutting became her new obsession, her addiction. A euphoric feeling came over her as the knife carved through her flesh. A release of the pain and fear bubbling inside.

“When I would self-harm, it would give me the sense of taking away the inner pain I was feeling. It was a total scream for help to get rid of the pain but not to the point of dying.”

There wasn't much to look forward to. She lost her identity when she was diagnosed with a mental illness, which only caused her to feel more hopeless and depressed.

“They said to me, ‘You will have this illness forever. You will be on this medication forever. You won't be able to work.’ Those are pretty powerful messages so basically I gave up for quite a few years.”

Sesula tried working but the jobs didn't last long. The result was always the same. Her illness made her paranoid; she thought her co-workers were talking about her.

With the feelings out of control, Sesula would quit.

IN 1993, the fog started to lift. Sesula began an employment program offered through the Whale House, a White Rock-based psychosocial rehabilitation service offered to adults with mental health issues. Learning computer skills and receiving other training was very empowering.

Sesula, with a laugh, talks about the irony of landing a job working as a receptionist for a psychiatrist. She didn't share her health history with her employer. It was a good job though and she stayed there for a while.

Another even more pivotal moment came when she attended a workshop called Understanding Why and How We Behave the Way We Do. Based in the technique of reality therapy, the workshop taught her that all behaviour was purposeful.

"The self-cutting was not a symptom, it was a behaviour, which meant I can do something about it. Getting a handle on that alleviated all the other things I was going through," she says, calling the realization a "light bulb" moment.

Sesula started one-on-one counselling with the workshop leader.

"I made a conscious decision. I don't like what was happening to me. I don't like what this illness is doing to me. I need to self-manage, take control of it, instead of letting it control me. I didn't know if it would work. It was a major effort that I was willing to put forth."

FROM THAT POINT on, Sesula started "climbing, climbing, climbing." Her ascent from despair and desperation to health and happiness took many years, but the work was worth it. She is the co-ordinator of the peer support programs at Vancouver Community Mental Health Services and Fraser South Health; provincial co-ordinator of BRIDGES support and education program through the BC Schizophrenia Society; a Wellness Recovery Action Plan (WRAP) recovery-oriented program facilitator; and she teaches Consumers in Action, a leadership training program. Sesula was also recently accepted into the Masters in Leadership program at Royal Roads University.

WHILE SOCIETY has come a long way in dealing with issues of mental health, she says, there is still much work to be done.

"Mental health illness is much more in the forefront than it was 20 years ago, 10 years ago even, but the stigma is still there, we still don't understand mental illness."

In an ideal world, mental health illness would be treated with the same compassion and dignity as those suffering from cancer or broken bones.

"It would be nice to see mental illness in the same light as cancer. If I share with you I have cancer, you'd think nothing of it – well, you'd be sad – but if I say to you I have a mental illness, you'd think that was kinda scary."

For anyone struggling with mental health issues, she offers the following advice:

"There is hope, all you have to do is reach out. Having a support network is really important. Talk to at least one person. Trust them, take them with you, ask for help."

And, "Don't give up, the sky's the limit. When I look at where I was and where I am now, nobody would have thought it possible."

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Surrounded by family and friends, Sesula will receive her award May 8, at a gala dinner at the Hyatt Regency Hotel in Vancouver. Aside from Mental Health category, there are also awards given for Social Adversity, Physical Rehabilitation, Medical, Addiction and Youth.