

To each their own- by Manuel V.

To some it seems like I have lived a very eventful life. Yet to me, this was all just normal. At the age of four I was abandoned by my mother and left in the care of my father. He was a golden gloves champ and an active gang member. He was very social but also very violent. He ruled with a quick fist, not only towards me but to his spouse at the time as well. Learning to be quite and in the shadows was a must. I taught myself to hide my feelings, hide my fears and hide any pain from those closest to me. This became normal. At the age of ten, I found myself roaming the streets of Chicago. I drank beer and smoked marijuana; I have been in countless fights and have been in crowds that have been shot at. I have participated in robbing people and have been a witness to murder.

Around twelve years old we moved to Florida. Florida was a whole other state yet the same old thing kept happening. Fighting, stealing, drinking and even more sadness. I spent most of my time in Florida inside juvenile facilities and prison. These places fueled my hunger to learn new things. They also intensified my anger and my aggressiveness. My continued failed attempts at self-satisfaction brought my feelings of self-worth lower and lower. I found solace in myself connected to one person who I felt I meant something to. For that person, I worked hard and got myself out of prison and right onto a greyhound bus headed for Vermont. I had plans of starting over in Vermont and leave the troubles behind. Yet my very first day here, I was faced with the same old disappointment and sadness. She told me that she no longer loved me and

couldn't believe I traveled all this way. Hearing that from someone you loved for seven years was numbing. That was a tipping point for me. I fell into a deep hole of depression. I started drinking every day and quickly found myself homeless. I hated myself every second.

Once again, I found myself in a holding cell. All I could think was "Why"? "Why can't I stop drinking"? "Why can't I be happy"? "Why am I here again"? This was the day I decided to get help for my alcoholism. That was the start of a four year stint of sobriety. Within those years I got a job that I quickly excelled in. I got a place with my girlfriend. Most importantly I started a family with her, I was now a father. Everything was going great. Everything except my deep seeded depression, my feelings of worthlessness, my stress, my sleeplessness and my anxiety. To me, this was normal but it was eating me up inside. My state of mind got so bad that I started drinking again just to numb the pain. I ended up losing my job. I wouldn't go home because I didn't want to have my family see me like that and put them in a harmful situation. I was arguing with my girlfriend a lot, to the point where it would get out of hand and I would get arrested. As I was going through the traditional court system I unfortunately knew all too much about, I was offered a way to get some help. Taking that offer is why I'm here before you today. In order to be accepted into this treatment program, I had to commit to go to rehab. I also had to see a therapist to be evaluated. While completing these steps I was told some surprising things I never knew about myself. I was told I have complex PTSD and severe depression. Also, that the things I thought were

normal, were actually far from it. I completed rehab and was accepted into the Mental Health Treatment Court program not long after.

This program allowed me the opportunity to focus on myself and my deep seeded issues. I was encouraged to see my worth and help myself, with the help of a few people of course. This program gave me the tools and constant encouragement to be a better, healthier person, not just for me but for my family too. All that was needed of me by my commitment to change and to have an open mind. Because of my time in this program I came to a revelation. I was never in a hole that was too big to climb out of. I just had my eyes closed to the possibility of change. The possibility of not being hurt for how I felt, the possibility of being happy, and the possibility of being worthy of being loved.

I owe a lot to the mental health treatment court and the connections I have made to supports in my community in Vermont. This connection to community has helped me in so many ways. Because of this support my normal is no longer what it used to be. My normal now is dad, at home with my kids. My normal now is friend, who is there for someone when they may be struggling. My normal now is looking forward and not backwards. My past is not my future. My eyes are open to the possibilities of what may await me. It's not nearly as dark as it once used to be.