

Stories of Recovery in LA County: Selma McPherson-Harvey

My name is Selma McPherson-Harvey. My parents were great examples of non-prejudice, democracy, human rights and most of all, education and creativity. From Prohibition to civil rights and transitioning to the 20th century, alcohol was a way of life, a way to survive and cope with the distractions of their time. Among the many life events of the 21st century, my mother lived long enough to see Barack Obama become president which made her cry.



I was educated and bright but something was missing. I drank to be a part of Studio 54 in New York City. I used substances because I wanted to and then I could not stop because the substances and the emotional torment had me so out of touch with reality I had to use more substance to live.

In 1984, in New York I was institutionalized for substance use. I was also diagnosed and treated for manic depression or Bipolar Disorder. No one had put the concept of co-occurring disorder together because these illnesses were treated separately. In 1994, after being clean and sober for 10 years, I discontinued my psych meds due to peer pressure. Some of my 'purist' peers believed sobriety meant not using psychotropic medication. So I stopped my meds and focused on exercise and my career as an actress. This could have been deadly to a dual diagnosed (COD) individual like me. My mania was ignited for years.

By 1996, I moved to California to become a movie star. Still being clean and sober, I worked with the best in Hollywood, but realized I was not connected and may not ever be. I walked away from Hollywood. I have Bachelor of Science Degree in Sociology and a year in graduate school; however, I walked away and changed careers. My stepfather transitioned in 2001. My mother got ill in 2004. In 2005, my second marriage was done. At the time, I was a Health and Fitness Competitor for some of the best companies. Again, nothing was working in my life and so I walked away from another career.

In 2008, I worked in a treatment facility to give back to those who needed help with substance abuse. It was frustrating because I felt the facilities of Celebrity recovery were enabling the client. The client manipulated and dictated how they wanted their recovery treatment to go. So I worked as an independent personal trainer. I took a few classes at Valley College to stay occupied but nothing was changing, I was still feeling low. I had no direction and being so unbalanced I knew something was wrong but could not put my finger on it. I found myself in and out of unrealistic, unavailable relationships that always ended in deeper depression and heartache. **But I did not use any substances.**

I lost my mother on December 3, 2008, four days before her 76th birthday. For all the years she was there to take care of me, I could not save her. I had the support of extraordinary women to reassure me that I would be fine and my mother was in a better place, but at that point my heart changed and I did not want to be alive.

I have a beautiful Maltese, named Ventura, who has helped stabilized me for so many years. I had to take care of her because she needed me, but by October 29, 2010, I really wanted to check out. I had been through crazy boyfriends, death, and no concrete employment. On that day I left my home feeling death on my shoulders. I drove myself to Olive View Hospital. I told them about my depression. **When we ask for help we do get it.** I stayed at the facility for 48 hours and with their help, I finally realized I did want to live.

When I left Olive View that Halloween Day, I vowed that I would find a way to give back. I would educate anyone and everyone. Having two illnesses, such as substance use and mental health issues, does not result in a horrible end to your life. It can be stabilized. In December 2010, with my 12 step knowledge and 25 years of recovery, I began my new journey of life. I built back my self esteem. I entered the COD Peer Advocate training program through SAPC. Dr. Whiten and Dr. Bradley were my driving force and helped me to move forward. I met other mentors along the way who inspired me to keep moving forward and not to stop until my work is done.

It was not easy. Unemployment was running out and I had no medical insurance assistance for my mental health illness. I went on-line everyday to apply for jobs, applying for everything from gardener to janitor. **I remained clean, sober and stable** with my medications. I got stronger in the belief of myself. I went to school and I did my internship, eight-hours a day, everyday for 15 weeks, and **I never gave up.**

After graduating my COD course, I was offered a position as a Medical Caseworker. I am finally able to give back. **I thank all of you for helping me accomplish my goals: my mentors, the doctors, HR at DMH, and the SAPC Health Care Reform Committee.** Now, I am recently married to my biggest fan and I am happy with my ability to give back to the people ("the tribe; the consumers"), in the Mental Health Community. I am truly grateful to Olive View for the help they gave me that dark day in October. Without it I would not be where I am now, just one year later, writing this article for you. My wish is to continue to learn, be educated and carry my knowledge to all mankind. It's an honor to be able to tell my story with the hope that it will inspire and challenge everyone to look inside themselves and find the gifts that they have to give to society.

Selma McPherson-Harvey