No Stigma Nevada

By Kim Palchikoff

To many people, turning 50 is a big milestone. Mine was bittersweet.  My life hasn’t gone as planned. I’m bipolar. Talk about an adventure in mental illness.

I grew up with plans to attend UCLA, become a high school social studies teacher, and teach inner city kids in San Francisco.  I loved to write, and hoped to produce a best-selling novel.

None of that materialized.

I didn’t get into UCLA and ended up teaching English in the former Soviet Union instead of the Bay Area. Influenced by my Russian step-father, I was passionate about Gorby’s Russia.  That gig was supposed to last one-year.

But when the Soviet Union unexpectedly fell apart, I quit teaching and was hired at the Moscow bureau of NBC. I stayed behind the Iron Curtain for 10 years, ultimately writing features for Newsweek.

I also fell in love with the Moscow Circus, which happened to be based just blocks from my apartment. After work I’d meet performers backstage during their evening show and over time, the acrobats, magicians and trapeze artists became my best friends.  I spent all my free time in their company, watching dancing bears and prancing horses in a red ring and had more fun than I ever imagined. I threw a gigantic, annual birthday bash for myself every year and they all showed up.

I didn’t share with them that I battled bipolar disorder, a mental illness that affects the part of the brain that controls emotions. Without understanding why, I was constantly switching moods, filled with highs and lows. At times I was like a Shakespearean play – filled with a high strung rainbow of emotions – love, hate, passion, jealousy, you name it.  In public, no matter how I truly felt, I tried to put on a happy face or tell jokes. It didn’t always work, and my new friends caught on. It’s hard to hide mental illness from your closest friends and family. They may not understand it, but they know something is off.  I was lucky. My circus friends never failed to cheer me up with their zany humor and outlandish tricks. They, too, as world class entertainers, could be moody. We understood each other.

Fast forward 25 years. I still live with bipolar disorder, though I know now what it entails, and am coping much better. I went from living in the Russian capital with its bitter winters, 15 million residents and endless vodka parties to Reno, a city known for its easy access to Lake Tahoe and beautiful mountainous scenery. My life is completely different from my Moscow experience, and in many ways it’s much calmer. My medications manage my moods quite well, and the serenity of a smaller-sized city quiets my mind.

And I’m still writing, but this time about myself, because experience has told me that sharing my story has helped readers who also are bipolar or who have loved ones or acquaintances with a mental illness.   And one emotion they commonly experience is feeling stigmatized. “Bipolar” is, to many people, a scary word. I’m trying to remove that stigma.

I’m calling my campaign, and my column, “No Stigma Nevada.”  I’m grateful for the support of the Nevada Arts Council and the Nevada Press Association~~.~~ I will offer my insights — personal and possibly humorous. I want to start a real discussion about mental health, something we as a state seem to have dodged despite having some of the highest suicide rates among all ages in America. In my columns I will be turning to experts in mental health for their thoughts. It’s time we stop whispering about mental illness. It’s time to confront it.

Recently I celebrated my 50th birthday. Dozens of circus performers from around the world wished me well on Facebook. They still remember me and I’m thrilled. At home I surrounded myself with a few close friends, and we had a good time and good conversations. That’s what I want to invite here. I’ll be honest in my column, sharing my life, and I hope to trigger discussions in your own life. Join me in my No Stigma Nevada Facebook campaign and share your own story.

It’s time to erase the stigma of mental illness.

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