

Nominating yourself for an award is sort of an arrogant thing to do. I normally would not do this or even ask someone to do this for me. But if my experience with mental health has showed me anything it is that awareness is a critical factor. If winning this honor can familiarize people with my story, allow me to learn from other people's stories and activism, and offer me more knowledge to continue my work in this field, then nominating myself for the mPower Award is something I am more than willing to do.

My name is Ingrid Vasquez and I am currently a 23-year-old freelance writer based out of Brownsville, Texas. I guess the past two years have brought mental health more into the forefront.

After being diagnosed with depression in the Fall of 2011 attending weekly therapy sessions, monthly group therapy meetings, and weekly yoga and meditation workshops, seeking help for my mental health did not seem like anything out of the ordinary. It was my first time familiarizing myself with my mental health, but somehow I had no stigma attached.

However, I never shared the what I was doing with my friends. It was my freshman year in college. Lies allowed no one to know my struggle with mental health. While my treatment lasted about two years, no one really knew the full story till my last semester in college (Spring 2015).

And that was for many reasons. My struggle with depression never allowed me to fully have a real college experience. I had no reason to lie to the few friends I had. I ultimately ended up preventing more friendships from occurring due to the lack of confidence and understanding of my own skin. It's something I try not to think about too often, but the lack of self esteem has been a cause of my relapses with depression. In an effort to fully be ok with my struggles, I began sharing them through my writing. As one of the shyest people out there, my words are my escape. And as you will see in the additional materials for this statement, my words have ultimately allowed me to fight the stigma.

Let me take you back to my college days, though. While I never shared my struggle with depression, I did make an effort to educate myself outside of therapy. I slowly began to plant the seeds of my "coming out party" as a member of the Texas chapter of To Write Love on Her Arms (TWLOHA) at the University of Texas at Austin. I also took part in an advising committee

at the UT Counseling and Mental Health Center where I received therapy. I have also taken part in smaller projects such as the People of Color & Mental Illness Photo Project and sharing my story through the Dell Scholars Program assisting other scholarship recipients. In the Spring of 2014 I even served as a Communications and PR Intern at Mental Health America of Texas. Addressing mental health in my community was the first steps I needed to be able to accept a life with a mental health illness and ultimately use my story to help others as well.

I feel like I am vulnerable because my experience has allowed me to be comfortable in my own skin. It has not taken away my struggles though. That is something I learned within these past two years after graduating with my journalism degree (bachelor's).

After moving to New York to pursue a career in entertainment journalism, I lost a freelance job and fell victim to a housing scam. Having funded my decisions on my own since entering college, I had money saved up, but it was not enough to stay in New York without a job. I was not finding a full time job quick enough. A nagging health problem I had also began to be a bigger issue. I had to move back in with my parents.

In the process I learned that I had a tumor. However, since I have no health insurance, it took a while to be able to visit with doctors. And in having a problem that was nagging for years, I kept being met with doctors that told me "everything was in my head." None of them knew about my background with mental health.

Once I finally was able to find a charity to help with some of the finances, the ball started moving on trying to find an answer. Through this process I was unemployed and stuck having to put my health at the forefront being assisted by a program that could only assist me if I had very little to no income. I had to make that decision for my health. In January 2017 I finally I had my tumor (and two others that were found during surgery) removed. While I was misdiagnosed with Lymphoma, everything turned out to be benign. About a month afterwards, I lost my father without no foreshadowing experience. He suffered a heart attack in his vehicle after being missing for about 12 hours.

I mention all of this because my last two years have showed me the importance of mental health. I keep being met with comments and admiration for the strength I have had, but between

you and me, it has not been easy at all. I have struggled to not fall back to my darker days. Having lost my dream, lost most of my money, my life that I knew, and my father, is something I have tried to put into words but cannot. Now that it is just my mother and I living alone, I have become the parent, as my mother is five time cancer survivor and has her own mental health struggles. I have no choice other than being strong.

I took a break from writing. I am slowly starting getting back to it. And while depression and now anxiety are two things I battle with every day, my advocacy work is something I am incredibly passionate in continuing to work on. I have a personal blog I am building up and am writing about mental health again. I keep trying to find ways I can put my experience and knowledge to good use. Just yesterday I spoke with a sergeant from my local sheriff's office in regarding to questions about my father's case. He mentioned that I inspired him to talk to his men about sensitivity and caring for the mental health of people they serve.

No matter what direction my career takes, I have multiple goals. The writing thing is not the end all for me. Winning this award will reinforce that I can make a difference in mental health.

Thank you for your consideration.