

My name is Kelly Showard. I am the director of community relations for Erie County Medical Center in Buffalo, New York. The only level 1 trauma center in Western New York. My job is to represent the hospital and develop community based initiatives to increase the health of community. In public relations, image is everything. I am acutely aware that I represent the hospital no matter where I am.

I am also survivor of childhood sexual abuse, sexual assault, chronic depression, generalized anxiety, and and a woman of color that uses my experiences to let others know that they too can make it. This is my story.

On September 4, 2013 I woke up. Not from a tragic accident or illness but from self inflicted damage. The day before I tried to kill myself. It was the only way I knew to end the suffering. It was the only way I knew to end the pain I was causing those around me. It was the only way I knew how to be free.

In the moments before I closed my eyes I told God that if He wanted me He would have to keep me because I was done. I had done everything in my power to make sure I'd never breathe another breath. I wasn't thinking about the hurt I would cause my family and friends. That's because in my mind, my death would ultimately bring them peace. The torture I felt I was putting them through would be over. They would come to see that this was for the best.

I woke up in the emergency room of Erie County Medical Center, yes, my current employer, upset at my failure. At least that's what I was told. After the drugs were out of my system and I was able to carry on a conversation with myself (yes, I answer back), I realized I was over it. I was over the hurt, over the pain, over it all. He woke me up (remember what I told Him) and because He did, that meant I had purpose.

I have long suffered from depression, anxiety, panic attacks, and a mood thing that some professionals call bipolar and others just call a disorder. I have been on a host of various antidepressants I'm not quite sure work. I'm not quite sure they don't work either so I tend to err on the side of caution and carry half a drug store in my purse.

It all began with a diagnosis of postpartum depression that likely stems back to the sexual abuse I endured as a child or some other life situation. It could be because some gene didn't like another one and I was predisposed. Or as research currently suggests, it could be the gluten in my diet...always the gluten. All I know is it's here and like an alcoholic, no matter how good I feel I will always carry this disease with me.

There have been some major changes since my suicide attempt. Things that probably needed to happen. My marriage ended, I lost my job, gained a safety net (rather, I recognized the net that was already there), and I started living and receiving in hope. I spent two weeks in inpatient care. It allowed me time to finally address my needs and to begin my healing journey. To continue to heal and to answer the call I was purposed to answer.

Despite what's comfortable, despite what makes sense, I've dedicated my life to raising awareness of mental illness. To combating the stigmas propagated by culture and religion so that people are comfortable asking questions and seeking help. I have chosen to live my life in the open. Sharing my ups and downs, highs and lows, and lefts and rights has allowed others to realize they are not alone, that the struggle is indeed real and they too can make it through.

I'd like to say I share my story without fear but that's not true. I accept the risk of being open about my journey because I know someone needs to hear it. Someone needs to know they are not alone. Someone needs to hear that there is hope. Someone needs to see that the face of mental illness is the face of their loved one, friend, neighbor or colleague.

In addition to workshops and speaking engagements I have developed the following programs to break barriers and raise awareness:

#### Front Seat Chronicles: The Hope Movement

A social media initiative created to instill hope through selfies and stories of success in the face of life's challenges. "Front Seat Drivers" including myself, have shared their stories on my website. Drivers include an on-air TV personality, a Bishop's wife and "first lady", artists, a personal trainer and a life coach.

<http://buffalonews.com/2016/04/16/buffalo-womans-website-helps-others-share-lifes-challenges/>

#### The Color of Crazy

A five member panel of mental health and substance abuse advocates that share their stories with the attendees and offer a "no question is off limits" Q&A session. The panelists don't use their names but are addressed by the color of their choosing in homage to Ntozake Shange's choreopoem For Colored Girls who Considered Suicide/ When the Rainbow is enuf. The program is held at community centers and churches to reach the people that need it the most. The panels have been attended by community members, faith leaders and city and county politicians. It was selected by Power 96.5 as a center stage presentation for the station's 2017 Health and Wellness Expo with national radio personality Tom Joyner.

### Destination Relaxation

A half day event where participants explore methods of stress management and relaxation as a way to open the dialog about mental health and selfcare. This program was birthed from my desire to share my journey of recovery with others. Subject matter experts present on various topics and their relation to mental health. Topics include intentional journaling, gardening, yoga, nutrition. Admission also includes one-on-one sessions with a dietitian, personal trainer and massage therapist for chair massages.