

Fighting in the Open: I am nominating myself for the Clifford Beers Award as a consumer of mental health services for over a decade, two-time MHA Conference presenter, and survivor who continues to make major contributions to improve the lives of others struggling with mental illness, chronic health issues, and co-occurring disorders. I am a PTSD peer-to-peer specialist, artist, author, educator, writer for The Huffington Post, health advocate, member of RAINN Speaker Bureau, TEDx Speaker (amyoes.com/tedx), actress, and playwright. I'm also a survivor and "thrivor" of sexual abuse, 27 surgeries, coma, organ failure, six years being unable to eat or drink, and the PTSD that comes from ten years of trauma – or what I like to call my “beautiful detour,” which is also the title of my upcoming book. It's a memoir/self-help and choose-your-own adventure novel, because that is what recovery has been for me – a call to adventure I had to choose to answer. Now, I'm passionate empowering others to do the same - “fighting in the open” through sharing my own personal experiences, providing the public with a comprehensive overview of the psychological and physical impact of trauma, as well as the tremendous growth that can be achieved on the other side. I fight stigma through stories. We all have a story that needs to be shared.

I have been told how rare it is for a survivor to speak so openly and honestly about their personal traumas, paint such a vivid picture of positivity on the other side of recovery, and also provide such practical, accessible tools which encourage others to do the same. What draws both survivors and their advocates to my story and work is that although what I have undergone may seem “extreme” or “unique,” the heart of my advocacy emphasizes the universality of our collective struggles. My goal is to show that we should find our uniqueness not in what has happened to us, which can further victimize, but rather, in what we choose to do with it. We are deserving of feeling any negative, painful, or stigmatized emotion that accompanies our trauma – we just need to find the safe container in which to do so. I've provided this container for individuals in over 300 facilities since 2012.

Detours: My first TEDx Talk discussed being a “Detourist.” We all have detours in life. This doesn't minimize what we've been through, but rather, draws a commonality to our struggles, so we heal through empathy and compassion. My TEDx Talk currently has nearly 8,000 views, and my Detour movement has an international following. I am passionate about getting this message out to the larger community on a global scale. To encourage others to thrive through their detours, I created the #LoveMyDetour campaign, to help others cope in the face of unexpected events. To creatively engage student advocacy efforts, I developed a trauma-informed program combining mental health education, sexual assault prevention, and Broadway Theatre for college campuses, organizations and conferences. I designed a creative curriculum for “Detourist Resiliency,” an outreach program taken to schools, hospitals and at-risk youth. I launched Detourist peer-led chapters on college campuses, Detourist creative arts workshops, and an online community to creatively fight stigma in society through storytelling. My detour movement was first inspired by the feeling that I didn't belong in any category. I was uncomfortable fighting in the open, because I didn't know who I was “fighting” for. When I went to speak at medical organizations, I was discouraged to speak about the psychological aftermath of sexual assault. When I shared my story with sexual assault centers, they discouraged to share the medical details. Yet, if I wasn't in the open about my own story, how would I ever find healing? Trauma typically does *not* fall into a clean category. What would I do to reach out to others, like me, who were struggling with multiple conditions, and didn't know which community to turn to? Furthermore, once doctors finally reconnected my insides after 27 surgeries, many in the clinical community didn't understand why it was taking so long for me to make the “emotional repairs.” I was a mental health misfit. And I had already learned that keeping secrets for too long can physically make you sick.

Writing: My strong ability to educate the public on recovery is conveyed on a local, statewide, and international level. Advocacy is a vital means of raising awareness and ensuring mental health is on our national agenda. I've headlined international conferences on women's leadership, entrepreneurship, mental health, disability, creativity, art therapy, and domestic violence prevention. I'm a regular mental health contributor for over 70 notable online and print publications, and my story has appeared on NBC's TODAY, CBS, Cosmopolitan, Washington Post, Good Housekeeping, MSNBC, among others, am a “Top Mental Health Writer” for Medium, a WEGO Health Activist Hero and WEGO Health Expert. I have written over 30 articles for Huffington Post alone on PTSD and received hundreds of letters from individuals who were unaware that PTSD could affect others outside of military populations. After my article, “It's OK to Freeze” many survivors of assault thanked me for finally connecting the dots for them, and eliminating the sense of undeserved shame they felt. My article, “To the Usher Who Called Me the Sick Girl” was shared virally as a call to action for how theatre manages visible and hidden disabilities.

Military and Police: A passionate social justice advocate, I transformed my one-woman musical into a mental health education and sexual assault prevention program for traumatized communities including military veterans and

police force. My trauma-informed program combining performance, creative arts exercises, and improvisational storytelling, "Post Traumatic Gifts," is listed in the directory for the National Initiative of Arts and Health in the Military. I've contributed writing for the 296 Project, a non-profit organization providing art therapy services for military veterans and those on active duty, as well as refugee communities and homeless youth.

My work with sexual assault: In the face of trauma, an individual can fight, flee or freeze. For many survivors of sexual assault, the "freeze" response can trigger complex feelings of shame and guilt, often intertwined with the feeling of helplessness felt during their initial trauma. When unattended, immobility can lead to destructive coping mechanisms and co-occurring disorders, including anxiety disorders, substance abuse, depression, eating disorders. Trauma can serve as an "invisible illness" that can complicate the road to recovery, but also illuminate alternative paths to healing by getting to the "root" of its cause. Combining sexual assault prevention education with clinically researched treatment methods for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, my hands-on workshops provide a comprehensive overview of symptom of trauma for survivors of assault, where participants learn "safe" means of re-experiencing feeling to help survivors unthaw the "freeze" response, move through trauma and develop their own self-soothing and confidence in themselves. I've also taken these programs into religious communities and conferences, such as the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance Conference at Columbia University.

My work with healthcare: As the 2014 Recipient of Convatec's Great Comebacks Award, I've spoken to hundreds of nurses at several **National and Regional WOCN Conferences** on a collaborative approach to patient care, and my medical abstracts have been accepted into several international conferences on Gastroenterology, HR in Healthcare/HOSA (Future Healthcare Professionals), and Narrative Medicine. I've also presented this for patients in oncology wards, support groups, for terminally ill patients and their caregivers, and for child life centers. I work with clinical staff, med students, nurses and patients and help bridge the gap between the mental health and physical health communities at conferences such as **the 2016 American College of Surgeons Clinical Congress**.

My work with colleges: In 2011, 64% of college dropouts were for mental health-related reasons, and of those, 50% never accessed any related services. Stigma may prevent students from reaching out to mental health services, and many students are unaware that these resources exist and are accessible for all. By bridging the gap of communication between academia, wellness, and the student body through integrative storytelling, an entire campus community can better respond with resilience in the face of adversity.

My program for students fights openly for survivors of assault, substance abuse, depression and other common university issues, teaching a systematic approach to storytelling which empowers to become campus agents of change. To address the deathly stigma surrounding mental illness, sexual assault and PTSD on college campuses, I developed a program combining a dynamic, live autobiographical musical performance, a talkback on "fighting in the open" for mental health, how to develop a resiliency toolbox, how to cultivate hope, and how to thrive in college with a physical or mental health condition, followed by a panel discussion on consumer advocacy and national wellness resources. Being able to reach out for help and find support is what helps us realize we're not alone. This inspired me to start trying to bridge the gap of communication between departments on campus – academia, career counseling, wellness resources, accessibility, and student groups. There can be a barrier between academia and a student struggling with anxiety, campus life transitions, and common adjustments needed for college. The resources on campus become compartmentalized and students who don't necessarily feel they have an issue "significant" enough cheat themselves out of learning valuable life skills. [Gutless & Grateful](#) aims to introduce these resources on campus helpful sources that can build resilience on campus, while also destigmatizing mental illness and encouraging students to reach out, speak up and start the conversation. One of the most difficult issues for students is to not feel alienated or stigmatized when they feel they have a concern that needs to be addressed - or worse, the feeling that they don't need/deserve/want help. The solution lies in our ability to engage, educate and empower youth to act as "fluids" in the system – infiltrating the gaps that administration may not be able to access. Gutless and Grateful is a prime example of successful and innovative programming, removing stigma through storytelling to elucidate not only our shared struggles, but the life skills inherent in all students to fight for themselves in the open.

Theatre and Mental Health: As a playwright, I've boldly brought issues that society tiptoes around to the center of conversation. After appearing on the TODAY Show in 2011 where I openly shared my story, I created a one-woman musical about my life's struggles, trials and triumphs, Gutless & Grateful. Ever since it's critically acclaimed debut, I transformed the program into a trauma-informed mental health education and sexual assault prevention program which I've toured for five years, not only to theatres, but schools, colleges, mental health facilities and recovery groups, Higher Ed administration, and corporate companies to fight stigma, build inclusive communities, and help

others to share their story. After being inspired by I've devised workshops for the Transformative Language Arts Network National Conference, the Eating Recovery Foundation, League for the Advancement of New England Storytelling, Mental Health America and others, and was this year's keynote speaker for the Hawaii Pacific Rim International Conference on Diversity and Disability, and will be the keynote speaker for next year's International School of Social Work conference. My multidisciplinary work is inspired by Dr. Bessel Van Der Kolk's quote: "The imprints of traumatic experiences are organized not as coherent logical narratives but in fragmented sensory and emotional traces: images, sounds, and physical sensations."

Sharing an underestimated approach to healing from PTSD: Healing from trauma happens in the body, through movement, not rational thought. That is why animals in the wild heal faster than humans. Healing is primal and often unable to be put into words for years. As a survivor and advocate, *my art is a call to action*, and empowering others to tell their stories is my life force. I'm a scavenger, telling stories through mixed media art, movement, music, and text to make reimagined meaning from catastrophe. I'm a "Detourist," embracing unexpected routes as opportunities for creative growth, and the opportunity to build a culture based on empathy and inclusion. Literally reassembling the fragments of my life, after decade of life-shattering trauma, pushed me to create a roadmap where there was none, reframing my own narrative as I begun to reassemble the broken shards of the life I once knew, as a sculptor would reassemble broken glass into a breathtaking mosaic. I learned that resilience comes from the hope that as artists, we must create ourselves, out of these dismembered parts of our lives. Through transforming the aftermath of trauma into art, we create our own unique masterpiece, cultivating a bold, new identity that is uniquely ours...yet, this transformation draws us together in a universal narrative. I create to find the commonality, as well as the distinctiveness, in all of our "life detours." I share my art to shift an entire community ethos in the direction of inclusion – to give courage and a sense of belonging to people who face challenges, and to build a society that gives everyone awareness and generosity of spirit that makes that betters our world. I've experienced how theatre challenges ideas, creates solutions and elevates our struggles to something heroic to triumph over – like a choose your own adventure novel. We have a choice in how we view our "call to adventure" and our "journey into darkness." Perhaps that's why I never felt like a victim, even after years of surgeries and the art that grew out of trauma, is a dancing celebration of life's beautiful detours, rather than a stoic Greek Tragedy. I create to thrive, exist, transform and belong, and to start a vital conversation on how society views and creates to one another's obstacles. Our archetypal journeys are beautiful detours, traveled more easily in solidarity, and they help us cultivate a shared resilience that is both universal and uniquely ours.

Why do I fight in the open? It takes "guts" to talk – and sing – about my sexual abuse, my anger, my guilt, how I lost hope in things ever getting better. But I share to show that things DO get better with patience, trust and resilience. I share to give courage and a sense of belonging to people who are struggling with all kinds of mental health or physical challenges, but also to help build a campus that gives everyone the awareness that betters our world. From my own decade of medical isolation, I learned that nobody can heal in a vacuum. Being able to reach out for help and find support is what helps us realize we're not alone. [Gutless & Grateful](#) aims to share how we can all build resilience.

I've worked to bridge the gap between those who are struggling with mental or physical health obstacles, and the rest of society. With demands for conformity in all areas of living, true diversity may be suffocated, perpetuating silence, defense and more exclusion. We need to think differently if we want true diversity, equity and justice in the world. To thrive in the world, human beings need to have access to all educational, cultural, social, and economic areas of life – otherwise they will remain on the margins and not be a central active force in participating fully in dimensions that give meaning to life. Unfortunately many of these arenas are created, maintained and sustained by conceptual and constructed views of 'normalcy' and able-bodied, thus creating and/or strengthening the many barriers toward achieving a quality of life due every human being regardless of their ability or disability. have the power to engage, to move ideas from the fuzzy margins to the focused center of our attention, and to inspire us to think in new ways. Arts & expressive communication can move us to the center of life's stage.

I've fought in the open, *even when my reputation was at stake* because I had to "break" before I could rebuild myself. I am nominating myself because, even when rejected by surgeons as "sabotaging my recovery" because it was "taking too long to heal emotionally," ostracized from the medical community for "developing an eating disorder out of spite" when in reality, I was battling with invisible wounds I had not anticipated after my digestive system was miraculously reconstructed, I persisted and responded with empathy, transforming their unawareness with trauma education. Now, I work to help others alleviate the same sense of undeserved shame through my honesty, insights, and consumer advocacy on a local and national level. If we don't fight in the open, we fight ourselves. This fear has overpowered any risk of public acceptance. It's why I'm still here. **Thank you.**