

If someone was to tell me back in high school about the work that I am doing today, I would have told them they must have me confused with someone else. Back then, I would not even believe I would make it to be 22-years-old.

Growing up, mental illnesses were not discussed in my household, as no one in my family suffered from any. Suicide was a taboo and foreign concept. But, as I went into high school, suicide began to be the only thought that would ease my mind. I attended an all-girls private high school. I was shy and insecure, and it was evident to those around me. My lack of confidence unfortunately made me the perfect target.

December of my freshman year, an anonymous Facebook profile was created to torment and destroy my reputation. I was so hurt and confused by whoever started the page, but even more so by the bystanders. The people who had become Facebook friends with the account were classmates that I sat next to in Biology to complete strangers I had never met.

Over the span of two years, the account acquired hundreds of friends and I felt completely alone. I began to feel as if my body was on autopilot and that I was wearing a mask around those around me- going to school each day, going home and acting like everything was fine, and crying myself to sleep. Repeat.

I was embarrassed to ask my family for help, in fear of seeming weak. I continued down the dark tunnel of depression. I had no hopes, dreams, desires. I lost all motivation. I believed my life was worthless. I believed that it did not matter if I was dead. I began to hate myself more than the bullies said that they hated me.

It was not until the end of my sophomore year, after attempting suicide by overdosing on pain medication, that my family found out about the cyberbullying. The school got involved, the initiators were found, and the account was luckily deactivated.

I attended therapy weekly and began taking anti-depressant medication. But, even throughout my junior and senior years when the bullying had ceased, I still had lingering, dark ideations and horrible, uncontrollable flashbacks.

The week after graduation, a time when many are celebrating, I was contemplating suicide. I told my mom I needed to get help. She drove me to a hospital outside of Philadelphia, where I was stripped of my clothes, phone, everything.

My plan was to go to College of Charleston in South Carolina in the fall, but I could not see my future past the day I was living. I received treatment at an intensive, outpatient facility for adolescents for three weeks and was diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, Major Depressive Disorder, and Social Anxiety.

It was the first time I felt like I belonged in this world because I was surrounded by teenagers my age that felt the same way I had been feeling. We were getting the help and support needed.

After completing treatment, I was ready to move forward and attend college. But, I did so by wearing that same mask I wore in high school.

I went to the College of Charleston and joined every club I could. I joined a sorority, became friends with everyone, and was elected the Student Body Secretary as a freshman. To an outsider, I looked like a confident girl that had a 'perfect' life. But, inside I knew that no one knew the *real* me. The one that would sneak off to on-campus therapy each week, in fear of being seen by others as "crazy" or "psychotic".

During my sophomore year, I was approached by my therapist to speak about my experiences with bullying, suicide, and mental health to our campus. After much hesitation and contemplation, I decided to do it. The room was filled and even my closest friends were waiting to hear about what I had kept inside for so long. That is when I realized what I was truly passionate about. I wanted others who felt like I used to know they are not alone.

From there, I began getting opportunities to speak about my story at different schools, college campuses, events, and conferences weekly to help those silently suffering. I noticed each time I gave a talk, I would receive countless messages from audience members saying they could relate in some way. People began telling me that by sharing, I was saving lives. It was truly an indescribable feeling, but one that I wanted others to have as well.

Over time, those messages developed my inspiration for "The Invisible Illnesses". I created a platform ([theinvisibleillnesses.org](http://theinvisibleillnesses.org)) for individuals to share how their lives have been affected by mental illnesses. Each week, stories are posted to the website, Facebook account, and Instagram account. By having diverse ages, mental illnesses, genders, and races, it shows that mental health can affect anyone.

Within a span of four months since its launch, the website received over 100,000 page views and hundreds of submitted stories. Within the past month, I have filed for the organization to be a non-profit. Within the past week, I created an application for campus representatives, and have already received over 20 applications from different college campuses.

I wanted the individuals' stories to be vulnerable about the struggles, but also be hopeful. Letting others know that it does get better when you reach out for help and that their life mattered. The slogan is "Just Because You Can't See Them, Doesn't Mean They're Not There." Receiving messages from individuals saying the stories saved their life is extremely humbling.

As previously stated, I did not see past the day I was living. But, now I am looking forward to my future with The Invisible Illnesses. To continue helping those silently suffering, as I once did. I have found my purpose and I am so grateful to be granted the opportunity to live it.