Dear Mental Health America,

I am sending this letter in regards to the nomination for the prestigious *Clifford W. Beers* award. This is such an honor for a person to receive, but even more so for someone like me! Years ago, I would never have had the courage to even write a letter about my struggles with mental illness. My self-esteem was very low, as I was bullied because of my diagnosis. Today, I am no longer a victim, but instead a victor who uses my experiences to educate, mentor and motivate others who are going through much of what I endured.

I had been married to an abusive man who was addicted to heroin. I believed that I was “ugly, fat and too stupid” to ever have anyone love me. So, I stayed with him for seven years. The only thing good he gave to me was three beautiful children. During this time, I would have severe mood swings where I would be on top of the world one minute and then in bed crying for days. I stopped combing my hair and doing the laundry. My oldest daughter went to live with my mother and father and the other 2 were taken away by children services. I refused to get the help that was needed as it was shameful to admit all that was wrong with me. I felt like a monster. What kind of a mother would not want to fight to get her kids back? I felt so empty inside like I was not worthy of being a mommy. After 18 months, I suddenly started taking my meds again, and fought for and won, full custody of my children again.

We went to live in an apartment with a new boyfriend but my anxiety was so high thinking that he would leave me, just like every man before him had done. We were in a bad car accident in which I became too scared to leave my home. I started eating all the time due to my depression from this life that was consuming my soul. My children both became diagnosed with ADHD. Between their diagnosis and my own, each day was a struggle. I became addicted to crack cocaine and my life went to hell. One night after being arrested for a Felony retail theft, I took the two youngest children to their father who was clean and sober at that time and living with his girlfriend and their two other children. I believed they would have a better life if their bi polar addict of a mom was gone!

I ended up becoming homeless on the streets of Philadelphia for over 5 ½ years. During this time, I was raped, assaulted and harassed because of my skin color. I was a white woman in a predominantly black neighborhood. I lived off ofmy insurance settlement for a few months but then it ran out. I began eating out of dumpsters and sleeping in abandoned houses and cars. Life became pretty bad for me. My life was a made up lie that my family was all killed in a car accident in West Virginia. I told so many stories that I became a separate new identity. I was paranoid of the dark, so I started smoking crack again to try and hide from my fears. The drug kept me under its control and forced me to sell the most valuable thing I had left, my body. I was arrested seven times for solicitation. After my last arrest, I was incarcerated in a Phila. Prison where I decided to write to my parents to tell them I was still alive.

A miracle occurred one day, as I was told that I had a visitor. It was my beloved mother and father and my oldest daughter. They could not believe that they had finally found me. They told me that my two youngest children had been signed over by my husband and had been adopted out to another family. My heart was shattered in a million pieces. My mom told me to stay strong and that I could get through this. I cried every night when I was locked up. I asked God to take me home to live with my Nanny as she always loved me no matter what? I needed her now. I was feeling so low and useless. How could I go on now without my babies?

After faithfully visiting me twice a week for 7 months, I was released to my parents. My felony was dropped to a misdemeanor and I was given one year of probation. I went home to try to start over. Things started feeling weird to me, as the drug use had ceased and the anxiety set in bad again. I worried over whether my children would ever see me again of if they missed me? I would punch myself in the mouth and make myself bleed as a form of punishment for being so bad. My mother and I fought a lot and she would call me horrible names like a whore. My daughter told me that I was a terrible mother to walk away from my children. I couldn’t explain to her how I hated myself and was too weak to admit I had a mental illness that prevented me from dealing with everyday life.

My diagnosis of bi polar and anxiety disorder did not come until after I was court ordered to attend drug and alcohol counseling as a stipulation of probation. The counselor had me see a psychiatrist who diagnosed me with bipolar and anxiety disorder. I stared opening up about my feelings and soon realized that I was not a bad person. I began taking meds but they made me feel like a walking zombie most days. I completed my Drug Treatment in 2000, and have been blessed to live a clean and sober life now. However, my mental illness still had control of my life because I had no coping skills. My own parents couldn’t understand why I couldn’t just stop acting so damn crazy?

I started using drugs again for a few weeks in 2005, which resulted in me overdosing. I woke up cuffed to a bed with some strange woman watching over me. She explained that I was being admitted to a psychiatric hospital for evaluation. I was scared to be there with all these other “crazy” people….but I was just like them. Then I realized that my mental illness was affecting me and that was why my addiction to drugs began. The counselor told me that I was like a beautiful butterfly trapped in a cocoon that needed to stop being scared to open up her wings and fly.

The words she spoke to me were my encouragement to use all of my adversities in life as a major blueprint to help others change their lives. I became a friend to the late Pa State Senator Mike O Pake who read my story which was printed on the front page of the *Reading Eagle* newspaper on Christmas day 2006 about how I turned my life around. People started stopping me on the street and at my father’s corporation and telling me how much it inspired them. I then ran for election and served 2 terns as Democratic Committeewoman.

I went back to college at age 48 and graduated at age 50. It was rough but I made the Dean’s list and graduated with a major in Social work and honor in Drug and Alcohol studies and Leadership. This was such an achievement to me. I was named Person of the week for my work with St Jude Children Hospital, where I have been a coordinator for almost 13 years now. I have been honored with 7 awards from the senators for my dedication to enriching the lives of others in the community and for St Jude and the Greater Reading Mental Health Alliance. I received the Paul J. Hoh Life Improvement award from Berks Connections/Pretrial Services for helping to make a difference in the lives of others through my work at Greater Reading Mental Health Alliance. I used my past of being incarcerated to show others how to better their lives and overcome adversities of a mental illness.

All of these awards mean a lot to me; however, the life that I lead now as a Certified Peer Support Specialist is the one that allows me to contribute the most to other consumers with a mental illness, just like me. I obtained this job almost 3 years ago after searching fruitlessly for a career where I could find my purpose as well as acceptance of my disease. This job is very demanding and has long hours, countless demands and much pressure. Yet, it has answered the long standing question of why did God allow me to go through all the sadness in my life? Why did he take my children away? Now I can show empathy to another mother because I truly understand how she feels and can guide her to make a wise choice and follow the plan of children services to get her child back. Why was I homeless in that neighborhood? Now I can clearly see what it feels like to be a minority and openly embrace all people no matter what color, religion or sexual preference, as we are all the same. I learned that no one deserves to be called names because a mental illness is just like diabetes or cancer, in that we can follow treatment and be treated with dignity and respect. I have read many books but know the suffering first hand of being addicted to a drug that controlled me like a puppet. I can share my triumph over addiction and be a shoulder to lean on as they now take that path to recovery. I go to Mental Health Treatment court as a member of the Forensic team to be a role model to those in the system due to a mental illness. I reach out to anyone that is still in the darkness but wants to try to see the light that I see now. I go to the streets to feed the homeless, many of whom suffer from a mental illness, every year with other agencies on December 22nd, called cups of Compassion. I even invite my consumers to volunteer with me, which increases their self-esteem immensely. I have been on BCTV a few times telling my stories of recovery and self-empowerment to share my contagious story of how good life can be, even with my illness and addiction. I will always have my diagnosis but it no longer defines who I am. My story is shared to let others know it ok to be afraid but take my hand and I will help you be strong. I accompany consumers to the WRAP classes so they have the tools they need to stay mentally stable. I teach them how to get onto the RECOVERY LIBRARY so they can watch videos of others’ stories, learn valuable insight on many topics of mental health and print out personal medicine cards to have information readily available in times of crisis. I really love my job of being a C.P.S. as it allows me to make a difference in the lives of others with a mental diagnosis. I want them to turn illness into wellness.

I am also Marketing Supervisor at G.R.M.H.A. where I plan events to raise awareness and funds for the nonprofit agency. The 4th annual WALK FOR WELLNESS is to raise funds for our child advocacy program to service families with younger children who have learning disabilities to receive the help they so desperately need. I am going to area schools to spread the message of how we need to STOMP OUT THE STIGMA of mental illness. I am bringing the message to the community by doing parades with our newly founded mascot, STOMP, to let everyone see how we are all the same! We actually got applause from the community this year with our small float and group of consumers who marched to support the message. I set up exhibits at the area fairs and tell people about our services. I hold an annual event each year to raise funds for St Jude Children Hospital. This year I offered to split the funds with G.R.M.H.A, with our message being, “Saving the lives and minds of the children”. It was a great success, which will be repeated each year.

I am also on the member advisory board of *Community Care Behavioral Health* which meets quarterly to discuss issues going on the various counties of Pennsylvania. We talk about changes that can be made to improve care of the consumers and those of us working in the mental health field. I am up for election to be co-chairperson of the advisory board. I love to hear what others have to say and also give my input so we can let others see what we see, mental illness is not who we are., it is just what we are diagnosed with.

I have been blessed to be medication free for over 11 years now. I have a therapist because I think it is important to my wellbeing. I practice my own WRAP and each time that I attend with a new consumer, I learn more. I regularly go on the Recovery Library for guidance and information. Each day as I drive to work I smile because I know that this is truly what I was meant to be, that beautiful butterfly who needs to show others how to emerge from their cocoon!!! I have had many success stories, such as that of a consumer who started her own nonprofit and others who graduated from the Peer support program with success. Sometimes the peer may stumble but I am there to show them how to stand up again. There is so much more to do to make the world see how Mental Illness is just that, an Illness. We didn’t ask for it but we must learn to accept it and find ways to live mentally well. It is much easier to get a company to donate for a charity that helps someone who has a physical disease like cancer or Aids, but someone suffering from Bipolar or Schizophrenia needs help and understanding too. I will NEVER give up the fight to STOMP OUT THE STIGMA as I continue as a Peer Support Specialist. I was blessed because no one ever gave up on me.

Thanks for reading my letter. It would mean so much to me to receive the ***Clifford W. Beers*** award. This would be something that I could tell others as I continue to advocate for Mental Wellness. Look at me, I have Bipolar, Anxiety disorder and am a recovered addict but I am achieving my life and so can you!

Thanks, Cheri Burkert, C.P.S.