Yvonne Woodland

I WAS FIRST HOSPITALIZED AT THE age of 38. Looking back on my life as a teenager, things were not very good, but I got through a lot of it. Married at the age of 18 with three children by the time I was 24, I had a fair amount of marital problems through the years. I had become very angry with my husband to the point where I literally saw red. Being that angry and not venting it was very stressful and was probably the reason that I had a lot of stomach problems in later years. I went to my general practitioner many times complaining of my stomach problems but he could never find anything wrong. Things were so extreme that I thought I was going to die and that my children wouldn’t have a mother to care for them. After a number of years of this, I was finally able to get past it. I went to work once my children were old enough to fend for themselves. Money was tight and the kids needed more clothing and more food. The first job I had was very stressful and it didn’t last too long. Then I started selling insurance, which I did very well at and enjoyed very much, but I got mixed up with another man and the bottom dropped out of my world. I had to quit my job and my marriage came apart. My husband told me I had to get out, so out on the street I went.

Early Symptoms Prior to being out on the streets, my general practitioner had sent me to see a psychiatrist. I had had some paranoia all my life but was able to control it and do many things, but my paranoia had become increasingly worse. I only told the first psychiatrist what I wanted him to hear, though, as it was not a good relationship. Next, I went to a second psychiatrist who treated my problems as a family dynamics issue and wanted me to blame my mother. There was no way I was going to do that, so that was the end of that psychiatrist; I would not go back. As time went on, a lot of things began to happen and things became very unreal. My girl friend down the street, who was a psych nurse always told me how unreal I was, even before my psychosis hit. My son would tell her what I was up to, and she would suspect things, but she never did anything about it. At that point, I thought the telephones were bugged, but when I told my husband about my fears, he said I was crazy. That was the worst thing he could have done, as I just clammed up and wouldn’t tell anybody what I was feeling or thinking, or about anything that was going on in my life. The paranoia and the psychosis made the horror more intense and the whole matter worse. I started to sleep a lot and cry; I think I slept and cried for a year and my body just shut down. There were many tearful, unfruitful trips in tears to my GP at this time. Years later, he told me he didn’t know what to do with me, so he chose to do nothing.

I’d think the satellites were spying on me, that the radio and television was talking directly to me, that people were monitoring me, and that my thoughts were being broadcast. People would smile, frown, laugh and say things that I thought had a special meaning for me. When I would read certain books, words jumped out at me, as I’m very sensitive to words. Names, colours and numbers had special meaning to me also. My mind was always calculating numbers, whether it was license plates, house and street numbers or what I spend in the grocery store. My brain would always be racing in one direction or another. I still deal with some of these curious inclinations now. Synchronicity is also a big aspect of it. Synchronicity is the theory of Carl Jung, a Swiss psychiatrist, that explains experiences of apparently meaningful coincidences, in relation to psychology, spirituality and psychosis. I relate to it and really understand it. Feelings of persecution also played a big part in the psychosis. I would get pains in my hands like Christ’s wounds. With my religious upbringing, I felt it was a spiritual emergency or crisis. When in psychosis, I think I am the Virgin Mary; later, I was told this choice stems from being separated from my children and not being able to nurture them. I also remember asking if I was special and getting the sharp and snapping answer, No. All of these experiences were never a topic of discussion—just more confusion between me and other people. The hell of psychosis and the hell of reality are just about the same for me. It was on September 30, 1979 that my husband told me I had to be out of the house. I had no job, very little money and no place to go. We had a tent trailer in our yard without licence plates on it, so I licensed the tent trailer and went down to the campgrounds and camped out, as sick as I was. The weather was very cold and I got physically sick because of it. As I could not take my children with me, I would go and see them every day. I wanted them to have a mom and three meals a day, but I couldn’t really help them a whole lot. One day, things were so bad that my mother told me to come home and live with her. She fed me well and let me sleep and cry all I wanted, and with that I gained a lot of weight. In my paranoia, I would take offence to things people would say and then hop in my car and drive all over town, crying all the while. Then I would end up with my children, who would send me back to my mom’s. Eventually, after an argument with my children, they sent me to Riverview.

Riverview Hospital When I was admitted to Riverview Hospital, the doctors stripsearched me before I was locked away. I might be guilty of many things, but doing drugs is certainly not one of them, so they could have at least talked to my family before doing that; I was very humiliated. As bad as it was at Riverview, though, something had to be done about my state of mental health, because I could not go on like I had been. I was put on a medication called Fluphenazine, which cured one monster but created another with its side effects. My mom, dad and my sister and her new baby would come and visit me every second day and my children would come in twice a week to see me, so I had a lot of visitors. The clergy in there told me: “Once a mental patient, always a mental patient.” This told me there was no hope which, in my opinion, is pretty stupid. You put up with a lot of negativity sometimes. Two months later, I was discharged as they said I was doing well. Before my discharge, my family was brought in for a family conference. It was really funny to see mom, dad, six brothers and sisters and their spouses coming in—it was like a little army had hit. I was not allowed in on the conference, so I had no idea what was said or what my diagnosis was. After my discharge, I asked my mother what was wrong with me, and she told me that I had a chemical imbalance. The next time I saw my mental health worker, I asked her about the diagnosis and she explained that my brain does not make a certain chemical. I was getting medication that I thought would solve the problem, but was not told about the side effects. My sister-in-law was a psych nurse also, but nothing was discussed with the family while I was present and I had almost no information to go on until many years later. For the next seven years, all I wanted to do was die. Death just seemed to be the best friend I could have had, but I couldn’t do that to my family, so sleep was the only freedom I knew. I had absolutely no energy, no energy even to talk. I would sleep 20 hours a day and then ask for sleeping pills so I could sleep the other four hours. That’s how much I enjoyed life. One night I saw a very bright light when I was sleeping which I explained away as a near-death experience. I had sore eyes for many days after. My mental health worker had told me to go out and get a job and an apartment, but she didn’t appreciate how hard that was. In the next breath, she told me that even she wouldn’t hire me! (If she wouldn’t hire me then who would?) I did go out and got a job paying very little money but it was certainly not enough to get an apartment with. It was a real struggle and very painful. All I wanted to do was stay home and sleep, but I lasted five months on the job, which was long enough to collect employment insurance. This provided me with enough money for the essentials and allowed me to continue to sleep a lot. Pushing for my family and myself, I managed to get other jobs but had trouble holding them. There were some positive happenings in my life during this period of my life. Starting in 1981, I dated a fellow for three years. We went for dinners and movies, but I never knew what the movies were about because I always slept through them. He helped me across a lot of rocky roads, and I am thankful to him for that. For a person with a mental illness, it’s a real plus to have a partner, someone to be intimate with and to go places with together. I also had short-lived reprieve in 1984 when the doctor said I was doing well and took me off the medication. I felt wonderful for a number of months and I was working and making more money, so that I could afford an apartment. I lost all the weight that I had gained and I enjoyed my independence. But, it didn’t last too long as I got ill again, spent three weeks in the hospital, was put on the same medication as before, and of course, I had to stop working. Finally in 1987, I asked the doctor if there was any other medication I could try, and he changed my medication to Fluanxol, as he said that it wasn’t as depressing as Fluphenazine. At that point I could have choked him for not telling me this previously! Once the new medication got into my system, I began to look forward to the new day. Life was worth living again.

A turning point came for me in 1994, when I went to a mental health seminar called People Living with People with Schizophrenia. Boy, did I see myself a lot in the symptoms and information presented in the seminar, so I went to my mental health worker and asked her if I had schizophrenia, and she said, “Yes, don’t you know?” Each successive mental health worker in the different places I lived had just assumed I knew from my first hospitalization, but telling me I have a chemical imbalance doesn’t tell me anything. Diabetes is a chemical imbalance too, but they don’t tell people with diabetes that. Why tell me that? If they had explained to me what I was dealing with, maybe so many good years of my life wouldn’t have been wasted! Waste, waste, waste. I can’t think of any other word to use. Around the same time, there was another positive development when I heard about Prozac and its different effects and side effects, and decided that it might help me with the depression I had been suffering for all these years, along with the symptoms of schizophrenia. First, I asked my mental health worker about this, but she said I didn’t need it. So I went to my doctor and he prescribed it for me. My family and friends have remarked on what a difference it has made. Prozac gives me the confidence and energy to make life better. It allows me to be more assertive and express my feelings. That same year, I met Marge Delange, who was then the regional co-ordinator for the BC Schizophrenia Society. She got me involved with the Partnership Education Program, which involved going to schools and colleges, the Justice Institute (where police academy recruits are trained), hospitals and many other educational centres. The Partnership Program consists of a professional, family member and a consumer telling their personal stories and answering questions about their experience with mental illness to faculty, students and the general public. I then became involved in other public education activities. We used some puppetry to educate elementary school students about schizophrenia. I did some TV videos in Sechelt and Delta, BC. With the educating I was doing, I too was getting educated and was able to also educate my family, which was certainly a huge plus. I then had the opportunity to take the Journey of Hope, a twelve-week family educational program that lead me to the BRIDGES program for consumers, out of Tennessee. I was very excited about it, and proceeded, with Al Matthews and Marge Delange, to bring it to British Columbia. Getting funding for the program was neither a pleasant nor an easy process as we met a lot of negativity, but we got it and the program is now in place and operating. Everyone with a mental illness should take the program when they are diagnosed for the first time. Hopefully other lives won’t have all those wasted years! Education, medication, family and friends are all very important. I have a lot of support from my family and friends, especially from my children, and I am at peace now. They say I have been to hell and back.

Submitted by Yvonne E. Woodland (formerly R.E. Henderson). She lives in Delta, BC and is in her 50’s. She has a diagnosis of schizophrenia and actively educates the community about mental health issues