

Sue's Story

My name is Sue and I am a recovered alcoholic and have also been released from the bondage of bulimia. May 31st, 2009 was my 16th anniversary of sobriety and on September 19th, I will be eating disorder free for 10 years. I cannot say recovery is easy, but it is worth every hurdle jumped and every change made. In hindsight I have found it was more difficult to live with the burden of addictions than to overcome them. While recovery was hard, excruciating at times, there were, and are still many pleasures that come with each new self-discovery and triumph.

My descent into addiction did not begin with my first binge or first drink; it began long before then - when I was a child learning to adapt and cope with the world around me.

At birth my life's journey was set in motion, much like a jigsaw puzzle. My parents began forming the borders and as I reacted to the stimuli around me, my personality emerged piece by piece. Heredity, in addition to interactions with siblings, extended family, friends, and strangers affected the direction of my developing puzzle. Close relationships merged numerous personal puzzles, each influencing how I learned to deal with the stresses of life.

Thyroid cancer and later lung cancer (from heavy smoking) shattered my mother's world and changed the dynamics of our family. The disease shattered her dreams and brought about depression, anxiety, and anger. Combined with financial discord, our home life was stressful and full of parental quarreling. Walking on eggshells became a way of life.

At an early age, I found food to be comforting, but because ours was an athletic family, weight issues were never a concern. Thank God, as mom abhorred people who were overweight. Always in motion, I was a thin, but healthy eater - the dinner table was the one place I received constant praise from my mother. I was good at eating and finally found a way to gain approval.

As an extremely shy adolescent, tennis and other sports gave me an identity and it is in that direction I chose to dream and excel. My body was strong and flexible; I was always the first girl chosen in gym class, sometimes before the boys. Off the court, I had only a few friends, but sports gave me a voice and a circle of cohorts.

While the pieces of my puzzle were filling rapidly in the sports arena, they were disconnected in several other areas of my life as I tried to be the family peace maker. Anything could set off my mother's temper; her rage was terrifying and inconsistent. As the years progressed, her distress intensified, especially after the removal of her lung when I was 15. That prevented her from playing tennis, her one lifelong pleasure. Cigarettes and sleep, even with one lung, were how she coped with life on a day to day basis. Early on, only her personality at home was toxic, but this eventually filtered into the community. We were truly embarrassed to be in her presence.

She fought with everyone, especially with me and dad. While her abuse towards me was only emotional and verbal, I often witnessed her physical attacks on my father, pulling her off and trying to comfort her sobs. Why he never fought back, I never understood. Why my brother and sister never heard the commotion during their late night fights, I never knew. The family discord was never discussed.

Soon dating entered the picture and was quite different from the fantasies conjured from the romantic movies and chaste novels I was allowed to read. Rigid rules about dating behaviors enforced by my mother were in direct conflict with the requirements of my long term relationship. Emotional blackmail and threats of rejection were the result of my thwarting unwanted sexual attention. Both my boyfriend and my mother demanded my faithfulness without compromise.

I had no close friends or adult confidants with whom I felt comfortable enough to confide my overwhelming fear and guilt. With no other available choices, I reluctantly opted to endure submission. As I lost control of the events around me, food provided immediate comfort. Little did I know the emerging picture of my puzzle was turning down a very dangerous path.

Leaving for college was a time of tremendous relief and great expectations as I would no longer have to hear from my boyfriend, "if you loved me, you would..." or "blood is thicker than water" from my mother. I would no longer be surrounded by irrational anger or hear the endless echo of slamming doors in my sleep.

College was so different from high school! My chosen major – botany – was very difficult. I was a lousy student and still very shy despite joining a sorority. There was no tennis team and without tennis I had no identity. I became even more withdrawn. I discovered the dining hall, the social Mecca of the university. How I enjoyed the cafeteria - my rapid weight gain was proof. Food had become the Band-Aid for my inner turmoil and I was unable to stop. My self-esteem plummeted. A svelte body would bring popularity, success, new boyfriends, and happiness. Yes, it was time to go on a strict diet.

I found that using more and more behaviors didn't help.... The compulsion to eat was unstoppable; I was losing control.

One unforgettable December evening my sophomore year I was soon to learn unimaginable news. My father and 17 year old cousin had been killed in an automobile accident – hit by a drunk driver. Together, yet separately, dad and I had endured my mother's endless wrath and now I was truly alone. He was finally at peace, but I was left to trudge forward, never knowing the hell that was yet to begin. The funeral was Christmas Eve.

On a cold January evening in 1974, four weeks later, my unfolding puzzle was about to take on a new life altering twist. Although the word bulimia nervosa would not be heard for another 10 years, a new destructive behavior would invade my spiraling reality. But then, the answer to my prayers, or so I had thought, had suddenly arrived, giving me the best of both worlds. I stuffed away my emotions and lost weight.

At first I only used the symptoms during the day, but gradually performed the behaviors at all meals. People did notice and joked about my enormous consumption. I was mortified and desperately tried to be normal, but every attempt was unsuccessful. The need to use behaviors was just too powerful. Although I was losing weight, the desire to be thinner and thinner never ended. No matter what my weight, it was never thin enough - and preventing weight gain was exhausting. Not much else mattered. I had lost all hopes and dreams for the future.

When I did hear the word bulimia broadcasted on TV, alone in my kitchen, I went numb. I can still remember the shame – relieved that I was not alone, but terrified I had been found out! By this point however, I had stopped trying to win the battle; the struggle was futile and wearisome. The bulimia had taken over; the puzzle pieces of this cancerous disease were too securely interconnected with every aspect of my life. Like a friend, the eating disorder was there to sooth my pain and anxiety; to celebrate the good times and help me forget the bad.

And by then, I had discovered alcohol.... and the nice warm feeling is provided; I could forget my shame when I drank. One glass became, two... Soon even a quart was not enough and I began to use stronger varieties of alcohol. Cigarettes helped too, another new addiction to which I quickly excelled.

Alcohol before dinner, with dinner, a night cap or three to ensure sleep. Soon drinking with breakfast, before and during lunch became the norm. It helped with the shakes at 2am, 4am 6am..... alcohol

helped me celebrate, it helped me play tennis, it helped me clean the house, it helped me cope with everything - Even the DUI for which I could have killed a family of three.

Divorce and a new marriage did not help. Pregnancy did not alter my destructive behaviors. The intrusion of the Department of Social Services did not immediately change my self-deprecating ways. Even the cost of food, booze, cigarettes and dental reconstruction, which topped \$200,000 from three decades of addiction, didn't push me to make changes. Never mind I had a husband and child – food, alcohol, and smokes were my only friends - every waking moment was spent either drinking or finding a way to stay inebriated and thin. It was an all consuming process. And I was so tired..... Death was close at hand.

I am one of the lucky ones. On May 30th, 1993 I woke up about 5:30 am, choked down my usual cup of warm alcoholic poison with breakfast, then passed out for over 12 hours. Thank God it was Sunday; my husband was home to care for my toddler. When I awoke, I was scared. Something felt different.

I vividly remember that last detox. The minutes felt like hours, hours like days, and those three days an eternity while every nerve ending was electrified. It is the morning after the shakes and nausea have passed and I leave the confines of the living room sofa bed to take a shower and change into something clean. Walking outside, I face the hot, sunny June morning feeling physically weak, emotionally drained. Squinting, after three days in the darkened makeshift bedroom, I sit on the porch steps and feel empty, numb. I have felt this way many times before, after each self-detox, but somehow I know this must be the last. Drinking again is no longer an option. But, what do I do now? I have no interest in doing anything at all. I feel small, hollow, and directionless. I have a daughter I have not seen for three days, and have no energy to propel me forward, but I must retrieve my child from the neighbor who had been caring for her. Tonight I will return to AA; 90 meetings in 90 days. I am powerless over alcohol; my life is unmanageable.

Looking back, there are a few paragraphs written by Marilyn Barrett, Author of "Creating Eden: The Garden as a Healing Place" that capture the essence of my recovery.

"Come into the garden with me. Don't worry about not knowing your way: Your heart remembers, even if your head has forgotten. When you were small and first had time to create your dreams, you were at one with the earth you played in and with each leaf, bird, and cloud you saw. This is the garden to which I invite you to return.

Imagine a place to which you can bring stress, sorrow, loneliness, and confusion and from which you can leave with a sense of resolution, understanding, and calm. Imagine a place where you can express your own unique nature, create beauty, grow pure food, and gain control over your life. In my life, the garden has been such a place."

Marilyn so aptly wrote that the garden is a place for "clearing away anger, confusion, and pain, the trash of the past." She added this clearing "is a prerequisite to achieving inner peace, balance and harmony" and people "must sort through the emotional rubble of the past they have inherited, and they must get to the roots of attitudes and behavior patterns that have stunted their growth."

She is so right. As a child my identity was centered in the sporting arena where I excelled as an all-around athlete and tennis player. When actively participating in sports, I felt strong and important. I also had found solace in taking walks in the woods and sketching trees, flowers and landscapes. I loved the sound of birds, wind and thunderstorms; enjoyed exploring old foundations and stone walls. Gone were the nightmare of my parent's marriage, struggles with my boyfriend, and shyness. Alone in the quiet of nature there were only possibilities. In the weeks following that last drink, I was drawn back outside to the peacefulness of the farm on which we lived.

Farm labor that summer brought back the mind-body connection. I ventured into flower gardening; a new form of art where I could once again listen to the birds and the rumble of thunder or smell rain on hot pavement. I began to love what my body could do, more than what it looked like. The dark hole in my soul was beginning to fill with color and beauty, one day at a time; one piece at a time!

While the pieces of my personal puzzle connected in a way that used addiction to help me cope; for recovery, I had to start a new puzzle. Optimism, physical strength, and creativity were the only positive attributes I remember that never left my side. These I used to create the new borders of my life and they provided guidance though the early days of rebuilding. With more than half my life controlled by dependency, I needed to find a way (one day at a time) to identify and remove these weaknesses and re-established strengths.

With AA at night and the peaceful fields during the day, I was able to work the twelve steps. With the alcohol haze gone, I could think about the past, present and future with more clarity. While farm labor can be boring, I set small efficiency goals so each day would bring small successes. Soon I was the fastest bean picker in the crew and planted my first flower garden. I had to think about the needs of each plant: weeding, watering, fertilizing, pruning. Gradually I learned plant names, when they flowered, how big they grew. Each bit of knowledge was only a small piece, but important to the future of my puzzle.

While I was indeed sober; my smoking and eating disorder worsened – except during time spent outdoors. At first, I did not think about alcohol or food for a few minutes. By the end of the summer I could go hours. That was progress. I could begin making plans for the future.

For several years I had worked in pre-press for a printing company, but it was now the world of electronics. Computer graphics replaces stripping, so I called a local community college. Unfortunately, some algebra proficiency was required. It had been 20 years since I barely survived a math class in high school and had escaped college math by taking astronomy. So with three months of sobriety under my belt, I learned to breath, sleep and eat algebra. For the first time in my life, I did the homework; I persevered. My first quiz earned me a 100% and I floated home with a feeling of joy not ever felt before. Yes, I can do this! The final class grade was an A - another challenge conquered. Next was the computer graphics class – and after learning how to turn on the computer - seriously, I had never used one before, I earned a B+ designing pipes and other engineering feats. Another hurdle jumped. I was overcoming my fears.

The local paper advertised the need for a part time gardener in Wellesley. Sober almost a year, I nervously went on the interview and was hired. I was still a smoker and bulimic, but was able to put more time in between binges and butts. At work there was always a little voice in my head mentally validating all my pruning cuts or praising weeding competency. That voice, only a short year before, had constantly played the negativity tape. Now only positive words! I quit smoking. Life was changing. I was actually good at something. My boss sent me to the UMASS “Green School” and I passed!

A family move to NJ propelled me further into the landscaping industry. A local community college with a “green industry” major enticed my growing passion. After a few months of hard work, I became one of the first women in the state to become a Certified Nursery Landscape Professional.

The pieces of my new life puzzle were filling in - some days many pieces were found and put into place, while others days only one or two fit. I found that occasionally, pieces placed but not securely fit, needed to be removed and replaced elsewhere at a different time. Those borders, previously thought to be permanent, were evolving. I had put together days, then weeks, and even months without using symptoms. Relapses happened, but were less frequent.

A job change for my husband moved us back to Massachusetts. I took a position with a Worcester landscaping company and worked with a woman who had been employed there for years. I had

negotiated a great salary because of the state certification. But one day she received my paycheck; I received hers. I was making \$3 per hour more. She was livid, fought with the boss, and within hours I was terminated with a "sorry it is just not working out." No one gets fired from a landscaping company, not even the drunk off the street. I was crushed. My eating worsened and I was scared...enough to seek help again. The prescribed anti-anxiety medication made me tired, so very tired and depressed. I would put my daughter on the school bus and sleep until she returned. I was too tired to even use behaviors. I did not need the eating disorder any longer, it had just become habit. The time to break free of the eating disorder was close at hand. On 9/19/09, my 55th birthday, I will be ED free for 10 glorious years.

Little by little, I learned how to cope with life on life's terms. Slowly the new skills were being securely ingrained. I was becoming competent and more marketable. During the last 10 years, my husband has had 5 major eye surgeries and for 3 years I worked two jobs to make ends meet. I remember the self talk during the drive home each day from work, mentally noting all I had accomplished and overcome. I was becoming strong and it felt good. I had survived without relapse.

Then came the year of the PTA: Me, who 10 years earlier lived only for alcohol and escape – a PTA President? What a concept! I was thrown into its presidency – never before holding a leadership role and having people rely on my ability to coordinate and follow through. It was the worse and best year of my life. My comfort zone was thoroughly violated, but I persevered. Each hurdle became a little easier and each tangent was helping me to form new goals. I am now half way through earning a Masters in Rehabilitative Counseling at Assumption College where I am also an academic secretary. In December I will have completed the four course graduate program at the Plymouth State University Eating Disorders Institute. After an internship or capstone project, I will be certified by the International Academy of Eating Disorders. For the past several years, I have been advocating for addiction prevention through various local affiliations. Last spring I earned the Lucy Stone Achievement award for making the worked a better place and just recently was honored at the State House in Boston as a Massachusetts Unsung Heroine. Yes, my friends, recovery is better!

Electrolyte imbalances almost took my life several times. My liver was almost to the place of no return. I should be dead. Instead I am living proof that the one can overcome an eating disorder; not just survive this pervasive disease, but thrive and excel beyond expectations. Like the box of puzzle pieces randomly placed on the table, you can craft a new self. Right now there may be no obvious direction but your life is full of possibilities.

Sorting the pieces first, though time consuming, can make the logical starting point more clear. Use a passion from your childhood or develop a new one. Start rebuilding where it was easiest to find success. One piece at a time. The end result can be a picture more beautiful than ever imagined in the beginning. As I said earlier, I believe it is harder to live with the eating disorder than to live without it. With recovery comes joy and a new zest for life. With each change, you can help develop a new identity which can free you from the self-doubts of the past and provide purpose for the future. Slowly you can become the person you always wanted to be. Believe in yourself.