** Colleen’s Story**

When I was eight years old, I wrote my mom a note that read, “I am a girl with a big spirit and soul. No one knows how I am or how I feel because I have a different heart”. I was born with a sensitivity and awareness of the world around me that others didn’t seem to notice. I cried whenever I heard someone yelling. I worried that my friends were mad at me. I was born with a different heart and at the time I didn’t think that was a good thing.

I basically had the perfect storm for an eating disorder to come to my rescue. Like I said, I was a sensitive kid. And people noticed that. In elementary school I was bullied a lot. I just couldn’t find a place to fit. When I was 10 I was emotionally abused by my teacher. She made me feel ashamed for crying and needing help. I was more alienated than ever after that. I learned that you can’t trust the people you think you should trust by default.

Flash forward to being 15/16 years old. I started going through puberty. My body was changing. My life was changing, too. My older brother was away at college and struggling with major depression. My group of friends weren’t particularly emotionally supportive. Most people I knew were dating or had at least dated in the past. I felt very alone and that I would always be alone. I made a promise to myself that I “wasn’t going to be sad anymore”. The perfect opportunity for anorexia to help me cope.

The thing about eating disorders, as we all know, is that they work. At first. I no longer felt sad. I no longer felt anything. I don’t want to spend too much time on the specifics of my eating disorder. That isn’t the real story. I’m fortunate to have a supportive and engaged family and I know that if I didn’t, I wouldn’t be speaking here today. My sister caught on very quickly as I began to unravel and she confronted my parents about my behaviors and personality change. I started seeing a dietitian and eventually a therapist only after a few months of engaging in behaviors. I wasn’t interested in recovery though. I thought I had finally solved my issues of being too sensitive and never quite fitting anywhere just right. I fought my team and my parents over every single bite of food for months. I eventually reached a state where I was extremely unsafe and could no longer ignore what I was really dealing with. There was an effort to keep me in school and at home. I started at IOP for a few weeks, which was definitely not a level of care where I could make progress. I was in Day treatment for two days before my therapist got my lab results back with a bad EKG. My parents were instructed to take me to the ER. I was admitted overnight to have my heart monitored. It was the scariest night of my life and still is. It is hard for me to fathom that really happened to me. I started to see and understand what this was doing to me. Not just to my body, but to my very soul.

I went to residential treatment for almost two months. For Christmas, New Years, and my 17th birthday. For the first few weeks, I was in denial I had a “real” problem and was unwilling to change. I was being completely controlled by my eating disorder. I began to feel a shift though. I think a lot of what sparked the initial change was the other women in the community. At one of my first community meetings, Rachel, a woman about ten years older than me, stood up as she prepared to pass on the “scarf of serenity”. She had tears in her eyes as she said, “I’m giving this to Colleen. She’s young, but I admire her courage and think she should be acknowledged for that”. It was the first time I felt a motivation to change. Not for myself yet, but for the women who had only known me a few days and could see a light in me. I will remember those relationships and connections forever.

I came home in February 2010 a much better place. I was actually motivated to recover and I felt like I had more of a personal identity. Eating disorders are sneaky, so I admit it did slowly integrate itself back into my life. My personal life was truly much better. I had separated myself from my toxic friend group and started branching out. In a way, I was trying to do both- have a life and dabble in an active eating disorder. We all know how that ends up going. In the summer of 2010, I was given an ultimatum by my outpatient team. Turn to my family and older sister for meal support, or have to go back to residential. They wanted to work with me since I was much more responsive to therapy, but I needed to make more progress in terms of my meal plan and how much I was using behaviors. My older sister had just returned from studying abroad and I asked her if she would help me with my meal plan. I said I would probably fight her A LOT in the beginning, but that I really wanted to improve. That summer was painful, but also really transformative. I started my senior year of high school in a great place. I was feeling good about myself, for the first time in almost a decade.

I will keep this part brief. Basically, I experienced some pretty intense cyberbullying my senior year of high school by my classmates and some of their parents. I wanted to disappear. I couldn’t handle it. The school was unwilling to take meaningful action. I felt like I could only go back to my eating disorder to cope. I needed more help and I wanted more help. The second half of my senior year I was homeschooled while going to a PHP that was wonderfully personalized to each client’s needs. I wanted to take ownership of my own recovery. I also knew that I needed to show independence to be able to go to college that fall.

I went to college at RIT for fine art photography. During my recovery process, I tapped into the more creative part of me and found photography to be a great coping mechanism. Photography also helped me express what I was feeling that was too scary or too painful to put into words. I felt out of place growing up, but I finally felt like I had come into my own at RIT. My eating disorder wasn’t at the forefront. I had an amazing group of friends who accepted me and while they didn’t understand EDs, they were patient and loving as I often struggled with body image and continued weight restoration. I also attended an eating disorder support group on my campus in my first and second years at RIT, while staying in touch with my treatment team from home. I moved away from my meal plan. I remember distinctly when it happened for the first time. I was walking around campus with some new friends from my dorm and they wanted to go get a smoothie at the coffee shop. I wanted to be a part of it, but had the meal plan in the back of my head and wondered “if” I could fit the smoothie into my meal plan. I remember thinking, I want to be able to really be here at college. I want to form new relationships and food and spontaneity and casually getting a smoothie on a warm September afternoon is a part of that. I faced challenges while in college. It wasn’t just that I went to college and the eating disorder was just washed away and never tried to “help” me in those times. When I was a sophomore one of my best friends passed away suddenly from non hodkins lymphoma. I remember the ED voice try to creep back in, but my roommate sat with me and held me as I cried and, when I was ready, I ate dinner with her.

When I was a freshman I was sexually assaulted. I shut down and it was a time that very well could have set me into a downward spiral. I’m grateful to my family, friends, and treatment team for guiding me during that painful time. I had always been an avid journaler and I relied on it a lot in my recovery. I still utilize it today. I spent a LOT of time journaling during that time to better understand how I was feeling in my body. The summer after my freshman year, I ended up intuitively turning to yoga. Yoga helped me feel at home in my body, probably for the first time ever.

It was also after this trauma that I started really making more photography projects to process my body as it changed and became healthier. It became a major focus of my personal work and I am proud that I was able to create artwork to engage others in conversation around mental health and eating disorders. I am also proud to say my work has been featured around the world, including at the ICA right here in Boston.

I moved to Boston in 2015 after graduating from RIT. Truthfully, it was a tough transition. My job was unfulfilling, I had a long commute, and I was away from my friends and family. Hmmmm… I wonder what would jump in for a coping mechanism? I had more or less been “ED-free” for three years. I was not expecting it to try to come back. Fortunately, with all the therapy and work I had done for many years, I was extremely self aware. I felt different. My thoughts were becoming filled with eating disorder thoughts and was trying to tell me what I could do to “fix” this feeling of isolation and unfulfillment. I was scared and somewhat in denial. However, this was around the time I started co-leading a support group at MEDA. I spoke with one of the clinicians there about how the transition to Boston had been difficult for me and that I was looking for some extra support.  I found an amazing therapist that I've done transformative work with. I had done a lot of work as "high school Colleen". But this is "adult Colleen".

This is honestly something I was feeling guilty and shame about. I thought I had "dealt" with these negative thoughts and had all my coping mechanisms in my back pocket. But I've learned that - hey, this is the way my brain is wired. And that all my ED wanted to do was try to protect me. But I've had to work at telling myself that while I appreciated its help when I needed it, I really didn't need it any longer.

 For me, my recovery is strong when I have connection. I've always sought after genuine and deep relationships with others. With my new work I've done in therapy as a young adult, I've rediscovered my values. I am not ashamed of my past, I know that I wouldn't be speaking here today had I not gone through an eating disorder. I don't think I would be as engaged in movements I care about, as my past experience has informed of the importance of body diversity and feminism.

 I am not just my siblings' sister. Or the kid in school who never quite fit in. Or the girl who had an eating disorder. I am Colleen. I'm an artist, an activist, a sensitive person. I started grad school this fall studying art therapy. I saw family over the summer and my uncle stated just how perfect that career path is for me. He said, it's really all come together. I didn't ever think it would, but I'm grateful for every step it's taken to get there.

 Now, I’m in graduate school studying clinical mental health counseling with an art therapy specialization. James and I got engaged earlier this year. My eating disorder always told me that I did not deserve love and that even IF i recovered, who would want that baggage? James has been an indescribable support for me and has actively worked to understand my internal experience and eating disorders in general.

 In terms of body image, I have worked to learn to appreciate my body for what it does and what it allows me to do. I’m able to go on walks, dance to songs I love, and get myself to where I need to go and where I WANT to go. Working on my body image also gave me a better sense of self overall- that I don’t look like my mom or my sister or my friends- I just look like me.

 For food, I don’t use a specific meal plan. It’s been a trial and error experience in figuring out what my body TRULY needs and what works for me the best. Personally, I do well when I eat every few hours. I don’t have off limit foods anymore and I definitely don’t count calories. There are still days when I’ll feel uncomfortable and anxious about what I’ve eaten. The difference now is that I know I need to translate those thoughts and uncover what is really going on for me.

 My family and I ultimately have a stronger relationship after helping me in recovery. I feel much more comfortable telling my parents how I am feeling and what’s ACTUALLY going on in my life. That being said, part of my recovery has been gaining independence and feeling like I can be different from my family. Recovery life with my family is using my voice and not backing down on what I believe in.

 Co leading a group at MEDA was very transformative for me, personally and professionally. It helped me realize I want to be an art therapist and work people in recovery from their eating disorders. I knew that I always wanted to use art and creativity to help others, and co leading one of MEDA’s group allowed me to better understand how I could. For my recovery, I learned a lot more about my own journey and found a way to put what I went through in recovery into words. Unexplored areas of my own recovery also came to the surface, which was challenging at the time. I think being in the group strengthened my recovery because it made me more aware of the cyclical thoughts that eating disorders produce and it gave me the space to voice how I broke out of it.

I am currently the co leader of the Project HEAL Boston Chapter. I’m grateful to be a part of such a change-making organization where I can help save lives. Being involved with ED awareness actually is not tricky for me. I chose to speak out about my experience pretty early in my recovery, perhaps *too* early. But it’s always been a motivating action for me. For me, using my voice through advocacy and awareness empowers me, but I think it’s important to note that it does not empower everyone. You need to do what will best serve your recovery.

 If you are interested in sharing your recovery story, try writing it out and reading it to yourself. How does that feel for you? The next step may be reading it to a close friend or family member.

 I met James in early 2013 when we were in college. At first, I opted not to tell him about my history with an eating disorder. Eventually, we were reaching a point in the relationship where we were not communicating effectively. James seemed to have a sense there was something I was not telling him. My history of an eating disorder does not define who I am, but I cannot deny it’s forged the path to where I am now. I decided it was best to open up to James about it so we could have an open, honest relationship. I would say that’s worked out :)

James has been a huge help in my recovery. Ultimately, he has listened and tried to understand why my eating disorder thoughts pop up. He has learned that sometimes I do not need a solution, I just need someone to listen. He can sense when I’m having an off day or just not feeling great in my body. We go grocery shopping together and he’s been teaching me how to cook! In terms of mistakes, I think I want to put that more on diet culture than him as a person. We have both actively worked to reject the diet mentality and embrace health at every size. There’s no dieting in our lives. I must say James has become incredibly media literate and he’s always rolling his eyes right along with me when someone makes a comment about food or weight. He has also learned that recovery is not linear. That is something I really want partners to know.

 I do struggle with ED thoughts from time to time. It’s much easier for me to identify them because of all the good recovery days I experience. The difference now is that I am able to not let them just sit and linger. I will tell someone. I will journal about it. I go to therapy. Any ED thoughts now I can treat as helpful information. What is coming up for me that my brain is responding  with thoughts around food and weight? What can I do to really take care of myself to fight these thoughts? I’m much more in touch with my true creative self and making art has really been cathartic.

 For anyone feeling hopeless- I have felt hopeless. I have listened to recovery stories and said, “wow, this is amazing, but it will never happen for me”. It can. It will. Try to hold on to the thing that keeps you fighting for a recovered life. No matter how big or small. For me, it has been connection and fulfillment. Remember that your full life cannot truly be full with an eating disorder. Even if you can’t find room for hope right now, I will hold that hope for you.