 **Nora’s Story**

Most of my childhood was completely normal, but I do remember my first encounter with an eating disorder thought.  When I was 6 years old my mom and I were in the kitchen listening to the radio and a weight loss infomercial caught my attention.   I memorized the phone number as best as I could before mustering up the courage to tell my mom I wanted to call the number and start the Cookie Diet.  My Mom laughed it off and told me I was crazy but I sat on the floor deep in thought.  At just 6 years old I was already unhappy with my body.  Another memory I have with her was going to a Weight Watchers meeting when I was 3 or 4 years old.  I didn't know much about this program other than its focus on weight. I also remember lots of clapping, laughing, and boredom.

When I was about 9 years old, my parents announced they were getting separated, and soon after they would be divorced. They had been fighting a lot, so I thought I would have been relieved, but the pain that rushed through my body at that moment seemed to take the wind out of me. I never thought this would actually happen. At this part of my life I was a very active child. I was on a gymnastics team and my focus began to shift from my friends at school to my weight and performance in the gym. Each day my friend Casey and I would go to my house and have a snack before practice. One day we decided to weigh ourselves after snacking and it soon became a daily habit. School, snack, weight. School snack weight. The only difference between my friend and I was that I took the number to heart. I still remember the exact number to this day and most of the time I was only a few ounces heavier, but I couldn't get it out of my mind. I was fascinated by weighing myself and comparing the number to my friend. It seemed so normal, but now I see how unhealthy these thoughts were for a nine year old.

I wanted to be just like my mom when I grew up.  I am very lucky to have such an amazing person in my life.  My mom was the more strict adult in our house and I looked up to her as my role model.  As I have grown up I have learned that although sometimes her rules seem unfair she has our best interests in mind and is really trying to be a responsible parent.  Throughout this whole journey my mom was there for me every step of the way. I know there was no way I could have made it to where I am today without her.

I looked up to my dad so much as a little girl. He was my hero. My dad taught me the importance of happiness and how to blast music and dance like nobody's watching. To this day I am proud that my dad truly doesn’t care about what people think of him. He cares about what makes him happy and I’ve learned a lot from him throughout my recovery.  However, a few weeks before I turned 13 I learned what it truly felt like to have a broken heart.  The lies that were always circling around my father were finally exposed and it tore me apart.  The pedestal he was once held so high on in my head had been lowered beneath the ground.  I hated him and told him that.  The words felt like venom seething through my teeth.  I told myself that he was no longer interested in my future and that I was worthless to him.  I tried to convince myself he was nothing to me but on the inside he meant everything to me, and I was dying.  I can remember the empty feeling that surrounded my heart.  It felt tight at first but as time went by I got used to the feeling of having no interest in friends, sports, or my family. Some of the most important aspects of my life had suddenly held no interest for me and everytime I opened my mouth to explain it, tears poured from my eyes.  All of these thoughts and feelings put me into a really dark place and I started therapy to try to make sense of it all.

At this point I was about to enter seventh grade, I was seeing my therapist Cheryl twice a week, and my relationship with food was decent. My mom had told me that if I could not “get myself together” then we would have to go to a psychiatrist for medication. The thought of being on medication at such a young age was my motivation for picking myself up from the sadness I was feeling. Unfortunately, I was too deep in my thoughts at this point. I was started on Prozac in November of 2013. I did not make it through a day without crying for at least thirty minutes and abusing my body had become a daily habit. I was entering a new part of my life, and the dark side welcomed me with open arms. It was at this time when I started restricting a lot more than usual. I used apps and calendars to keep track of the calories I consumed and spent most days trying to burn off all the calories I ate through vigorous exercising. I can remember one day I was on the elliptical and my heart rate was low. I knew this wasn't healthy, but I kept pushing because the calories meant more than my safety. For me the days were all mostly the same. My body felt exhausted, I couldn't seem to speak the right words, my eyes felt like loose doors of an auditorium full of tears, that just wouldn't stay shut. My eating disorder was my way of numbing the pain I felt inside. The feeling of sadness stings, but after a while you get used to it. Kind of like when you stretch after a workout, it hurts at first then feels really good, but once you stop stretching your body cannot adjust and gets very sore. My anorexia and bulimia was like stretching, and without it I couldn't operate.

Just being sad got boring. My mind was in a terrible place and the thoughts in my head did not express the true pain I felt. I began to realize I could not run from what was in my head. The pain was everywhere. In the music I listened to, in the tears I cried, in the people I saw, everything reminded me of the sadness in my mind. At times I felt as if my mind was a maze and I was lost in the scary part.  I simply could not get away from it. I became fascinated with ways to hurt myself, depriving my body of the nutrition it needs to survive, and suicidal thoughts. As a perfectionist my depression and eating disorder was not just something I could turn on and off. It was a full time job, with responsibilities, punishments, and goals. I was in control of my future and I could not screw up now. Being in control of my body was all I cared about. My mind was being drowned in loud “ed” thoughts but it was so hard to distinguish if it was me or my eating disorder talking because we both sounded the same.  At this point I felt as if I had hit rock bottom. I no longer wanted to live this way so I decided one day the world just was not for me. Fortunately my sister caught me counting my sleeping pills and stopped me from doing something stupid, but this was not the last time these thoughts coursed through my brain.

In the spring of 2014 my eating disorder had taken on an insane cycle of restricting, binging, and purging. Scales were a constant trigger while in the throes of my eating disorder. Weighing myself often had become normal. The numbers on the scale were not just symbols, they were my entire world. The number symbolized my failures, my pain, my shame, my guilt, all at once. My weight was a constant reminder that I would never be good enough. No matter how much the weight on the scale fluctuated my goal kept getting farther away.  It was impossible.  I was running myself to the ground. I was living in a place I felt I did not belong. I remember crying in my moms arms every afternoon. She continued to ask me what was wrong but the issue with depression is that sometimes it is everything, and other times it is nothing. I told her I wanted to die. I looked into my mother's eyes and told her I no longer wanted to live. I will never forgive myself for telling the person who brought me into this world that I wish she never had.  On top of ED’s voice screaming in my head I struggled every single day with thoughts of my dad.  The sadness that burned from inside was now seeping through my skin, and my lips could no longer conceal the dark thoughts that raced in my head. I was so tired. Tired of crying in my moms car before lacrosse practice and walking in being stared at. Tired of being a disappointment. Tired of the same numbers on the scale. Tired of being so hungry I felt full. Tired of waking up dizzy. Tired of making myself sick. Tired of the sadness. Tired of hurting. Tired of living this way, but I did not know anything else. My eating disorder was my life.

The day I gave up on ruining my body was the most relieving day of my life.   I told my mom that I didn’t feel safe anymore.  She didn’t understand what I meant so I showed her what I had done to myself.  That night she took all the razors out of the shower and I slept in her bed with her. I finally felt safe in my house.  We went to the therapist and discussed my behavior and I agreed that I would no longer hurt myself.

 A few nights later my mother found me out in the yard.  I told her that I was getting some fresh air but that was not the truth.  I was using behaviors. As she ordered me to come inside and I walked up the back steps in shame. My throat was sore, my cheeks were puffy, and water flooded the back of my eyes. The next morning she went outside and confirmed that I had been lying.  She confronted me and I continued to try to lie and deny but she wasn’t buying it.

The next day in school I realized that was my last straw. I went to the bathroom and looked at myself in the mirror. I no longer recognized the eyes looking back at me because they were not longer filled with life. I burst into tears on the bathroom floor and when I finally got back up and went back into the middle school library I told my best friend Chloe what was going on with me. She explained that she noticed how little I was eating and was concerned but did not know what to do. It felt so much better to get some of the thoughts off my chest. That afternoon I finally told my mom what was going on with me. She wasn’t furious, angry or upset like I thought she would be.  She was just sad - her eyes lacked the anger I had expected and instead they just burst with sadness.

 I realized that I needed to ask for help - real help.  Not just visiting a therapist twice a week or taking Prozac every morning.  I needed to shut off the voice in my head that told me I was a disappointment because for the first time I recognized that voice was not right.  I realized that if I continued to do everything my eating disorder told me to do, I wouldn't make it to my 14th birthday.  I told my mom that I wanted to find treatment.

The next day I skipped school to attend an intake at a local eating disorder treatment center, little did I know I would not return to finish seventh grade. I remember my intake like it was yesterday. The receptionist asked what I was there for and my mom answered politely and afterwards we waited about fifteen minutes before a counselor named Sara brought us into a room. I sat on a couch in the corner, pulling at my black and grey patterned shirt, making sure I didn't look too fat. I remember being so worried that she wouldn't believe I had an eating disorder because I was fat. She asked me various questions and I answered them honestly. For once someone seemed to get what I was going through and was not judging me. Every time I looked at my mom I saw the tears building up in her eyes, but this was one of the most relieving moments of my life. I knew that I was finally understood and this was a safe place. After they finished asking me questions I was taken out of the room so my mom and Sara could talk privately. Once I was invited back in Sara gave me the option between starting the IOP program or having the residential treatment. At this point I knew I was deciding between life or death.  After telling her I didn't feel safe alone at night she scribbled some notes onto her paper and told me a bed would be ready for me on the second floor by tomorrow. She gave me a tour of the teenage floor, but little did I know that would soon become my home. My life was about to be turned upside down and I was only 13 years old. My mom and I cried the whole ride home and I remember her telling me “you might be the first of your friends to go through this, but you won't be the last.” That night I called my friends over and explained to them what was going on and assured them that this was best for me.  They came and helped me pack and I said goodbye. That was May 22, 2014.

The next two weeks I spent at the residential program. I was on lockdown and I no longer had any control of my own decisions. While in residential I met some of the most beautiful girls that I still remember to this day. Their small words of advice are what really kept me on track.  When my insurance company would no longer cover residential treatment I switched to IOP.  In total, I spent three months doing a lot of work on myself.   The time I spent there was one of the hardest experiences of my life.  I learned to deal with my emotions and not go back to eating disorder behaviors while living at home. Eventually I was discharged from treatment a few days before the Fourth of July and it felt as if I was starting a new life.

Throughout this journey I have learned that everyone goes through hard stuff sometimes. My 17 year old brother told me he struggled with depression, along with my mom.  My Nana and uncle opened up to me about their alcohol addiction. My aunt also told me about her bipolar disorder. One day a girl in school told me she was just starting prozac and said she felt like I was the only person who would understand what she was going through. That day I came home from school crying, because I finally understood what my mom said to me. I might be the first to go through such a hard time at such a young age in my school, but I would not be the last. One of my best friends to this day also opened up to me about his OCD and I found it an honor that he trusted me with this information. It is at times like these where I don't feel so alone anymore. I feel like my eating disorder was not my fault, and that it was just what life handed to me.

Like I said earlier recovery can be beautiful yet ugly. To this day I still struggle to maintain a good mood. I would love to say that I don't have trigger foods, and I don't ever wake up in the middle of the night from having a bad dream about food, don’t check my body in the mirror in the morning, but unfortunately I cannot, yet I am extremely excited for my future plans. This fall I was captain of my high school soccer team, elected as a representative of my class in student council, and just recently made the Varsity North Reading High School Lacrosse team as a freshman. I also take great pride in my dedication of following my meal plan and practicing healthy exercise.

Just recently I went to the doctor's office for a physical. Something about the doctors really gives me a bad feeling. I constantly feel so judged there, although it is a facility known to make people feel better. I stepped on the scale backwards as usual, explaining that I did not want to know my weight. Throughout the exam I was nervous so reminded them a few times not to tell me my weight. I realized I must have sounded a little annoying but in all honesty I didn't think I could handle knowing the numbers written on that sheet of paper. For me, my weight is something I may always be ashamed of. No matter how small the number I may never really be happy with it. Unfortunately this is the nature of eating disorders. There's always a small part of me that wants to know the number, but the other part urges me that what I don't know cannot hurt me. Finally at the end of the appointment the pediatrician handed me a sheet of paper that had all of my information. including my weight written in pounds and kilograms. My eyes read the number quickly, swallowing the information like a dry pill that gets stuck in your throat. These digits coursed through my veins faster than I could think. The numbers felt as if they had been branded to my forehead. I was no longer Nora. I was a number. After gathering my thoughts I told my mom what had happened and she went to the doctor and explained that I was upset. We had told her several times to not show my weight, but unfortunately she didn't understand the significance this number had on me. This place I had once felt was safe, no longer was to me.

Every experience teaches us something.  What I learned from that day was that I handled knowing my weight. It was hard trying to unknow what I had just found out but I felt as if it happened for a reason. I truly never thought I would be able to see those numbers and not relapse. But knowing that I saw them and did not act on my sadness shows me that recovery is possible. It shows me how far I’ve come and all the therapy and tears and explaining was worth it because look at me. I know my weight and at this point I told a few of my friends and I’m starting to feel comfortable again. Now this doesn't mean I will let my mom put the scale back in the bathroom, or no longer worry about sticking to my meal plan. It just means I’m working on recovery and I’m a few steps closer.

Support systems have been a major part of my overall recovery.  Three people that I think about when I picture my support system are my mom, my little sister, and my art teacher. Throughout this journey my mom was there for me the entire time. Even when she would come into my room trying to talk to me and I just buried my head into my pillow crying I could hear her breathing right beside me. Throughout all the denying and hiding I had done she still stayed by my side. Another major support is my little sister Celia. Celia learned what depression, anxiety, and eating disorders were when she was just 11 years old because she watched me go through it. Celia has become an expert on reading people’s emotions. On some of my worst days she knew exactly what and what not to say. Every single night, no matter how grouchy or much I had been ignoring her all day she said “goodnight, I love you, sweet dreams,” before she fell asleep. I remember the first night after coming home from treatment and my mom, brother, and sister brought home a bag of “gifts” for me. I eagerly unwrapped the measuring cups and food scale as tears welled up in my eyes. At this moment I knew that my entire family was here to support me, and although they did not know exactly how much it meant to me, I could see that they were trying to understand and help. The last person who was there for me when I needed her the most was my middle school art teacher Ms. O'Brien. I can remember many days when I was very upset, I walked straight past the guidance counselor's office to her room. I am not sure what it is about her that makes me feel so comfortable. I remember the day I told her why I had not been in school for so long. She did not have to say anything, I just knew that she was someone I could trust. From then on to this day I see her as one of the most supportive people I know. I definitely have told her way more than any other teacher of mine knows, but no matter what I always see her as a very mature and wise friend.

So throughout this journey you can imagine I have had a few experiences and techniques to help me through it, and I would love to share these with everyone. First of all whenever I have a problem, small or large I talk about it or journal. I have learned that I process information much better when it is out of my system and I can work it out with someone else. Usually if my mom isn’t available to chat I talk to my closest friends Mary, Casey, and Chloe. Although they don’t always know what to say, the fact that they care and try to understand means enough. I never expected my 15 year old friends to understand how to help someone having a panic attack, or to stop talking about food and calories all together. I could not be more grateful for the friends I have today. At times I get frustrated if they don’t agree with plans I make or we can’t decide on what to do but at the end of the day I know they will always be there for me. I know with this great support system comes the responsibility to help them if they are ever struggling and it is in times like these that I am grateful for these experiences because I know how to make it a little better. I also find comfort in holding frozen oranges. I remember some of the worst panic attacks I had in treatment were easily resolved with the sensation of a freezing object numbing my hands. I also really enjoy drawing and crocheting. The most important piece of advice I would like to give you all is a tool I use when I feel extremely triggered. I say to myself, “If I still want to use this behavior in 24 hours I can, but for now I need to wait until then to do anything.” I used this very early in my recovery, especially on hard nights where I felt alone. I can promise you all that every morning after I woke up from restraining from a behavior I was so grateful I had not done it. I can assure you that this thought of waiting for an allotted amount of time has kept me in recovery. At triggered times I like to remember that using behaviors is a permanent solution to a temporary problem.

A lot of times in my life I have underestimated my willpower. At points I thought I had decided I did not want to live. I thought I was unlovable. I thought I could never recover from my eating disorder. It was a blessing just to finish dinner and keep it down. Thoughts of the future were toxic to me because my anxiety held me so far back. But at other points I am able to realize I am one of the strongest people I know. I have dealt with true feelings of hatred, self loathing, extreme hunger, nutrition deprivation, and lack of life in my eyes. And I asked for help that saved my life. I worked every single day even when it hurt to get out of bed. Even when I felt like there was too much food on my plate. I got back on my two feet and proved to everyone that I am not weak. I am not just a kid. I am beautiful. The greatest lesson I have learned through this journey is that I am the all the words I speak, and the smiles I try to hide. I am the songs I sing loudly and all the tears I have cried. I am the places I have been to and the one I call home. I am the things that I believe in and the people that I love. I am Nora Standel and I am not bulimia.