

A Balanced Life through Faith

Janel, a 31 year-old Chinese American woman, is director of the Cambridge-Somerville Recovery Learning Community (CSRLC). The CSRLC is a resource center sponsored by Vinfen and the Metro Boston Recovery Learning Community. Its mission is to support the vocational and educational goals of persons with lived experience of a psychiatric condition. Speaking to Janel by phone on February 5, 2014, I asked about her experience with mental health difficulties and challenges: when did they start, how did her family react, and were there cultural issues that helped or hindered her recovery?

Janel described her early mental health condition as "when I got severe anxiety." She was living at home in New Jersey, going to college and majoring in accounting. She describes her family culture as "Caucasian/Asian". Janel's Asian upbringing and values included a strong desire from her parents that she be a high achiever in school and then achieve success later at a career. However, being born and raised in a predominately Caucasian New Jersey community, Janel's values were heavily influenced by the American lifestyle.

Her first experience with depression and anxiety occurred in 2002 during her sophomore year, and she was unable to do her schoolwork. She left college for a semester. Janel's family was torn, not wanting other people to know, yet realizing that she needed professional help. She did finally see various doctors, including a primary care physician and a few psychiatrists. Janel feels that she was dismissed by these providers - "They would not hear me out. I had no relationship with them...they did not take the time to understand what stressors might be going on with me. They just wanted to patch it up with a pill."

In the spring, Janel had a mental breakdown that led to mania. Janel was hospitalized and at first her parents didn't tell anyone, "But they decided to tell my college friends." Her friends came to visit her in the hospital and brought her food, "Something quite important in my culture." The hospital was a better experience than her previous treatment. Janel recalled that they gave her "lots of meds." She felt that the hospital was better because "there was a nurse I could trust there. She was a nurturing person who allowed me to decide whether I would participate in the group activities or not." Janel could work with art supplies if she preferred. "Working with your hands can be very healing and calming when in a state of mania."

Janel feels that her "faith in God" is the reason she was able to keep going and recover. After the hospital, Janel was still unsure and "did not know what to do with the rest of my life," but she eventually decided to go to school for Mental Health Counseling and Behavioral Medicine, and received her Master's Degree in 2007. Janel worked for a mental health company until she had "an episode" at work. After this, Janel decided that she would like to work as a peer, and was hired by the same agency as a Program Director of a Recovery Learning Center! She was a little nervous about going to work with the same people she had been working with prior to her episode at work, but she found that her co-workers and supervisors were friendly and supportive.

In her recovery, Janet reflects, she was angry about her early treatment, but her faith in God kept her going. She looked forward to "having recovery and moving forward professionally and

personally.” In her current job, she helps people with lived experience develop coping and wellness strategies to better manage their mental health challenges in their daily lives. She also helps them gain needed skills and confidence to move forward with their life goals, whether that be vocational, educational or other life goals. She sees it as her role to help people “build self-esteem and self-confidence.”

She tells people about her mental health history, and how she has moved forward not only in recovery, but also in overall wellness, developing new friendships and relationships. She reflects that in her family there may have been an Asian emphasis on being “academically-focused, getting A’s and having a career.” Through faith, therapy, and finding her own supportive communities, she believes that she now has a better sense of a balanced life between work and leisure and physical and mental health. Janel feels that a balanced life contributes not only to recovery, but also to overall wellness.