



Crestwood Recovery Resilience Solutions

Fall Seven Times Get up Eight

By: Douglas Meron

In 2020 when the pandemic began spreading, I was dealing heavily with mental health symptoms and was a resident of Crestwood Behavioral Health. For the past twenty years, I have been in and out of the mental health system. I started to believe that this cycle would continue for the rest of my life. Throughout these setbacks, I was fortunate that my Mom never gave up on me. Oliver Goldsmith said, “Life is a journey that must be traveled no matter how bad the roads and accommodations.” Despite these challenges, the hope that things would improve was the best medicine.

At Crestwood, my symptoms looked like a plot by all the patients to crucify me. This was a terrifying state of mind. I listened to music on the radio and it was almost like the radio described my innermost thoughts. I didn’t dare share the horror that was going on in my mind. To cope with the situation, I researched good news on the Internet and started a good newsgroup. If there could be good news during COVID-19, then I could find a silver lining to my situation.

After spending a year in an alternate universe, my time at Crestwood came to an end. I was discharged to Casa Pacifica (an Assisted Residential Facility) in Oceanside, California. This was my third time at Casa Pacifica. My symptoms remained and I began to refuse to take my medications, which intensified the symptoms. I was almost at the end of my stay at Casa Pacifica and faced the prospect of going to a group home. Right before I was placed, I had a meltdown at Casa Pacifica and ended up in the hospital. This seemed like a sign that the vicious cycle would continue. Now looking back upon this, being sent to the hospital was a blessing in disguise. If I went to the group home, my days would look like staying in bed for most of the day while battling symptoms without as much care as received at Casa Pacifica.

At County Mental Health, my symptoms persisted; however, I was able to take my meds supervised. At the hospital, I questioned my symptoms and had some moments of clarity. In

the mental health community asking if the symptoms are true is known as reality testing. I called my family and friends and continued to reality test. I still had symptoms, the hospital workers listened to me and assured me that this hospital stay wouldn't last forever. After a few months, I was discharged from the hospital and went back to Crestwood Behavioral Health. The hospital workers held the hope for me that I would be successful at CBH. I was proud that I read a couple of books when I was in the hospital.

When I arrived at Crestwood (my second time around) I was determined to get better. I did enough reality testing that I began to question my delusions. I focused better and read several books. This had been the first time in a while that I read so much. Once again, I would call my Mom and her partner Michael to continue the reality testing. I began going to the art groups at Crestwood and found it therapeutic to find my inner artist. Also, I built up relationships with the staff at CBH and did reality testing with them. When I am well I still have symptoms such as someone wearing a t-shirt such as "Have a Good Day," and for that t-shirt to be a direct message to me. The difference is when I'm having fewer symptoms, I can reality-check that thought with myself, and these "messages" happen less frequently. When I am caught up in symptoms I am in a reality that differs from most people. At Crestwood, I began to truly accept myself for who I am which bolstered my self-esteem. I took a break from talking to my Mom to practice my assertiveness and independent skills. It was scary not talking to my Mom for a month, but when we came back together we had a relationship with more boundaries. Throughout the years, my Mom rescued me from some scary situations. I developed more self-confidence and when Valentine's Day came up, I made a card to myself that said, "I love Douglas." I experimented with a yoga practice and even tried Zumba dancing while I was at Crestwood.

I thought to myself that if I continued to do things like I had been doing I would have the same results, which is known as the definition of insanity. At Crestwood, I discovered that I had a lot more interests than I had before. One simple thing that I did every day was completing a word search puzzle. I enjoyed the word search puzzles because it was something that had answers and I could feel proud that I completed something that day. I went through a bout of insomnia at Crestwood and started doing yoga as early as 3 AM. Yoga was a way to still the mind and link the mind and body together. I used to think it was weird when people in the mental health field talked about having coping tools in one's toolkit. At Crestwood, I developed many coping tools that I never had. Another thing, I practiced gratitude every single day. I made sure to express gratitude to my Mom and Michael for never giving up on me. I started to contact friends I hadn't talked to in a while (due to delusions) and rebuilt my support system. I couldn't have reached my recovery goals without my family, friends, and the kind staff at Crestwood.

Previously I thought it was extremely difficult to be at a place like Crestwood. I reframed it and looked at Crestwood as a luxury to have 24 hours to work on my recovery. The first time I was in 2

Crestwood it felt like my soul was crawling in my skin, the second time I viewed Crestwood as a sanctuary to get better. Once again, I didn't want to discharge to a board and care. I decided that I would go to Hummingbird, a step-down facility on the same campus as Crestwood. There was a waiting list to get into Hummingbird, but I was determined to wait until a spot came up.

Another tool I developed at Crestwood was improving my writing skills. Crestwood has a program called Dream Catchers, which allows clients to get paid to work while in the hospital. I met with the job developer and determined that I could start up a newsletter while I was in the hospital and get paid for it. In college, I got paid to write for UC Riverside's Daily Highlander. I considered it a blessing to become a paid writer once again. I called the newsletter the Crestwood Crossroads. In a typical newsletter, I would offer coping skills for the clients at the hospital, I would interview a staff member, write poetry or help other clients develop their poetry skills. For many years, I had been on Social Security Disability and thought I would never be part of the paid working force again. It gave me the confidence to get paid what to do what I loved to do.

Finally one day in October of 2022, my service coordinator Savannah came to me and said she had the good news that Hummingbird had an opening for me. I had worked with an art therapist to come up with what I would have to do to maintain the progress that I made at Crestwood and continue to grow. I kept what was working for me and found an online template called Productive Day. The Productive Day template included today's goals, today's meals, a to-do list, a gratitude section, today's priorities, and an hour-by-hour breakdown of the day. I developed a routine of waking up and writing a one-page summary with my opposite of the previous day and what is on tap for the current day and then throwing that page away. Next, I would fill out the productive day template to plan out my day. Some of the daily things to do were to do a word search puzzle, complete a Sudoku puzzle, listen to a gratitude meditation, read the newspaper, walk for at least an hour a day, complete some mindful coloring, practice yoga, and read a book. This practice would keep me productive and I use it daily as a way to maintain wellness.

When I got to Hummingbird, I started up another newsletter called The Hummingbird Harmony. At Hummingbird, there was a system where you could earn the privilege to go out into the community. I advanced rapidly through the system and earned the privilege to go out into the community by myself. In December of 2022, I went through training to become a peer support specialist. The training program was 80 hours of classroom work over two weeks. Unlike some of my college courses, the training was practical. We practiced role-playing asking clients open-ended questions and we learned a great deal about ourselves in the process. The main point of the class was to use our experience of living with a mental health challenge to help our peers rediscover their strengths.

After graduation from the class, I began to work as a peer support specialist at Crestwood. During

the internship, I had Maria as a mentor. Maria was instrumental in helping me when I was in the hospital and now we have a different relationship. It felt so amazing to come back to the hospital that I once had been in and tell my story to clients in the hospital. I had come full circle and gained confidence by helping others. In the peer support class, they talked about the concept of mutuality. It helped me solidify my recovery by helping others and it was a total win-win situation. The internship was 106 hours and it was a time of joy. My days were full of working the Hummingbird program and completing the internship.

After the completion of the internship we had the “Gladuration”. I will always remember the “Gladuration” from the peer support class. I read a poem and gave a small speech. The moderator asked if any parents would like to say anything. Michael raised his hand and said that this was the best version of Douglas he had ever seen. After graduation, my Mom and Michael took me to one of my favorite restaurants. We took several pictures during the graduation and at the restaurant and my Mom looked at the pictures and said I looked radiant. The peer support graduation was one of the best days of my life.

I continued working as a peer support after graduation, but no longer needed supervision. My days were full, I worked two hours each day from Monday through Friday as a peer support while continuing to integrate into the community. I was a model citizen at Hummingbird and was the only one in the program to have a single room. At this point, my Mom and Michael would go out each weekend into the community going out to a cafe and playing Scrabble. I even mentor residents of Hummingbird on how to develop coping skills and work the program. I loved to teach groups about gratitude and share with my peers how important practicing gratitude can be to one’s recovery. After working on the program at Hummingbird, it became clear that I was ready to graduate from the program. The glitch was I was still in conservatorship. The conservator talked to me and I explained that I learned to be med-compliant, love myself unconditionally, and had more coping tools than ever before. After the conversations, the conservator decided I no longer needed to be in conservatorship. This meant I could determine where I would go after discharging from Hummingbird. Due to regulations, Hummingbird told me I had three months to find a new home. I felt overwhelmed and wondered if I would have to have a roommate that I met almost blindly off the Internet. I was determined to use my networking skills to help me find a new living situation. While I was in Hummingbird, I went to a support group. I contacted the moderator of the support group (who is very social) and asked him if he knew anyone looking for a roommate. I wrote down that I was looking for a place that was drug/alcohol-free, had a friendly roommate, was close to bus stops, had a washer and dryer, was close to a supermarket, with my bathroom and bedroom. This is when I met Elise, who was a friend of the moderator and she had a place with everything I was looking for and in my price range. I gave my Mom Elise’s number and they hit it off. I had found the perfect roommate and would discharge from Hummingbird to Elise’s condo.

I got exactly the living situation I wanted. Before I was discharged from Hummingbird, I went on a weekend-long retreat with my church. I wanted to go on a similar retreat six months ago but was denied because I was still in conservatorship. This retreat was the first weekend I spent away from the mental health system in four years. It was a great dress rehearsal for living on my own and I met a couple of men on the retreat who became part of my growing support system. I gained confidence at that retreat that I could indeed live independently.

In the middle of October of 2023, I moved to Elise's condo in Hillcrest, an urban part of San Diego. I now was independent and responsible for paying bills, taking my meds, cleaning my home, and cooking meals. Right around the time I moved into Elise's place my favorite baseball team the Philadelphia Phillies were in the National League Championship series. I knew Elise would be a friend because we watched the championship series together and bonded as roommates. Part of living independently was continuing to work at Crestwood as a peer support specialist. I took the 10 bus from Hillcrest to Crestwood two times a week to work. Everything was new and I had to find new connections in Hillcrest. It was great that I could walk everywhere that I needed to go or if it was too far I could take the bus. My Mom and Michael continued to visit me once a week and we would go out for breakfast and play Scrabble. I soon discovered that Elise is an outstanding Scrabble player. I played Scrabble with Elise and every so often Elise would accompany us to breakfast and beat us in Scrabble.

In Hillcrest, there was a liberal church right next to where I lived. In addition, the church that I went on the retreat with was within walking distance. I also joined a Toastmasters group called Career Builder's Toastmasters. I continued to utilize all the skills I learned the previous couple of years. I had manifested a positive brand new life for myself. Now my weeks are filled with volunteering at Brooks Theatre (a playhouse in Oceanside), going to shows at Brooks with friends, seeing my Mom and Michael weekly, going to church, of course working two days a week at Crestwood, going to events at a local library, going to Toastmaster's, food shopping, cleaning, cooking, to name a few things. I never have a day where I don't have things to do.

Recently, I went from transitioning from Crestwood's Dream Catcher program to a Crestwood employee. Once again, I get so much from sharing my story with my peers and listening to them using reflexive listening and compassion. I could hardly dream of such a lovely life three years ago. I know that I need to take my medications to maintain such a high quality of life. I am grateful for everything I went through. Going through the hard times makes the good times even sweeter. I enjoy my time off from work engaging in meaningful relationships with friends and staying active on a shoestring budget. I look forward to continuing to grow professionally and personally. One of my favorite quotes is "Don't go through life, grow through life."