Everything was dark. I felt alone and isolated from the world and I didn’t feel like anyone could or would understand what I was going through. My feet felt like they were held down by cement blocks. Every step seemed to weigh me down more. Conversations seemed drawn out and torturous and pleasantries seemed completely unnecessary. Everything took so much energy and effort. My soul felt like it was being slowly sucked out of my body. I lived like this day in and day out. Not knowing where to turn for help not knowing if there were others out there like myself. Pain and misery followed me around every corner and it seemed no matter how hard I tried it would never stop. Hopelessness and helplessness consumed me. I stopped reaching out to others. I withdrew. I didn’t believe this feeling would ever evict itself from my being. My grades began slipping and I began socializing less. For awhile I tried to fake my way through it. I tried to pretend to be happy but my attempts at looking “normal” faded. Anguish and suffering took its place. Drugs and alcohol became a way to escape my emotional rollercoaster. I’ll never forget those days. I’ll never forget people trying to “cheer me up.” What they didn’t understand was that I was in a deep dark place and their “pull your boot straps up” mentality wasn’t working for me.

I was 16 when I attempted suicide. It’s not something I’m proud of. It’s not a romanticized or noble act. For me it was an act from an individual that was being tortured every day. Tortured and sorrowed by life itself. The simplest tasks such as brushing my teeth or combing my hair became anxiety provoking tasks. My dark days are certainly not my favorite, but it’s important you understand where I was to understand how I got to where I am now.

It was the day before Halloween. I remember because there was a crepe paper pumpkin on my breakfast tray the morning I awoke in the hospital. My mind was foggy and I was confused. I looked around the room reading the letters on the wall. I thought it was peculiar that they would write the word Cab over and over again on the border surrounding my room. It wasn’t until later that day that I realized I was in a pediatric unit and the letters where abc, but whoever the person was putting up the border had started on the letter C. I tried to laugh and smile when people came in. I tried to tell jokes and pretend everything was ok. I was embarrassed about what I had done and terrified at the fact that I might have to talk about it. Now everyone was going to know I was different. They were going to know that there was something wrong with me. Would they make fun of me? Would they laugh? Would they deny my pain? I wasn’t sure but all I knew was that if I thought things were hard before they were going to be harder now.

Mental illness runs in my family. It’s not something that anyone liked to talk about. Or at least it felt that way. Was I “disturbed?” Was I “crazy”? Would my parents and my friends abandon me? I wasn’t sure and I was scared to find out.

When I left the hospital my parents were given “resources,” which just consisted of therapists and psychiatrists in the area. I was told that I needed to seek therapy and take psychiatric medication. I went through many therapists and psychiatrists ...10 or more? I just didn’t feel like I connected with anyone. Some of them might have not been good doctors but the fact was I wasn’t ready to accept that I had a
mental illness and everyone around me just kept pretending that nothing ever happened. Nobody knew what to say or how to act around me. I didn’t know what to say. I didn’t know what to do and there was no one there to guide me. I was never told that I had a specific diagnosis or given any support groups to go to. Nobody wanted to talk about what happened, throwing me into and even deeper isolation.

Previously, I had been an honor roll student. My last two years I skipped school frequently and began engaging even more in drugs and alcohol to relieve my anxiety, depression and the battle I faced every day. I managed somehow to muddle through high school. I still had suicidal thoughts frequently but I thought if I continued this path that I could squash them down with substances.

I was accepted to college and I thought my life would change. I would be on my own and things would be better. I really tried when I went to college. I tried to pull things together. I vigilantly wrote in a journal and slowed down my abuse of drugs and alcohol. Things seemed to be getting better but then my mood started fluctuating beyond my control. One day I woke up and decided I was going to run for the student Senate and fix the school. I also signed up for all honors classes, signed up to be a double major in Psychology and English, and even put in an application to become a skydive instructor. A few hours later I contemplated ending my life. I lost track of time frequently. I would fall asleep in class or I would be bouncing of the walls and jittering in seat. I decided I needed help. I knew I could no longer do this on my own. I began seeing a counselor at the school and a psychiatrist and was diagnosed with bipolar disorder. It was the first time in my life I had felt any relief. I knew now what I had. It had a name. It was real. It wasn’t just me and it was manageable.

I would love to say the story ends there and I magically started my medication and went to therapy and everything was “a ok.” But that’s not how it worked out for me. I went through many years of taking medications or not taking medications and self-medicating with drugs and alcohol. Besides struggling with a mood disorder I also struggled with who I was. I struggled with what I was. It wasn’t until years later that I was able to finally distinguish the fact that I HAVE bipolar disorder, not that I AM bipolar disorder. I believe acceptance of your disorder whatever it may be is truly the key to recovery. With acceptance I could look at it objectively. This is not who I am it’s something I have and it is treatable. I wish I could tell you the day, the time, that exact moment when that epiphany hit me but it came gradually over time.

For years I have been attending therapy, seeking psychiatric treatments, and reading everything I can get my hands on to learn more information about this disorder that had stunted my life. I wish I had all the answers. I wish I had the key that I could hand over to the next person I meet, but I don’t. Not yet. I believe that everyone suffers differently and recovers a little differently. Finding the right treatment for you whatever that may be. Therapy and medication works for me as well as paying attention and being more in tune with myself. When I get angry or upset I know how to work my way through it. If I’m a little more sad or happy than usual I ask myself why? Does this emotion make sense? If they don’t, I start to go over the things in my life that could be exacerbating the situation. Am I sleeping enough? Am I sleeping too much? Have I been actively taking my medication at the times and frequency that I am supposed to? Do I have added stressors in my life? Which ones can I work on? Which ones can I
eliminate? These are very basic things but for someone like myself these triggers could cause me to end up becoming suicidal or manic. Balance it so important.

I’ve also reached out to find a support network. As a psychology major I decided to attend a NAMI (National Alliance on Mental Illness) class. It was there that I met some wonderful people that were very empathetic to my situation. In this class I was able to see someone do a speech called “In Our Own Voice (IOOV).” It was someone just like me talking about what it was like to be in recovery and how to maintain stability. The day I saw that presentation my life drastically changed. I wanted to become more involved I wanted to do something that no one had done when I was suffering. I wanted to talk about it. I feel like talking about it takes away from the stigma associated with mental illness. In turn it is easier for an individual who is struggling to accept their diagnosis and get the help they need and move on with their lives. I attended the IOOV training in 2011 and have been doing IOOV presentations since then. It fills my heart with joy and sometimes even moves me to tear up at the end of a presentation. I’ve never felt so good about myself. I don’t see looks of hate or judgment. I see people who are hearing my story and are moved. All those times that I felt people didn’t understand it was because I didn’t have the words to tell them what I was feeling in a coherent way. After starting IOOV I began to attend many different NAMI meetings. I currently run a support group for other individuals with mental illness and they are some of the most amazing people I have ever met. I can understand that someone without a mental illness may not understand what they are going through. But what I can’t understand is how one could not look at these individuals and hear their story and have anything but admiration for the struggles that they overcome every day. I’m very proud to be a facilitator to a group of such extraordinary people.

I currently work full time and I spend most of my free time doing volunteer work for NAMI. I am currently an IOOV presenter, Connection (peer support group) facilitator, and a Walk Committee member. NAMI’s goal to provide education, advocacy and support has become mine. Knowledge is power and the more people know and understand the less stigma there will be. Less stigma will then lead to more individuals being able to accept their biologically based disorders and others to be able to talk about it. I have made a vow to myself to use my personal experience to help others. Reducing stigma and increasing support from the community as well as making mental health as important as physical health conditions is a priority. The more I talk about my journey the better I feel and the more I realize that people don’t see me as Bipolar. They see me as Tricia.