

FROM COCOON TO BUTTERFLY

Shelia's Story

In order for my story of recovery not to be so painful, I use the transformation of one of God's most remarkable creations that transforms and that would be the butterfly, but first I would like to tell you why because I have a very painful story. I am a 53 year old black woman whose mother was **once told that I would not ever have a chance for recovery.**

I have been connected to the mental health system since 1985, my very first attempt of suicide, followed by 18 more times. Each time I tried, the doctors would say that I knew what I was doing, but **it wasn't my time to go yet** and someone up there just must think you are very special. I can remember the 19th attempt, I almost made it, but there was an officer of the law holding my hand and praying for me and I could see him as I was in and out of a drugged state. The last words I remember before they took me to the psychiatric floor was, "Why do you want to die, **you are a beautiful young lady with a purpose to live** for and God is not going to take you until it is time." He stayed with me until they admitted me. Those are words that haunted me for a very long time. So **I was stuck between wanting to live and wanting to die**, just existing. It was like being a dragon in the bowels of Hell.



I have based my life on the transformation of the butterfly, because just like the butterfly it starts off as a single larva. That's the way I felt with the onset of my mental illness; **abandoned, alone, and isolated.** It started at a very early age. Even though the egg may not hatch out when it's laid, that's the way my mental illness was waiting to hatch out. As the larva feeds it grows into a multi-legged green caterpillar. That represents the many medications I was on, the number of therapists and doctors I'd see, the diagnosis, the suicide attempts, the alcoholism, and the way people looked at me.

When the doctors and therapists didn't work, Day Programs did. Just as the caterpillar wraps itself in the cocoon that's the way I had wrapped myself not knowing inside **there was a miracle taking place.** Just as a butterfly gets ready to shed her cocoon, she is transparent and you can see her struggling to get out. A special Program Manager Joshlyn Lucas, staff members, and my peers saw me struggling to get out as each layer came off. **I saw the light of hope,** I am a butterfly.

A butterfly goes through four stages. In my stage two, I am one of the first Peer Specialist to come out of the Day Program. I am a Respect award winner. I am a Beacon of Hope award winner. I am a NAMI Connection Facilitator and I am on the Board of WINGS. I am the consumer on the Parents and Teachers as Allies. Pat Mayfield offered me a job as a Peer Specialist and I have been working now for three years. I work with Maxie Kirk, who was one of my teachers and who is now my supervisor. I work with people who were once my teachers and are now my co-workers. I teach my peers, who I once sat in the Day Program with. In stages three and four, even though you see the beauty of the butterfly, the caterpillar is still there. Just like a butterfly the migration wasn't easy. My mental illness, is only part of who I am. I am dealing with physical ailments, but my Grams taught me when you walk the Rainbow Trail and you walk the Trail of Song, all around you is beauty. The Mental Health Center and my peers have taught me to walk the Rainbow Trail. They showed me how to walk the Trail of Song, and they have taught me to find the beauty within myself and now all around me is beauty. My name is Shelia and I am more than a caterpillar.

