



ANGELA FAZIO
My Story
April 14, 2009

Voted most talented of my high school class, after graduation I pursued a career as a performer on tour, in summer stock, off-Broadway and in nightclubs. Four years later I entered Hunter University in Manhattan as a candidate for a Bachelor of Arts, majoring in music. Then I transferred to Albright College, in my hometown of Reading, PA, changing my major to pre-med following a futile dream of a medical practice with a young man who was then my fiancé. Neither the dream nor the romance lasted.

My first psychotic episode occurred when I was in my junior year of pre-med. Neither my high school classes nor my brief theatrical career had prepared me to study the sciences. I had not had trigonometry, chemistry or other science courses. As a result, my studies were stressful. One morning, I awakened with auditory hallucinations. I believed the voices were real. I saw a physician in Manhattan who prescribed Thorazine and Stelazine. I was diagnosed with schizophrenia and continue to keep that diagnosis with my present psychiatrist. I also have been diagnosed with bipolar disorder with psychotic tendencies. The medication was prescribed because of a chemical imbalance in my brain. In remission, I transferred my major to English Literature and received a BA from Albright College. After a short time as a high school teacher, I moved back to Manhattan. There for a brief time I had an unbelievable career working on documentaries for RAI-TV (Italian Television Network) as an interpreter, researcher and associate producer. I also worked on documentaries for RKO-General-TV and ABC-TV.

As my career reached a high point, I had taken myself off medication and I was trying mega-vitamins. I was decompensating and getting progressively worse. I was “losing it.” Because I felt ignored during an important meeting at ABC-TV, I picked up a glass ashtray in the editing room and threw it. As it hurled in the air, I was asked to leave my job. I admitted myself to Payne Whitney, the psychiatric unit of New York Hospital, where I was a patient for three months.

When I was discharged in 1976, I moved to DeLand, Florida, to be with my elderly parents. Two years later, as a result of being over medicated, I developed the side effect of tardive dyskinesia, a neuromuscular condition of involuntary movements of my face, arms and body that made me appear grotesque. Off the meds, my movements would subside but I’d be psychotic. If I took the anti-psychotic meds, my movements would be exacerbated but I wouldn’t hallucinate. I was between a rock and a hard place.

From 1978 to 1986, I was involuntarily committed to state, county, and local hospitals and jails. When I was admitted to Northeast Florida State Hospital (NEFSH) Macclenny, FL, for the fourth time, I was able to stay there until I became stable and stopped hearing the voices (auditory hallucinations) from December 1986 to August 1987. When I asked attendants what I needed to do so that I wouldn’t have to return to the hospital, I was told I needed to stay on my meds. So I did just that in spite of the hideous involuntary movements. Since then, for 22 years I have not had to return to any hospital. NEFSH saved my life.

I enrolled as a volunteer patient for a Vitamin E protocol to assist with tardive dyskinesia at the National Institute for Mental Health (NIMH). The protocol didn't work for me, but I learned that Clozaril would help me.

In 1990 when Clozaril, an atypical medication, was approved, I was able to get the medication through the help of close friends (the medication was very expensive and they ran a media campaign for me). My movements subsided significantly. In 1993, I became a peer counselor for Act Corporation (now Stewart–Marchman-Act Behavioral Healthcare).

For more than two years I have been a certified peer specialist for the Mental Health Association of East Central Florida, Inc. I help run the Open Door Drop-In Center in DeLand.

I have been a group leader for 14 years of Recovery International. It is a self-help mental health method developed in 1937 by the neuropsychiatrist, Abraham A. Low. The program offers tools and techniques that participants can use to deal with depression, anxiety and a variety of other nervous and mental health issues. Meetings are based on Low's book, "Mental Health Through Will-Training." We meet for a little over one hour one time a week.

As an advocate, I have been on several boards and councils. For several years I have been vice chair of Northeast Florida State Hospital and a member of the National Alliance of the Mentally Ill in Volusia and Flagler Counties. My story appeared in five installments in the "Orlando Sentinel" and also in "The Florida Medical Journal." After being alienated from my extended family for 10 years, we are now on good terms. I was very lucky throughout my illness to have a beau, Peter, who was always there in the worst of times.

With my co-author, Dotti Lewis, I have completed my memoir about my struggle with mental illness. We are in the process of looking for a literary agent.

Clozaril has given me my life back.