

*The following is a part of the story of John Friday. In it, John recounts some of the journey that led him through difficult experiences, into recovery, and beyond. Today, John is a Certified Peer Support and Wellness Specialist employed at Friendship Program, using his life experiences to support others with behavioral health challenges.*

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## **A Brief Biography**

I have a lived experience of mental illness, as well as childhood, adolescent, and adulthood traumas. I was first introduced to the mental health system in the 1960's, when I was in the sixth grade. My parents had divorced a year or so earlier. My art teacher was concerned about me, because of the composition of my artwork. As a result, my mother took me to the Texas Children's Hospital, where I was shown ink blots and photographs. I told stories about what I was shown. Then, I was put on an amphitheater stage with my artwork in front of a lot of adults dressed in white coats. I did not understand what was happening, or why. A couple of years later my mother placed me in a home for boys. Over the years, I have had difficulty with my emotions, and relationships.

I served in the U. S. Air Force from 1970 to 1977. In 1976, I had a breakdown. I was treated as an outpatient at the base hospital. In 1977, there was a troop reduction, so I took the opportunity to get out of the service, and attend college full time. I received an honorable discharge. I graduated college with a bachelor's degree in liberal arts in 1980 with honors. In 1990 I earned a master's degree in education. Even so, my life was very rocky. In 1996 I had another major breakdown. Ultimately, it led me to the VA Hospital, where I was diagnosed with three mental illness conditions. I was given a treatment plan. I began to educate myself on the disorders I had, using the DSM III. That was the beginning of my recovery journey, with its ups and downs.

I first heard about peer support in 2010 from my job coach at Community Alliance. I attended a Wellness Recovery Action Plan workshop, and developed my first WRAP. Soon after, I was interviewed by the Salvation Army's Emergency Community Support program, and hired as a part-time peer support specialist. In January of 2011, I completed a course on peer support, sponsored by the Nebraska DHHS Office of Consumer Affairs. In February, after passing the peer support exam, I received my certification as a peer support and wellness specialist.

In 2012, I became a full time peer support specialist for Community Alliance's Safe Harbor peer services program. It had a telephone warm line, and a crisis diversion center. In 2013, I became a facilitator, training future peer support specialists. I also worked as a peer support specialist volunteer involved in the Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) training of law enforcement officers.

After little over two years on the warm line at Safe Harbor, I started showing signs of burnout. I felt that working more in a face-to-face peer support setting with the people I served would be much better for me. In 2014, I went to work for the Friendship Program, Inc. as a peer support specialist, and served peers in the one-to-one peer support setting that I sought. In addition, I facilitate groups, such as art journaling, Wellness Recovery Action Plan (WRAP), Pathways to Recovery, and NAMI Connections. As an after work project, I submitted a proposal for a pilot Pathways to Recovery course to the Behavioral Health Education Center of Nebraska (BHECN), and was granted funding for my program. The Stephen Center in Omaha graciously provided a meeting room for the course, which is soon to start. In addition, I am an active member of the Region Six Behavioral Healthcare Manager of Consumer Affairs' Consumer Advisory Team (CAT).

One thing I have noticed since I first became a peer support and wellness specialist, is that it has not only given great value to all the trauma and struggles with mental illness that I have experienced, but it, and my recent marriage, have been awesome sources of healing. Only a short time ago, one of my peers asked me if I was happy. Without hesitation, I responded from the depth of my heart, "Yes, I am truly happy."

**John Friday, M. Ed., CPSWS**

**Peer support and wellness specialist**