

Vibrant voices emerge from the black-inked letters, “mental health.”

I am listening to an Inupiaq girl speaking with heart-rending anguish about her mental illness—how she feels powerless to define herself and her culture amidst stereotypes about them as alcoholics. Her words flow raw and undisguised, striking me with powerful blows of candor. I feel my heart aching for her inability to narrate her own life and be understood. Again and again, her words penetrate deeper into my mind, filling me with a yearning to unravel more of her missing narrative. I am struggling to grasp my emotions. What is it about her words that make me feel like I am...her?

I clasped it.

Her voice. Through her voice, I can *live* her life.

Even after countless days of collaborating with advocacy organizations to facilitate mental health discussions, I have never felt more empowered to understand every individual—every missing narrative. I cannot describe the passion I had to share this experience with others and foster more interpersonal compassion.

Six months later, I began leading mental health advocacy workshops with my new love: storytelling. I wanted to challenge myself to be vulnerable and to inspire others to share their stories by beginning with mine, “Proudly, Triumphantly Blubbery.” A smile irresistibly lights my face upon seeing 15 unfamiliar faces from across Anchorage. The first voice colors the silence. Infused with strength, her story of depression soon intertwines with his about anxiety, and from person to person, we dye the black ink brightly with colors. Through every perspective, we illuminate more of the incredible complexity hidden underneath the stereotypes and stigma surrounding the simple words, “mental illness.” Our voices become more than abstract sounds but brightly colored canvases of experiences and people. Fingers trembling, we imagine our own homes falling through thawing permafrost. Hearts uplifting, we enter his mind refusing to despair despite debilitating stress. Warmth and pride imbue the room for our shared hindsight and tenacity as we *become* one another. With every story, we weave together a vivid tapestry showing our community that we are not our mental illness—but *humans*.

Here, we each bring irreplaceable experiences. Our voices bring humanity. Together, we create potent messages advocating for more compassionate communities unachievable by one individual.

I discovered the power of storytelling. Only stories told with the emotion of human voice, unlike words alone, can truly encapsulate human experiences. They enable us to immerse ourselves into another's perspective and experience *lives* that we cannot live. My peers' willingness to be vulnerable inspired me to understand how everyone deserves to feel heard and valued. Their infinitely-complex narratives revealed to me that everyone holds a unique, impossibly dynamic identity and that others do not define us.

I feel indescribable pride for what we are doing together. It took all of our stories to reveal the people behind the labels of mental disorders. Fueled by a shared passion, we have begun an Anchorage-wide movement destigmatizing mental health unachievable by one individual and are opening up conversations on tabooed topics like stereotypes and sexuality. These are the stories that make Anchorage not a darkness-laden town but my home.

I choose to continue using storytelling and collaboration in my dreams of advocating for more inclusive, supportive communities. This is what I aspire to do by studying ethnicities and cultures, neuroscience, and psychology in college and beyond. Through ethnicity studies, I can unravel the cultural stigmas surrounding mental illness and its effects on multi-racial societies today. With neuroscience, I will investigate the fundamental mechanisms of and possibly help develop treatments for psychological disorders. Through psychology, I hope to study how social and mental health stigmas impact intergroup interactions and to collaborate with ethnically-diverse communities to design more culturally-conscious solutions to public health challenges.

With this scholarship and by attaining a liberal arts education, I aspire to become a more impactful advocate for open, cross-cultural dialogue to promote mental health in our increasingly diverse world. I want to use all the knowledge and opportunities I gain to become more than a

professional, but someone who also values the individual as a whole. I want to be the person who sees the human first and inspires others to do so as well.

It takes every unique story and voice *together* to transform black ink into color: color that will paint a new multidimensional page of the narrative where an understanding world can become a reality.