



# An Ode to Schizophrenia

By Steven Wilson

I suppose all people who are affected by mental illness have that moment when “it” happens—the moment when their condition makes itself known. My moment happened when I was an undergraduate in college. It was in the form of voices, hallucinations and paranoid thoughts that one of my professors was trying to kill me.

I was scared and acted like it. I was in trouble, but I acted like everything was fine. My mind split, but it seemed to repair itself enough to get by. I learned one thing that proved to be true in the real world: When you struggle with an invisible disease, many won't believe you. That realization hurt the most and still hurts to this day.

Many years after college, my father passed away on Jan. 2, 2007, due to natural causes, then my sister died the very next day in a car accident on her way to the funeral. I cannot express the pain and anguish that came over me.

The months that followed brought back all of the horrors of my collegiate break, but this one seemed much deeper. My mind split again, but this time there was no repair. I decided to get away from everyone, moving into a serene house in the woods with a pond and vocal wildlife. I loved to gaze at the moon and listen to an orchestra of fireflies and bullfrogs.

It was here that I took up art again. I was 12 years old when I first entered my own world of creation. I was a plasterer's apprentice at the time, and I used construction materials to create works of art before I even knew they were works of art. I did a few “headstone portraits,” as I called them, using discarded sheetrock. Only my sister would ever see these works, as I would quickly and quietly throw them out. I did hide a few upstairs every now and then, but I always found that once I created a work, it stayed with me.

I cannot say when or why I decided to take art back up so many years later. One day, I bought canvas, brushes, knives and other materials and transformed the living room into a full studio. I did not fight the voices or hallucinations, as they were my partners in this new endeavor. I created things from my mind and from my pain, and with every piece, I got a little better. I eventually showed my work in various shows. I joined art clubs and art organizations. I began to socialize again. I started to feel alive again.

Then things took an unexpected turn. I was working on a book of poetry when my symptoms returned. It was the old fear returning again, and this time I was no match for it.

I attempted suicide but somehow managed to (I don't exactly remember doing it) call a hotline number I had been given and

was taken by ambulance to the hospital. I was admitted to a psych unit and was given meds and a caseworker. The therapy and the meds helped almost immediately, and after just four months I started to feel better.

In the year-and-a-half that has passed since that attempt, I have again rebuilt my life. I rejoined more art-based activities and became active in mental illness groups. I had known about NAMI for a long time but had wanted no part in it. Now, things are different. I am different.

I had been approached by Capital Arts Board members and asked to be the featured artist for its Go Green Art Exhibit, which celebrated Mental Health Month as well as the environment. When they asked me, I sat in my chair for a few moments and thought it out. I felt myself shake my head a few times “no” before I said the word “yes.”

Over the next few days, I filled my allotted exhibit space and wrote a speech I was asked to give at the reception. The day of the reception came, and people trickled in. I walked around gathering what strength I could. After a few hours, the show director got everyone’s attention and I was in the spotlight. I took a few deep breaths and started my speech. The consensus was that the reception was a success, and the director received a lot of positive feedback about my speech in particular.

Maybe it was because I held nothing back: I spoke about my past in full bloom. I told them about the suicide attempt, the hospitalizations and the medications. I shared true stories about the works hung before them. I expressed how none of my successes would have been possible without the many people who helped me along the way. I told them who I am—who I really am.

My name is Steven. My diagnoses are schizophrenia, PTSD and generalized anxiety disorder. But I am not my diagnoses.

I am an artist. I am a human. I am. 🌀

 Share your own story of hope, struggle or recovery to NAMI's You Are Not Alone at [notalone.nami.org/submit](http://notalone.nami.org/submit)

*Steven Wilson is an artist who works in visual and written form. His work has been seen in over 20 exhibitions. He is on the NAMI Jefferson City Board of Directors and is a member of the Missouri Writers' Guild. Steven also orchestrated a booth for NAMI Jefferson City at Project Homeless in Jefferson City, which enables those less fortunate to gather information about NAMI and its programs. Visit him at [www.stevenwilsonart.weebly.com](http://www.stevenwilsonart.weebly.com).*

