

BRADFORD WRITES!
Fall 2023

From Food to Freshman

By Shannon Crattie

“I don’t want to do this shit anymore” I said aloud by the dumpster during closing at work on February 4, 2023. It was just past 10pm as I stood there in the bitter cold, feeling an intense sense of overwhelm consume me. I leaned back into the side of the large metal dumpster, lit my cigarette, and could no longer restrain myself from crying. As I exhaled the smoke from my lungs, I let out an audible sob. My face wet from a stream of tears burned from the cold winter air; my breath restricted from a heaviness felt in my chest. In this moment I knew that something in my life had to change. I had come to loathe the food industry that I spent more than twenty years in.

I hastily finished my work, hoping to quell the discord within myself once I was home. *“If I just medicate & relax, these feelings will pass,”* I thought.

I started my journey with therapy in September of 1997, about a month after my Great Grandma Maudie passed away. “Grandma,” as I affectionately called her, provided me with so much nurturing, comfort, safety, and love that I needed to cope with things I did not talk about. My grief was apparent; a concerned teacher facilitated my first of many meetings with Jo. She visited from an outside agency to provide counseling services to students, and it was a relief to have someone not associated with family or friends to talk to. I felt I could express my emotions to her, that she “got” me. She helped me recognize that writing was more than something I

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enjoyed doing, that it could be a helpful means of coping. I trusted Johnna and valued her guidance.

At 14 years old, I disclosed to my family that I had been a victim of abuse. I was diagnosed with Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (CPTSD), not at all a typical mental health diagnosis for a teenage girl back in 1999. I began seeing two counselors; April worked at the local YWCA which specialized in abuse recovery, and Berta at the Guidance Center which provides various mental health services within the community. April helped me work specifically through the trauma, introducing me to a wider range of coping mechanisms that I could apply to other aspects of my life. Berta provided little help to me; I consistently felt judged by her and unwilling to listen to what I had to say.

About a year later I had stopped seeing Berta and April was leaving the YWCA. I began seeing Annie at the YWCA, who introduced me to group therapy programs to supplement my private sessions. Minnie was the legal advocate at the YWCA, and another person in whom I could confide. These two women provided me with so much support and encouragement that helped me develop confidence that I did not have before. They were with me as I testified against my perpetrator in court, helping me learn how to face my greatest fears in the moment. I knew that someday I wanted to carry on their influence, but reluctant to consider a therapeutic role. Despite several people encouraging me to become a counselor, I would not entertain the thought, believing I was too messed up myself to be of help to anyone else.

Transitioning into adulthood created barriers to continuing counseling, and I discontinued therapy for a few years. I always understood the value of having a counselor in my life and decided to seek out services again beginning in 2009. I found it difficult to find someone that

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provided the therapeutic care that I was looking for until June of 2021, when I found Therapist Jan.

I felt unsatisfied with my life-- *and myself*— when I began seeing Jan. I knew I needed to do something differently, I wanted to do something differently. I was unsure of what that “something” was, but having the right therapist would help me discover the answer. It has been over two years now, and I continue to see her on an almost weekly basis. With her help, I was able to emerge from my chrysalis transformed into a butterfly.

I had been toying with the thought of going to school for a few months, but I was still unsure of what exactly it was that I wanted to go to school for. I knew that I did not want to go in undecided, so it remained only a thought. That night as I sat on my couch, as I replayed the course of my life, I started recognizing the things that make me who I am. The qualities I possess, my strengths, what I believe about myself all came together to remind me of who I am. The people that have told me for more than twenty years to be a therapist were right all along; it fits with the nature of who I am. I am compassionate, curious, intelligent, empathetic, sympathetic, kind, encouraging, knowledgeable, and relatable. I have an insatiable desire to help people wherever they are in life, and I can do that more profoundly in a professional capacity.

As I started looking at schools online, reading up on how to fund my prospective education, I thought a lot about my own mental health journey. I have managed a life with depression and anxiety for more than two decades, and I still face challenges. I began to think “*maybe I should not be a therapist after all.*” I decided to hold on to any further decision making

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until I had a chance to talk it over with Therapist Jan. I knew I would get a no bullshit response from her, and I had this expectation that she was going to advise me against it. To my surprise, quite the opposite happened though, with her initiating a conversation about the things I will need to work on personally if I am in fact going to be a therapist. I felt validated and became more serious about my educational pursuit.

UPB was not my first choice. Although I much prefer an in person learning experience, I believed online learning would provide more flexibility in my schedule. I intended on continuing to work full time hours, and pursuing an education would be in addition to the life I already have. With the goal of becoming a mental health therapist, I must attend a school with an accredited program. I had found an online school that I thought was a good match, however I was denied admission and given some suggestions if I wanted to reapply later. I was devastated by that rejection, but it gave me further information to consider when applying to other schools. I decided to apply UPB and developed an additional plan in case I was denied. I submitted my application to the Admissions department and wrote a letter to someone in enrollment services to express my commitment of being a student at UPB now or in the future, and I outlined what my plans would be if I were not accepted.

I was formally accepted as a UPB student on March 23, 2023, and I was over the moon. I was going to be a Pitt Panther, like my mom was. And I am not doing “this shit” anymore; I resigned from the food service industry midway through the semester with no plans of returning to it. My studies are my work for now, and I am gradually moving from a life of fighting to survive to a life of living intentionally.