

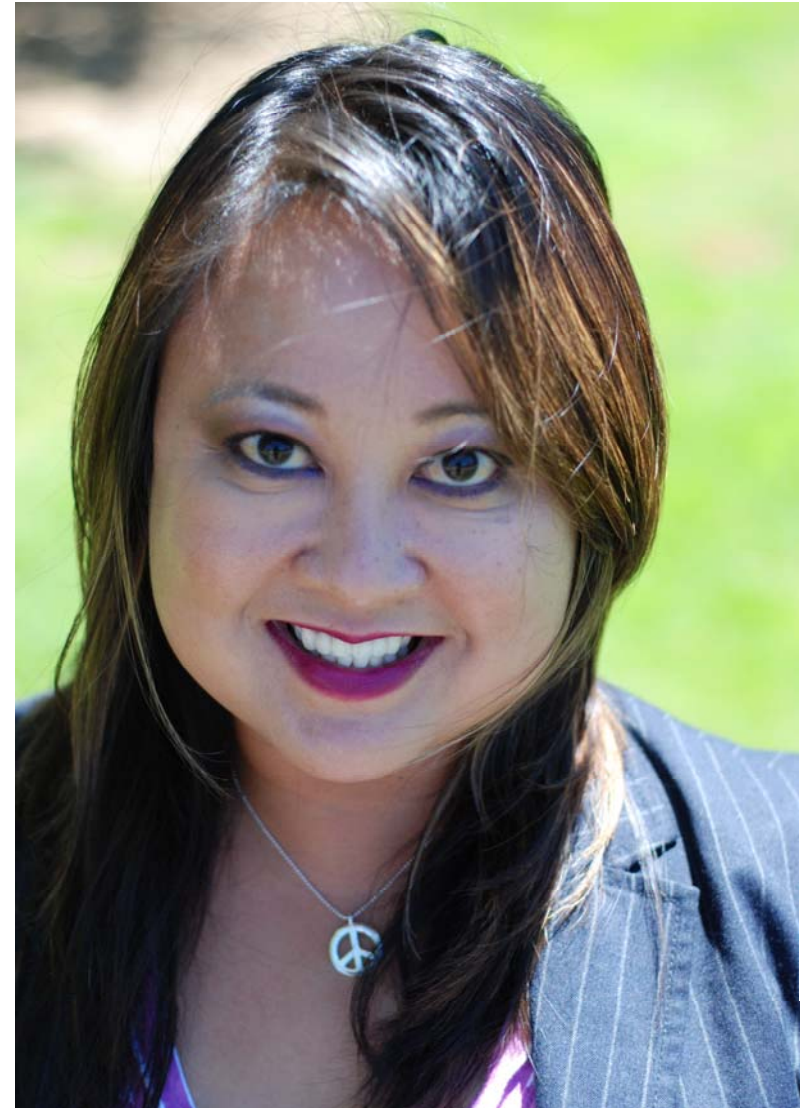
I heard from an Alcoholics Anonymous slogan that, *You're only sick as your secrets*. I also heard that, *The truth shall set you free* and *Honesty is healing*. My name is Aireen. I was born in the Philippines and have been living in San Mateo County for over 25 years. I am the youngest of four children, and we came to California when I was 9 years-old. My childhood was very tough. I lost my mother at the age of 5 due to breast cancer. My father was an alcoholic, sexually abusive, and had a bad temper. One of my family members had an incestuous relationship with me at the age of six.

All these traumatic events were very painful and disturbing. To get rid of the pain and bad memories I turned to alcohol and drugs. My drug of choice was alcohol and crystal meth. I drank alcohol and used drugs all throughout my 20s and early 30s. Due to my heavy use of drugs and alcohol, I was placed in the hospital on an involuntary hold for almost a month. One of the doctors diagnosed me with anxiety and severe depression. The doctor prescribed me medications to control my disorders. I thought that being on medications would make me stop drinking alcohol and using drugs, but it didn't. I continued to use alcohol and drugs. I was very symptomatic and had major mood swings, racing thoughts, hallucinations, and paranoia. I saw another doctor, and he diagnosed me with bipolar disorder, and prescribed me new medications to help me. With severe depression, anxiety, and bipolar disorder, I faced some challenges around my family and co-workers before getting employed in San Mateo Mental Health Services. Some people called me *weirdo*, some people treated me differently at work and didn't include me in their little cliques. At some family gatherings, everyone would be together talking, enjoying each other, and I would be in the corner by myself. With all these awkward feelings and being treated like I was crazy, I continued to relapse on alcohol and drugs. I've been to Psychiatric Emergency Services over a dozen times, changed my medication over ten times, and have experienced scary hallucinations and delusions due to mixing prescribed medications with alcohol and drugs, and because of the side effects from the medications. I felt very tired and fed up!

In 2006, I worked at Heart & Soul as a Peer Support Worker. Working at Heart & Soul has completely changed my life around. They gave me a wakeup call by including me as an equal human being. I was able to meet other consumers like me and I didn't feel alone anymore. All my colleagues at Heart & Soul are like my family. They treated me with a lot of compassion, understanding, kindness, and respect. They nominated me for the San Mateo County Mental Health Consumer Hall of Fame in 2007, and they encouraged me to go back to school. I attended College of San Mateo through Caminar supported education, and I got my Peer Counseling Certificate in 2009. They made me a part of their Stamp Out Stigma program, and I've been sharing my story at places like universities, high schools and suicide prevention programs. This made me gain strength, confidence, and humbleness. I was able to learn other new resources and successfully used them, such as different churches I go to, County resources and community agencies like NAMI. These various organizations gave me hope and I was able to get all the help I needed. They helped me to polish my resume, find a job, get financial assistance, get clean & sober, improve my public speaking, understand my mental illness, and reach good overall health.

In 2012, I was hired at Voices of Recovery (VOR) as a Wellness Coach. VOR is another part of my support system that has taught me about the Wellness Recovery Action Plan by Mary Ellen Copeland. They have given me positive changes and tools to save my life. I appreciate the opportunity to share my story because I feel like if I help somebody else, I also help myself. Most important, as the sayings go *please never give up*, *everything happens for a reason*, and *have faith, patience, kindness, and love*. Today, I have recovery and gratitude, and I take things *One Day At A Time*. I am very grateful to God, my family, friends, colleagues, mentors, and everybody that has made a difference in my life.

**- Aireen, Daly City**



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