

ADVOCATES

First, we listen ...

"Each of Us Is a Person First"

By Deirdre Millman, 2nd Prize Winner

To me, we are all people. We are human beings. It doesn't matter what color our skin is, our physical appearance, the religion we follow, or our mental health issues. When you don't look at the person first, you are judging, labeling and following stereotypes, and that causes stigma. Stigma must end, because all it does is hurt others and provide misinformation.

I myself have labeled someone. Over the summer, I was part of a group. One guy walked in wearing all black with black boots. I think 'oh great, there's a Goth guy in the group.' Well, lo and behold, we end up talking and I realize that he is not some Goth guy, but a person, to be treated with respect. We are still friends to this day, so I'm glad I was eventually able to get past the stereotype and see him as a real person.

I try to help people see me as a person first. I don't introduce myself and say, "Hello, I'm bipolar, but my friends call me Deirdre." That would be wrong. Instead, I say, "Hello, my name is Deirdre, what's yours?" This one little act helps people to see me as Deirdre the person, not bipolar the mental illness.

Most mental health issues have stigma attached, and that's usually due to the media. Have you ever seen a movie about someone with a mental diagnosis? If so, here are the options: The person has a severe case of the disorder and it's frightening; or, the person lives a perfectly happy life. That is how the world sees us – one extreme or the other. But how many of us actually live in one of those extremes? I bet there are many more of us that are in between.

In the newspapers, we read horrible stories of people committing heinous crimes. The first question that's usually asked is if the criminal had any history of mental illnesses. That paints those of us with mental illnesses as bad, violent people. This is not true, as we are usually the victims of the crimes. Those stories are either underreported, or never reported.

I am not bipolar. I am a person who was diagnosed with bipolar disorder. I love to do creative things, such as writing and crafts. I'm going back to school to get a degree in Human Services. I like to read. I watch many TV shows: Bones, CSI (all three), NCIS (both), Castle, The Mentalist and many more. I enjoy spending time with my family, friends and pets. I have a cat named Lucky, and a rabbit named Storm. These are the things that you would learn about from Deirdre, the person, not bipolar, the mental illness.

I hope that you will all be able to see me as Deirdre the person, and not bipolar the mental illness. I promise I will try my hardest to do the same for you!