

# ADVOCATES

First, we listen ...

*"Each of Us Is a Person First"*  
*By Patrice O'Toole, 1<sup>st</sup> Prize Winner*

## **"My Father: Guardian Angel."**

My Father, John J. O'Toole, passed away at age 74. I still think about him. He was a remarkable human being. He had bipolar illness. He was sick at age 40. He had shock therapy and spent many days on the sofa. Despite his problems, we never defined him as having a mental illness, he was my Father first.

In 1980, I got sick. He became more than just my Father. He was my "guardian angel." He and I were prescribed the medicine Lithium. He would make sure both of us took our medicine. This was his "miracle drug."

I remember going to visit him in the hospital. At one point, upon coming out of the hospital, he was able to get a job at Channel 5, as a security guard. He was employed with them for a decade, as he took his medication faithfully. He loved his job, and on many occasions my family and I were able to visit him.

To this day, I still think of him as my guardian angel, as, despite the obstacles in dealing with my illness, despite his own, he took me under his wing, and was able to assist me in setting up my receiving Social Security benefits, and secure me with MassHealth insurance.

At the age of thirty-two, I got pregnant, although my Mother was horrified, it was my Father who remained by my side throughout. He came to the hospital the day after my son was born.

Though some could dismiss my Father, marginalizing him within the diagnosis of "Bipolar Disorder," for his kindness and dedication, I always think of him as a person first. In earlier life, he was a First Sergeant in World War II. Miraculously, he went all through the war without getting injured. Even in the midst of war, he maintained his creativity, putting his energy toward writing and the camaraderie between him and his

company. I don't like it that doctors' have placed blame on my Father for passing on the mental illness gene to my family. I feel like it is discrediting his actual person, and achievements.

My Father influenced me greatly, and I follow his example of faithfully sticking to my medication for years, going to therapy and have even taken up keeping scrapbooks and souvenirs as he did. He also helped my older brother, John, who was about to be drafted for the Vietnam War; my Father used his influence with the National Guard to get my brother enlisted.

Despite everything he went through, I feel of all my siblings, I am the one who respected him the most. Though he never left a will, he kept all of his army memorabilia, and I feel proud to be the one who got his casket flag, gold cross and rosary beads. I have these displayed in my home and I gave some World War II materials to my older brother, John.

My Father was able to ensure that he be seen as person first, by treating his illness effectively, with the help of Lithium, and taking pride in his work. His job at Channel 5 turned out to be his therapy.

He worked there for ten years, and never got sick again. He put his heart and soul into his job. Though it does not work for everyone, Lithium helped him greatly. He was a person who enjoyed meeting others; he made positive contacts with all the Channel 5 employees, particularly the news people. My Father, John J. O'Toole, never became mentally ill again. He was treated fairly at his job, and for the remainder of his life.

During the Blizzard of 1978, my Father was working at WCVB. It was a short walk from Needham Center and our home. Near Route 128, many people became stranded at the TV station. A number of employees indeed left their cars in order to venture to the station. My Father took it upon himself to walk all the way to the Needham Heights CVS, to collect provisions for the stranded individuals. He later received a letter of commendation from his security guard company due to his efforts in this crisis. My Father, John J. O'Toole, was able to weather the storm of both '78, and of bipolar illness itself, in not being seen as mental patient, but as the caring individual that he truly was. I continue to draw inspiration from him, in my own life resolve, and thusly how I treat individuals on a daily basis, to this moment.