



"Barbara"

that let my sisters and me stay up late listening to Herb Alpert records. Along with the diary, she sent photographs of herself as a young girl. The images did not reveal the mental unrest that would hold her captive on and off for years. Her writings exposed an alternate narrative that haunted my imagination.

My aunt's writings and my advocacy work in the community coalesced. This was the jumping-off point for a new series of paintings titled, *The Wilderness Diary*. It features portraits of people who have all experienced a mental health struggle. Many are peer recovery specialists I've worked with in my community.

During adolescence, our physical transformation is paralleled by subtle changes hidden deep within our biological landscape. I wanted to explore this window in time. The mercurial skies and enigmatic landscape of my home in the Catskills became the backdrop for my paintings, which mirror the emotional and physical isolation my subjects describe. I decided to pair each person with an animal companion as part allegorical indicator, foreshadowing mental states to come, and as part, protector.

The Wilderness Diary is not only a meditation on the people I painted, but also a reflection on our on-going mental health crisis. Lack of funding for mental health services has had a profound effect on communities everywhere. Delaware County has one of the highest suicide rates in the state. Eighty percent of the inmates in our jail have some form of mental illness. In 2017, a group of advocates and I formed the Mental Health Justice Project to address concerns related to area jails and mental illness.

My paintings became a refuge from the harsh reality, the injustices and inhumanity people must endure in overwhelmed systems of support.

Along with the portraits, I'm creating an audio diary of my aunt's writings and a printed "wilderness diary" that includes the courageous stories of the people I painted. Despite living with a greatly misunderstood condition, they advocate for people struggling today. They are truly unsung heroes!

My friend Kaima Nelson-Bowne summed it up, "Your work stirs me deeply. I'm edged into some strange place between peacefulness and disturbance." It's true, the paintings stem from a place of great difficulty, however there is triumph, too.

Anyone can face a mental health struggle, especially during times of stress, like a pandemic. Mental illness is a facet of the human condition. Creativity itself is an irrational voyage. I hope my work helps others understand that they're not alone. There is hope!

More about *The Wilderness Diary*
@ www.jessicafarrell.com

Contact NAMI Delaware/Otsego:
namidelawareco@gmail.com

OR NAMI NYS: www.naminys.org

The NAMI NYS Help Line during the pandemic is 518-248-7634.

PAINTING AND ADVOCACY

By Jessica Farrell

Paintings by the author

I am a painter and a mental health advocate living in Delaware County. Six years ago, I joined my local NAMI chapter. NAMI, the National Alliance on Mental Illness, is a grassroots mental health organization dedicated to building better lives for Americans affected by mental illness. In 2015 and 2016, I was able to partner with NAMI through my job at the David Byrd Estate, and facilitated several awareness conferences.

I was always captivated by the people who shared powerful stories of recovery. One of those stories belonged to my Aunt Barbara. Several years ago, she sent me the diary she'd kept during her struggle with bipolar disorder in the 1960s. She hoped her mental health recovery journey could help others.

Barbara was the cool aunt, an animal lover,



"Bethel"