

The Wilderness Diary — Paintings by Jessica Farrell

The Wilderness Diary is a series of portraits inspired by the writings my Aunt Barbara kept during her struggle with Bipolar Disorder in the 1960s and 70s. She sent the “diary” to me a few years ago when I was working with my local NAMI (National Alliance on Mental Illness) chapter on a variety of mental health advocacy projects. My aunt asked me to do something with the material to help other people.

Barbara was the cool aunt, an animal lover, that let my sisters and me stay up late listening to Herb Alpert records while consuming licorice rope by the yard. Nothing prepared me for what I read—poems, coded messages, and frantic letters from the edge of a tormented dreamworld. Along with the diary, my aunt sent black and white 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. Psych wards, medication, and 14 shock treatments were a stark contrast from the beguiling girl in the photographs. The writings exposed an alternate narrative that haunted my imagination; this was the jumping-off point for my work.

The Wilderness Diary features portraits of people who have all struggled with a mental health diagnosis. Many are mental health advocates and peer recovery specialists that 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 when a complex interaction between genes and environment can result in mental instability.

In my series, the wilderness represents the human psyche, a place of shadows and mystery that’s full of troublesome thoughts and anxieties where a young person might hide. I imagined what it would be like standing at the precipice of a shape-shifting reality caught somewhere between daily life and a lucid dream. The mercurial skies and rugged, enigmatic landscape of my home in the Catskill Mountains became the backdrop for each painting—mirroring the emotional and physical isolation my subjects described.

I decided to pair each person with an animal companion as a part allegorical indicator, foreshadowing mental states to come, and as part, protector.

Old school photos, candid snapshots, and each person’s story served as my guide. Unearthing the photographs from albums or basement boxes was mired with emotion for some people. Jason Paden said, “Looking at the photos of me from a 44-year-old perspective was an opportunity to celebrate the success of recovery, the dues I put in. I’m now realizing how much I love that little guy in the photo. He’s the one who took on the really hard stuff. He was just an innocent kid who knew nothing of the scary physical world changing all around him or, more importantly, the raging inner world he couldn’t escape and was living with daily. He’s the hero to my story.”

The Wilderness Diary is not only a meditation on these nine people but also a reflection on the significant, on-going mental health crisis that plagues this nation. One in five adults live with a mental health condition. Misconceptions and stigmas make it challenging to address. Lack of funding for mental health care services has had a profound effect on communities everywhere. Delaware County, NY, where I live, has one of the highest suicide rates in the state. Eighty percent of the inmates in the county jail have some form of mental illness. We live in a society that locks up people with a medical condition because we often have no better alternative. Our failing systems of support challenges the very core of our humanity.

Despite this, through these individuals and their stories of adversity, I found hope. My aunt and all the friends I painted lived through a widely misunderstood illness and were able to move forward. Many of them advocate for others in their communities. Their perseverance is nothing less than heroic. Mental illness is a facet of the human condition. Creativity itself is an irrational voyage. I hope my work helps others understand that they are not alone. There is hope!

Artist Note: I want to sincerely thank family and friends who allowed me to include them in this series. I will carry your stories with me forever. I hope my work reflects the dignity and wisdom you have graciously shared with me and others.

** I use the words “mental illness” for lack of a better term. Unfortunately, it inadequately describes a struggle that is much more complex and individual than any label can define.*

**** Printed booklets that include the recovery story of each person I painted and an audio version of my Aunt Barbara’s actual diary are companion pieces to the paintings.**