

ERIN GILBERT-GORHAM INTERVIEW

INTERVIEWER: Angie Crouch

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My name is Erin Gilbert Gorham – E-R-I-N-G-I-L-B-E-R-T-G-O-R-H-A-M. My initials are EGG [laughter]. I am diagnosed with schizophrenia and PTSD and schizoaffective disorder. I was diagnosed with that almost eight years ago in June. I lived my whole life not knowing I had a mental disorder and when I found out, then I realized why I had done the things I did.

I had a full time job until I was 40 years old and then the place I worked when out of business and I became a drug addict. I decided to take a three month vacation and in that three months, I started using methamphetamines. I did that for about 7 years, because of the PTSD and the schizophrenia. They diagnosed me when I was in recovery. My counselor that I had took me down to LAC-USC Medical Center, to the Psychiatric Department. She knew that something was wrong because I couldn't grasp simple tasks that she was asking me to do.

[I used meth] to mask the pain of the PTSD, because I was raised in a very abusive environment. I had abusive relationships; my dad was an alcoholic. They said that the reason I started doing drugs was because of the mental illness, which I never knew I had.

How did your illness affect your life, besides the drugs?

Not being able to grasp simple things to do, always being angry, always being mad, always doing what I wasn't supposed to do. Even though I knew it was wrong, I wasn't doing what I was supposed to be doing, that I knew was right.

For eight years, I had a run in with the law. I was constantly in the back of a police car, in handcuffs for possession, under the influence. I did six months in County Jail for child neglect, child endangerment and child abuse. But I was cleared of those charges because they figured out why I was doing the things I did with the children.

They were not my children. I had a girl living with me, and she was having some surgeries, so I was babysitting on her three children. I took them to the park and it got a little dark and the Sheriff rolled up on us and ended up taking the kids. But they let me call my mom and she came and got them. And once again, I was in the back of a police car in handcuffs. So I did six months in County Jail and I was never so glad to get out because they had put me in a lesbian dorm, and I'm not lesbian; I am straight.

How did you get into recovery?

I went to court [and] the judge gave me a decision. I had to make a decision, either do three years in a state prison, two hundred and seventy straight days in County Jail, or do a three-month live-in residential program. I chose the residential program; I weighed my options and that seemed like the best option.

And I did two programs within a six month period of time. I got kicked out of my first one, went back to court and my judge gave me another chance. And so I've been clean since December 24th, 2003. I have to count backwards.

Once I got my diagnosis, I knew that it could be treated. But I thought that I was going to have to be put into a mental institution or something like that, because everybody that I had heard of, prior to me getting clean, always ended up in a hospital or ended up in a psychiatric ward. I didn't want to do that because I hate hospitals.

I was scared. Once I got my diagnosis, I was very scared. But when I came home from my second program, they had given me medication at LAC-USC Medical Center and I ran out of medication. So I called Arcadia Mental Health and they got me into their program right away. So I've been with Arcadia Mental Health since June of 2004.

How has your life changed through getting services at Arcadia Mental Health?

It's enabled me to get a job. I volunteered for 16 and a half months at Arcadia Mental Health [and] didn't get paid. Then I went to an accelerated program for peer advocacy and I got hired on August 27th, 2005.

I am a community worker. I help run the Dual Diagnosis group at the main [Arcadia] clinic. I run the Narcotic Anonymous group at Wellness, and I help my clients try to stay clean, because that's my passion.

So you're able to help others that are having problems similar to those you have had.

I do one-on-one counseling with a couple of my clients that I'm helping to stay clean and I've told them that if I could do it, they can do it too. If they have a problem, they've got my cell phone, they know my work number and they can call me 24 hours a day. I'm there for them.

It makes me feel really good. I know when I leave work at the end of the day, knowing that I've helped somebody is a big inspiration for me and a big accomplishment. I feel like I helped somebody. But when I leave work, if I get a call in the middle of the night or during the night, I answer the phone and I help people stay clean.

Where would you be if you had not received services at Arcadia?

[I would be] in jail, or still doing drugs. But I've learned that the drug scene is not for me. I've learned that with the services from Arcadia Mental Health, if I didn't have them, I'd probably be at a psych ward. I don't want to do that, because it's too much like being in jail

I really enjoy [my work]. I'm hoping to become a community mental health worker in June when I graduate. So maybe it will be a job improvement [or] job increase.

Ten years ago I thought I was just going to be a drug addict. And everybody that I've touched – I've touched a lot of the people's lives, since I've been clean. I've been able to help a lot of people stay clean, and I just enjoy my job. I enjoy my life.

END OF INTERVIEW