Mending the Mind
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In the spring of 2010, Sonia Hayman of Richmond – who was at the time a self-described "hard-core drug addict" – awakened in a jail cell where she was on suicide watch.

"I had used three times more meth than most people would take, and apparently, I got mad and grabbed a knife and started stabbing the door," Hayman said. She says "apparently" because she doesn't remember what happened that night. Hayman was charged in 1st District Court with multiple charges of aggravated assault, causing serious bodily injury to another. In the months to follow, Hayman would embark on a journey where she learned about addiction, but she also learned about mental illness, acceptance and even forgiveness.

When she was 6, she was in her father's arms when he suddenly passed away. When she was 7, she watched helplessly as her adoptive mother was murdered. And, there was a period in Hayman's life during which she was sexually abused. As a youth, Hayman was in and out of counseling. She was angry and had an explosive temper. At one point during her early 20s, while taking Zoloft – a drug commonly used to treat depression and other disorders, she noticed she did not become angry so easily. But even then, having a mental illness was just not on her radar. After a few years and a few shoulder surgeries, Hayman discovered what she thought was a better way to medicate herself: Meth. "It took all of the pain away, both the physical and the emotional," she said. "It makes you go numb – I didn't have to deal with any of it." For eight years, Hayman used. After the sixth year, when she started using needles, the anger and violence started escalating until that night when she picked up a knife and sent her children and her husband retreating for safety.

Hayman was accepted into the mental health court program in 1st District Court. It was at this point in her life when she first learned about being bipolar, a disorder marked by dramatic mood swings. After learning she might be bipolar, Hayman said she sat in her jail cell and read everything she could get her hands on. Nearly every word she read hit home. "I was reading, and I said, 'Crap, this is me; crap, this is me….crap, I'm bipolar!'" Hayman said the thing that saved her is the judge who saw something more in her than a drug addiction – or a mental illness.

Mental health court is a program that offers help to qualified people who have committed crimes as a result of their illness. Each person moves through four phases of treatment and supervision before graduating from the program. "The very first step is to make them talk about their illness in open court, in front of everyone," said Judge Kevin K. Allen. "If they don't want to do it, then I know we're not making progress." But it isn't enough to force a person to look at his or her own mental illness with acceptance. "What I wish I could do is make society stand up and say mental illness is just an illness – let's start treating it instead of ignoring it," Allen said.

Dennis Kirkman of Bear River Mental Health was one of the key players involved in organizing the mental health court program. "We don't have the luxury of serving all the people all of the time, so we do what we can with what we have," Kirkman said. Bear River Mental Health is funded by the Utah State Legislature and is often subject to the financial pitfalls of the state. "If the money doesn't keep up with the population, then we have to decide, who can we help?" Kirkman said. Right now, the help goes to patients on Medicaid, to participants of the mental health court program, and to those who have been court ordered to receive treatment. Other obstacles that people can face in seeking mental health care for a loved one are reluctance and uncertainty about approaching someone and asking them to get help – and a person's own civil liberties. However, after a crime has been committed, the judge then has the power to force a person to get the help needed. Then, with a healthy support system and the proper medications, people can learn to identify those time periods when their mental illness is causing problems.

Hayman said admitting she had a mental illness was much more difficult than it was to admit she had a drug problem. "The hardest part was accepting that I did all those things," she said. However, with treatment, she has been able to put her family back together and she has earned a bachelor's degree in criminal justice. Although she has graduated from the program, she continues to visit the mental health court, where she mentors others facing the same issues she did.

With acceptance of her own mental illness, Hayman said she was finally able to forgive the man who killed her mother, because she understood what he meant when he said the drugs made him do it.

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