

# Decatur woman lends voice to bipolar disorder

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DECATUR, Ala. (AP) — Amy Griffith pulled the worn piece of paper from her purse. Reading over the names, she finds comfort, hope and acceptance.

Some of the world's greatest artists, performers and thinkers — Winston Churchill, William Wordsworth, W.B. Yeats, Ernest Hemingway, Mark Twain, Virginia Woolfe, Florence Nightingale, Ludwig van Beethoven, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Rosemary Clooney and Vincent Van Gogh — fill the page.

"These people beautified the world. The world was a better place because they were in it. And every single one had bipolar disorder. I am a part of their group," Griffith said.

Griffith, a Decatur attorney, joined the group in 2009. During the past five years, Griffith, her parents, husband and friends have undertaken an emotional journey that has tested their resolve and relationships.

Now, the 46-year-old wants to share her story.

"Bipolar is like the monster no one wants to talk about. Since no one talks about it, no one really understands it," Griffith said. "I hope to help people learn what this illness is. I hope to dispel some fears. I hope to put a very human face on bipolar disorder."

Naomi Griffith paused for a second, trying to find the right words to describe the daughter she watched grow — from the musical girl who played bassoon in the Decatur High School band, to the college student who landed internships at Birmingham law firms, to the empathetic woman she knows today.

"Amy is incredibly gifted. She is smart, independent, articulate, musical and athletic. She has a real sense of understanding about people and how they think. She's pretty remarkable," Naomi Griffith said.

A social worker by trade, Naomi Griffith never worried about her daughter's mental health. The little bit of unpredictability and moodiness Amy Griffith displayed in middle school and high school, Naomi Griffith attributed to her "just being a teenager."

After graduating high school, Amy Griffith attended Birmingham Southern College, where she studied English and history, joined a sorority and met the man, Brian White, who would become her husband.

"Brian has been the most important part of everything. He is as solid as a rock and has never wavered. He is a major part of her success, and I thank God for him every single day," Naomi Griffith said.

It was 1987 when White became friends with the girl with the infectious smile and outgoing disposition. For most of college, they dated other people. Then, their friendship turned into something more.

"I don't know how to explain it. It was just one of those things where time and circumstance brought us together. Basically, I got lucky," said White, also a Decatur attorney.

To the outside world, Amy Griffith's life appeared charmed. At 25 years old, the University of Alabama School of Law graduate was engaged to the man she loved and, after passing the bar exam on her first attempt, worked in one of Birmingham's prestigious firms.

No one knew that Amy Griffith felt lost in her office in the building on 20th Street in the heart of Birmingham. Because she could not speak without crying, she volunteered for in-depth solo research projects. From her office window, she looked down on the city and dreamed of switching places with the landscaper grooming the bushes.

"I challenge anyone to tell me why the earth decided to open up and swallow me," Amy Griffith said. "I felt like I was beyond human contact. I was drifting from place to place, like air."

On a fall evening, two months before Brian and Amy's wedding, Naomi Griffith met her daughter at Cracker Barrel in Cullman. There, she first noticed her daughter's agony.

"She wasn't sleeping, and she was getting overly emotional and crying a lot," Naomi Griffith said. "I really began to get scared at the wedding. We were at this big production and all of her friends were there, and she could not have been less interested. She was just going through the motions."

Naomi Griffith and Amy's father, Dennis Griffith, encouraged their daughter to seek treatment. A doctor diagnosed her with depression and prescribed Prozac, which elevated her mood.

For the next 10 years, the medication allowed Amy Griffith to function as a lawyer, a wife and a contributor to society. Then, the anxiety arrived. In 2008, the medication that worked for the past decade failed.

"The world lost all color. There was not even black and white — everything was just gray. The way people looked, the way they talked, what they said, all of it was gray," Amy Griffith said.

The anxiety ushered in paranoia, loneliness and fear. She stopped working, went weeks without eating and struggled to find the energy to get out of bed.

"I felt like I was in deep water, unable to touch the ground, but I had to keep my head up. And on top of that, I felt like I had been treading water for hours," Amy Griffith said.

Fearing for her safety, Amy Griffith entered a three-day in-patient facility, where she saw a different doctor every day who prescribed a new medication.

"We had a series of short hospitalizations, and it was always just short, put a Band-Aid on the situation, treatments that got her nowhere except back in the hospital," White said.

After three visits to north Alabama hospitals, Amy Griffith's family and friends secured a spot for her at Vanderbilt University Medical Center. Doctors examined her and recommended she stay for three weeks.

There, Amy Griffith first heard the diagnosis of bipolar disorder.

"I thought it was a death sentence," Amy Griffith said.

For 20 percent of the approximately 5.7 million Americans diagnosed with bipolar disorder, it is. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, more than 90 percent of

people who commit suicide have one or more mental disorders.

Along with the high suicide risk, bipolar disorder ranks as the fifth-leading cause of disability worldwide and the ninth-leading cause of years lost to death or disability.

"If those numbers were associated with cancer or another physical illness, you'd have so many funds flowing in to do interventions and research," said Marie Glenn, a psychiatrist at North Alabama Regional Hospital. "People can have a good life living with bipolar. The problem exists in the scarcity of resources."

Sue Brantley listed five psychiatrists in private practice in north Alabama — none accepting patients. Another psychiatrist recently opened an office in Decatur, but Brantley questioned how long before he, too, would no longer have spots open.

As director of the Mental Health Association of North Alabama, Brantley witnesses the struggle people living with severe depression, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder and schizoaffective disorder face when trying to secure treatment.

She calls north Alabama "psychiatrically poor."

"Years ago, I would get a call from a person with no insurance, and I could make a few calls and find someone to see them. Now, I can't find spaces for people who have good solid resources," said Brantley, who started working with the association 29 years ago. "There are just not as many people going into the profession."

The proof exists in the research: According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 240 psychiatrists practiced in Alabama as of May 2013, and 40 of those worked in Jefferson County.

The American Psychiatric Association predicted a shortage of about 22,000 child psychiatrists and 2,900 geriatric psychiatrists by next year.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services designated 4,000 Mental Health Professional Shortage Areas in the nation. The list includes all 67 Alabama counties.

"Sadly, a lot of times, it is luck of the draw," Brantley said. "Sometimes spots open up, and if you are lucky enough to call on the right day at the right time, then you may find a spot. Mental health care should not work like that."

Amy Griffith, who is with her eighth psychiatrist, experienced the struggle first hand. She can't help but question, "What if?"

What if she had been less persistent? What if her family, out of love, didn't nag her to find another doctor? What if they didn't have insurance?

"We had to scratch and claw to get Amy where she needed to be, at Vanderbilt. If we hadn't been persistent and didn't have some knowledge about how to get things done and hadn't been a little lucky, we'd be in a very different place," White said.

Each family member coped with the bipolar disorder diagnosis differently.

"I was stunned. I thought you had to have these high highs, where you sleep with 10 men or run up \$100,000 in debt. I didn't know cycles were so individual," Naomi Griffith said. "I didn't know anything about this illness because no one talks about it. People say they're depressed or on a tear, but no one says the word bipolar."

Under the umbrella of bipolar disorder, defined by the National Institute of Mental Health as a brain disorder causing unusual shifts in mood, energy and activity levels, specific types of the illness exist. The disorder is unique, with every patient experiencing different levels of depression and mania, Glenn said.

Amy Griffith's lows overshadowed her highs, which she described as a "really, really good day, a golden day."

To understand the diagnosis and her role in Amy's treatment, Naomi Griffith entered therapy.

"I am a fixer. I can fix anything if you just give me a chance. I couldn't fix this; I had to know my limits. For a mother, that is not easy. I am not used to seeing those kinds of limits," Naomi Griffith said. "This has been a journey and a real learning process for Amy and all of us who love her."

While Amy Griffith feared the diagnosis, her mother educated herself on the disease, and her father served as a constant support. White accepted the news with relief.

"When I heard someone say, 'I think we can help you,' it was like a weight was lifted off of us. We had a diagnosis, and we knew what we were treating," White said.

During her stay at Vanderbilt, Amy Griffith found "emotional sand" under her feet, where before, she felt nothing. She found comfort from her doctor, Steve Chandler, who said, "This is nothing to be embarrassed about. I see it every day. It is a chronic condition just like high blood pressure."

From her minister, the Rev. Sherry Harris, she learned, "Everybody is dealt a different set of cards. It is how we deal with them that matters."

Amy Griffith returned to Decatur and found a new way of life: one governed by consistency, healthy eating, plenty of sleep and counseling.

"Anyone can write a prescription, but that has to be accompanied by very sophisticated therapy, and that's where we are lacking in north Alabama," Naomi Griffith said. "It really worries me that there are people out there in agony with this disorder who cannot get the help they need."

With the proper treatment, Amy Griffith can identify the onset of episodes, which makes them shorter and less intense.

"I'm like anyone else. I go to church, I cook dinner, I work, I go out to the movies and every now and then I have a sick day. That's it," said Amy Griffith, who goes to bed, wakes up and takes her medicine at the same time every day.

Two years ago, she took another step in reclaiming her life and got her license to practice law renewed. In Nashville, Naomi Griffith excitedly listened to her daughter's news.

"When she said, 'I'm getting my license renewed, and I'm going to find my place,' I was like, 'Woo-hoo!' I knew then that we had turned a major corner," Naomi Griffith said.

"Amy is one of the most tenacious people I know. She didn't give up," White said. "At the beginning, this must have looked pretty frightening and bleak, but that didn't stop her, and now she is at a point of getting control of her illness."

For family members of those living with bipolar, White recommended to constantly ask questions.

"If you're not seeing results, ask questions just like you would your general practitioner. It can be frustrating, so you just have to not lose your resolve to find the right treatment," White said.

Currently, Amy Griffith serves on the board of the Mental Health Association and works at the Decatur law firm of White, Griffith & Oakes as a Guardian Ad Litem. In that role, she represents the interests of children pulled from their homes for safety reasons.

"As much as I would not want to have this disease, I do believe being bipolar has changed my life in some good ways," Amy Griffith said. "It has made me a more forgiving person because I don't know the cards people have been dealt. I am living my life day to day, like they are. Some days are good, some days are bad, but I'm living."

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