Cathryn Murray is an amazing person. Not just for what she achieved, and lost, but for determination to rebuild her life after losing everything to mental illness.

At 8 years of age, she founded the Global Teen Club International, a not for profit organization comprised of ethnically diverse and socially aware young people. In 1992 she received national recognition from Noxzema being named an Extraordinary Teen Finalist and the organization became affiliated with a United Nations program in 1996.

In 1999, Cathryn launched a website and became well known as a plus size model while also working in the public sector. Happy, successful, independent, in 2009 Cathryn had a breakdown and was diagnosed with Bipolar I. She lost everything.

Cathryn shares with us her story of loss, recovery and rebuilding her life with mental health.

BMH: You achieved some really impressive things at such a young age, who inspired and supported you?
Cathryn: My mother was very inspirational and encouraging. I didn’t want to be like the other kids. I wanted to do something useful so I set up a program called the Global Teen Club International. It was a not for profit organization comprised of ethnically diverse and socially aware young people.
I published a monthly zine for young people around the world. The zine published young people’s writings and helped to connect young people around the world. We learned more about our similarities and not our differences.
Through this program, I also helped to mentor young people, spoke at juvenile hall programs, published a poetry book Small Things, and was honoured as a successful youth volunteer as Global Teen of the Year.

BMH: You’ve done all these things as a teenager, then you’re working, you’re seeing someone, you’re modelling, you’re active in the church and community. What happened?
Cathryn: It was too much. I was pushing myself far too much. In 2007, my mother died. That triggered my breakdown in 2009. I lost my grasp of what was real and then lost everything after that.
BMH: How did your breakdown impact your life?
Cathryn: I lost everything. I lost my job, my apartment, my clothes, everything I owned. I had nothing, just what I was wearing. I was hospitalised under a 52-50 (a mandatory two-week hold). Then I was placed in a group home and was on disability for a year after that.

I was put on the S.P.I.R.I.T. (Service Provider Individualized Recovery Intensive Training) program. This trains and educates those who would like to become better self-advocates and/or Mental Health Service Providers (MHSP).

This program made me realize that I can continue with my education and accomplish things even with a mental illness. I attended this program at a local college in the SF bay area. I learned a lot from this program, especially about my diagnosis, and other people’s diagnoses, and it helped me to educate myself about mental illness and get the facts that I would need for myself and to help others.

BMH: That’s work and home. Was there an impact on family or friends or relationships?
Cathryn: Everything changes. I lost a lot of friends during my breakdown. They turned their back on me, with reason, but they weren’t supportive and left. But I also realize now those individuals were not my true friends. True friends stay by you through the rough times and good times as well. When I was on medication, I wasn’t the same person and lost more of my friends. I made new friends during my recovery, through the ANKA behavioral program in Concord, CA.

“ I had nothing, just what I was wearing ”

This program helped me to start opening up more with a therapist, meet people that were going through the same struggles I was going through, meet people that I could truly call my “friends.” It was through this program that helped me realize that I needed to go back to school and educate myself. After graduating from Anka, I was accepted into the SPIRIT program.

They were there for me when I was at my worst and they’re a really important part of my life now. Some of my old friends have reconnected and are coming back into my life.

BMH: What does the program do to help?
Cathryn: Concord Mental Health has helped me tremendously. I am assigned a case manager, money manager and psychiatrist. When I lost my apartment they assisted in placing me in a group home, they helped get me stable again and in getting a monthly income. CMH helps many people become independent again.

BMH: How did all this impact personal relationships?
Cathryn: My relationship from before the breakdown ended. But we got in touch again recently and we’re back together. That’s working out really well. We’re taking it slowly and seeing how things work out, but it’s good.

As for my father, we did not speak for many years. I think going through therapy helped me learn to forget things that happened in my past and focus
more on the future. I reached out to my father a few years ago. My mother wanted me to get to know my family on my father’s side, and I was able to attend a family reunion and also have been able to spend the holidays with my father’s family. I realize now how important family is. It was something that took awhile for me to get to this point in life. I credit my therapist, Ziba, for getting me here.

"You have to be positive"

BMH: Now you’re studying and looking for an internship, you’ve started modelling again... Are you concerned that you’ll face another breakdown?

Cathryn: No. I had so much energy before. I didn’t sleep and I took on too much. Now I’m calm. I make sure I sleep. I’m more in touch with my reality now. Everything was so overwhelming. I understand my disorder and I manage it. I’m really careful about what I take on. I’ve learnt to say no to things so that I don’t take on too much at once. I see my doctor every month and talk about what I’m doing and how I’m feeling and they suggest when I should maybe slow it down a little.

BMH: What does being a mental health advocate mean to you?

Cathryn: It means writing and speaking out to others, people I meet in my community and wherever else I can. I think we need more positive role models and messages around mental health. When the media mentions mental health it’s usually negative and about crime. I have bipolar disorder and I live my life in a really positive way. I want other people to understand that. I want other people to know that you can lose everything and start again and be positive and that it can work out.

BMH: How do you stay so positive?

Cathryn: It’s just the way I am. You have to be positive. I love writing and using my Wellness Recovery Action Plan. The WRAP model was developed with the help of a team of people with lived experience. It is kinda like a journal, but so much better. It was created by Mary Ellen Copeland. WRAP is program that can be adapted and modified to apply to mental health recovery; dealing with the effects of trauma, addictions, diabetes and fibromyalgia. WRAP can be modified for families, veterans, and kids, and other emerging recovery models. Some elements of WRAP focus on peer support and peer education. WRAP undertakes a strengths-based approach to recovery. We are encouraged to manage our own wellness and recovery in a manner that is comfortable to them and within their means. The key recovery concepts of WRAP are hope, education, personal responsibility, support and self-advocacy.

BMH: What’s next for you?

Cathryn: I’m going to be placed in an internship, graduate from Heald College in April. In my future I would like to be involved in event management. I love putting on events, planning everything and working with people. I’m a really positive person and want to share that.