

# Rachel Solomon

By Luke Schmaltz, VOICES Newsletter Editor

Rachel Solomon is the Program Coordinator for The Family Restored (TFR), a non-profit organization focused on supporting and strengthening families affected by substance use disorder (SUD). Based in Portland, ME, TFR is a partner with Massachusetts-based The Sun Will Rise Foundation (TSWR).

Solomon is a Family Group Facilitator at TFR and cites the 12-step method as the program that helped her overcome SUD. She does her work in honor of her sister, Cindy, who died of a heroin overdose in 2012 at the age of 18.

## A Pattern of Progression

"I never really thought I would become addicted to drugs and alcohol," Solomon begins. "I started using weed, I smoked a lot of it in high school and then I was prescribed Adderall. Even though it was a prescription, it was a terrible drug for me. I don't think I needed it, so in essence, I was abusing it. I sought it out because I was smoking weed and I couldn't keep up with my schoolwork. So, in my young mind of somebody with this disease, I thought the solution was to get more drugs."

"The progression just continued, and I started using prescription opiates like Percocet. Once those were unavailable, it turned into heroin. I never thought I would be someone who was shooting heroin, but one thing kept leading to another."

"For a long time when I was using, I was a functioning alcoholic. But as time went on, especially after I lost Cindy, I stopped functioning as well. I was in college doing well and then I started doing poorly. I stopped taking Adderall, which didn't help. Then, I slipped into opiates. I dropped out of college because my grades were so bad. I tried moving and I lived in a couple different states, and I ended up back at my childhood home. Internally, it was the worst I'd ever felt. I didn't want to use anymore but I couldn't stop. I kept trying to stop on my own and I kept relapsing. I didn't really want to live anymore, so I asked for help, eventually went detox, and then went to treatment. I'm pretty lucky to be here."

## Best Friends

"My sister and I were really close, only two years apart. In high school we hung out every day, it was like two friends living together. Her addiction progressed a lot faster than mine, and she had a non-fatal overdose pretty early on. That waved the red flag to everybody. We got put into these categories; she needed help, but I was OK because I functioned pretty highly for a while. She went to treatment quite a few times and kept trying to get back into recovery from that first overdose."

"Cindy was the kindest, happiest person," Solomon says. "She was one of those people who always made others feel included and she never made anyone feel bad about themselves. She had bright, beautiful blue eyes. She would bring people together, make them laugh, and was so forgiving, especially with her friends. She radiated positivity."

"When she died, she had just gone to treatment three months before, so she was sober, living in a sober house in Portland, ME. So, she did get to live the last three months of her life sober. She came home for Thanksgiving weekend, and she was happy, she looked good, everyone was happy to have her around. I said goodbye and went back to college that night. She went out with some friends and picked up again. She had a fatal overdose in her room at home."

## Navigating Grief

After her sister died, Solomon's grief journey was marked by a period of numbness followed by accelerated clarity and an extended period of painful acknowledgement – which continues today. "When Cindy first passed, I was still in active use – I had a pretty bad heroin habit myself. From when she died to when I got sober, it was really hard for me to grieve. That first year-and-a-half, I was just walking through life like a zombie. I was really sick in my addiction and things had gotten progressively worse. When I got sober, it was like a whirlwind, and I felt it for the first time. It started to dawn on me that this had actually happened, and this was forever."

"I do the 12 steps of AA, and by using a sponsor and developing a prayer and meditation life, I can lean on those tools to process my grief. All of those things helped to ground me, and to not live in guilt, and what ifs, and should-I-haves, and should-I-not-haves, and to realize I am not the controller of things. By peeling back that layer, it made it easier to remember Cindy more authentically."

Solomon emphasizes the continuity of grief, and how it simply does not go away after a short time. "I always felt this pressure to kind of like, wrap it up," she explains. "OK, it's been a year, it's been two years, I shouldn't be this sad anymore. I still do it to myself, even now, after 10 years have passed. How does this still feel so raw? I almost wish I could go back and grieve her harder in the moment. This is a huge loss, and it is OK to pause, to feel it, and to talk to people about it."

"I know it's been almost 11 years, but it is this journey I am on, and it is still really sad. It can still be really shocking, like, did that really happen? New things bring on the grief, like getting married. I am under contract to buy a house right now. I am going to own a home and she will never be in it. She never met my husband; she never met my dog. When you lose someone close, you experience their loss for the rest of your life."

## Helping with Empathy

"Cindy is my inspiration to help people. I worked in an inpatient treatment center, and while I was working with different women I thought, 'Well, how would I want someone to treat Cindy?' Now that I have transitioned to working with family members, I think, 'How would I have wanted someone to talk to my mom while she was going through things with Cindy?' How would I have wanted someone to talk to Cindy and make her feel loved and supported? Through my sponsorship and the work, I feel connected to her."

"If somebody wants help and they are not sure where to start, the first step is to be honest with the people you love and allow yourself to take the risk of telling them what is really going on. I was really dishonest in my using, so it was hard to ask for help because the situation was a lot worse than anyone may have thought," Solomon explains. "Even though it seems scary to tell someone what is going on, our loved ones usually know anyways. Being honest allows others to support you so that you can find that next step. Everybody knows someone impacted by this disease, so chances are, somebody knows somebody else who has a suggestion. If someone were to call me today, I would be able to tell them exactly what I did to get my life back."

## Advice for Anyone Struggling

"If I could go back and give myself advice, it would be to let yourself be sad and to express the emotions. There are so many support groups out there, I had no idea. Until TFR started their partnership with TSWR, I didn't know there were so many groups out there. TSWR hosts virtual and in-person groups every week, these meetings are open, and you can express yourself and say whatever you want."

"What I've learned through support groups, helping people, and reading things that we do, think, and feel things that we think make us crazy, but we are not. To have people around you say, 'I feel that too or I do that too,' makes you feel less alone. We should be able to talk about our loved ones and feel sad. It's OK to feel that way and to be unable to function because most people who die of this disease are extremely young and it is horrific."

"Anyone who has a loved one who is struggling or who is struggling themselves, let yourself get help from people who have walked this path. Recovery is not exclusive. Anyone can be in recovery. I don't have anything that someone who is struggling right now doesn't have besides more time away from the drugs. You don't have to be the most intelligent person, or this, or that. It doesn't matter where you come from, anyone can find recovery and live the life they want to live. It can happen, you just have to ask for help."