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A Q&A With Dark Corners

Sarah Schuster

I choose “mental health” as a beat in a news-writing class. This means every article I write will delve into a different corner of this subject. In an assignment, I break it down into four categories: policy, disorder, “positive practice,” and “negative experience.” These are broad areas and I have made them up, but they help make a vast topic more manageable. “Negative experience” is a little vague, so I emphasize that it focuses on grief and stress. “Positive practice” refers to stress-relieving practices to better our mental health, like meditation. I tell my professor I’ll eventually write a

more uplifting story, but I don’t get around to it. I prefer to explore darker corners and don’t think I could stand writing a news piece about deep breathing. There’s too much dirt in the air.

My first piece covers policy and answers the question, what resources does Syracuse University offer mentally ill students? *The Post Standard* reports that the number of students seeking services from the SU Counseling Center has nearly doubled over the past five years. Counselors and resources are limited, and the center is having a hard time keeping up. Coun-

selors can only provide short-term care and those who need more are referred to outside help; emergencies are exceptions. Because the center is so short-staffed, the counselors don't have time to talk to me. The only person allowed to fraternize with the press, the center's director, tells me he can only answer a few questions through email.

To expand the story, I set up an interview with the director of the Office of Disability Services. Students can apply for academic support under a "psychiatric form," and I want to know if his office has seen a similar influx of students seeking mental health services.

We are taught to open an interview by developing a sense of trust. It begins with a handshake and a smile, perhaps a comment on the weather or an interesting item in the subject's office. It's important to be present. Listening is an active experience and asking questions a calculated process. Make the subject feel comfortable, poke a hole, and capture what drains out.

But the director of the Office of Disability Services sits me down and immediately tells me he won't talk to me. He's angry at me, and I'm confused. He tells me he's had bad experiences with student journalists who have written articles tainting his office's name. I tell him I come in peace and have no preconceived notions and no intentions but to find more information for my story, but he thinks it was extremely inappropriate of me to contact counselors in his office. They all work in the same building. Did I think they would give me different information than he would?

I explain to him that I'm a student and this is a learning experience for me. I contacted his counselors only because I needed six sources. But he is a bureaucratic rock, and he shows me the door. I break for a second and murmur, "I really want to know..." but he doesn't want to hear my protests and doesn't want to tell me his story. I leave his office in tears, and when

I get home, write, "The Office of Disability Services declined an interview."

Once, my brother attacked a nurse who was sitting behind her desk. He was at Rogers Memorial Hospital in Wisconsin during his longest inpatient stay, three months, and this was very uncharacteristic of him. After launching himself at her and screaming, he grabbed a pen and started stabbing his own arm. This wasn't so uncharacteristic of him. But Collin's violence had never been aimed externally. During our only physical fight that I can remember, I slapped him, and he never retaliated. His nickname during a poetry slam I hosted was "The Sexy Cuddle Monster." The Sexy Cuddle Monster doesn't lunge at people.

When my mother called me and explained what had happened, she said the doctors were calling these episodes "dissociations." By definition, a dissociation is "a psychological defense mechanism in which specific, anxiety-provoking thoughts, emotions, or physical sensations are separated from the rest of the psyche." Following a dissociated episode, my brother collapses and doesn't remember a thing. After he has had two more episodes like this, although he is being treated for obsessive-compulsive disorder and an eating disorder, policy says he must now go to a special unit where he will no longer be "a danger to himself and others." He's no longer allowed on outings. No strings on his sweatshirts. No shoelaces on his shoes. I'm given a new number to call, but it's harder to reach him there. Residents pick up the phone, leave to get him, and disappear.

When we finally speak, my brother speculates that what he experienced wasn't true dissociation at all. He thinks he might have done it on purpose. He is an actor, a great one, so this isn't impossible. He makes me promise to not tell my parents, and I don't. But later, doctors will convince him otherwise. If he were truly psychopathic enough to attack a nurse and fake

a dissociation, they say, he wouldn't feel so much remorse. He wouldn't be sobbing about it. It's much more probable that his mind, left without its previous numbing eating-disorder behavior, just didn't know what to do with itself.

"I should be a case study," my brother tells me when I ask him about it months later. "I still don't really understand."

The only people who want to talk about mental health are those who have been personally affected by it. Offices don't want to talk to me. Policy makers don't want to talk to me. But my second story is about the Out of the Darkness Walk, a walk to raise money for suicide awareness and prevention. The coordinator is a perfect interviewee, quotable and already spilling like a waterfall. It takes all I have not to cry when she tells me the anecdote I end up using for my lead, hearing and feeling it while simultaneously formatting it into sentences. I start the story with the following:

Debra Graham discovered the Out of [the] Darkness Walks while throwing out what she thought was a pile of junk mail. As papers fell into the garbage, the word "suicide" caught her eye. It was a flyer promoting a walk in Long Island hosted by the American Foundation of Suicide Prevention, the first of its kind in New York. It fell on the day that would have been her son's 18th birthday. She had lost him to suicide the year before.

A traditional lead is only one sentence, but anecdotal leads get away with more. I spend so much time perfecting the anecdote that what follows is mediocre. I receive a B+.

During the winter break of my sophomore year of college, we had all woken up to my brother screaming, "Fuck!" He had locked himself in the bathroom before finally rushing downstairs, my parents following closely

behind. Sitting on top of the stairs and clutching my knees to my chest, I heard snippets of his dream, and from the snippets I wrote this:

He's standing in a kitchen. It's our kitchen, but everything is brighter. The walls are white and the floor is white and the kitchen lighting is horribly bright. It's not a kitchen, but a laboratory, but a kitchen all the same. And maybe it's the bright lights or the fact that he's dreaming but he can feel himself in this kitchen. Feel parts of himself he doesn't want to feel. He feels his core, his actual body, and then around him he feels the extra weight of shape. Fat, he thinks to himself. What he feels is this fatness. All this extra skin and extra meat that's surrounding the core of him. He just wants it to be stripped away. He wants it gone so badly he starts to shake. He thinks how great it would be to just be a core. On the counter appears a knife. A butcher knife. Bigger than any knife we have in our kitchen, but this is a dream, so the knife appears. He takes the butcher knife in his hand. He can feel the core of him. He can feel the extra. With the knife, he starts chopping off layers of himself. There is no blood at first. It is a clean chop. He is simply getting rid of what doesn't belong to him, what shouldn't be a part of him. He starts chopping faster of faster, but soon he chops too far. He's bleeding now; he's hit his core. But he doesn't stop and chops and he chops until he's nothing but a pile of skin and bones and blood and even now, he doesn't feel beautiful.

At the Syracuse National Alliance on Mental Illness educational conference, I am a smiling note-taker, the youngest by at least ten years. The woman sitting next to me tells me her mother committed suicide. A few tables away, a more than slightly mentally disabled man interrupts the speakers with sound but inappropriately timed comments. I am completely at ease. I enjoy these people, admire their activism and the fact that they're here at 9 A.M. on a Wednesday, possibly missing work. I'm skipping all my classes. These are my people, and they are tough, harshly questioning the man from



Illustration, "Busted Jaw" by Holly Wilson.

the New York State Office of Mental Health when he tells us about his office's plan to expand community-based treatment. While this is all well and good, what does he have to say about children's mental health beds, now nonexistent in Syracuse? Is forcing Syracuse parents to drive an hour to Utica his idea of community building? What are we going to do without beds?

I want to stand on my chair and cheer like this is a sporting event. I want to hug each and every one of them and cry in their arms. I want to grab the microphone and scream to them. I want them to know I understand, I'm with them. I'm part of this.

But I am a journalist, and a journalist must not engage. A journalist is a blank slate able only to regurgitate what he or she can observe. A note-taking fly on the wall is barely seen, certainly not heard. Certainly not embraced.

That night I tell their story and dutifully swallow my own.

It's an uncharacteristically blue day, so I choose to write on a bench outside, sacrificing warmth for glimpses of clear sky. My bench sits on a pathway leading to the heart of the university, and students pass everywhere. My focus sharpens in this chaos, but my pocket vibrates before I can start. I take a deep breath when I see Collin's name on the screen. Every call from home is a coin toss. 50% chance of panic, 50% chance of calm. I'm rarely called during periods of calm. This time: rain. He's sobbing because he got into a fight with my mom, who out of frustration got into her car and drove away. "Why am I here?" he cries to me. "I'm only staying alive for them. I'm only staying alive for you." He needs to leave, but he just doesn't know where to go.

“Go for a walk in the park,” I coax him, trying not to beg, but I can hear the desperation in my voice. “Don’t get into a car. You’re fine. It’s going to be fine. Please don’t drive.” I hear my dad’s voice in the background, and, still sobbing, Collin says he has to go. I tell him to call me back, but he hangs up, the line dead mid-sentence.

Students pass. I breathe. As I stare at my phone, the longing to call a friend pulls hard against my need to carry this conversation inside of me like a precious, bitter jewel.

“You,” I hear. “Hey, you.”

I glance up and see a boy with a megaphone. He’s walking toward me, beaming; his amplified voice wants to know my name. I can’t help smiling, and I tell him. This pretty, shaggy-haired Megaphone Boy is a perfectly bizarre distraction, taking me from one reality to the next. Just obnoxious enough to knock my head out of home and back to the bench. Whatever this is, this moment is ours, Megaphone Boy.

If he asked me out, he wants to know, through this megaphone in the middle of the university, on a scale of one to ten, how romantic would it be?

“Two,” I smugly answer. Another boy with a camera had been hiding farther down the sidewalk, and I explain to him that this element takes romance points away from his proposition.

After a few more laughs, and his obtaining my phone number, he turns to leave. My phone buzzes again.

“Everything’s fine,” my brother tells me. “It was just a fight,” he laughs. “I’m OK, really.”

Violence, calm, storm. I look up, and the boy with the megaphone is nowhere in sight.

At the end of the semester, my professor says I seem very passionate about my beat. I nod and agree. On my papers he writes that I have strong structure and style, but a consistent criticism is that I need to pay more attention to facts, like the spelling of names. I agree about this, too. I’m an over-reporter, I explain to him, spending too much time transcribing and researching and not enough time writing the actual piece. I create outlines like I’m preparing to write a book, ironically making me more prone to silly, rushed mistakes.

But what I want to tell him is how it feels to hold these stories in my hands. I want to describe, so he fully understands, the feeling of gripping answers while questions slip through my fingers like sand. Questions with no answers, like Why him? Why not me? Answers that surpass word counts, like what will become of us, how will this end. Topics that don’t fall neatly into categories when positive practice and negative experience create a swirling synonym for a home full of disorder, ruled by broken policy. Moments of happiness and hope thrown in, complicating the story line, making structure impossible to maintain.

And in some ways we know this, the inability of journalism to perfectly replicate real life. No Truths, only truth. Windows that we frame to fit a time and an angle, but that always block some light from shining through. We’re taught to end an interview by asking, “Anything else? Is there anything else you want to say?” Because inherently we know it’s never enough. Dark corners remain dirty. Something always slips through the cracks. But it’s the best we can do, so we write.

