

Making lives worth living.

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BUILDING ON EACH OTHER'S STRENGTHS.

Elizabeth Rivera is a walking testament to why it's important for families and communities to help children with serious emotional and behavioral disorders. Elizabeth wasn't fortunate enough to get the help she needed when she needed it most. However, by working diligently to understand her own mental health issues she's become a better parent to her own children and a powerful advocate for children with SED and their families.

What is a serious emotional disturbance (SED)?

SED includes a range of behavioral and emotional disorders severe enough to limit or interfere with a child's ability to function in the family, school, or community.

Growing up without the support of family or the community

One of Elisabeth's earliest memories is of her mother collapsed on the floor from an overdose of prescription drugs. At age six Elizabeth was too young to understand why her mother was intent on ending her life. When her mother finally succeeded at age 25, Elizabeth and her siblings — an older brother and sister — were sent to live with her mother's mother, a decision that set in motion a series of unfortunate events that included time spent in foster homes and juvenile detention.

Elizabeth's grandmother had her own mental health issues that prevented her from providing the children with the kind of supportive and nurturing environment they needed. The situation was compounded by Elizabeth's own behavior, which was becoming increasingly erratic. Unable to cope, her grandmother took her to the local police station and turned her over to the authorities. With no other family members available to take her in — her father was serving time for a drug-related offense — Elizabeth entered California's child services system at age 11.

Over the next two years Elizabeth was shuffled between 20 foster homes. During a stay at a group home, she was diagnosed as having attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and Tourette's syndrome. Elizabeth was placed on medication and was doing much better until she was transferred to a foster home where the family discontinued her medication. Without proper care, Elizabeth's mental health, and consequently her life, went from bad to worse. She ran away from her foster family at age 13 and, guided by a faint childhood memory, set out in search of her father's sister.

Elizabeth found her aunt, with whom she remained until the course of her life was yet again radically changed — this time by a visit from her older brother and his friend. For the next three years she would live with her brother's friend and his family. It was a life that included frequent physical abuse and extensive drug use. When she learned of her father's release from prison, she left the boy's

family in the hope of reuniting with her father. Her dream of creating some kind of family life ended abruptly when police killed her father while he attempted to break into a pharmacy.

Alone again, she moved to Long Beach, where she eventually ended up on the street. A string of arrests for petty theft, heroin addiction, and prostitution finally brought her before a judge who gave her an ultimatum: Get straight or serve serious prison time for any subsequent offenses. Assigned a counselor, she began the difficult task of trying to regain control over her life. Elizabeth found the strength to beat her drug addiction, and counseling and proper medication gave her the tools she needed to turn her life around.

Applying life's lessons

Once she got her own life in order, Elizabeth began helping others by sharing her life experiences. But that's not the end of her story. After becoming a wife and then a mother, she found herself confronted with an all-too-familiar challenge: Two of Elizabeth's three children were born with emotional and behavioral disorders. Her daughter was diagnosed as bipolar with obsessive-compulsive disorder and Tourette's syndrome. Her son's diagnosis was more complex and included Tourette's syndrome and oppositional-defiance (OD) and obsessive-compulsive (OC) disorders. Both children have been hospitalized at one time or another, but only her son remains on medication.

Elizabeth's own experience has given her the resolve to do all she can for her children, including leaving her state job in California and moving to Idaho, where the pace of life is slower and she is

able to spend more time with them. "Growing up I felt broken," Elizabeth says, "and no one had the time or desire to help me." However, she's honest about what it takes to be a good parent to a child with SED: "It takes patience – lots of patience – but fortunately there are resources available in the community to help families get through it." Elizabeth contributes to that solution by providing respite care for families living in her area.

Regarding her own family, Elizabeth is remarkably upbeat. Her daughter, who is now 15, has a part-time job and is making great strides at becoming more self-sufficient. Elizabeth's son is also doing much better. Both her daughter and son are home schooled, but her son has a desire to return to the public school system and Elizabeth feels confident that he has shown enough progress to succeed in that environment. "My son's been through a lot," she says, "but he remains strong. He really is my hero."

Reconnecting with her aunt after a separation of many years, Elizabeth learned her mother and her grandmother were both bipolar and suffered from depression. Knowing her family's mental health history has helped Elizabeth answer many questions about her own life. Of course the one question to which she will never know the answer is: What would her life have been like had her mother and grandmother received the help they needed? Elizabeth doesn't dwell on what could have been – instead she works to ensure that the lives of her children and the lives of other children with SED are full of hope and not despair.



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For more information about the Idaho System of Care and services and support available in your area, call the Idaho CareLine by dialing 211 or 1-800-926-2588.

You also can contact the Idaho Federation of Families, an Idaho-based support organization for families with children affected by SED, on the Web at www.idffcmh.org or by calling 1-800-905-3436.