

A new reason to live

One year ago, Tara Elizabeth Axmaker, high on meth, stabbed a Clackamas County acquaintance, stole a police car and led deputies on a chase that ended when she wrecked about five miles away.

In October 2013, Axmaker pled guilty to first-degree assault, aggravated theft and attempting to elude police. She was sentenced to 10 years in prison. She is currently serving that time at Coffee Creek Correctional Facility in Wilsonville. This is her story, in her own words, as submitted to Street Roots.

My name is Tara Axmaker. I am writing this letter to reflect on the last year and to let people know about how my life, and the lives of others, were affected by my addiction to crystal meth and my untreated mental health issues.

I was diagnosed as bipolar when I was a juvenile. I was also diagnosed with depression and post-traumatic stress disorder from being in multiple foster homes and a childhood trauma. I was supposed to be on medication, but I never followed up with it. I ended up self-medicating with street drugs.

On March 15, 2013, I took the last shot of meth I would ever do. A year later, I am sober and treating mental health issues that have gone unacknowledged and untreated for years. What a difference a year can make.

A little over a year ago, I was out of prison. I

going on. And so I would stay up even longer and the longer I stayed up, the more I wouldn't eat or drink, the worse my mind was getting. All I had in my veins was chemicals.

The night I went over to Matt's house: It's why I'm here. I went over there and everything was fine at first and then I did a shot of meth. We slept together. During the night, I thought he was switched out. My mind said the evil one; the government clone is here, the one who helped kill your child. I stabbed him with the knife, not once, but two times and then I ran and hid outside. I laid down outside and looked up at the stars. My mind said the aliens are in the stars. That's where they stay. And there are no stars in the sky, so you're OK. The aliens got their feet on the ground and they have your back. I told myself I did good because he was an evil one. I told myself I don't have to fear anything. I just laid there quietly and two cop cars showed up and they went inside to look at Matt and I ran and jumped in a cop car. I got in a high speed chase with them and I eventually wrecked.

When I got to the interrogation room they asked me what happened. I told them everything and they took me to the jail. I thought I was being released. I thought, I did a good thing. Why am I in here? I even thought I was going there to get a officer's uniform and I was all of a sudden a cop.

Three o'clock in the morning came around I

danger to society. I had all their guns in the cop car, even though I wasn't knowledgeable of them. I was so out there. And they didn't know what kind of risk I was. I was so out of my mind, anything was possible.

Life is funny. I'm in prison, but I'm not in prison. It's like my life is just beautiful now. I have something to live for now. Out there was a prison for me. I was just so stuck in my addiction, in this crazy delusion, trance life. It was just a one-track mind: money, sex and getting my next fix.

Now, in a strange way, I feel like my life is complete. I have hope for my life now. I have love in my life now. I was diagnosed with depression and post-traumatic stress disorder when I was a juvenile. I was given medication, but it was always hard for me to figure out how I was going to pay for the doctor's drugs. Or if I had to get on insurance and stuff. I don't have a lot of schooling, so it was really hard for me to understand financial stuff.

My grandmother had schizophrenia. Before I came to prison the first time, I was diagnosed with schizophrenia, but the doctor this time said he wasn't sure if it was drug induced or schizophrenia. My doctor was in the courtroom to be sure I was able to aid and assist at the hearing.

It was drug-induced. No food, no water, no sleep and no medication that I needed all along. Add the drugs, and it brings out a mild

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remember I was walking down Burnside and I had these boots on and I looked and I felt so great in my skin. I wasn't on drugs. Everything was just awesome. I was going to catch my bus. I was wearing real clothes - not prison clothes anymore. I just got off work. It was just like real life.

And then I remembered walking downtown Burnside, again a few weeks later. This time I was in my addiction, high on meth and thinking that every car that goes by is watching me and that they're all aliens and it's some conspiracy.

Old acquaintances and my own bad patterns are what put me back in my addiction. When I was in prison the first time, I still held onto those old people that I used to hang out with. So when I got out, I wanted to show this guy how good I looked, clean and sober. I went over there and he was using. I passed it up a couple of times, but I started hanging out with him and before I knew it - relapse. A little bit became a lot and it just became an every day thing.

I didn't really get high anymore though. I would go immediately into a psychosis. I was automatically fearful of things, mainly authority. I thought that people had killed my daughter. I thought that she was the chosen one and she was put in my belly - a golden child of God - and didn't have a dad. I started to think all of these weird things. There is nothing that anybody could have said to me that made me think that my delusions weren't real. And I didn't think she was with my ex-husband anymore, I thought that she was cloned. The original one was sacrificed, the clone was in foster care.

My "friends" - tweakers and drug addicts - would play off my psychosis. They thought it was funny and so they would say little things like, "Yeah my spaceship will be arriving soon. I'm an alien." And I would start believing my delusions even more. I didn't know that they were just messing with me. Now, I realize, they would play off whatever crazy things I would say. Like, I would say, "It's scary how people are being sacrificed every day, isn't it?" and they would be like, "Oh yeah, I sacrificed one. I killed about five people this week." They would say things like that. It just made me spin out even worse.

But I just kept hanging around these people because I was so addicted to getting high.

The more I got high, the worse my mind was getting. I wouldn't eat because I thought that I was eating human food products. And I thought the government was killing people and I thought it was really human body parts and stuff and so I wouldn't eat anything.

Every day it would get worse. It got to the point where I wouldn't sleep. *If I sleep, they're going to kill me.* I had to figure out what is really

didn't get released. But an officer came and talked to me and she gave me a bed roll and said, "How about it's time you go to sleep now?" She seemed really nice and I went to sleep.

The next morning they put me into a separate room to detox before I went into the general population. I thought they meant detox from all of the poisons that the government been giving me. I didn't think I needed to detox because of drugs.

When I saw the paper, I was still in disbelief. I thought I was framed. I thought that there was a clone of me that did it. For days and days, I would talk to myself in the cell and I thought my boyfriend could hear me through a piece in my tooth so I would talk to him all of the time in my cell.

When I finally did call him, I started to realize that things weren't the way I thought they were. They put me on medication, and I started sleeping and eating and drinking. I started trusting them a little bit. My mind started healing from the damage that was done. It took a long while.

When I really realized why I was there and what charges I had, I asked God. I said, "Please God, help me because I don't have anybody." My mom lives in Bend and she doesn't have much money. So I need somebody to help me get through this. I'm in hot water. I'm in a lot of trouble. This is so not good.

I could just feel the heat of what happened.

The next day I got a voicemail on the phone in jail saying, "This is Gary. I want you to know that I love you and I want to be there for you. No matter how much time you get, I want to be by your side." He's been there ever since: visits at the jail behind a screen, money on my books, and money on my phone to call my mom. He comes here to the prison and visits me every weekend. He takes paid vacation to come visit me. Puts money on my books, makes sure I'm taken care of. He talks to me on the phone. He's just an amazing man.

In here, I've gotten quite a bit of attention because of the crime I committed. For a while there, I was getting so many letters from all over, mostly other prisoners who heard about me. And in the halls here, sometimes people break into Alicia Keys, "This Girl's on Fire" because I was singing parts of it that night on the police radio.

It really bothers me.

What I did was a huge mistake. I couldn't see that then because my psychosis, fueled with a meth amphetamine addiction, had me living in a fake reality. It was meth and it was horrible. They danger I put other people in that were on the street by me recklessly driving. It was life-threatening to me, to other people, to the cops. And they were going to shoot me because I was a

schizophrenia and makes it worse.

I'm on Prozac and Lithium and it's going good for me.

I feel good. I definitely feel I am being rehabilitated. I feel I have hope now. I'm not depressed. I'm not fearful of my life. I have goals. And I'm able to think clearly. I feel like I have a beautiful life ahead of me.

They gave me a bail - before I was convicted and sent to prison - they didn't think I would be able to make it. I mean, Axmaker? They just thought I was this girl who doesn't know anybody. And I really didn't just know anybody. But Gary is just this guy because he's a good citizen in the world and he had a good job and a good label so he could go to the bank and do that. He also loves me. Still, I didn't think he would do it, I told my probation officer that I don't even know if it's going to happen.

Then one day, all of a sudden, the guard said, "Axmaker, roll it up." And I had been telling all of the officers that I was going to get bailed out and they would laugh at me. "You ain't getting bailed out. You ain't going anywhere." They laughed all the time. And the one who laughed the most, she had to dress me out when I left the jail. And she was like, "Well, I'll be damned, you really did it."

My PO took me to a work release center where I was to stay (prior to prison). Gary had already been there. He came there faithfully to visit me.

I'll never forget this: Gary and I were sitting outside soon after my release. He said, "Babe, look at those ducks right there." The work release center was on the water and we could see the ducks. He told me, "There's something about ducks that I want you never to forget." The sun was shining on us and it was just all beautiful and warm. He told me that ducks are true soul mates. That ducks have one soul mate and they stay with that one partner until they die. I was looking at the ducks and it was really pretty and for a minute, I felt so free.

I need a good amount of time in here. I needed time to transform my life. I couldn't do it on the outside the way I was living. My grandma told me once, "You sleep with the dogs, you wake up with fleas." She was right.

It's been a year since my crime and though it's far out, I can see a light at the end of the tunnel. I'm really thankful that the man I stabbed didn't die. I'm grateful for this chance to make a new life. I can honestly say that I'm done with the lifestyle that got me here.

Now I can look in the mirror and say, "I love you. I love who you are. You are a beautiful woman." Before, I couldn't do that.

It's going to be OK. I know it is.