

‘I don’t know what I have to do to drill into my head to stop the pattern. I have to take it as a life-and-death disease, literally.’

— CELENE ECKER

leaving Earth. I was in control of that. I was an astronaut. I was so delusional that I thought I heard trees speaking. I thought I was supposed to be the next Madonna. That’s funny,” she adds with a laugh.

I’ve known Celine Ecker the better part of a year, and I’ve watched her slowly fall apart, as she’s gone from being a sensitive, highly intelligent and fragile woman to being a person at war with herself, off her meds and increasingly erratic, struggling to maintain a tenuous hold on reality and human relationships; it’s a terribly helpless thing to see, and in my helplessness I’m one more person who failed her.

When Ecker went off her meds in October and disappeared, having lost her housing, I prayed that she wouldn’t die. I ran into her once in December, at the same place we had coffee to talk about this article. It was absolutely freezing outside then, and she was brutally underdressed. I bought her a bagel and cup of coffee, and we talked. It was like communicating with someone you know through a scrim of fuzz in a nightmare where meaning becomes a louder and then quieter echo: At one point, Ecker told me she’d removed her ovaries the previous night, after she’d given birth to three stillborn babies stored now in her backpack. She scrawled me manic notes on free postcards she’d picked up, filling up the space with subliminal advertisements for her future self: “Coming to a theater near you for Christmas, 2017” and “Lunarstream Movie Productions presents the fastest animae star on planet Earth” and “Keep your dreams in your mind.”

And then I said goodbye, please take care, stay warm. I did not, despite Ecker’s distressing condition and isolation and confusion and the arctic cold outside, offer her the shelter of my house. No — my failure is, in some essential way, our failure. I’ll own that.

Though she is now staying in a shelter and under a six-month commitment with the state of Oregon to continue taking her medication and maintain counseling, Ecker says she is worried that the cycle of mental dissolution and homelessness in her life will continue. “I just get scared that

I’m going to repeat the pattern,” she says. “It’s happened so many times. There’s only so many chances you get in life. I’ve tried to commit suicide at least three or four times, to the extremity of swimming out into the ocean.”

Being aware of the pattern, Ecker explains, doesn’t help. Despite the fact that she can’t remember large chunks of the past 20 years, she knows what happens when she crashes. “I don’t take my medicine,” she says. “I just think I don’t need it. Sometimes I forget to take it, and more and more I don’t take it and end up on the streets again. It’s out of control. I lose weight. I get sexually abused by men on the streets. I get sleep deprived. I starve for a whole month. I don’t eat. I don’t sleep. I walk around. I feel alienated. It’s like a Jekyll-and-Hyde personality, one extreme to another,” Ecker says.

“I don’t know what I have to do to drill into my head to stop the pattern,” she adds. “I have to take it as a life-and-death disease, literally.”

At one point, I ask Ecker if she senses something is wrong when she’s delusional. She asks me if I know when something’s wrong in my head. It’s a chilling question. Then I ask her if there’s anything I could have done differently. “It’s really hard to talk to someone who is in that state of mind, because you don’t know that you need help,” Ecker explains. “I’m too out there, I don’t relate to anybody. Once someone gets that far out, it’s hard to reel them back in unless they give up.”

STRESS KILLS

Hard, but not necessarily impossible. Many people suggest — including several homeless individuals I’ve spoken with — that Eugene does a better job than most cities in addressing the issues of homelessness and mental illness. Funding and staffing and bureaucratic bloat aside, we do possess a slew of advocates and organizations focused on helping those in need, whether homeless or experiencing mental issues or both: White Bird, St. Vincent de Paul, SLEEPS, Laurel Hill Center, ShelterCare,

Buckley House, Looking Glass, Eugene Mission, Egan Warming Center, to name a few.

The Johnson Unit is ground zero for many individuals, like Ecker, who find themselves undergoing severe psychiatric crises. “It’s the isolation of either the mental illness or the homelessness that drives people to the crisis,” says Dale Smith, director of behavioral health services at PeaceHealth, home to the Johnson Unit. “It’s a horribly isolating experience. That is what leads to that desperation and isolation. If you have any degree of paranoia or psychosis, (being homeless) just fuels it like a hot fire.”

“Your lifestyle will create mental illness,” I was told by Mike, a 51-year-old man staying at the Whoville encampment at the corner of Broadway and Hilyard. “The stress. Stress kills. If you’re mentally ill already, the hoops get harder to jump through. Once you’ve gotten down, it’s hard to come back up. A lot of people don’t make it.”

Paul Cooper, another Whoville camper, says that agencies that help the homeless and mentally ill are too often ostracized. “The mentally ill, they can’t help it,” he says. “I feel they’re just kicked to the curb.”

Whoville’s Mama Carrie says about “half of us out here” suffer from mental illness. “Truthfully, people need meds no matter what,” she says. “Whether it’s mental illness or a physical ailment.”

Smith says the focus of the PeaceHealth transition team is to create what’s called a continuum of services, including intensive case management and a “hand-off of care” that engages a patient’s life needs, such as stable housing. “That becomes the focus of that team, establishing some kind of housing,” Smith points out. “The bottom line is really about that support system, that network, so people don’t slip back into that situation. The problem is everybody sees them as failing. They don’t fail. We fail.”

Regan, whose CDLC is currently seeking a court mandate challenging the “criminalization of homelessness in our communities that fail to offer an alternative to the unhoused condition,” says she suspects that up to 90 percent of our homeless population have mental health issues, and that many of these individuals “become addicted to street drugs in an attempt to mask or manage symptoms.” And, Regan adds, the stress and anxiety of such an unstable condition is only exacerbated when a person comes in contact with law enforcement officers untrained in negotiating mental-health crises.

“If you truly want to decriminalize mental illness and homelessness, it has to start with the cops,” Regan says.

As a freshman rep in the Oregon State Legislature, current House Majority Leader Val Hoyle fought for the creation of two new state mental facilities, including the one slated to open in Junction City in 2015. Hoyle, whose own brother has experienced mental-health issues, acknowledges the controversy surrounding the building of the hospital, which some see as one more “Cuckoo’s Nest” means of institutionalizing and deadening patients with heavy pharmaceuticals.

Hoyle insists, however, that hospitalization, while not an end in itself, is a step above incarcerating the mentally ill in jails. “We need to treat mental illness the same way we treat physical illness,” she says, adding that stays should be shorter and followed by strong community support, including reliable housing and services.

“I really want people to get care at the community level,” Hoyle says. “We don’t have enough places for people to go ... It’s very clear that stress is a trigger for people who are mentally ill. If you have someone who’s mentally ill and they don’t have a stable place, then it’s harder for them to manage their mental illness.”

WHERE THEY’RE AT

Right now, in this city, in this nation, we all seem to agree that something is broken. What we disagree upon is

‘The mentally ill, they can’t help it. I feel they’re just kicked to the curb.’

— PAUL COOPER, WHOVILLE CAMPER AND LOCAL MUSICIAN

