

Kate Rodgers

Kate is an amazing woman. Not only is she my wife, but she is also my best friend and soul mate. That's all the clichés out of the way.

My Kate, who is from Canada but has lived here 28-29 years, is truly an amazing woman. At the very young age of 24, having just left drama school as the girl most likely to succeed, Kate started on her road to acting work and theatre success. After almost 6 months of working in schools and colleges, teaching drama, Kate began to show signs of not being well. She was not getting the acting work she was told she would be getting and was working in restaurants to supplement her teaching income.

Because of her work load and the hours, Kate's health began to deteriorate and her mental health was beginning to suffer; badly. She was sleeping sixteen hours on her days off and going for long walks in the middle of the night, she could not sleep. Her dream, of making the world a better place through her theatre work was slowly slipping out of reach. Kate did not end up in the big theatre in Down town Toronto, but ended up in the psychiatric wing of the big hospital in downtown Toronto. Her family thought this would be the best thing for her. So began her journey of mental health and mental illness, but more so, her journey of maintenance and recovery. It was going to be a long road and she was not prepared for much of what was going to happen.

Their story

Having found that life was just too challenging, Kate found herself in what was called, at the time, the revolving door syndrome. She was in and out of hospital and she was in and out of psychosis. We are still not sure how the illness came on her, but the way she was behaving, convinced the system to offer her medication. In some cases more medication than her body could cope with.

She was in and out of the general hospital for many months and with each visit, they changed her medication. Her body was going through chemical warfare. During this time though, she knew that the treatment she was being given was there to help with her recovery. She kept telling her self that; “she would recover, as a year ago, she was fine”. However, some of the treatments were a bit harsh and on one occasion whilst in hospital, the authorities deemed it necessary to chain Kate to the bed, with leather shackles around her wrists and ankles. They thought she was being too disruptive on the ward; whereas Kate saw it just being theatrical bravado and being over the top. They chained her for almost a week and it was whilst there that she found a sense of calm and started to reflect on what was happening. And when she was calm they released her. She asked why, and they told her that her behaviour was inappropriate. She was confused, as her behaviour as a classically trained actress, to her, was appropriate.

From this action, it led the authorities to sending Kate to a long term psychiatric unit with a prognosis of several months plus. This broke her heart; as all her dreams of an acting career and working in theatre and making the world a better place through her art and theatre where, in her mind, gone. Years of hard work and study all for nothing. She had read and heard about the long term unit and had gathered that not many people ever come out in the short term. The saying was, “this place is full of human shrapnel”

Kate was only in there a few months and, eventually, asked to sign herself out. She was not certified so she was allowed to do this. They told her if she left she would find it difficult getting back into the system. She said she was ready and would take her chances in the outside world. Brave or just silly? She needed to find out for herself.

When Kate got out of the psychiatric system, she went to live at her sister’s house and whilst there started her own journey of recovery and self-help. She knew she needed some type of medication and found this at her GP’s. She knew she needed to take better care of her self physically and started a regular exercise routine. She knew she needed a better diet and change the way she ate completely. She also knew that she needed to help others understand their own journey of mental illness. To encourage people and tell them that there is hope and light at the end of the tunnel. She had a burning need to help others.

She did this by buying her own medical records and researched what had happened to her of the many months she was in hospital. She read and studied

the medication she was given. She studies the diagnosis they gave her; of which there were many. Piece by piece she built up a picture of what had happened and what she went through. This was very good for her recovery journey, as some medications took away the memory of what she was going through, at the time, whilst on that medication.

From all this research, she wrote a play called 'Cracked Up'. Cracked up mentally and cracked up with laughter. It was based on her behaviours whilst in hospital; some of the things she did, according to the records. She discovered some were very funny. So, cracked up mentally and cracked up with laughter was the theme of the play. It was a one woman play and Kate was to be the star. She wanted to act and share her story. She wanted to tell her story in the hopes that it would help people with their recovery journey.

That play became incredibly successful and filled the theatres wherever it played in Canada. It also did a national tour of New Zealand. Whilst in New Zealand, Kate was asked to speak in many diverse places such as schools, libraries and women's refuges and safe houses. It played to theatres in England and Ireland. On the back of the play Kate started to be asked to come and be a guest speaker at many mental health conferences around the world. When we began telling Kate's story, she often says she was the 'lone wolf in the prairies'. But thanks to Kate and her openness, honesty and her constant encouragement, many people have followed suit and are now telling their story publicly; from general public to celebrities. We always had sad stories of mental health, but Kate's message is one of hope and optimism.

Her knowledge and expertise and gift of positive storytelling with positive outcomes have been sought by many. She has now spoken in over 25 countries to many groups of people; from big businesses such as high street banks to smaller self-help groups and the message is always the same; **DO NOT SUFFER IN SILENCE**. If you feel that your mental health is struggling, talk to someone. She has, over the years given a voice to people who often find it difficult to speak for themselves.

Kate is also one of the directors of a theatre company for people with mental health challenges. The entire members have now found a voice and a platform on which to use that voice.

Kate has never hidden the fact that her mental health is a constant challenge. Kate had never hidden the fact that some day she really struggles; But Kate has also never stopped voicing hope and encouragement to others. She is and has been a great advocate and is no longer that lone voice. We have come a long way in the last 35 years when it comes to 'telling your story' and I truly believe and yes of course I am bias as her husband, but I genuinely believe Kate was one of the early pioneers when it comes to telling your story about mental health. We now have new directives such a social prescribing where creative and storytelling activities are greatly encouraged and many people are sent to Kate and I's theatre group to do just that.

I saw, the play Cracked Up and it certainly woke me up and opened my eyes about a subject I used to fear and shy away from and now, almost 30 years

later I am still married to the woman who changed my entire mindset when it comes to talking about your mental health. I have many photographs of Kate delivering speeches to many thousands of people, knowing that at least one in four of her audience will have been touched by Kate's words and the other will have taken it all in.

Over the last 35 years, I know Kate has changed the hearts, minds and attitudes of many people when it comes to mental health; from health care professional, decision makers and service users. I also know that she is very humble when it comes to praise and thanks. She is very kind with her time and very grateful for all she has in her life.

For me as her Husband, friend, soul mate and sometimes, as and when needed, carer; I would really like to see her recognised for the work she has been doing since the day she discharged herself from hospital over 35 years ago. She found her voice then and now, has given a voice to many thousands of people since then. Without her, many people would still be silent. Without her, many would still carry around with them some kind of stigma towards mental illness. Without her many people would have no voice to encourage others on the recovery road. Without her I feel we would not have come as far as we have when it comes to finding your voice.

Thank you so much for reading this.(A very proud and better informed husband)

Kate – Just to say what a wonderful job you did entertaining and enlightening us the other evening! I found your humour both provocative and stimulating. The bravery you showed talking so openly about your mental health, was fearless and very funny, and I think it was valuable for my colleagues to see that modelled, and to be reminded of the “humour” in us all. Many thanks.

Jay Williams, Culture Development Manager, Improvement and Performance Services

You truly are an inspiration at the end of a hard long day. It's so easy to feel down, low, think how hard the day has been... this exercise you shared turns that on its head. I'm usually half full but struggled recently ... then you arrive! Thankyou Kate. Kate Chilton NHS Practice Manager.

Bill and Kate are two of the most genuine, compassionate and caring people who I always feel I can turn to for support, and have done so, over the years.

I learn best by a mixture of visual, auditory and kinaesthetic learning aka doing. Therefore the use of Theatre and drama as a therapeutic tool is both extremely important in terms of both my journey of recovery AND by general development as a person on this planet. This is also the case for so many other others. Whatever learning style or level of wellness a person has, Stepping Stone Theatre has developed to cater for everyone. Rosie, a service user.

Kate's writing group has been a breath of fresh air through the pandemic. It has enabled me to express myself and make new friends, all the while

confronting my issues in a safe and supportive space. I have nothing but thanks and admiration for what Kate has achieved in these few months! Gryph.

For most of my adult life, I've struggled with anxiety and depression. Every Friday, since last April, I have attended the Stepping Stone Scribblers writing workshop with a lovely bunch of people who have become friends. We have great fun, get all creative, and under the gentle but firm tutelage of the wonderful Kate the Great, I have rediscovered my muse. This year I have written a poem a day, and have posted them on Instagram. Also I won a prize for one of my poems in an online poetry competition. This would not have happened without the encouragement of Kate. Thank you Kate. Dave (a scribbler)

Stepping stone was a great opportunity for me and I hope that I can re-join in the future when things are a little more normalised whatever that means, I applied and auditioned for the course and was accepted onto it which I start in September, and if it wasn't for you guys telling me that I can achieve what I want to achieve I don't think I would've ever done it. The first day at stepping stone was so hard for me because I didn't know anybody but everybody made me feel so welcome and coming to you and joining was the best decision I ever made in my life. Kate and Bill you are amazing at what you do for us. Ben (former member, but I'll be back)

Stepping stone has helped me and my son. I first found out about stepping stone when my son joined the theatre group and invited me to go see a show. I was shocked at what I found out about my son and his mental health struggles. Some things he had never told me. But bill and Kate was a great help to my son after attending many shows I started to understand my son's behaviour. Then the lovely Kate invited me to join the scribblers writing group and through this I have made some wonderful friends and have learnt to be open and honest about myself and to know I'm not alone with my struggles and fears. I would like to thank bill and Kate for their hard work and support they give to others. love from Dee (a scribbler)

“Kate's work is insightful and very inspiring.” Jenny Shipley, former Prime Minister of New Zealand