

Nancy Alterman, who bravely volunteered to share her story as our first Lotus Ladies Personal Profile, is the embodiment of one of the core values of Lotus Network: **It is never too late to become the person you always wanted to be.** We hope that her story will inspire you to share your own story or nominate someone else whose story deserves to be heard...we believe they all do!

Nancy Alterman

At her recent 66th birthday celebration, Nancy Alterman's brother told her, "I think you might be the happiest person I know." It was a remarkable statement to make about a woman who had spent much of her teenage and adult life mired in a deep, all-encompassing depression.

Nancy grew up the youngest of four children in the privileged cocoon of a loving, Jewish family in Denver. She was pretty. She was a natural athlete. She had lots of friends and did well in school. As Nancy entered her teen years, however, she felt her charmed life slipping away. Her natural zest for life vanished, leaving her uneasy in her own skin and unable to connect as she once did with the world around her. She did not know it then, but Nancy was at the precipice of a struggle with bipolar illness that would hold her tightly in its grip for most of her adult life.

Nancy drifted through high school and college; relying on peers to get her through the coursework she could no longer bring herself to care about. She soon began suffering from bulimia, and by her junior year, her increasingly worrisome state led to her first of four future stays in a psychiatric hospital. Somehow, she managed to complete college, graduating with a degree in Recreation that she could not begin to imagine how she would ever use. Up until that point she had always done what seemed to be expected of her; now that it was time to start making her own choices, she felt utterly unprepared for what lay ahead.

As she entered adulthood, Nancy witnessed her peers go on to successful academic and professional pursuits while she, certain she lacked the ability to do more, pattered along in entry level jobs. Comparing herself unfavorably to

her peers, she often asked herself, “What is WRONG with me?” Nancy veered from periods of dulled drudgery, treated by a series of doctors who prescribed medications that kept her stable but disconnected, to episodes of mania, often precipitated by dropping her medication altogether. During one of those episodes, following only a five-day courtship, Nancy got engaged. The marriage, which lasted ten years, was not a fulfilling one. Nancy occupied herself with tennis and golf at the country club, playing the part of the “spoiled housewife” as she attempted to block any interaction that would require more of her than being visually present.

Once her marriage ended, Nancy’s cycles of depression and mania became even more pronounced. She would fly high for weeks or months at a stretch, only to come crashing down. At the tail end of one of those manic episodes, Nancy sank into a crippling depression. For the better part of a year she did nothing, barely leaving the house for weeks at a time. She couldn’t bring herself to exercise, play tennis, golf, ski, or bike...any of the activities that would normally have kept her going. Nancy was a prisoner of her mind, a mind which raced with thoughts telling her how worthless she was and how much she wanted to die. Were it not for the death by suicide of her older sister, Judy, when Nancy was in her early 20’s and the anguish that death had caused the family, she just might have reached her breaking point too.

For decades, Nancy had tried to find ways to manage her mental health—inpatient treatment, medication, and meditation. Nothing had made any lasting difference. At the age of 55 and eight months into her most severe depression yet, Nancy’s latest doctor recommended Electroconvulsive therapy (ECT), commonly known as electric shock therapy. Nancy was past the point of caring about what happened to her, so it was left to her brother, who had been by her side throughout the entire ordeal, to make the decision to give it a try. Her family, including two different cousins who flew out to care for her for weeks at a time, rallied around her, escorting her to the pre-dawn treatments and caring for her in their aftermath. Finally, after six weeks, Nancy felt a shift. She woke up one morning to something she had not experienced in years: quiet and calm. Gone were the negative thoughts telling her all the things she could not do, and in their place was an optimism she had not felt since she was a child.

Nancy, supported by ongoing treatment and medication, began her life anew. She resumed her athletic pursuits. She discovered an artistic talent, a talent she never knew she had. She threw herself into philanthropic and charitable work, finding meaning in supporting her beloved Jewish community and promoting mental health advocacy. She even started a video production company to showcase nonprofits with one of the same cousins who had seen her through her treatment. The interpersonal ties she once ran from became a critical element of how she came to define herself; as a sister, a cousin, a friend, and perhaps most of all, a confident woman.

Now, eleven years since her last ECT treatment, Nancy is rejoicing in the life that is still ahead of her. She has, she says, her fingers in so many pies, she can't figure out which flavor she likes the best! She lost so many years due to her illness, but Nancy is well aware that it was those challenges that shaped who she is today, and that is a person she is finally, and deservedly, delighted to be.

The story of Nancy Alterman was written by Jessica Redmond of Storyteller LLC
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