

Jennifer



I remember having lots of coloring books when I was a child. My mom must have realized at some point between spaghetti on the high chair and coloring on walls that, "Okay, this kid's an artist. Let me give her a focal point."

I always had to have the crayon box with like a hundred different colors. And I could differentiate sepia from puce, you know? Most people would not really know what those are, but I just always had this fixation with color.

My father's side came to the U.S. as refugees from Cuba, so I'm a first generation American and I have a lot of Cuban traits. I'm not too dark, but I'm the darkest one in my family, and I'm the only one with big, frizzy, curly, Cuban hair. Growing up I heard the question "What are you?" all the time. And that was something that always stuck with me, because I didn't feel like I fit in.

I was judged by my skin color, by my hair, by my weight, by having glasses, by my gender, and being short.



Whatever color you paint it, prejudice is prejudice. But when you are taught to love, unconditionally, without boundaries, you're able to give that to someone else.



I mean, you name it. For all of those things that I am, and that I can't change. I would straighten my hair, I'd try to cut it short. I'd wear long sleeves so I wouldn't get too dark. Wear lighter foundation, looking ridiculous ... How do you teach a kid to have dignity when they're in the face of all that?

Even today it stays with me. They're deep wounds. Those are wounds that go back generations before I was ever born. Those are wounds that people have died over.

Hearing it from so many different directions, it began to sink under my skin, and I began to struggle with depression and anxiety, and with a fear that became overwhelming. Fear of people.

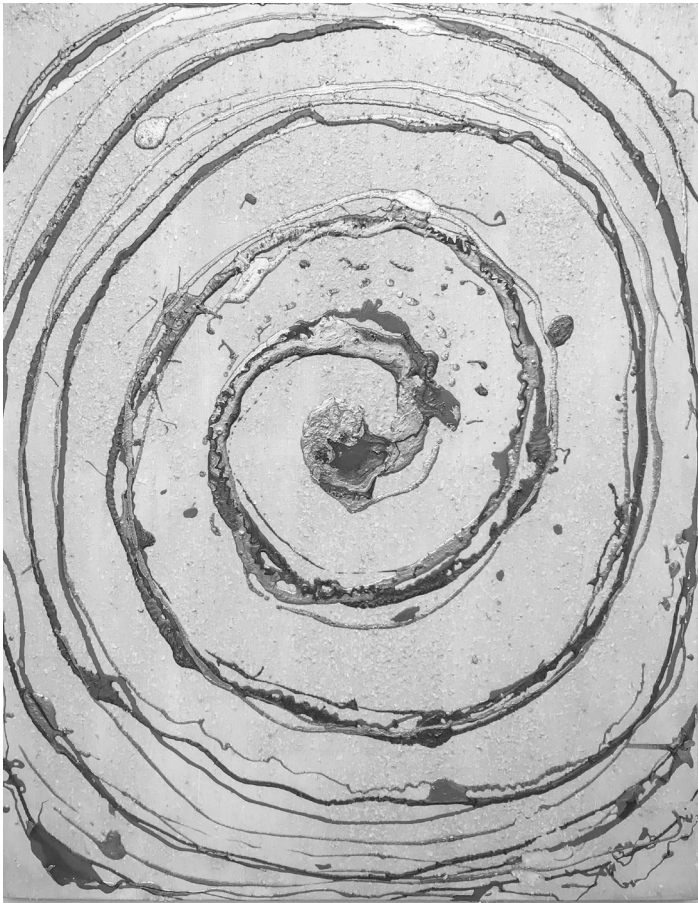
Fear of social events. Fear of being judged. And I started to judge myself. I never felt good enough.

Instead of taking it outward, I took it inward. Starting at the age of 12, I began to suffer from self-injury. I struggled with alcoholism. I struggled with drug abuse. I would seek anything to alleviate all of the pain and anger and the void that I felt.

There was a significant turning point – I had hit rock bottom and I had an out of body experience after a severe car accident that nearly took my life. And I was able to see myself, outside of myself. And I remember crying out within me, "Whatever is out there, please help me."

After that I came into a 12-step program, which I still work on diligently every single day. I was introduced to the concept of a power greater than myself. I began to heal.

There's a big stigma, a heavy, heavy stigma on people who struggle with mental health, and emotional health, and substance abuse. All of those struggles that I overcame.



The Spiral. Painted by Jennifer.
Acrylic on canvas. 2009.

People used to see my scars and say, “Oh my God! Did you do that to yourself!? Why would you do that?” It was traumatizing having to explain my past to people who didn’t feel any type of empathy. I know the scars. I don’t ever want to go back there, and I also don’t ever want to forget. But don’t just see my scars. See me – who I am.

I’ve covered the majority of my scars with tattoos – turning my body into a personal coloring book. And now people say, “Oh, that’s beautiful artwork.” And nobody knows what’s underneath. But these are not just tattoos. This is my life story, written on my skin. And instead of fear and lack of understanding that doesn’t allow others to see beyond my past, when I explain the tattoos they can really hear my stories. Hopefully I can open their minds a little bit. And, more importantly, open their hearts.

Today I’m working as a residential counselor with kids that mirror the younger version of me. And hopefully I can make some sort of difference in the moment that I’m blessed to encounter them. That wasn’t the plan; that’s just how it happened. Hurt people hurt people. And you need to heal yourself before you can heal others.

“This painting represents the spiral that I always seem to be falling into, or flying out of. Nevertheless, it reminds me of some of the best times of my life.”



Scratching the Surface. Painted by Jennifer. Acrylic on canvas. 2009.

“This painting represents my past, transitioning into early adulthood – trying to discover myself, and struggling with growing pains and self-harm.”