

The background of the entire cover is a photograph of a mountain range. The mountains are layered, with the closest ones in the foreground and more distant, hazy ones in the background. The colors are muted blues, greys, and whites, creating a serene and somewhat somber atmosphere.

# DIANA KENDROS

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**A true story of Hope, Transformation,  
and most of all, Courage**

# SAVING *a Life*

**Diana tells the compelling story  
of how her son overcame bullying,  
trauma and psychosis during  
his school years on his  
decade-long road to recovery.**

*Saving a Life*  
*by*  
*Diana Kendros*

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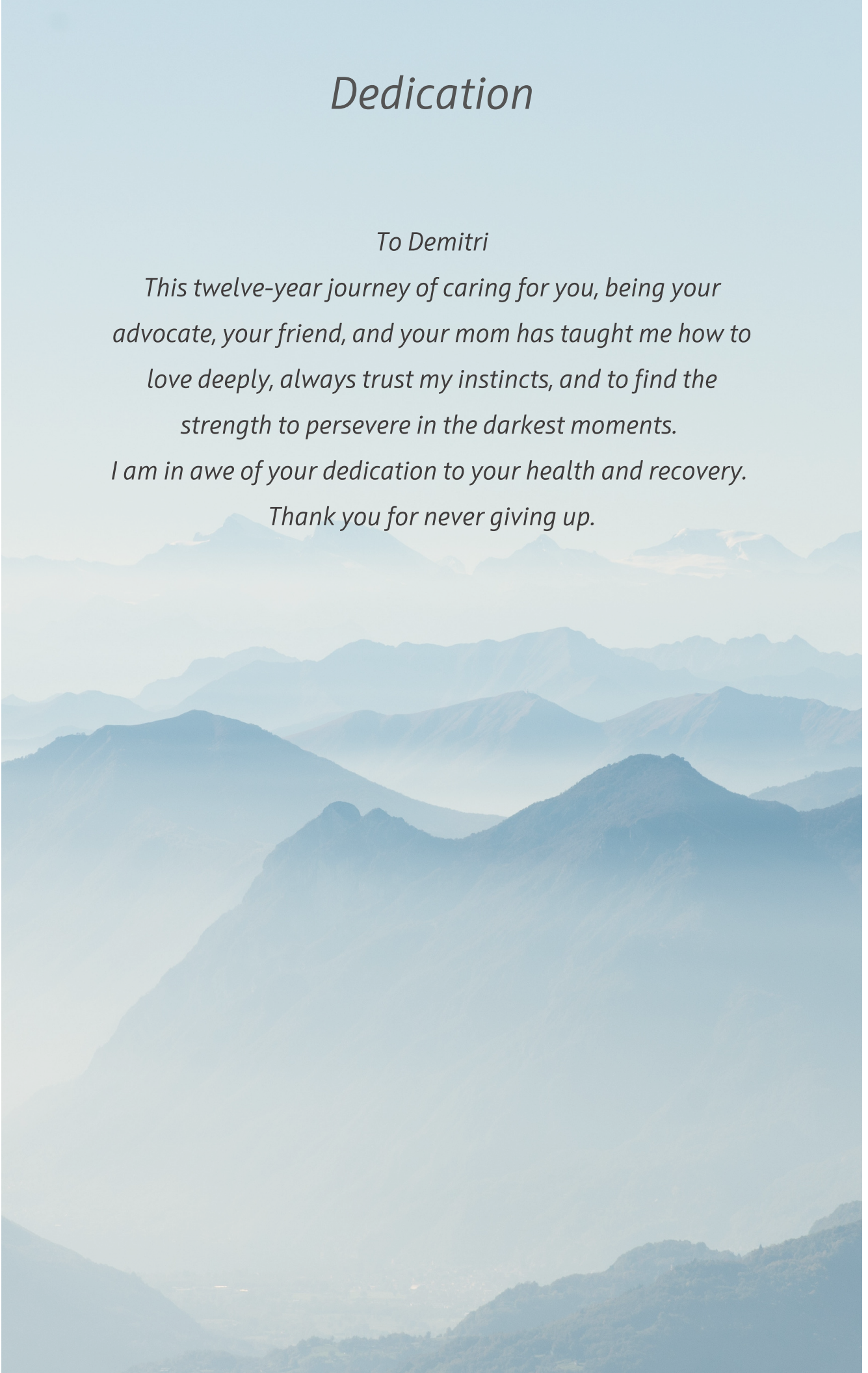
# *Dedication*

*To Demitri*

*This twelve-year journey of caring for you, being your advocate, your friend, and your mom has taught me how to love deeply, always trust my instincts, and to find the strength to persevere in the darkest moments.*

*I am in awe of your dedication to your health and recovery.*

*Thank you for never giving up.*





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# *Introduction*

This is the true story of my son, Demitri, and his journey from deep despair to thriving beyond anything we could have imagined.

It conveys the heartache and the sacrifices that were made to save his life, and the determination, fearlessness and love that were needed to create a space for his healing.

In 1990 our family made Fairfield, Iowa, our home where I worked for Reader's Digest as a senior account manager. Several years later, I founded a product development company, which over the course of a decade became an international sensation with mass product distribution, thousands of customers and hundreds of sales reps.

Then tragedy struck. And everything changed.

Demitri had suffered a traumatic incident, become mentally ill and attempted suicide. That was real. Everything we once knew, everything we once thought was real about our life, was no longer our life. We were suddenly confronted by strange and frightening behavior and literally were catapulted into an unknown, disorienting reality.

We knew something was terribly wrong.

But we had no idea what to do or how to respond.

We were completely lost.

The only thing I knew for sure was that something drastic had to be done and that it would require my complete commitment.

So I gave up my company.

I gave up my home.

I gave up my life in Iowa.

I gave up everything - to save my son.

This is our story.

# *What Now?*

Through bitter tears Dimitri described the assault. Listening to his pain, I couldn't think. I couldn't even breathe. It was an inconceivable act committed by schoolmates he had thought himself safe with. Dimitri had been bullied for years, but this time it escalated to the point that several boys tied him down and severely assaulted him. Blank shock.

Then my thoughts started racing. What could I say? How could I help? As my eleven-year-old son sobbed in my arms, I knew I had to put all my needs and fears aside. In that moment I chose to focus all my attention on helping him survive the inevitable consequences of the ordeal he had just suffered – and what was to come.

The crazy thing was that this territory was familiar: I had left high school at age 16, due to similar trauma. The memories of my own pain flashed in my mind and I could not imagine this horror happening all over again—this time to my son. My journey of healing had taken many years, surviving it alone. I was not going to let Dimitri go through this all by himself. In the space of a few minutes, an emotional train wreck had occurred. No amount of wishful thinking was going to make it go away. I had no choice but to surrender to the inevitable aftermath. Prior to this, Dimitri was a happy, kind child and a growing artist. He was a bit chubby and was drawn to artistic activities that did not interest many of his athletic classmates.

Due to his weight and sensitivity, the more athletic boys teased him. As the things Dimitri loved about himself were ridiculed daily, self-doubt began to creep in. I saw the light that had shone brightly in his eyes leave him just a little bit more each semester over the course of elementary and middle school. As parents, we believe we will do anything for our children. It simply goes with the responsibility of caring for them.

But sometimes things happen that we just can't imagine. These are the times that try our souls. For Dimitri this was life or death. There was no middle ground. I knew I had to show up stronger, clearer and more caring a mother than I had ever been. I summoned the strength that came from decades of taking care of myself. This allowed me to be present for my son in his moment of crisis. I knew I had to steady my fear and swallow my pain in order to give him all he needed to return from the edge of the cliff he was about to fall off. I had absolutely no idea how bad things were about to get.

# *The Impact of Bullying*

It took a few weeks after the assault for Dimitri to begin demonstrating his most severe symptoms. A teacher found him in the auditorium under the bleachers crying and violently shaking. "I see blood all over the walls," he screamed.

The school called me immediately. We brought Dimitri home, and, upon entering the house, he seemed disoriented. In the corner of our living room stood a stand- up reading lamp behind an overstuffed chair. It was our cozy corner and a favorite spot for him.

As he entered the room, he started screaming and ran towards the lamp, pulled it out from behind the chair and started hitting it. It took several minutes to calm him down. He said he saw the main boy who had assaulted him, not the lamp. We took Dimitri to the hospital.

The doctor diagnosed him with visual and auditory hallucinations and recommended that we see a psychiatrist. We went home that evening with medication to help him sleep. The next day I kept him home from school and worked in my home office next to the living room where Dimitri was watching TV.

I noticed him going back and forth to the kitchen. I went into the living room and saw he had a knife on his wrist. He was cutting himself. Blood dripped down his leg. I quelled my panic and carefully removed the knife from his hand. Trying not to cry, I cleaned his wrist, held him tight in my arms and called his dad.

Our fear deepened as we drove to the hospital in silence. After hours of evaluations the psychiatrist asked just one final, deciding question. "Do you feel safe in your home with your son." It turned out that this was the deciding factor for admitting Dimitri to the psychiatric ward.



# *Our Journey Begins*

I learned quickly that severe depression can cause hallucinations, both auditory and visual, and that mental illness, like cancer, lies dormant in all of us.

We visited Dimitri each day and did everything we could to convey our commitment to his survival and wellbeing. An irrevocable change had occurred. Our life, our happy boy, our family as we knew it, would never be the same. We needed to learn so much in a short period of time. Our entire focus shifted to accommodate understanding his pain and suicidal signals.

But my attempts to penetrate his inner reality and communicate with him now that his brain was working in such a completely different way, remained elusive. One evening I walked into Dimitri's room to say goodnight and saw five drawings of adult faces on the floor—three men and two women.

I asked him about them, and he replied, "Mommy, they are the people in my head telling me what to do."

You can imagine how my mind reeled at that revelation. But I was becoming well-practiced at not panicking. So, I sat down next to him on the bed and asked if the voices were always in his head. He nodded and his eyes filled with tears. All I could do was hold him and try to make him feel safe in my arms.

Mental illness is elusive. It doesn't always display itself conveniently. With each moment we learned how to listen and observe the changed person Dimitri had become. Each day he displayed a wide range of emotions, giving me the opportunity to tune in and try to help. During moments when his emotions were escalating dangerously, I'd slow him down. I provided reassurance when he didn't feel safe; because he trusted me, he let me in.

There were setbacks during those following few years. The teasing from schoolmates continued, the stigma of mental illness followed us, and his inability to focus at school was debilitating.

Demitri knew he could rely on me to listen and provide guidance. My daily involvement meant endlessly battling my own memories. I cried intensely at times. It was a constant struggle and hard as hell, but his life was in danger. And I knew it was my job to do everything I possibly could to save him. We created places of safety and trust both in our home and in school so he could adjust and be part of the outside world.

He was failing his classes and was misunderstood. Things were getting worse. I worked feverishly to learn what I needed to know about his condition. I called doctors, read books, talked with the National Alliance of Mental Illness (NAMI), and attended therapy sessions.<sup>11</sup> It was difficult to find some kind of inner stability or solid ground. All I knew was to accept that Demitri was mentally unstable. No one - neither school personnel, parents, nor even our friends - really understood the impact all this was having on Demitri and on our family.

The one thing I knew without any doubt was how talented Demitri was. So, I began to focus on that. He enjoyed drawing for hours on the floor in the living room. One day while watching him draw, I decided to shift my thoughts from deep worry and embrace the idea that anything was possible. He liked to draw homes with detailed floor plans, furniture, and landscaping. As he shared them with me, he was laughing and joyous. I began to see an opening. If I could somehow create an opportunity for him to express his artistic talent in the company of like-minded students and teachers, he might have a chance to heal. I had no idea how this would happen, but from that moment on, I simply allowed myself to explore this idea and began to research high schools focused on the arts. Important changes needed to happen.

I resolved to remove him from his current school to escape the stigma and exposure to the offending students. After a lot of research, I found Interlochen Center for the Arts. The school offers multiple art majors, solid academics, art and academic competitions, college prep and most of all, no tolerance for bullying, drugs or alcohol. It sounded like the perfect formula.

An opportunity for supported artistic expression with rigorous academics and clear rules and boundaries, nestled in the northern Michigan woods. Demitri wanted to study filmmaking at Interlochen, but in light of his poor grades and his problems engaging socially, his father advised him to play to his demonstrable strength by submitting a portfolio to study visual arts. We applied and waited. A few weeks later we received an email indicating interest but stating they could not accept him due to the seriousness of his illness. He had a 1.4 grade point average; they felt they could work with him on his academics. He was clearly talented, but his mental instability was a problem. We wrote back and forth to the admissions counselor, asking what we could do to boost his stability so he could attend. We suggested moving to Michigan so Demitri could attend as a day student. The committee agreed. I resolved to remove him from his current school to escape the stigma and exposure to the offending students. After a lot of research, I found Interlochen Center for the Arts. The school offers multiple art majors, solid academics, art and academic competitions, college prep and most of all, no tolerance for bullying, drugs or alcohol. It sounded like the perfect formula.

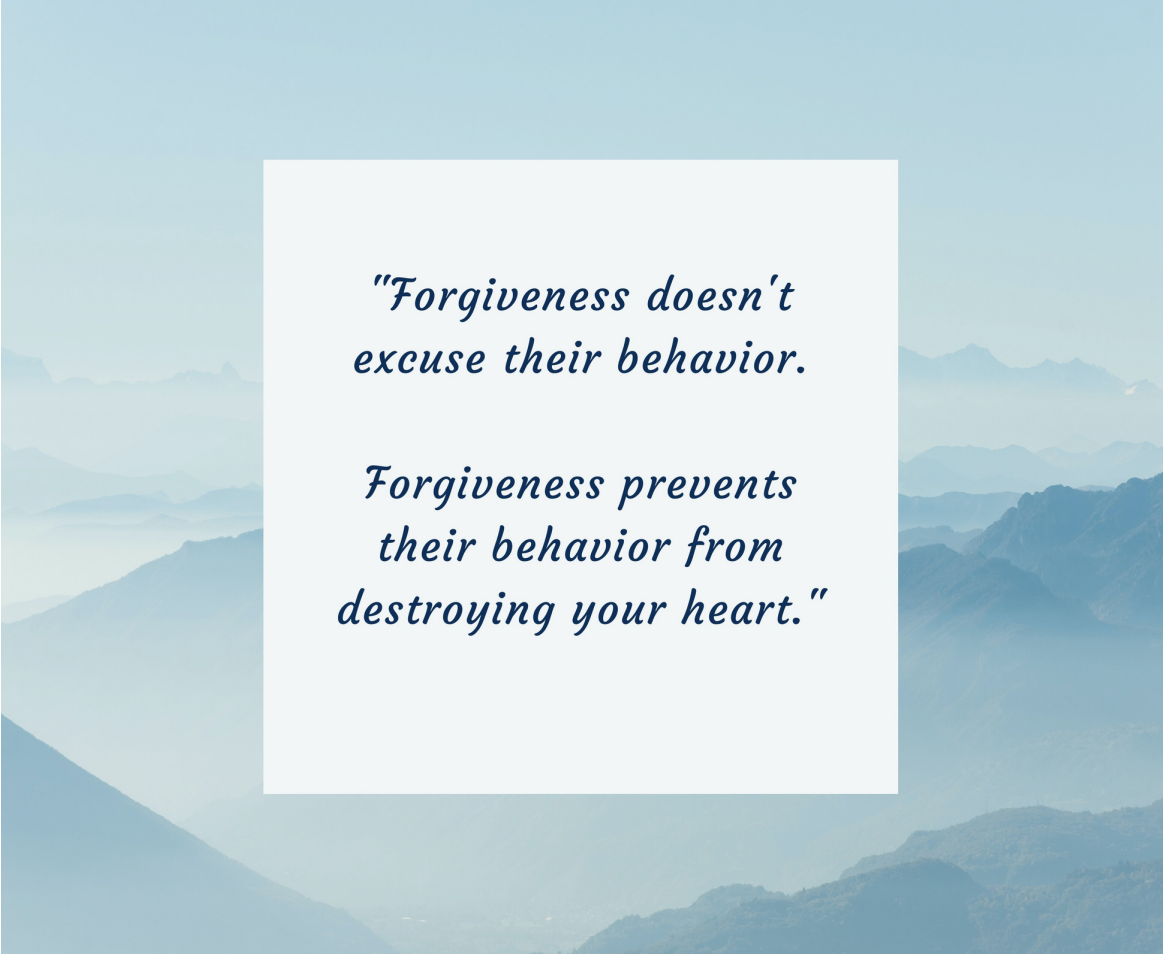
## *Learning to Forgive and Thrive*

I knew that in order to find peace inside myself I needed to forgive everyone involved. My anger was not going to serve anyone, especially Demitri. But forgiving the perpetrators seemed impossible, but I knew it was absolutely necessary for our health and wellbeing.

His entire life was in front of him and the only way to move on was to forgive and teach him how to reclaim his life and his gifts. We visited Interlochen, found a furnished home for rent close to campus, and decided to move.

Once the acceptance and scholarships came in, we packed only what we needed, sold everything else, and drove to Michigan. We were filled with hope and anticipation for a new life. We found a psychiatrist who focused on rebalancing Demitri's medications, improving his nutrition and increasing exercise, along with establishing a firm routine with gentle rules that also boosted his coping skills.

During the first year at Interlochen, he seemed happier. The light in his eyes gradually returned. Open communication was vital for his healing. When we spoke, I mainly asked him questions and listened carefully to his answers. Validating him in this way deepened his trust in me and we explored ways in which he could thrive both socially and academically and set benchmarks for a healthier life. These steps helped him build self-confidence and strength.



*"Forgiveness doesn't  
excuse their behavior.*

*Forgiveness prevents  
their behavior from  
destroying your heart."*

As a communication coach, I teach inner-dialogue techniques. I shared with Demitri how to understand his self-talk and shift it, eliminating fear and increasing self-confidence. Determined to succeed, he began to focus better. He applied himself and advanced in his classes. Our conversations gradually filled with positive stories of all the things he was learning and with experiences of trust, reaching out, and feeling safe again. He developed communication skills and psychological tools that enabled him to meet his own challenges and integrate into the Interlochen family. Demitri was thriving, and, after his first year, was approved for film study and residence on campus; transitioning to greater independence and taking ownership and pride in his health and well-being.



I communicated regularly with the school counselors and Demitri's teachers to alert them to medication changes and any social or emotional issues that might affect his disposition. I wanted them to support the full healing we sought. We knew our son could become a whole human being again who could live fully, not just get by. They appreciated my involvement and noticed his transformation. He became stronger each year at Interlochen, and his three-year journey concluded with great success artistically, academically, and most of all, vocationally. He had discovered a love for filmmaking and writing. We had completely changed our lives, and Demitri was healing and thriving on his own. He was released from psychiatric care, artistically engaged, and restored to his true self. Interlochen's supportive environment, the proximity of his family, along with the encouragement of his doctors, teachers, and counselors, provided exactly what Demitri needed to become balanced and healthy.

My life was transformed by this experience. I had worked for over 20 years developing and operating my own company. That life was long gone. The mundane tasks of a normal daily routine were put aside. My family was catapulted into another realm. We had to be strong, determined, and courageous beyond anything that our old selves were capable. In truth, it was the perfect storm because Demitri's crumbling wasn't the only problem. We were struck with financial crisis in 2009 (as many people experienced); we lost our home as well as our savings. My marriage was unraveling, and my daughter was forced to be more self-sufficient than was fair during her turbulent teen years. A storm was raging but knowing that he was in danger of being institutionalized, I chose to put his healing first, focusing on his needs while letting go of everything else.

Demitri graduated from Interlochen and embarked on his college adventure. I, too, have started over after my 27-year marriage recently ended, now living on my own and rebuilding my life. And we have worked hard to keep our family strong, supported, and together. Today I live more in the moment and enjoy serving my clients from around the country. My own healing has deepened, and I am stronger than I've ever been. I believe that everything happens to help us grow and learn; and when faced with what seems to be the impossible, we must remember that we have choices in how we respond: we can face challenges with full awareness and intention, or react with fear and defensiveness.

This does not mean we don't feel our pain. It means we choose to feel our pain but in the presence of compassion, and honesty. It means allowing ourselves to be fully connected and communicating authentically within ourselves and with those we are sharing the experience with. In traveling this remarkable journey with my son, I've learned the value of this approach to living.

It is the one I am committed to using for myself and sharing with others. We can recover from terrible adversity.

We hope by writing and sharing our story that this helps to serve as a reminder that recovery is possible, and hope can be restored.

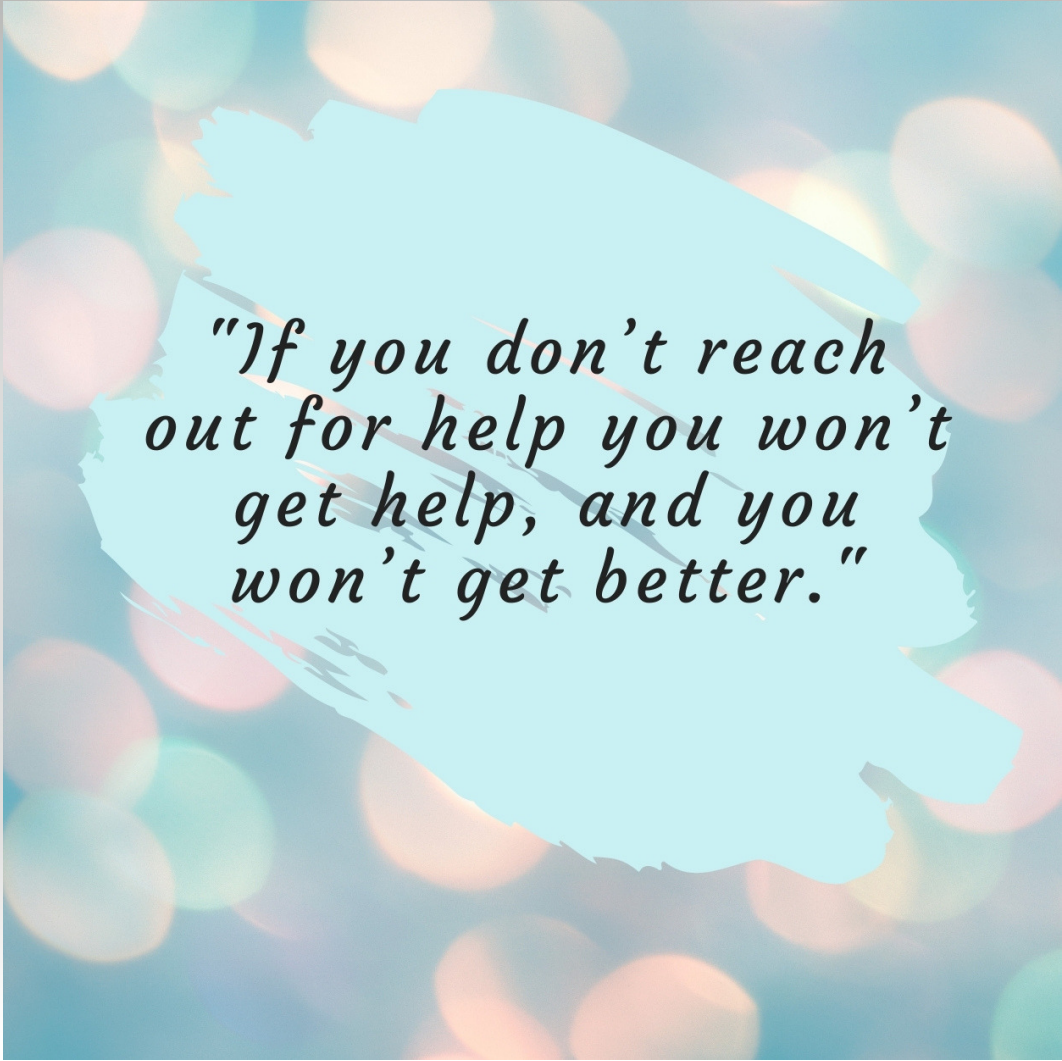
## *Demitri's Message or Hope*

When I was at the point of wanting to end it all and even after and having to recover from it.

My biggest tactic that I used and the most essential tactic I had was my dreams and believing that one day they will be achievable. And when I was sitting in a hospital wing in a ward with bandages on my wrist, I just dreamed that one day I would be a successful, happy filmmaker, and that all of these problems I had would go away, and I would be happy, I would be healthy, I would be doing what I love, I would be successful...and that's what got me through the worst times of my life was dreaming and hoping that it would happen.

And Hope was so important, and not even hope as an excuse, but hope as a belief and a tool to get through the worst times of my life, and to hope that everything would be okay and that my dreams would be fulfilled and they are – 12 years later, I am living my dreams, and that's an indescribable joy.

I strongly advise if you're going through the horror of wanting to end your life, hope that your biggest dreams will come true and believe that they will – that's what got me out of it – hope – that I would thrive and that I would achieve my dreams.

The image features a quote centered on a light blue, irregular brushstroke background. The background is set against a bokeh effect of out-of-focus lights in shades of blue, green, and orange. The quote is written in a black, cursive-style font.

*"If you don't reach out for help you won't get help, and you won't get better."*

The biggest step you have to take in order to recover is to seek help, and that could be through a family member, a friends, a professional – you can call a hotline, you can just talk to someone, because you can't get through it alone. You feel that your completely alone in the world and no one wants to help you, but I'm telling you through my experience that people do want to help and it's a matter of you finding the courage to reach out and ask for help, and that's the first and hardest step.

*Once you have your support system, you are already on your way to recovery.*

You get the right medication, you get the right care, you find your tools and your tactics to continue to stay healthy and happy, and it's a very long, life long journey that you're going to be taking and dealing with this, and you're going to have bad days, but you going to have so many more better days, and you're going to have amazing days, and fulfilling days, and the bad days won't seem so terrible.

*"Seeking help is the most important thing,  
finding the right recovery and support  
system is the also very important, and  
having someone there for you -- because you  
are worth the life you are given, you are  
worth living out your dreams."*

*-Demitri*





Even single person born is deserving of a full and happy life and you are in charge of your life, and you do not deserve to give up this easily, because there are plenty of things worth living for. Even though I am a survivor of suicide, it isn't what defines me.

*I am an artist*

*I am a brother*

*I am a son*

*I am a nephew*

*I am a filmmaker*

*I am a writer*

I am recovering everyday but also thriving every day in the dreams that I'm fulfilling and the life that I am living, because my life is my life, and I get to choose how to live it, so you get to choose how to live your life and the choice to end it is not the right one because you can fulfill your dreams and live a long and happy life.



### *Interlochen Faculty Testimonials*

*"When Demitri made concerted efforts to investigate his connection to his stories and entertain questions about them, there was a switch. **The confidence in his own identity began to translate into both improved story/storytelling and better, stronger relationships in the department.***

*This renewed confidence had him making accelerated improvements draft after draft of his screenplays and, ultimately, graduating with a confidence that was leagues different from Demitri's first days in Motion Picture Arts."*

*- Michael Mittelstaedt, Director of Motion Picture Arts, Interlochen Center for the Arts*

***"This family went from tragedy to triumph and the story needs to be heard by everyone.*** The story of Diana's family is one of struggle, courage, and hard-won triumph. I believe anyone involved with school-age children would benefit from hearing about this family's determination to develop a plan that would enable their son to emerge as the confident, talented, and the loving young man that he is."

*-Jean Gaede, Academic Faculty Interlochen Center for the Arts*

***"The whole faculty continue to be impressed by Dimitri.*** The amount of personal and scholarly growth that Dimitri has shown over his two years in our program has really been incredible, and it's clear that finding his passion for screenwriting and film has been a driving force in helping him to achieve that growth."

*- Lesley Alicia Tye, Instructor of Creative Writing and Motion Picture Arts*

## *Dimitri's Accolades*

*Dimitri graduated from Interlochen Center for the Arts with a major in Motion Picture Arts.*

*2015 YoungArts Honoree*

*Scholastic Silver Medal and Honorable Mention awards for screenwriting and photography*

*Interlochen Academy Fine Arts Award*

*Dimitri's short film, Multiplayer, was screened at the 2015 Traverse City Film Festival.*

*Multiplayer is an official selection of the AAHS in New York and the Miami Independent Film Festival for 2016.*

*He currently attends University of Iowa, earning his degree in Screenwriting, Playwriting, and Theatre.*

# About the Author

## Diana Louise Kendros

Diana is the CEO of Diana Kendros International speaking and seminar company and her podcast, Conversations for Hope. She is a Certified Strategic Coach and Compassionate Communication Specialist, a Seminar Facilitator, Certified in Mental Health First Aid, and Wellness Recovery Action Plan (WRAP).

She is a Board Member and Nationally Nationally Certified Mental Health Educator, and Family Support Group Facilitator with National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI).

Diana travels the country and shares her message of hope through keynote address, and workshops. In addition, Diana teaches corporations and businesses how to implement a Mental Health Safety & Support through her Professional Training and Program: *What Do You Do When Mental Illness Strikes?*

Diana is an entrepreneur with over 25 years of business coaching experience and owning and operating International product companies, consulting in brand identity, marketing, and strategic positioning.



Diana is currently writing her memoir about the consequences of trauma and how it can force us to interpret our life through damaged lenses.

The object of her book is to understand how easily we put up our human coverings, create facades, put on happy faces, display veneers in order to ignore or push away the pain that is inside of us, all the while believing that these masks will protect us, protect our families, and somehow will help us deal with the devastation of our inner turmoil.

This is a story of how we can heal and become who we really are - who we were truly meant to be.

# *Diana's Reviews*

## *Compassionate Listening and Anti-Bullying Workshops*

### *Book Diana to Speak*

### *Keynote*

**IOWA STATE  
UNIVERSITY**  
Extension and Outreach

Rachel Wonderlich Jefferson County Iowa State University  
Extension and Outreach County Youth Coordinator

*"The Anti-Bullying Training was very valuable for all participants. I felt the content was very applicable and easy to understand. It's a hard topic to discuss, but one that is absolutely crucial. Diana did a wonderful job setting the tone for the topic and creating a safe atmosphere for all participants to fully engage".*



CASA State Conference Grand Rapids, Michigan  
Compassionate Listening Workshop - Break-Out Session

*"COMPASSIONATE LISTENING WORKSHOP WAS INCREDIBLE!  
Within one hour, I learned more about how to listen with intention and respond effectively with Diana's knowledge than from anyone else. She is deeply knowledgeable, caring and an excellent coach."*



University Career Day Workshop  
Traverse City, Michigan

*"I am grateful to have learned the Compassionate Listening exercises as it will help me in all of my relationships. Diana, your workshop helped me to understand myself better, and to not pre-conceive a conclusion or judge a person before listening to them."*



STUART R, M.D. | Participant  
Art Creates Hope Benefit ~ Keynote Address

*"Outstanding! I Was very moved by Diana's keynote address and the worthy goals of her organization. The personal story of her son's situation and the family's response was really gripping!"*

To Book Diana or Make an Inquiry



***Published Books, Podcast & Interviews  
by Diana Kendros and Demitri Makeig***

***Expert Insights Publishing International Bestselling Books:***

***Ready, Aim, Thrive Anthology with James Malinchak***

*Amazon International Best Selling Book*

***Messages that Matter Anthology with Jill Lubin***

*Amazon International Best Selling Book*

***My Big Idea Book and Journal with Global Best Selling Authors***

*Amazon International Best Selling Book*

***PUBLISHED! and Insights Award-Winning Magazines***

***Bestselling Authors International™***

***Honoring Best Selling Authors Across the Globe!***

***Write Now! Blog Talk Radio with Viki Winterton***

***Saving a Life eBook*** Self Published

***Conversations for Hope Podcast - iTunes***

*with Jeffrey Hedquist at Hedquist Productions Studio*

