



Survivor Story: Kristina Yates

This is the complete transcript of my interview with Kristina in Oakland, California on 4/18/13, with minimal editing for readability. Asterisks indicate areas where the transcriptionist found the audio indecipherable.

TRIGGER WARNING: Please do not read this text if you are triggered by discussion of suicide methods or self-injurious behaviors.

If you're feeling suicidal, please talk to somebody. You can reach the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255.

Des: To start the interview, tell me your name, how old you are, what you do, and then your story as you see fit to tell it.

Kristina: Okay. My name is Kristina Yates and I will be 63 in May, and now my story?

Des: Yeah, and what you do.

Kristina: Well, I'm a licensed managing family therapist, and I see a few clients—not very many—and I take care of small dogs in my home, which are running around right now. So, I have a little business taking care of little dogs when people go away, which is a lot of fun.

So, let's see. I guess my story starts when I was in high school, or junior high school, or my early teens, and I started having a serious depression every year. I would just kind of sink, and it may have been in the fall and winter. I can't remember what time of year it was, but it would get so bad that I would make a suicide attempt, and I felt very, very, withdrawn.

I remember feeling like... I felt like I was talking through glass. If we were having a conversation, it felt like you would say something, there would be a pause, I'd have to figure out what would be the right response, and kind of like everything was sluggish.

I felt very separate from the world. And I never told anybody. I never made any threats or left any notes, and it was actually kind of hard for me, 'cause I was very much a sweet girl. I was raised in the south.

The first time I took all my mother's pills—and my mother took a lot of medication—and I just took everything in the house. I threw up in the night and then that was that and, somehow, we never talked about it.

The second time, I took several bottles of Sominex—commercial sleeping pills—and again, I fell asleep, threw up in the night. That time, enough had gotten into my system that when I woke up... it was on a Sunday morning. I was hallucinating and I was walking around the house and sort of talking to things on the wall. My mother was there and she looked at me, and my eyes were very dilated, and she asked if I had taken anything.

I said, "I took a few Sominex 'cause I couldn't sleep."

So she took me to the hospital. It was too late to pump my stomach. Some psychiatrist intern or some man who I think was a psychiatrist, I remember, talked to me. I don't even remember staying overnight. It seems like I probably should have, but I don't remember staying overnight at all. Then he called us up in about a week and that was the end of that.

So, every time this depression would come around and I had not been successful at my suicide attempts, it was getting harder and harder to figure out what to do. I was just pretty numb.

The next time, my mother had a gun in the house because, once, a man had come to our door and had shot through our door, and so she had gotten a little... I think it's a .32 pistol. Anyway, it was in her night table drawer, so I took that and held it at my chest, pulled the trigger. It made a big bang. It didn't go off because it was set so that the first one was a blank.

Somebody comes to the door, the back door. I go to the door. It's the young man who often does yard work for us and he said, "You look like you just got caught doing something."

I remember that was exactly what he said. Well, it made a big bang so I never tried that again.

I think this was just one a year, and then the last—well, almost the last one—was when I was a senior in high school and I decided I was gonna cut my wrist. Interestingly, it was on the day that my mother had scheduled an appointment for me to see a minister for counseling.

She said, “You’re depressed.”

I had never seen this man, and I walked out of P.E. It was P.E. I had bought razorblades. I went home. I happened to have the car that day so I could go to this appointment after school. I didn’t normally have a car, our car, and went home and got a bottle of whiskey that was at the house, and drove out into the country, just sort of drove my... I drove the car into the woods and I sat there and I drank some of this alcohol and I slashed my wrist several times because it stopped bleeding, and then it stopped bleeding, and great.

When it was clear I wasn’t gonna die, I started the car up and I drove home, went into the house, dripping along the way, called this minister. It was an hour or more before my appointment, and I talked to the secretary and I said, “Hi, this is Kristina Yates. I have an appointment with Reverend Overton. I know it’s not ‘til 4, but I was wondering if I could come now.”

And then I walk in there covered in blood and she went out of the room and came back and bandaged up my wrist. Reverend Overton came and told me that we would need to call my mother and for me to think about what we were gonna say.

That time, I stayed in the hospital for a couple of days. I remember I would face the wall and would pretend to sleep but wasn’t. I remember my mother being there visiting saying, “There’s nothing worse than trying to kill yourself and not succeeding.”

I really felt she understood. It felt like an empathetic statement, actually. And this depression, all of this stuff, was all about my relationship with my mother, ‘cause once I left home, it eventually stopped. It pretty much stopped.

I actually had a couple of depressions that were very related to things that happened. You know, bad things happened and then I sunk into a depression.

But this stuff that was going on at home was about my mom. I never saw my father. From the time I was 5, it was my mom and I. She worked really hard. I was gonna be her second chance at everything, and so I was the perfect little girl and I tried to live up to all her expectations.

She told me very inappropriate stuff about how she was dating a married man, or things I really didn’t need to know. I was her confidant and we were pretty

isolated. It was in the 50's and it was hard. It was really hard. I made good grades and I was the good girl. I mean, to this day, I feel like I'm still learning, you know, who am I? There's still residue of that performance... figure out what's expected and do that.

Let me think. There was one other time, I think. No, there were two other attempts.

Years later, when I was about 20—not that many years later—and I was living in Hawaii, I had a boyfriend at the time and he had never left the islands. We went to California and we hitchhiked across the United States. We flew to London. We were using my credit card. I thought he was gonna take initiative. He thought I was gonna take initiative 'cause he didn't know—he'd never been out of Hawaii. I sunk into a depression, and so we flew all the way back to Hawaii.

He was supposed to pay me back. It turned out we got to Hawaii and he was smoking marijuana and getting stoned, and I had a job in a hotel lugging a mop. It was just real clear this was a bad situation. I had gotten more and more and more withdrawn, so I left the island we were on. I left him and went to Oahu and stayed with some people I knew, and I was just really, really depressed. And what did I do? I ate rat poisoning. That didn't even make me sick.

Then, while the people I was staying with were gone—I think it was around Christmas—something about this makes me really sad to think about it. I've done all these suicide attempts and nothing had succeeded, so this time I take the gas stove apart and I rig up something with a plastic bag attached around where the gas comes out and put that around my head with a headband and turn the gas on. Whenever I would almost lose consciousness, I would hear the voices of people I knew calling me back.

Ironically, an old boyfriend called me while I was in the process of that. I picked up the phone and I just started sobbing and started apologizing about something I had done in the past, but I just cried and cried and cried and cried. But again, I never told anybody about any of these things, and then the depression would always leave. That was when I was 20 and I'm pretty sure that was the very last time. I've had some depression but nothing like that. I've had thoughts of, 'Oh, I just wish I could die,' but nothing, nothing, nothing to that extent since then.

I've had other things happen in my life, but that's it in a nutshell.

Des: What made you decide that you should tell your story?

Kristina: I think it's important. I think people need to be talking about suicide a lot. I mean, I never told anybody. I didn't feel I had a friend. I never told anybody in high school how I felt.

I think it's... well, it's traumatic for everybody and when people do succeed at suicide, it's really hard on people left behind. It's just a big, important subject and our culture's all about "be happy, be happy," and I mean, I feel that way about a lot of things.

In my mid-20's, I traveled for three years out of the country. I went over land from Europe to India, but something happened in India—I was there for a year and a half—and I had a breakdown. I was put in a mental hospital there and given electroshock. So, if things weren't bad enough, I was going along and separating from my mom in my 20's and then this thing happened.

And I got over that. I healed from that, but again, that's the kind of thing... I think all this stuff needs to be talked about. I think it's really, really important to share and I'm really glad I did not die. And I do not consider suicide to be an option. I am really glad because I can't say that I'm the happiest person around, but I'm just glad, and I feel my body didn't want to die... that I was just in emotional anguish.

Des: You're awfully resilient.

Kristina: Yeah, my body just... oh, but there was no help.

I remember Reverend Overton wanted to get a second opinion, so I was at this hospital. We were all in a circle and a microphone was hanging from the ceiling, and [there were] all these doctors. The doctor—I will always remember this—this is after I cut my wrist. The doctor said, "Well, you're a beautiful young lady and you just did a very violent thing to yourself. Can you tell me about your problems?"

I said, "I don't have any problems."

I was that shut down. I wasn't thinking, 'You jerk'. I just really didn't even... and that was horrible. That was just like being on stage, just awful to have that experience.

Des: Yeah, I was gonna ask what happened after he [Reverend Orton] said you should think about what to say to your mother.

Kristina: Well, then we go to the hospital. He drives me to the hospital. My mother's there. My boyfriend shows up. Yeah, I remember my boyfriend saying, "Why didn't you say something?"

He was probably part of the problem too. He was a lot older than me. I had lost my virginity to him and there was a lot of pressure on me to go to college. He had been in the Navy and was a construction worker. Mother wasn't thrilled about that.

I continued to see Reverend Overton. I remember he wanted me to sit on his lap one time and I really did not think... my take on it wasn't that it was anything sexual on his part. He was trying to act fatherly to me. I didn't know what a father was and it was just pitiful, really. There was no... yeah, I just didn't get much help.

Des: Tell me the difference between how we look at suicide now versus what it was like then.

Kristina: So, how I view it differently.

Des: How you view it, yes, and how you feel society does.

Kristina: There's certainly more acceptance around suicide and suicide attempts and more attention on it, that's for sure, than there was back then. Back then, everything was hush-hush.

For me now, philosophically, I don't really think it's the answer. I don't think it's gonna solve anything and so I would never consider it. I have a lot more options now as an adult. I know how to seek out help and take care of myself and that sort of thing. It's really just not an option.

There was someone—I didn't know her—but there was a woman who everybody was looking for who was missing recently... people at the church that she went to and some people I knew through Occupy Oakland. It makes me really sad. I put posters around 'cause she was missing, and it was just a couple of days later they found out she had jumped off the Golden Gate Bridge. And yeah, I had mixed feelings. I didn't know the woman. I felt sad and then I also felt angry, like, 'Wow, is that the best you could have done? And everybody was looking for you?' 'Cause people are just so horribly impacted by the suicide of others.

Des: Yeah, I think most people... it seems a lot like they don't think about how it's gonna affect others and also that it's just hard to when you're in that space. There's that tunnel vision, which is terrible, but you have no perspective.

What happened with your mom? How did you resolve that?

Kristina: We just never really talked about much. Talk about denial. I mean, we never really... she must have been terrified because she knew. She knew from

the first time. All her medicine was missing. Come on. She must have been really terrified. Here's her daughter doing this, but we never really talked about it. We didn't get any family counseling, but that psychiatrist who called us was just such an idiot. He was kind of pitiful, and neither mother nor I liked him at all. Nothing ever really got dealt with.

I remember Reverend Overton said that I... oh, this is a good story. He said I needed to tell people or otherwise I would always want to hide this. I'd want to wear a big bracelet or cover up the scar. So, before I went back to school on Monday or whatever day it was, I called a friend who was kind of a gossip and talked a lot, and I told her what happened.

I said, "Would you spread the word?"

I actually wanted people to know, so that I didn't have to be the one to break the news.

She said, "Couldn't I just tell them that you cut your wrists slicing tomatoes?"

I said, "Martha, I have a cast on my arm. You don't do that slicing tomatoes."

'Cause I was four hours in surgery. I cut all my tendons, my blood vessel, my nerve, everything, and I was in a cast. They said they didn't know how much use I'd have. When I came out of the cast, I could just kind of barely move my hand.

When I got to school, nobody knew. In fact, one person asked me and I said... I had some little line I had memorized, "I felt really bad and I cut my wrist."

Something, and I looked so good that this other student jokingly said, "Oh did you try to kill yourself?"

They were being sarcastic. They didn't really realize that that was actually what I had done, 'cause I always looked real good, even after I came back from India. There was a photograph and I was just really shocked at how well... here I'd had electroshock and everything else and looked good.

So I had to go around and tell everybody what happened, and the gym teacher—I had walked out of gym class—she gave me a D on the next report card. She said [it was] for one day's absence.

Des: That day?

Kristina: Uh huh. Beats me what her point was.

Des: So India was ...

Kristina: That was a completely different experience. That was some kind of...almost like a psychotic break. It was very strange, and I've never had that experience before. I've had depression and I've even had almost mania. I mean, in the past when I've gone through real stress, sometimes I couldn't sleep, but not like overspending or that sort of thing, but just kind of too wired.

I don't know. I know I was with the police. It was all kind of suspicious. I was with the police. I kind of flipped out, got hysterical, got locked up in a mental hospital, and then fought because nobody, nobody from the embassy contacted me. I thought nobody knew I was in there.

They force drugged me. They held me down. The more they would drug me, 'cause I hate drugs, right? 'Cause my mom's the prescription drug addict. I always hated drugs, then I'd fight more. It was this vicious cycle: drugging, fighting, drugging. Then, when I wouldn't stop, they gave me electroshock, and then I went, 'Whoa, you better figure out what they want and do it as fast as you can.' And I did. I got real compliant, as they say.

But that was a very different experience. There was nothing about depression. I was depressed after that when I came back. I mean, there were repercussions, but again, not to the point of suicide attempt.

Des: That was in, what, the 70's?

Kristina: Yeah, mid-70's, like '75, '76.

Des: I'm curious about electroshock therapy.

Kristina: I don't think they put me to sleep. I think they just did it. I mean, it's India. It was like... you know how you've woken up and not known where you are? It was that sort of thing, only lasting, like waking up and not remembering people or... it was terrifying. It was really, really terrifying.

I became an activist against forced treatment. I think electroshock is... I know people want it and I think it can stop depression. But it's like, hit somebody over the head with a board, you'll forget what you were worried about before that. I just think it's brutal. I think it's a very inhumane treatment.

Des: Yeah, I agree. Do you have lasting memory loss issues from that?

Kristina: Some. I remember seeing people that I knew in India but then not remembering who they were and... parts of the trip.

The embassy was no help. I was a hippie traveler. They didn't really care about me.

Des: So you don't really deal with depression regularly. You have a catalyst and there's a depression, but not recurring anymore.

Kristina: No. But I have worked so much on myself, done a lot of... been a client for psychotherapy, healing body work. I've worked on just nurturing myself, exercising. When I grew up, my mom told me I was not the outdoor type and I was not the athletic type. Now I bicycle all over the place. I have two kayaks. I am very athletic and I'm high energy and I'm very social. I was alone with my mom I was not allowed to use my body, and I had all this energy, and it just kind of... I've worked really, really hard on developing healthy coping mechanisms and self-nurturance and done expressing arts and just all kinds of stuff.

Des: Right, and you're a therapist too so you have all of that training.

Kristina: Yeah, but I think life was the best training, to tell you the truth.

Des: One of the things I've been paying attention to is those basic coping skills it seems like a lot of us don't have, so what would you say are the best ones?

Kristina: Well, I just know what works.

Des: Works for you.

Kristina: The latest one, it's really good, is Hawaii. I discovered that years ago. I went to Hawaii for five weeks last winter and I got a plane ticket for \$250 roundtrip. I was able to camp on the beach at a campground with hot water. My tent faced the ocean for \$5 a night. So I've gone to Hawaii repeatedly. This time I had a rental car from a local guy, Tony. I had an old Mercedes Benz, really old. But sometimes I hitchhiked. One time, years ago, I went for three months. I was getting burnt out as a therapist, and I went for three months and hitchhiked

And my little dog—I'll show you pictures of little Pepper—he was my service dog. When I first got him, I took him everywhere, and that was really wonderful. Everybody else loved him. He was six pounds, tiny little thing, and he'd sit on my lap in restaurants and he flew. And that was very nurturing until I started fostering dogs and now I have more dogs... I no longer needed him [as a service animal] because I got a lot of what it was I needed at the time.

Diet, exercise, sleep. I get acupuncture. There's community acupuncture for \$15. I'm very resourceful. Anything alternative. I'm gonna start getting body work, whether it's massage or more healing body work, but I want to do that regularly.

And connection. Connection is really, really important. I taught co-counseling for ten years and I still have a person I co-counsel with, so being with people that listen well and are conscious is really important.

And just having fun, which isn't always easy. I feel like this society just like blasts, 'Work harder, work harder,' even for those of us that aren't in the corporate world. There's just this value that's coming at us, so it's not always easy to kick back and have fun.

Des: Do you use the Internet at all to connect with people?

Kristina: Some, but I find the computer really tedious. I use it more than I'd like. I just got this smart phone and I love that I can talk. I talk emails. I talk the texts. I use my voice all the time.

I use it some, but I sure prefer in person, and that's hard. I grew up in Tennessee and my experience of the south was that people are much friendlier and just speak to each other, strangers. And here, I like living in West Oakland. There are a lot of black people here and I find that they're friendlier in general than, say, when I lived in Berkeley near the university. But sometimes I just have to go out into the world and start talking to people 'cause I really... after a couple hours I begin to feel isolated, a couple hours alone. I find face to face better than the Internet.

Oh, I was just gonna say about Hawaii. I love nature and I love water. I go to this particular place in Hawaii every year where the dolphins come in, and I swim with these wild dolphins.

Des: That's amazing.

Kristina: Oh, it's wonderful. It's wonderful. My goal is to spend every winter there, to be able to go for four months.

Des: Where is this campground?

Kristina: It's on the big island of Hawaii and it's in South Kona. I didn't even have to make reservations. I just went there and paid my money.

I love Hawaii 'cause it's very much like the south. It's slowed down. But I mean, to have the ocean there, dolphins, turtles... oh, it's just wonderful. I don't like

clothing. I get to dress like this. It suits me. It's very nurturing. It feels very nurturing, so I think knowing how to nurture myself and knowing what I need and trying to get that as much as I can helps a lot.

Des: Hawaii as coping method.

Kristina: Yes, that's right.

Des: I like it.

Kristina: Prescription for emotional distress.

Des: Go to Hawaii immediately.

Kristina: Yeah.

Des: Is there anything you feel we didn't cover?

Kristina: Oh, of course I will remember it afterwards.

Des: Yeah, there will be something later.

Kristina: You know, just the reaction. When they were sewing up my wrist, I was conscious. They used a local anesthesia and I remember the nurse saying, "And she's so young."

Or, later, I'd have this cast on my arm and people would ask what happened. I would tell them, and they'd say, "Well, we all make mistakes."

I'm like, "Yeah, my mistake was I didn't succeed."

I mean, that's what I was thinking. People didn't know how to react.

I have done solo performance, autobiographical storytelling, and I did tell my suicide story on the stage and I remember a young woman, 14 or very young, came up to me and really appreciated my story. She thanked me, and that felt so good. You know, that felt so good. I think it's important to talk about. I think it's just really important 'cause anytime you talk about stuff, it de-escalates the intensity of it.

Des: Right, and it's so strange to me. I have Google alerts set for suicide, suicide awareness, suicide attempt, and it's just strange, the things that the media reports on. They don't report on how prevalent suicide is on the whole. They only report on famous suicides or murder-suicides or suicide bombings. It's hard to

get people to talk about when we're only sensationalizing it.

Kristina: Oh yeah.

Des: So I guess that's what I'm trying to do is de-sensationalize it.

Kristina: I think if you start talking and people are honest, almost everybody has thought about it.

Des: It seems that way to me.

Kristina: Yeah, I mean, the people I talk to, they say that.

Des: Even if it's not necessarily a serious thought.

Kristina: But it's like, 'I wish I could die. When will this be over?'

My goal is to really enjoy life more because I still do have the feeling. I feel like there's a part of me that's unhealed. There's a part of me that really looks forward to death. I just feel like it'll be a deep sigh of relief, just an end to struggle. To me, that's an indication that I'm not having enough fun, 'cause I want to be enjoying this life more. I do think death will be pretty cool. Hopefully it doesn't come violently and hopefully there's not a lot of suffering beforehand, but do you know what I'm saying? I mean, I just have a feeling that it'll be a relief, but I want to enjoy life more. That's my goal.

And I'm ever so glad. I think if you don't deal with it now, you'll probably deal with it later. It's just not an answer. It's not a solution.

If you're feeling suicidal, please talk to somebody. You can reach the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255.