

MY NEW YORK STORY



By Chamique Holdsclaw, former WNBA star

The #1 draft pick in the 1999 WNBA draft, Chamique Holdsclaw was one of the best basketball players in the world. She went on to become Rookie of the Year, a six-time All Star, and an Olympic gold medalist for Team USA. Today she is a renowned, inspiring mental health advocate, traveling around the world to talk to young people, families, and community members about the importance of speaking honestly about mental health. Here's her story in her own words.

The road that led me to mental health advocacy started on the outdoor basketball courts of Astoria, Queens, and brought me to places I never thought I'd be. Today, when I get to help others, I can see that it's all been worthwhile.

Growing up, basketball was a refuge for me. My early years were marked by the instability of life at home, caused by my parents' struggles with addiction and other mental health concerns. When I was 11, the state determined that my brother and I would be better off living in Astoria with my grandmother—and off we went. Grandma June helped me feel safe in the world. She taught me discipline, and showed me unconditional love.



FACING REALITY

Still, taunts from neighborhood kids constantly reminded me of my troubled upbringing. They'd tell me that they'd seen my mother passed out drunk on park benches, or that my dad was crazy. But on the basketball court, the taunting stopped; that's where I could be in control. Basketball gave structure to my life, allowing my mind to focus on a single cherished task. By the time I got to Christ the King High School, I was one of the best basketball players around.

It was a perfect mask for me. But like any mask, it could only obscure reality for so long.

I went on to play basketball at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville for four years with legendary coach Pat Summitt. My childhood dream came true in April 1999, when I was selected as the number one pick in the WNBA draft. Excitement surging through my body, I walked up onstage and shook hands with the league's president.



Chamique Holdsclaw

BEING THE BEST

I could feel the weight of everyone's expectations resting on my shoulders. Some expected me to be the savior of women's basketball: the female Michael Jordan, some said. But for the moment, those expectations didn't matter. My lifelong effort to be the best basketball player in the world had paid off. As I exited the stage, I saw my smiling grandmother, tears streaming down her face. It was one of the proudest moments of my life.

When my grandma died unexpectedly in her sleep in May 2002, my life unraveled. I buried my emotions along with her. Three days later, I was back on the court, trying to numb myself with the only drug that had ever worked for me. A deep depression set in, and worsened over time. I didn't tell anyone how I was feeling. In 2006, I found myself on suicide watch at Centinela Hospital in California. And in November 2012, I emerged from a mental blackout, sitting in my car, with a 9 millimeter gun sitting in my passenger seat.



Chamique Holdsclaw at the Mental Health Film Festival

FINDING A SOLUTION

I was shaken to my core. How had this happened? What if I'd hurt somebody, or myself? This proved to be my breaking point. For me to live, something had to change. I had to tell the truth about how I felt inside.

Soon thereafter, I was diagnosed with bipolar II disorder. I was angry, but relieved—identifying a problem meant that a solution was within reach. I was prescribed a medication to manage my symptoms, and I started to learn about what it really meant to care for myself: physical exercise, eating well, building community, tending to my relationships, being honest. And perhaps most importantly: letting other people in, and learning that I was worthy of love exactly as I am. This realization transformed my life.

In the years since, I've become an advocate for people living with mental health concerns. I share my story on college campuses around the country, and I've aligned my efforts with the work of New York's own Community Access Inc.—a housing and mental health agency—at whose NYC Mental Health Film Festival I screened *Mind/Game*, the documentary about my life. I've also gotten to spend time with Community Access tenants, and I've gotten to see how unconditional love transforms people's lives every day.



Chamique Holdsclaw at Community Access Gala

A BRIGHTER FUTURE

What I've learned is this: Mental health concerns affect us all. We should be working to create a world where we can all talk about what's really going on—free of fear and with hope for a brighter future.

When I travel around the country, I try to embody the spirit of service and unconditional love my Grandma June taught me. When I meet young people on college campuses across the country, I tell them that they are worthy of love and respect, and that there is nothing shameful about seeking help. I especially love meeting young athletes, because it gives me a chance to teach them what it took me a long time to figure out: It's okay to strive to be the best player you can be, but it's more important to be the healthiest, happiest person you can be.

For so long I had thought I had to be the best to be accepted. I always wanted to be first. I had no idea that I simply had to be me.