Communications professional and Anorexia Nervosa Genetics Initiative (ANGI) participant, Rachel, 33, Melbourne, became fascinated by anorexia nervosa at school, producing artwork inspired by the potentially life-threatening disorder.

During her first year of university, aged 19, Rachel began displaying behaviours characteristic of anorexia nervosa. That year, she was officially diagnosed with the illness. An endless string of hospital admissions stretching months on end ensued, for the next four-to-five years.

With subsequent diagnoses and recovery from bulimia nervosa and alcoholism, Rachel has overcome monumental hurdles during her short life.

Here, she shares her personal story in a bid to help others battling this devastating illness.

At 16 years of age, during her final years of school, Rachel developed a fascination with anorexia nervosa and depression, which she portrayed vividly in her school work.

“Although I wasn’t actively exhibiting any of the behaviours at this age, I was interested in anorexia nervosa and based my art projects on the disorder.

“My English assignments were also about depression,” Rachel said.

“I realise now, this was a cry for help.

“I was diagnosed with anorexia nervosa when I was 19, and spent the following four-to-five years in and out of hospital for months at a time,” said Rachel.

“Anorexia nervosa is all-consuming. It takes over your mind and was all about control for me. I needed control over everything.

“The obsessive behaviours stopped me from socialising. It completely ruled my life, from the moment I woke up, to the moment I went to sleep,” Rachel said.

Rachel penned a poem entitled ‘Do you know?’ to summarise what having anorexia nervosa meant to her.
“It really affected my family,” said Rachel.

“My brothers weren’t able to get my parent’s attention because they were so worried about me. Fortunately, the illness didn’t affect my friendships in the long-term, although I couldn’t socialise at the time.

“As a consequence of the severity of my anorexia nervosa, I developed various health issues, including pleurisy (inflammation of the chest lining which often results in lung infections), pneumonia, bradycardia (slow heart rate), stomach ulcers, ongoing fibromyalgia (widespread pain and tenderness in the body) and digestive problems,” Rachel said.

“The turning point for me came at 24 years of age, during Christmas. My grandfather was dying from cancer at the time and I realised that if I focused on food, I wouldn’t be able to experience being with my family for my grandfather.

“I started enjoying myself, but the transition quickly led to bulimia nervosa, during which I had periods of eating small amounts and then purging. I also began drinking heavily at this point,” said Rachel.

“I recovered from bulimia nervosa two years later, aged 26, when I was diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). It was at this point that I discovered my eating disorders were a knock-on effect of PTSD.”

Although Rachel claims to be fully recovered now from anorexia nervosa, she is highly cognisant of things that can trigger her addictive behaviours.

Despite the all-consuming grip anorexia nervosa had on her life, Rachel graduated from university with a degree in Communications and Public Relations. Continuing a career in the same field, Rachel is also pursuing her photographic and artistic ambitions.

“One of my photos, ‘with strength and courage’ reached the top 50 most powerful images for Canon’s 2014 ‘Shine’ contest, designed to ‘shine a light’ on mental health issues,” Rachel said.

Rachel is currently participating in the Anorexia Nervosa Genetics Initiative (ANGI) – the world’s largest and most rigorous genetic investigation of anorexia nervosa to date. The international study aims to detect genetic variations that may play a role in the potentially life-threatening disorder.

While Rachel maintains her anorexia nervosa was triggered by an event, she acknowledges the role that genetics may play in the illness.

“I think it depends on how people react to triggers. Someone may have a genetic predisposition but still needs a trigger to develop the illness.

“If ANGI discovers the genes that contribute to anorexia nervosa this will help create a greater understanding of, and ultimately a cure for the illness,” said Rachel.


For more information, or to coordinate an interview with Rachel, please contact Kirsten Bruce, Mark Henderson or Claire Wright from VIVA! Communications on 0401 717 566 / 0431 465 004 / 0467 415 617.