

Karmen Bryan-Auker

Karmen Bryan-Auker is newly-30 and extroverted. Karmen grew up in the church and its religious education program since age five; she found it supportive through earlier life crises and still feels connected to the community. Karmen lives alone in an apartment in the Overland Park neighborhood of south Denver.

I am a bubbly personality for whom life centers around people. I am the ultimate people person. My family and boyfriend are most important in my life. I am unusually resilient, personable, and sympathetic, huggy, loyal, and extroverted.

I started out the beginning of 2020 feeling pretty good about my life. I had a stable home in my own apartment, a job I could handle, a car, a boyfriend of three years, and a loving family.

These accomplishments didn't come easily to me: I have a major mental illness, which I have controlled well for seven years with medications, but they limit my stamina and work hours and lead to conditions that undermine my general health. An NVLD processing disorder means I can handle certain jobs a lot better than others. I was traumatized by loss of my birth family before finding my adoptive family at age five.

Nonetheless, for three years I worked half-time at the Mental Health Center of Denver Recovery Center as a greeter. The job was a perfect fit for my personality and skills, and a good accommodation to my disabilities. I had a great encouraging boss and good support in the workplace. I had enough social security disability to cover rent and utilities in my apartment. I joined a gym and enjoyed working out twice a week. When I got paid, I enjoyed being able to pay my bills, buy food I liked, and pamper myself with professionally done nails and occasional hair styling.

You could say that 2020 was not my year. A lot of my world came crashing down because of COVID.

At first, my company sent all the workers home in March with full pay and closed our offices until July. I had three health conditions that put me at higher risk of severe disease or death if I get COVID. And as an African American and Native American person, I knew the risks for my people were higher, too. So, when it was time to return to work, I didn't know what to do. My doctor advised no, but I really missed being around people and was going stir-crazy locked up in my apartment. My parents and sister and I decided that with a full regalia of personal protective gear (face shield, mask, gloves, and gown) I would try returning to work in August.

Unfortunately, like in all workplaces, the work itself had changed. MHCD went virtual for most services, opening the building with only one on-site case manager and two nurses to give people injections. Rather than greeting people to the Recovery Center, I was now a screener – asking questions to screen for the virus and taking temperatures, cleaning the lobby, offering hand sanitizer, and telling clients they had to do virtual appointments rather than finding the help they needed in the building. Some clients were confused or agitated or could not access the virtual services. Some would try to barge through our barrier, not understanding.

By mid-November, COVID surged again, getting to the worst purple color on the state COVID dial. The governor issued a public health order advising high-risk people to stay home. I felt too scared to continue work knowing that I was high risk, so I decided to quit my job.

I felt bad to be losing my job, coworkers, and boss. And there was little to do inside my apartment except for laundry and watching television, so the boring days dragged on. Because I had my social security payments, I was able to pay rent on my little apartment, and my parents helped with other necessary costs. Having no discretionary income and needing to minimize risk meant I couldn't go to a gym or get a manicure or a haircut. Having to ask my parents for money for even small things made me feel really poor, even when I tried to remember that I had shelter and car and food.

I wasn't able to hug my mama. Before COVID, I could come over after work and walk into my parents' house to share a snack or get my medicines refilled. For a year, I had to mask and wait on the porch even on hot or snowy days. I am not a person who deals easily with change, and I found that change especially hard. I felt as though I had a disease when I wasn't able to hug my parents, my boyfriend, my niece, sister, or brother-in-law. Waiting for those vaccines felt like forever.

The historical event that changed my life most last year was the murder of George Floyd. Watching the police respond so violently to the protests felt scary. My own experience of policemen in the past led me to expect more of them, and their response in the protesters frightened me. I was afraid of them being violent toward me because of my color. I felt relieved when Mr. Floyd's family got the court decision for that cop that murdered him. I feel like the world needs to come to a place that is not racist, to stand together, not stand apart.

Getting food during COVID was frustrating. I made menus and grocery lists and my mom ordered food for someone in the grocery store to pick out. I drove and the grocery clerks put bags in the trunk of my car. Often the stores didn't have or choose the right stuff. Working through other people to get what you need is not satisfying. Going to the store yourself, choosing among what is available, is much more enjoyable.

When the state opened the mountains so we could go on hikes, it felt better than being in the city where everybody was so focused on COVID. In the mountains you can feel your body strengthening as you move.

Traveling was a loss to COVID last year. My mom and I had tickets for a mother-daughter trip to New York City and Washington D.C. two weeks after the shut-down, but that trip didn't happen. Even now that I am vaccinated, risk for COVID out in the world is still high so I can't see me and mom going on a trip anytime soon. That really makes me sad.

The year spent in my apartment was mostly boring. But I tried to learn to cook new dishes (beef stroganoff, tacos, and mac and cheese) and to broaden my horizons on the food I eat. I went on hikes with my boyfriend, took bubble baths, and naps. I tried to keep my apartment clean and the laundry done. I put up my Christmas tree early and left it up late to feel like there was some

joy in the apartment and I left the shades up so people outside could see it. Some year, there will be a Christmas where the world can celebrate with their families again.

Because I am a registered member of the Muscogee Creek Nation, I was blessed to get an early vaccine in February through the Denver Indian Center. Now, I can shop for groceries myself, get my nails and hair done, and find a job! I volunteered to work a giant vaccination event recently and it was a joy to feel useful. We vaccinated 500 people and they were so happy!

The federal stimulus checks were a blessing during the COVID year. They gave me the opportunity to replace worn-out sheets and make my apartment more comfortable. I was able to use the money to buy my own food after I got fully vaccinated. I could pay utilities. I also look forward to going on an overnight mini-vacation in the mountains for my birthday with my vaccinated boyfriend and sister and brother-in-law.

As the state comes out of COVID, I worry about whether I will be able to find another half-time job that is as good a match for me as the one I had before. I look forward to having discretionary money to pay my bills and feeling part of a team. I am applying for jobs and going out for interviews and hoping for the best!

I send my best wishes for people at church and hope the reopening goes well there, too.