

**GUTLESS AND GRATEFUL: A PROGRAM COMBINING MENTAL HEALTH  
ADVOCACY WITH BROADWAY THEATRE  
BY AMY OESTREICHER 2015**

**The Problem:**

*“Data from the 2013 National College Health Assessment II indicate that about one-third of college students across the United States had problems functioning because of depression in the last 12 months; almost half said they had felt overwhelming anxiety in the last year, 20 percent said they had seriously considered suicide in their lifetime, and 5.8 percent said they had attempted suicide. The same survey showed that four of the top five “substantial obstacles to their academic success” were sleep difficulties, stress, anxiety, and depression.”*

*A Strategic Primer on College Student Mental Health, 2014*

**Gutless & Grateful combines mental health advocacy, awareness and invaluable tools in a dynamic, musical theatre performance and/or interactive workshop. Students will be informed, inspired and entertained with engaging entertainment and powerful firsthand experience told with humor, honesty and heart.**

Students may feel uncomfortable reaching out to health and counseling services. Worse, students may be unaware that these resources exist.

In 2014, a report by NASPA: Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education, the American Council on Education, and the American Psychological Association focusing on student mental health issues:

*“Given the complex relationships among mental health, problematic health behaviors, learning, campus safety, and the quality of the learning environment, mental and behavioral health should be a strategic priority on every campus. Mental health professionals lead efforts to understand and respond to the needs of students with psychological, emotional, and behavioral concerns—but not all students who could benefit from mental or behavioral health services will come to the counseling center today, or any day. Students may not recognize the need for or recognize the availability of available services.” – A Strategic Primer on College Student Mental Health, 2014*



### **Gutless & Grateful aims to:**

- Engage
- Encourage
- Entertain
- Educate
- Empower



### ***Gutless & Grateful: The Show***

*“One part moving testament to human indomitability, the other a thoroughly satisfying evening of song. While each element is strong enough to stand on its own, combined they illuminate and enhance each other. Rarely have I seen narration and song so artfully meshed, and Oestreicher’s likeability, good humor, interpretive skill, and manifest commitment to what she is saying and singing make us not only understand her story, but also feel it on a very deep level.”*  
-Roy Sander, critic for *BistroAwards.com* ([more press quotes here](#))

Everyone has a story. After Amy’s was featured on TODAY with Kathie Lee and Hoda, she was inspired to bring hers to the NYC stage in 2012. Ever since, Amy hope to bring out the stories that unite us all.

### **Celebrating Life’s Beautiful Detours**

Amy shares her near death experience and unique personal story with humor, hunger and heart, highlighting the disappointments, struggles, triumphs, and gratitude in her life on a musical journey of hope, determination, and perseverance. A celebration of life through creativity, passion, and resilience, Amy shares what trauma can teach all of us. Just as suffering is relative, healing is a human right as natural as learning, evolving and changing. Amy will share how passion fueled her success and turned her hunger into an insatiable entrepreneurial drive Amy will perform segments of her autobiographical one-woman musical, talk about the healing process of telling her story, and provide tools for others to do the same.

### **Gutless & Grateful On Your Campus**

*“I can offer a positive story of someone living with medical conditions. As a 28-year-old college student, I know that life doesn’t always go as planned. My keynote incorporates crisis-preparedness and the ability to bounce back (resiliency) from difficult circumstances - an imperative tool for any college student.”* - Amy

Gutless & Grateful strives to shift an entire college ethos in the direction of inclusion – partly to give courage and a sense of belonging to people who are struggling with all kinds of mental health or physical challenges, but it’s also to help build a campus that gives everyone the kind of awareness and generosity of spirit that makes that world a better place.

**Students will learn how to:**

- Develop Healthy Habits and Take an Empowered Approach to Wellness
- Cultivate a Support System
- Reframe “Failure” and “Obstacles”
- Prepare for Life After College
- Make a Positive Impact in their Community
- Learn How To Bounce Back in Difficult Times
- Develop a Resiliency Toolbox
- Break Down Body Image Barriers
- Find resources for support on campus

**College, Mental Health, and Gutless & Grateful**

*“Our detours create the intricate fabric of who we are.”*

- Amy

Amy Oestreicher is a PTSD peer-peer specialist, artist, Motivational Speaker on College Student Mental Health, author, writer for The Huffington Post, award-winning founder of the Fearless Ostomates, and CT-based actress and playwright. (See documentary *here*.)



*“Throughout these ten years, I’ve been strong, determined, and willing to do whatever it took to stay alive. Yet I still wrestle with being grateful that this happened to me, wanting answers, wanting my old life back, being ambivalent, and just being confused. But the one thing I refuse to be is numb. I am changed by all of this, but alive nonetheless. With creativity, passion, and that little spark, anything is possible. “*

**How to Thrive, Not Just Get Through**

The aim of Gutless & Grateful is to present a picture of a “detour” in life, whether than detour be a physical condition, a mental illness, or an everyday stress/concern of a college student. As someone who has lived through various detours, including sexual abuse, PTSD, medical conditions, illnesses, and more “typical” unexpected twists and turns in life, Amy provides a safe, open and honest forum where we can reduce the stigma and make it acceptable for people to talk about mental illness, depression and suicide as well as physical health conditions, traumatic past experiences, and feeling of alienation on campus. It is important to use the performance and the talkback to show that an individual who had a perfectly healthy and “normal” childhood was forced to grapple with an entirely different world and new circumstances when a coma threatened to change life forever. Amy strives to paint a picture of a vulnerable teenager struggling, yet also a picture of recovery to prove that with resilience, trust,

creativity and the cultivation of inner resources, one can work toward that through use of tools for resiliency and coping skills.

Gutless & Grateful is based on an action plan to help students cope with their own detours in life, from the everyday struggles to more concerning health issues. Gutless & Grateful is a celebration of the *detours* that unite us all.

### What's a Detour?

**detour** – \ˈdē-,tūr – noun

The act of going or traveling to a place along a way that is *different* from the usual or planned way.

A detour is a curve in the road of life, a **bump in a path**, a big sign in the middle of your trip that says, “Sorry, you have to go *THAT* way.”

Nobody expects a detour to happen, in life. It's what happens when we think we have things planned and all figured out...and then we're thrown a curveball.

### What's a Detourist?

A Detourist looks for the upside of obstacles. A detourist follows that twisted path because they're **curious** to see where it could lead.

A detourist travels along detours – simple enough. But in addition, a detourist embraces those unexpected routes as **opportunities for growth**, change and self-fulfillment. *Amy is living proof that a detour can lead to unexpected blessings.*

Resilience takes work – especially when nothing seems to go our way. The good part is that **everyone** has had an unexpected detour one time or another, and the best teachers are the *stories* we hear.

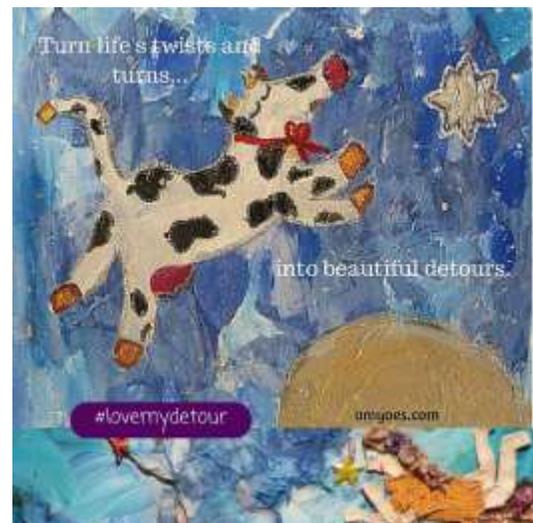
### Am I a Detourist?

Have you experienced a bump in the road?  
Did life go a *totally* different way than you had planned or expected?

Did you **learn something new** about yourself that you never would have realized, had you *not* had that experience?

Has that unplanned event in your life shaped who you are today?

If this sounds like you've been here before, then **you're a detourist.**



## What kinds of Detours are most common for college students?

- **Depression**
- **Anxiety**
- **Eating Disorders**
- **Suicide**
- **Substance Abuse**

## The Power of Our Stories

The more stories we hear about turning an obstacle into an opportunity, the more empowered we are to transform our own lives and have confidence that when life DOES surprise us, we're capable of getting through anything.

College is full of bumpy rides, stresses, anxieties, and other speed-humps along one's journey. *Gutless & Grateful* is a story of navigating life's detours with an empowered approach to mental health.

## Structure of the Program

Gutless & Grateful is an easy program to put on—a 90-minute, 3 component keynote/program:

Part 1) A 70-minute one-woman autobiographical musical – *Gutless & Grateful* – a comedic yet poignant story on surviving 27 stomach surgeries, organ failure and sexual abuse, turning those obstacles into opportunities. Through interwoven song and dialogue, Amy shares a primal piece of live-storytelling – a powerful message that it's possible to overcome physical and mental obstacles.

Part 2) An educational session/speech discussing an empowered approach to mental health (or topic of choice), how to develop a resiliency toolbox, using creativity to heal, how to cultivate hope, and how to thrive with a physical or mental health condition.

Part 3) A Q&A session where students have the opportunity to ask about Amy's own journey, and to introduce students to staff counselors and mental health resources.

The program can also be followed by a more intimate, interactive workshop which allows students to connect and process the material through creative expression.

Amy's message is empowering for students not just to get *through*, but to **get thriving**.

## #LoveMyDetour – The Outreach Component

The Gutless & Grateful Q & A is followed an introduction to the legacy Amy will leave on campus. At every college Amy tours, she invites the campus to participate in the #LoveMyDetour Social Media campaign.

## ***In Amy's Words***

*"The April of my senior year of high school I fell into a coma - that was my detour. I thought that in just a few months my path would lead right to college.*

*The road that followed - even with 27 surgeries thrown in - became my beautiful detour. Without every twist and turn in my path, I never would have learned so much about myself, my life, and my world along the way.*

*The road may be long, tough, and filled with even more detours, surprises, and unexpected turns. But a Detourist just keeps going and let's those twists and turns create an even stronger, savvy traveler.*

*A Detourist turns a "wrong way" sign into traveler's gold. Without that detour, life would not be as rich. It's the twists and turns that make us who we are.*

*Are you a Detourist? Why wouldn't you be? If you're a Detourist, every obstacle is an amazing opportunity to grow, learn and see all that life has to offer - and who doesn't like to travel?*

*Traveling as a Detourist can be tough. A detour is not a free ride, but it is a thrilling one. When the road gets rocky, the important thing to know is that we're not alone.*

*Share your story - a time you thought you had life all planned out and life ended up taking you the other way. Tell me how you turned a "wrong way" into your own beautiful detour.*

*Share a picture, draw it, sing it, shout it, write it, dance it, but make sure however you share it, share with the hashtag #LoveMyDetour.*

*As we travel, we see that our detours are not detours at all. Every road leads somewhere - we just need to hang in long enough to catch the flowers along the way. The more we share our detours, the more we realize we're not alone.*

*So consider this a field trip, Detourists, and start sharing your travels. Together we're stronger!*

*I love my detour. Now tell me why you love yours."*

## What This Involves:

- Personal student accounts (with their permission) in Amy’s Why Not Wednesday weekly feature, featuring a new Detourist every week
- Social Media opportunities to participate in the #LoveMyDetour campaign.
- An online forum of support that lives on after Amy leaves the campus and continued access to more Detourist stories and inspiration

## Community Art-Making Component

Another available option is to be followed by a community-based collaborative art-making project, fostering a sense of creative community and a way to integrate the key issues addressed in the keynote. This can involve:

- Each student writing a “detour” in their life on a paper strip, which is then assembled into a paper chain link, demonstrating the detours that unite us all
- A visual journey map done by students on individual sheets of paper with markers and crayons, which is then assembled as one large map that the students can collage and rearrange based on their relations to one another’s shared struggles.

## Empathy and Empowerment

Through creativity, we embrace our individuality while emphasizing our commonalities.

*“It’s about learning how to occupy your own story so you can control it. It’s not about the specialness or uniqueness of my story or a life-threatening crisis, it’s about owning an unexpected event and making things happen a reason, turning obstacles into opportunity and learning how to dance through the detours.”*

-Amy



## Gutless & Grateful Talkback Component

*We navigate our detours through creating our own recipe for resilience:*

- The Power of Stories: the healing effects of sharing our story, learning our stories for ourselves, and allowing ourselves to be affected by the stories of others
- Gratitude: The idea of cultivating hope through gratitude. Through simple exercises and habits, including the discipline of a daily gratitude list, we become grounded in who we are, once we know what our values are and what we stand for. Once anchored in ourselves, we can begin to access our inner-trust and compass to navigate our detours
- Creativity: Once we become grounded in who we are through gratitude, we can use creativity to center ourselves and propel us forward. Through creativity, we are able to be with our experiences and emotions that may be too painful, frightening or overwhelming for words, as well as experiences that have yet to be acknowledged.

## **Gutless & Grateful Wellness Q & A**

*According to a 2011 NAMI study, 64% of college dropouts were for mental health-related reasons. Of those, 50% never accessed any mental health programs or services.*

- The Gutless & Grateful Talkback can be followed by a Q and A session, introducing a wellness staff member. Through prompted questions and an open discussion, the staff member has the opportunity to address campus concerns and introduce resources on campus.

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## **Gutless and Grateful Rider/Tech Requirements**

*Please contact Amy directly on formatting the program specifically to fit your college's needs.*

## **Event Proposal: Mental Health Advocacy/Sexual Assault Awareness & Broadway Theatre Keynote**



Gutless & Grateful is a keynote that combines Broadway theatre and mental health advocacy, meant for the entire student body, promoting wellness, providing hope, help, and saving lives.

**Format:**

- A one-time event on campus that also leaves the conversation open for students to continue working on an empowered approach to mental health.
- As many as two presentations in a single day, which could especially be useful for several reasons: a) (as an option) to perhaps do one for a specific group of students (pre-med, psych, social work etc.) and one for the general student body, or b) to get both morning and evening students in to hear this message, or c) to perhaps allow members of the community to attend and hear this message as well.

**Possible sources of funding:**

- Student Activities Office
- A coalition of staff-led and student groups in some combination of: psychology, LGBT center, nursing, counseling services, Greek Life, NAMI, Active Minds, Student Orientation/First Year Experience, and/or social work.
- Mental Health Programming Grants such as <http://www.samhsa.gov/grants> or <http://www.grantwatch.com/cat/23/mental-health-grants.html>

Venue: Theatre or lecture hall (easy to reserve and typically free)

For more information and a menu of options, contact Amy Oestreicher at [amyoes70@gmail.com](mailto:amyoes70@gmail.com)

**A behind the scenes look of Gutless & Grateful**

*Learn more in Amy's essay for Huffington Post: [Forever Gutless, Forever Grateful](#)*

As a survivor and "thrivor" of nearly 30 surgeries, a coma, sexual abuse and a decade of medical trauma, I have been challenged with moments of extreme difficulty. But as an artist, newlywed, actress, 28-year old college student and overall lover of life, I've learned so much from this beautiful detour.

I am what some doctors have called a "surgical disaster." I never had any health problems — theatre was my entire universe and I performed professionally all of my life — then in April of my high school senior year, I abruptly developed a blood clot, my stomach exploded (it actually hit the ceiling of the OR), and after both my lungs collapsed, I almost died. Months later, I woke up from a coma covered in tubes, bags, and drains, and was told that I had no stomach anymore, I could not eat or drink, and no one could tell me when or if I would ever be able to again. It took 27 surgeries and over three years, but I eventually was miraculously reconstructed and with the intestines I had left, was given a system that digests food. With time, patience, and dogged determination, I was eventually discharged from the hospital. What I'm glossing over are the multitudes of surgeries, setbacks and frustrations, because what was the most important was my passion.

What "happened" to me inspired a creative decade-long marathon. Now I'm best known for "Gutless & Grateful" which I am taking across the country. I had always had a dream of combining song and dialogue in a show of my own design. I love the idea of storytelling through

theatre, but as a teen, I didn't really have much of a story to tell. But sometimes, a setback is an opportunity in disguise. Suddenly, I had a tale of hurdles, triumph, and heart. Eight years after my coma, I was finally headed towards a life of medical stability. I learned through experience that things can heal with time, and that's not always the prettiest or easiest way. It was an extremely difficult journey, yet when I started to put together a musical of my life, things felt like they had happened for a reason. Now I had a story to tell, a message to share.

My one-woman musical autobiography, *Gutless & Grateful*, started out as stapled pages of my journal – a few pages from the thousands of journal entries I had completed when unable to eat or drink for years. I selected 16 songs—some of which I had written – that had always resonated with my journey and me, and loosely strung them together to sing for my own therapy. I'd perform *Gutless & Grateful* for my parents, my dogs, but mostly for myself. Through the songs, I could allow myself a safe place to feel the charged emotions I was still trying to process from years of medical trauma.

Soon, I started to put words to the anger and pain I felt – my sorrows, memories, hardships, struggles, triumphs, warrior-mentality, inspirations, milestones, thoughts, joys – I typed and typed like a madwoman four hours, in an effort to process what was happening, and to find myself through the uncertainty. That was the only way I knew to still make my mark somewhere – to prove that I was still alive, kicking, and breathing. Isolated from the entire world and from my entire former life, but still here, and still desperate to live some kind of substantial, meaningful life. I needed an outlet to just get all of my confusion, frustration, and musings out. I needed to process all that had finished and all that was still happening to me, and all that was to come in my very uncertain (scarily uncertain) future.

My show dared to explore a very personal topic – what could have been a tragedy – in a comedic, yet poignant musical. “*Gutless & Grateful: A Musical Feast*” was the culmination of years of struggling in the dark, and the spark in me that refused to die. It told my triumphant survival tale in a way that inspired many theatregoers and prompted them to rethink the ways they live their lives. It was such a powerful experience to share my story and have it affect so many people, that I truly felt firsthand the transformative power of theatre.

*“They say that everything happens for a reason. But that’s not always true. Sometimes, you have to make it happen. I think about my old life, and I miss it. I miss the simplicity and straightforwardness of it. I look at old pictures and I miss the innocence, the joy, the carefreeness in my eyes. I can’t be 13 again but I can be the best 26 I can. But sometimes I wonder what life would be like if this never had happened – This is not the path that I planned for myself – but does anyone’s life ever work out exactly how they plan it? I was led astray, and hurt, and betrayed, and dehumanized, taken apart and put back together, but differently. But my passion never went away. I kept my hunger alive. Now I know that my role in life is still to be that same performer I always wanted to be when I was 13. But now with an even greater gift to give. A story to tell.”*

**Amy Oestreicher – Orator, Performer, Writer, Artist, Singer, Actress, Survivor**

Amy Oestreicher is a PTSD peer-peer specialist, artist, author, writer for The Huffington Post, award-winning founder of the Fearless Ostomates, and CT based actress and playwright. As a survivor and “thrivor” of nearly 30 surgeries, a coma, sexual abuse, organ failure and a decade of medical trauma, Amy has been challenged with moments of extreme difficulty. But as an artist, newlywed, actress, 28-year old college student and overall lover of life, Amy eagerly shares the lessons learned from trauma and has brought out the stories that unite us all through her writing, mixed media art, performance and inspirational speaking.

Piecing her life together after her initial dreams of performing musical theatre took on a beautiful detour into broader horizons. Amy has written, directed and starred in a one woman musical about her life, Gutless & Grateful, has flourished as a mixed media and acrylic artist, with her art in multiple galleries and mounting dozens of solo art shows, and continues to share her story through her art, music, theatre, workshops and writings.

Amy’s “beautiful detour” has inspire her passionate desire to create and help others. She created the Detourist #LoveMyDetour movement to bring a positive light to life’s bumpy, unexpected routes. Her writings have appeared in Washington Post and On Being with Krista Tippet, her story has appeared on the TODAY Show, and CBS, and her one-woman show has been seen in theatres across the country, earning rave reviews and accolades since it’s BroadwayWorld Award-nominated NYC debut.

Amy has collaborated with Beechwood Arts founder Jeanine Esposito in creating a series of monologues titled “Five windows on a Resilient Journey”, expressing the life-altering detours and ultimately the invaluable gifts of her resilience journey.

Amy is currently touring the country with her one-woman musical, Gutless & Grateful, her keynote presentations, workshops and signature talkbacks, which she has devised specialized versions for corporations, college campuses, survivors, healthcare professionals, and artists. She is also leading mixed media creativity workshops to promote creativity as a mindset, an essential survival skill. Visit [amyoes.com](http://amyoes.com) for more information.

