



NEWS RELEASE

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2005/2006 BLACK DOG INSTITUTE WRITING COMPETITION

Stories on how people live with the Black Dog (mood disorders) will provide new inspiration to help thousands of sufferers to be better equipped and informed to deal with a mental illness that strikes at one in five Australians.

The NSW Assistant Minister for Health (Mental Health), Cherie Burton, said today she had been deeply moved by the large number of inspirational stories to emerge from the 2005/2006 Black Dog Institute Writing Competition.

The Minister today presented prizes to the winners of the competition which attracted 634 entries from Australia and overseas.

Three independent judges – Anne Deveson AO, writer, broadcaster and documentary film-maker; Margret Meagher, Managing Director of I'Media Asia Pacific –publishers of Arts + Medicine; and Leanne Pethick, former CEO of DepressionNet – selected the first, second and third place getters as well as 12 Highly Commended Award winners.

Winner of the \$2000 first prize was Robert N Stephenson from Hawthorndene in South Australia who described how his Bipolar Disorder “had often meant losing whole weeks and even months, to those black spots.”

“There were choices open to me, many choices, and most, if not all, were beneficial to my health and future,” Robert said.

“There are no quick fixes or easy cures for my bipolar and I am by no means clear of those dark woods or the frightening dreams that haunt them. I must live partially to a set regime of medications and regular psychiatrist visits.”

Robert titled his essay **Learning to Live, Not Suffer**. He declares he doesn't suffer bipolar disorder anymore; rather he has chosen to live with it instead.

Winner of the \$1,000 second prize is Siobhan Walsh of Hurlstone Park in Sydney who titled her essay **The Black Dog: An Owner's Manual**.

Siobhan writes that most people who own black dogs, never intended to. The black dog was just sitting by their bed one day when they woke up. Or he had been lurking at the back door for a while and finally moved in... And most black dog owners agree that they don't really have time for it. The black dog seems to get in the way of all things that are beautiful and fun in life.

She provides valuable advice across many fronts, eg ‘Give the dog space, but not too much’, ‘Feed the black dog’ (referring to the fact that the black dog can play havoc with sufferer's eating habits) ‘Exercise and the black dog’, ‘When the black dog wont listen’, ‘Introducing the black dog to other people’, ‘You are not your black dog’ and ‘When the black dog sleeps’.

As Siobhan concludes, the black dog can bring with him the darkest hours in a persons life. “But knowing the darkest hours helps you appreciate the brighter days.” she said.

The \$500 third prize went to a mother from Coffs Harbour in northern NSW who spoke about **Understanding her son's black dog**. Judith Fleming described how depression, like quicksand, was not selective with its victims.

“It (depression) wraps its dark and smothering cloak around people regardless of their intelligence, beauty, talents, social standing, physical prowess or financial position”, she writes.

Speaking about her son, she said that rather than being able to chase it away, the black dog moved in and dominated his life after he left school. “The debilitating periods became more frequent and intense. They would drain away his energy. He talked of giving up. He could not see that his future would ever be any different. He had been a prisoner held in the tentacles of depression for as long as he could remember and he was tired. He craved just one day when he could switch off the tormenting tape in his head. I felt powerless and at times fatigued by his suffering.”

“Through years of psychiatric treatment, anger, fear, resolution, impatience, self-doubt, tears, humour, strength, openness, willpower, courage, understanding gradual acceptance, my son has chased his black dog towards its kennel.

“But it is still there in the backyard. What is important is that he knows his life is now different. He knows he can be free of the torment.”

The 12 Highly Commended Awards in the competition went to:

Mark Miller, Shoalhaven Heads, NSW
Anonymous Entry, Tasmania
Catriona Russell, Marsden, Queensland
Michael Griffith, Burwood, NSW
Ingrid Barr, Werribee, Victoria
Daniel Bainbridge, Forrestfield, Western Australia
Daniel Cremin, Mt Riverview, NSW
Meg Wright, Greenslopes, Queensland
Megan Redfern, Gowrie Mountain, Queensland
Dennis Sleight, Florey, ACT
Kylie Ladd, Ivanos, Victoria
Jean Sharman, Pymble NSW

The essays of the first three placegetters are on the Black Dog Institute website blackdoginstitute.org.au

Arts+Medicine magazine, which explores the positive impact of the arts on health and wellbeing, was the media partner for this year's Writing Competition. Caroline McConnachie, editor of the bi-monthly magazine, praised the initiative. “Depression and bipolar disorder are by nature intangible which can make it very isolating for those suffering either condition, and for their family and friends. It's why Black Dog's competition is such a brilliant, forward-thinking project.

“These finalists have each demonstrated the elixir-like qualities of writing. In extreme cases it has rescued lives, such as this year's winner. But for most people with experience of mental illness, it can provide a non-confrontational platform to convey innermost thoughts and engender empathy in others.”

FOOTNOTE: At today's function, the Minister also launched the *Tracking the Black Dog* which is a product of the Institute's inaugural writing competition which looked at the origins of the term Black Dog to describe depression.