



BLACK DOG INSTITUTE

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News Release

BLACK DOG INSTITUTE THIRD ANNUAL WRITING COMPETITION

The Black Dog Institute has been overwhelmed by the wealth of innovative consumer advice and well-being plans to cope with the ‘highs’ of Bipolar Disorder that have been unearthed during its 2007 writing competition.

The writing competition was the third conducted by the Institute in as many years and this time focused on “*The Getting of Wisdom*” and Bipolar Disorder, suffered by more than one million Australians (or five percent of the population).

“The 192 entries cover a wide-ranging list of strategies – a formidable ‘toolkit’ comprising everything from recognising the early warning signs for ‘highs’, how to achieve a healthy lifestyle, the joys of creativity (writing, poetry, painting and music), managing finances, the role of support networks, humour and humility – that provide an insight into the lives of people impacted by Bipolar Disorder, whether they are sufferers or carers,” according to Professor Gordon Parker, Executive Director of the Black Dog Institute.

The Minister Assisting the Minister for Health (Mental Health), Paul Lynch, today presented prizes to the winners of the competition declaring he had been deeply moved by the stories and the lifetime journey of people with Bipolar Disorder as well as the people around them that provide an essential and compassionate support network.

Three independent judges – Barbara Hocking, Executive Director of SANE Australia; Dr Tanya Hanstock, clinical psychologist from the Newcastle Region and Enrique (Topo) Rodriguez, the former rugby union international- selected the first, second and third place getters as well as 10 highly commended award winners.

In their report, the judges said they learnt things that can only be taught by people who have gone through a journey and that these insights were much more powerful than anything you could glean from a textbook or journal article.

“Not only have the entrants appeared to have obtained wisdom, but also the best thing is that they will eventually be able to share this wisdom in a toolkit in the form of a book for people with Bipolar Disorder for years to come,” the judges stated.

Winner of the \$2,000 first prize and trophy was Raquel Tracy from Epping NSW for her essay titled *The Staircase*. The story is about her mother-in-law's life. The writer describes how her mother-in-law made endless trips up and down a staircase when experiencing the highs and lows associated with the impact of Bipolar Disorder – spending weeks, sometimes months, on the highest step or the lowest rung.

The author describes how her mother-in-law rarely pauses for breath on the steps in between; her mind only knows how to plummet to the bottom, and to propel itself to the top. Now 60, a doting grandmother, a treasured mother-in-law, her mother-in-law has collected suitcases full of wisdom on her many trips up and down the stairs.

Wisdom, she believes, is the byproduct of living with Bipolar Disorder. She imparts her wisdom to others, not by standing on a soap box in the Domain, like she once envisaged, but within the walls of her own home. Her wisdom is the quiet kind, the type that lurks in the tone of her voice, in her off-hand comments and heartfelt advice.

Winner of the \$1,000 second prize and trophy is Jennifer Ann Martin from Beauty Point NSW who opens her essay with the words:

“If you could feel gloriously alive, at one with the world and buoyantly optimistic, why would you ever wish this to stop? It is an incredibly hard thing to swallow that these blessed feelings are actually part of an illness known as Bipolar Disorder. Yet once true acceptance has occurred, wellbeing can then be achieved by careful ongoing management, effective communication and awareness,” according to Jennifer.

And, while Jennifer makes the point that prevention is definitely better than a cure, effective management provides for the worst cases scenario.

The \$500 third prize went to Raechel Mathews from Sydney NSW for an essay titled *Polar Bears*. In this story our author writes:

“Depression has the Black Dog. In our home, Bipolar has the Polar Bear. A code word created between my sister and I when she was first diagnosed with Bipolar and which aptly describes the illness and our experience of living with this ‘animal’. Polar Bears look cute and cuddly – and most of the time, my sister is open, funny and playful. Polar Bears enjoy company – and my sister has a wide circle of friends, enjoys sport, movies and going out. Polar Bears are versatile – living on land and in deep waters – and my sister is managing her illness extremely well at age 21, having had the illness since she was 14, attending university and singing in a local church group. However, Polar Bears also have a predatory side and this is when we see the illness emerge and sister goes from gorgeous to grizzly,” the author writes.

Most importantly, our author's advice is ‘love your Polar Bear unconditionally.’ “The calamitous carnivore is fleeting and gives way to the cuddly creature time and time again. So whether your bear's condition is hibernating or active, let them know every day the fact that by being part of your life is a blessing.”

Ten highly commended awards were also presented today. (The names have not been published for privacy reasons).

Essays of the first, second and third place getters as well as the highly commended can seen on the Black Dog Institute website www.blackdoginstitute.org.au

Some of the personal thoughts in the essays on how people managed the ‘highs’ of Bipolar Disorder, include:

- See yourself as a survivor, taking small but steady steps through this unusual life of ours
- Grow beyond the confines of the illness by learning about it and yourself
- Go back and visit your ghosts... make peace with yourself and your past
- Act normal and people will relate to you likewise
- Be honest with your psychiatrist, develop good sleeping patterns, listen to your family and friends, don't use the phone or computer after 5pm (too stimulating)
- Early to bed. Need to regulate the sleep-wake cycle
- Writing. If it's creative it's OK; if it generates into 'lists' then stop.

Then there was the entrant who texts herself with encouraging messages while another makes the point – ‘I can never stop the eruptions but I can avoid getting burnt’. Another entrant recalls that her husband never knew whether saint or shrew would greet him when he came through the door. She counts down from 100 in threes to slow herself down.

FOOTNOTE: Professor Parker said the essays from the previous two competitions had resulted in the production of books – *Tracking the Black Dog* (a look at the history of the term Black Dog to describe depression) and *Journeys with the Black Dog* (inspirational stories of bringing depression to heel).

He said this latest essay competition will enable the Institute to collate broader consumer insights on how people with Bipolar Disorder manage the ‘highs’ and minimise the associated risk and consequences. Over the coming months, the Institute will be exploring the best possible way of developing this grass roots Consumer Bipolar Disorder Toolkit.

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