

The Hawkesbury Bipolar Bears Support Group

Established by Maree Twomey in 2007, The Hawkesbury Bipolar Bears Support Group meets on the last Friday of each month.

Maree's dream was to provide a safe environment for a group of like-minded people to give and receive support, respect and understanding, in an atmosphere of sharing, learning and friendship. Group members undertake recreational activities together and take a proactive approach to having fun and enjoying life.

Maree has successfully lobbied local businesses who willingly donate time, money and raffle items to support the group's various fund raising activities. These accomplishments alone are exceptional, but it is the personal challenges Maree Twomey has overcome to reach this point that is truly remarkable.

Abandoned by her mother at birth, Maree was subjected to extreme verbal, emotional, physical and sexual abuse throughout her childhood. As an adult, she continued to face assault, abuse, discrimination and public vilification. Eventually diagnosed with Bipolar Disorder, Maree struggled for some time to identify with herself beyond the 'label'.

Maree was first assigned to therapist Marie-Pierre Cleret whilst she was an acute admissions inpatient at a psychiatric facility following a serious attempt to self-harm.

"Maree's history of abuse in childhood is extensive. What is remarkable is what she has done with such a history. Through all the pain, rejection and loss, Maree demonstrates an indomitable strength of spirit, an amazing capacity to care for others and a level

of resilience and resourcefulness that continues to take my breath away, even after more than twenty years," says Cleret.

"Fortunately, hers is the kind of nature that, apart from unwittingly attracting people who want to exploit others, also calls out the best in people. Maree has a deep compassion for people who are less fortunate than her, who struggle to find their place in society as she did. Throughout it all, Maree has retained her sense of hope, her ability to see the best in others, and her capacity to love and show kindness to others.

I conducted training workshops on how to provide therapy with survivors of complex trauma and used aspects of Maree's story as my case studies. Workshop participants challenged the veracity of the case studies on numerous occasions, claiming that no-one could possibly have had such an awful life. I enjoyed telling them that they were only getting excerpts of the whole, true story," says Cleret.

Known throughout the Hawkesbury Region, Maree has done more than establish a support group and bring together a community. She shares the details of her incredible journey in *Inspired Recovery*, a book that explores the triumph of the human spirit over debilitating mental illness.

Inspired Recovery is a compilation of true stories about people who have achieved their life goals while managing severe mental illness including bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, schizoaffective disorder or depression. The accounts in the book bring a genuine message of hope to others. Pre-order your copy of *Inspired Recovery* today at www.inspiredrecovery.com. Profits from *Inspired Recovery* sales will be donated to registered charities throughout Australia.



The facts about Mental Illness in Australia¹:

- Around 20% of adults are affected by mental illness every year.
- Many people with mental illness recover well and are able to lead fulfilling lives when they receive appropriate ongoing treatment and support. However, only half of those affected by mental illness receive treatment.
- People with a mental illness require the same level of treatment, understanding and support provided to those with a physical illness. It is rarely possible for someone with a mental illness to make the symptoms go away just by 'strength of will'.
- One of the biggest hurdles for people trying to get well is confronting the attitudes that their family, friends, employers and neighbours hold towards them because of their illness. Sadly, this often leads to isolation and discrimination.

¹ Source: SANE Australia http://www.sane.org/information/factsheets/facts_and_figures.html and Victoria Mental Health Services <http://www.health.vic.gov.au/mentalhealth/illnesses/facts.htm>

How can you help?²

- Pro-actively learn ways to effectively deal with trauma in relationships, situations and events.
- Support friends, relatives and colleagues with a mental illness to obtain care and treatment.
- Address discrimination in every area of life, including employment, education and the provision of goods, services and facilities.
- Talk about mental illnesses openly. It is surprising how many people are affected by mental illness, but have been too afraid of rejection to discuss it openly.
- Support organizations that provide high-quality support and treatment services that enable people with a mental illness to participate fully in all aspects of community life.
- Encourage research into mental illnesses to assist understanding of how these illnesses affect people and how they can be prevented.

² Source: Victoria Mental Health Services <http://www.health.vic.gov.au/mentalhealth/illnesses/facts.htm>

For more information visit the Hawkesbury Bipolar Bears website at www.hawkesburybipolarbears.com or the Inspired Recovery website at www.inspiredrecovery.com