

BIPOLAR BABE:

Sharing My Story So Others Do Not Suffer in Silence

BY ANDREA PAQUETTE

My name is Andrea Paquette, Founder and Executive Director of the *Bipolar Disorder Society of British Columbia*. I am also known as the “Bipolar Babe” in the mental health community. In May 2009, I created a bright pink T-shirt with the logo *Bipolar Babe: Stomping out Stigma*. I wore it proudly to show the world that it was ‘OK’ to have a mental illness, and to emphasize that we should all talk about mental health openly without shame. I also created the website www.bipolarbabe.com, which became a place of comfort & education - a safe space where people shared their stories, formed friendships on the forum, and read my personal blog.

In January 2010, the Bipolar Babe project grew into the *Bipolar Disorder Society of BC (BDSBC)* with the help of the media and many amazing supporters who formed a passionate Board of Directors, and from date of application to approval, the Society received charitable status in an impressive 29 days. Currently, the Society delivers peer support and school/community presentations’ programs on Vancouver Island and I am proud to announce our new *Stigma-Free Zone Superheroes* classroom presentations program being delivered on the Lower Mainland.

Andrea’s Personal Story

I feel it is important to share the history behind the creation of the Bipolar Babe Project, which includes my personal story. During my classroom presentations, I take students back to a place where I feel they can relate, which is when I was 16 years old. I dropped out in my grade 10 year in school and I instead drank alcohol daily, experimented with drugs, hung out with a criminal crowd, and my boyfriend at the

time was a seasoned armed robber. I was a troubled teen who dealt with a family divorce at a young age and a mother with bipolar disorder. Our family never spoke about mental illness when I was a child and my mother’s hospitalizations were minimized to be merely a regular event that took place from time to time. I lived solely with my father after my parents’ divorce from the age of 8 years old, but I eventually knew in my mid-teens that it was time for a change. I wanted to leave life in Sudbury, Ontario behind me and I had a hopeful heart as I called my mother who had moved to Vancouver Island years prior. In a matter of two months, this amazing woman somehow managed to purchase a one-way plane ticket to Vancouver Island for me and I was able to hit reset on my troubled teenage life.

After one year of living with my mother, she started suffering with delusions, which led to my unwelcomed exit from her home as we fought endlessly during her bipolar episodes. I did not empathize with her decision to kick me out of the house as I knew nothing about her illness, and I only felt unloved and abandoned. Still, I remained hopeful and eventually found housing with two older friends, continued working part-time at a fast-food restaurant, and channeled my pain in the hopes of showing my mother how well I could do in school. I worked tirelessly alongside a scholarship club that encouraged and cared about my future and I was awarded with \$10,000 in scholarships and bursaries in my graduating year, and gained early entrance to the University of Victoria.

I eventually found my true calling in the world of politics and political science courses captivated me with theoretical



teachings and professors who taught me to “think without crutches.” With a Political Science degree in hand and years of provincial government work on my resume, I sold everything I owned, jumped into my 1996 green Dodge Neon, and drove swiftly across Canada on my own heading East. Originally, I arrived in Ottawa to find my dream life and work in the House of Commons as I had many contacts in the political realm and I planned a strategy to make this goal a reality. However, a promising life and a new job did not find me in Ottawa, but bipolar disorder certainly did.

Andrea’s Journey with Bipolar Disorder

At 25, my bipolar psychosis manifested itself and I was seeing, hearing and believing things in my own reality that were not true. This break with reality was triggered by my first manic episode where my elevated mood state induced a sense of grandiosity that took hold and my eyes intently took the computer screen. I was suddenly able to type like a seasoned pro with an unbreakable focus that allowed me to produce a 33-page, single-spaced document in three hours. It was absolutely brilliant in my eyes and I titled my work, “The Canadian Federal Election Strategy,” and I naturally poised myself to be the next Prime Minister of Canada! As I lost days of sleep, my delusions grew, and so did my sickness in my

bipolar disorder episode that plunged me into a journey that was both unexpected and powerfully overwhelming.

During this time, it became commonplace to reach out and connect with as many people as possible and I felt it was my mission to be kind to them. I randomly approached by reaching out my hand with introductions and this quickly escalated into long and meaningful conversations. I even recall approaching a man in a wheelchair, and I removed my gold diamond ring that my grandmother gave me as a teen, and I felt that he needed it more than I did. During this time, I felt more empathetic and kind than I ever had in my entire life, but as my heart grew larger, so did my illness. The last thing that I would ever consider was the fact that I was sick because I just felt unstoppable and that I was experiencing an amazing journey.

The bipolar psychosis took its grip and I began to have visual hallucinations such as a globe of the earth that formed in my gaze and it began to deteriorate in front of my eyes. The image was as real as I could touch it and as I stared in awe, I did not realize that I was having a break with reality. However, once there was a loud knock at the door with nobody to see behind the peephole, I became agitated and scared. This event prompted me into a panic and I immediately called 9-1-1 for help.

Subsequent to talking to the attending police officer for 30 minutes, he recommended he should call an ambulance to take me to the psychiatric ward for assessment. I was eventually taken to the hospital, medicated and diagnosed as having bipolar disorder with psychotic features. I was finally grounded with medication after three weeks, but my troubles had just begun. I then slowly realized that my life had fallen apart and I felt broken. I had no source of income at this time and I spent all of my money not knowing the consequences. I did not have family to support me as they were all in British Columbia, and any friends I did have abandoned me. I had also lost my serving job due to my odd behavior and I was in disbelief when my roommates confiscated my key and the hospital became my home.

I do not share my story for people to pity me, but I share to simply demonstrate that it is possible to lose everything; we can even lose our sanity. With \$400 in hand

from social assistance, it was nearly impossible to find a place to live until I realized that rent can be negotiable with some landlords. When I finally found a room to rent, I sat on the edge of my bed, head resting in my hands, sobbing, and I just could not believe that it was all a farce. I was saddened, for every experience was chalked up to being a mere brain illness. I had never experienced the world in such a profound way before, and never have again. I was not relieved to finally have a diagnosis of bipolar disorder, but instead I felt stigmatized and defeated. I decided to move back to BC where I suffered at the hands of a depression that gripped me so badly that I could not take a shower nor cook myself something to eat. I medicated myself to sleep every day for weeks, not wanting to see the light of day. Eventually, I lost all hope and I swallowed a very large bottle of pills attempting to take my life. When I woke in the Intensive Care Unit at the hospital after three days, I was distressed because I had lived to see another day. In time, I did not want to lose all hope that someday I would be able to enjoy life again. When I met a psychiatrist who truly cared about my wellness and I adhered to a new treatment plan, I began to feel that maybe I could do something with my life.

I had suffered two hospitalizations by this point, but in a matter of months of being released from the hospital, I journeyed to South Korea to teach English to children, and eventually became a university professor, the only white English-speaking woman in a town with a population of 100,000. I returned to Canada after two years of healing and sought meaningful work in the provincial government. I soon became a policy analyst for the Ministry of Social Development and Social Innovation where I managed social assistance and disability programs for British Columbians.

The Bipolar Babe Project is Born

The idea of creating a T-shirt that read 'Bipolar Babe: Stomping out Stigma' was the first step to creating a community project, which revolved around the objective of getting people to talk about mental health, and I began to share my personal story of living with bipolar disorder. I began speaking engagements in the local community, which eventually included my dream of presenting to youth in schools.

There are many people who will not admit to having a mental illness due to the fear that people will judge them harshly and consider them to be unpredictable and dangerous. Upon my own diagnosis, this looming stigma caused me great fear, and it took me years to talk openly about having bipolar disorder, especially about my psychotic episode. However, when I tell people that I did indeed experience mania, major depression, psychosis and even a suicide attempt, they often listen intently, many realizing that one in four people will experience a mental health issue during their lifetime.

I created a catchy *Bipolar Babe* logo and www.bipolarbabe.com, which caught the attention of numerous local and national media outlets. I shared my personal story and the work that I had been doing in the community. Spreading my message widely, I recruited several strong supporters and formed a non-profit society named the *Bipolar Disorder Society of British Columbia*. I dedicated much of my time volunteering by presenting and running support groups, and I became passionate about educating today's youth on stigma and mental health that affects people's perceptions of themselves and others. I share my personal story of struggle, so that others do not suffer alone in silence as I once did.

Today, my life is fully dedicated to working with people with mental health issues, especially youth, and helping those who need a support group, education, or just a friend. I believe that we all just need to be heard and everyone's story is important and worthy. The Society has a particular interest in youth as they are open, blossoming, curious, and truly benefit from learning about stigma and mental health. Young students who have received one of our classroom presentations soon become more empathetic, accepting, and understanding. We are furthering our cause and expanding our Programs to the Lower Mainland by offering the *Stigma-Free Zone Superheroes* classroom presentations program.

The Stigma-Free Zone Superheroes Arrives in Lower Mainland Schools


Our new Program creates awareness of the stigmas that exist in society and helps everyone develop an understanding of the

challenges that numerous people face in their lives. We offer students the opportunity to “claim” their classroom, and eventually their school, as a ‘Stigma-Free Zone.’ A stigma-free zone is an environment where youth refrain from actions that may cause harm to the emotional well-being and confidence of others, and provides a safe space where people can exist free of ridicule, harassment and bullying.

Youth are encouraged to understand people’s differences and celebrate their diversity and individuality, which truly makes up the unique fabric of humanity. It is challenging to live stigma-free, which is the exact reason why the *Stigma-Free Zone Superheroes* Program provides youth with in-person and online tools via the website www.stigmafreezone.com. It is understandable that many youth may already possess stigmatized perceptions, but there is great hope that they can empower themselves to create and sustain stigma-free environments that will instill awareness, understanding, and acceptance, not only in their schools, but

prompt them to take action for the rest of their lives.

We ask you to consider becoming a Community Partner by working with us to deliver our program presentations in your school to support your students affected by stigma, while including all youth who are curious and open to learn about this important topic. Let’s work together to foster acceptance of ourselves and others and make a positive impact in the lives of our youth.

Our programs truly share the message that, “No matter what our challenges, we can all live extraordinary lives.” 

In 5 short years Andrea has presented her story in over 150 schools, workplaces and community events reaching over 12,000 people. Her message of stomping out stigma and mental health awareness is engaging, entertaining, enlightening and eye opening. The consistent feedback from participants reveal that she is positively touching lives and making an impact in many positive ways.



Andrea has also been named the 2015 Courage To Come Back Award Winner by Coast Mental Health, the 2013 Mel Cooper Citizen of the Year in Victoria, BC, and was given the 2013 Award for Mentorship from the National Council for Behavioral Health, Washington, D.C.

You can view many of Andrea’s media stories, print highlights and radio interviews at the following link: <http://www.bipolarbabes.com/media/>

Please contact Andrea to book a Stigma-Free Zone Superheroes classroom presentation today!

E-mail: babe@bipolarbabes.com
Please Visit:

Stigma-Free Zone Superheroes Program: www.stigmafreezone.com
Bipolar Babes Website: www.bipolarbabes.com
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