

Number of document(s): 1

Document creation date: **October 4, 2007**

Created by: **Ms Bev Hiscock, Transcontinental-Newsnet**

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The Telegram

The Telegram (St. John's)
Provincial, Tuesday, October 2, 2007, p. A4

Mental health

Margaret Trudeau says 'life is good'

Tells St. John's audience about fight with bipolar disorder

Danette Dooley

Margaret Trudeau shared her personal story of recovery from mental illness during a Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) fundraising dinner and auction at the Fairmont Hotel Monday evening.

Dressed in a two-piece red suit with a white blouse, Trudeau beamed of self-confidence, poise, personality and courage as she told of her struggles with bipolar disorder - a mental illness she's lived with throughout her adult life.

In 1971, at age 22, Trudeau became the youngest wife of any Canadian prime minister when she married Pierre Elliott Trudeau.

Her first battle with mental illness surfaced as post-partum depression after the birth of her second child.

"I was told I had the baby blues and that I would get over it. I couldn't stop crying and I didn't know how to get out of bed. I couldn't look after my babies. I'd lost something and I didn't know how to find it."

Trudeau was hospitalized and given a drug that made her worse rather than better.

"It turned me off from getting medical help," she says.

The Trudeaus had three sons.

The first day Trudeau separated from the prime minister in 1977 and moved out of 24 Sussex Dr., a girlfriend from her "hippie days" invited her to spend time in Toronto with The Rolling Stones. "My destiny was changed. I was 27 years old. I'd been in what I call the crown jewel of a federal penitentiary at 24 Sussex. I was with a man who had a big job and was very preoccupied with it."

Trudeau talked openly about her party days at Studio 54 and how she used marijuana to self-medicate for years.

Things weren't always that way, however, she said.

During the first few years of her marriage to Pierre, the vibrant young woman had many exciting stories to share with her husband.

When the stories ran out, she was left feeling trapped in her own home.

"I couldn't even cook a good dinner. I didn't have a kitchen. I had my children and all I wanted was to be a mother. But we had a nanny who was doing that very well."

After leaving her husband, Trudeau worked as a photographer, actress, author and television host.

However, bipolar illness was never further than around the corner.

It's a disorder that comes in cycles and one that leaves the sufferer feeling like they are on a roller coaster "and you just want to get off," she says.

Trudeau's second marriage was to a man she describes as a "wonderful, ordinary real estate guy."

However, bipolar took over her life once more when one of her puppies died.

"I fell hard and fast," she says.

That marriage - that resulted in two children - eventually ended as well.

She eventually found a good doctor who put her on the right medication.

However, her world came tumbling down once more in 1998 after her son Michel died in an avalanche. She hadn't recovered from his death when Pierre Trudeau passed away in 2000.

"I couldn't go out and I didn't reach out for help. I used my acting skills that I learned in New York City and I'd say, 'I'm fine, I'm doing good.' Whereas, I was trapped in my house for 2 1/2 years."

It was shortly after Pierre Trudeau died that she was diagnosed with bipolar disorder. After seeking and receiving treatment, she tells her story

in the hopes of reducing the stigma attached to mental illness.

Trudeau's visit to this province was in recognition of Mental Health Awareness Week.

During her talk, she commended the CMHA and its Newfoundland and Labrador division, for being there not

only for those who suffer from mental illness but, also their families.

Diagnosis is 50 per cent of the cure, she says. And her first step was accepting that she did indeed suffer from bipolar disorder.

Her message to the audience was one of hope in recovery and of the importance of reaching out for help.

"I'm bipolar and I want to talk about it. I want people to know that there is treatment. I've got my life back. I believe that life is good."

danette@nl.rogers.com

Figure:

Margaret Trudeau was the guest speaker at the Canadian Mental Health Association fundraising dinner and auction at the Fairmont Hotel Monday evening. - Photo by Danette Dooley/Special to The Telegram

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PUBLI-C news-20071002-ET-0009 - End date: 2007-10-05

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