Privileged insight into ‘invisible illness’

Flying with Paper Wings is the story of one woman’s struggle to survive against an invisible illness, and her continued fight for an identity, self-esteem and a future.

Award-winning poet and SANE Speaker Sandy Jeffs has lived with a severe form of schizophrenia for over thirty years. Since diagnosis in 1976, Sandy has experienced periods of depression, suicidal thoughts and psychosis. As part of her treatment, Sandy has been prescribed countless medications and had multiple stays in psychiatric hospitals and clinics.

The most challenging and persistent symptom of Sandy’s mental illness is the ongoing presence of voices seeking to control, degrade and harm her:

‘A voice has told me: Spoken words are meaningless. So I shall not speak. I shall write notes. Then a voice declares: Food and drink are the Devil’s food. So I have to fast. I am not worthy to live. Another voice shouts: Scum and shit, lie in this bed until you die.’

‘Flying with Paper Wings offers a privileged insight into the experience of managing a severe mental illness,’ says SANE Australia’s Executive Director Barbara Hocking. ‘Sandy’s story is not one of overcoming adversity but rather of the strength required each and every day to live a full, active life with good humour and compassion, despite the distressing and often unrelenting symptoms of her illness. Sandy is the most resilient person I know.’

With sincerity and candour, Sandy shares her story: from an abusive childhood, in which she witnessed her father beat her mother, to an adolescence torn apart by a traumatic sexual assault, to a dramatic descent into suicidal withdrawal and psychosis at the age of 23. She also reflects on what helps her cope.

‘Climbing out of the madness has been a process of self-discovery and renewal. It has been a transforming, enlightening experience, going forward two steps only to fall back one, or three. Many times I thought I had made no progress at all. One important part of my recovery has been to acknowledge that the enemy is not the world, or my friends, or my doctor, but mental illness itself. Accepting that I cannot deal with my illness alone, that I need the help of others, has also been important.’

Sandy Jeffs has worked with SANE Australia as a SANE Speaker for over 15 years.

Note to Editors

- Review copies are available
- Sandy Jeffs is available for interview
- For more information about schizophrenia visit www.sane.org

Flying With Paper Wings: Reflections on Living with Madness
Sandy Jeffs
Vulgar Press
RRP $33.00
Available to purchase from SANE Australia: www.sane.org or 03 9682 5933

Continues…
media release

For immediate release

Flying with Paper Wings: Extract

The absence of dramatic hospitalisations and medical intervention did not mean that madness had been banished from my life. On the contrary, madness was always in the shadows, sometimes stepping out to waylay me with a wild delusion, or set its voices on me like a pack of marauding dogs. The delusions and voices remained unshakable, a constant menace in my everyday existence, sometimes horrifying; sometimes quite laughable.

One time I became sure my friend Veronica, who had just had a baby, had given birth to the new Messiah. I was so convinced, I wanted to put a full-page advertisement in Melbourne's major newspaper, The Age, to announce the momentous event. Veronica said she couldn’t quite believe me but that we should wait a couple of weeks before we made a final announcement about it. It was a wise way to handle me because after a couple of weeks my delusion subsided. And she saved me a lot of money. I am also proud of myself that, in the mire of psychosis, I can have a feminist delusion – the child was a girl!

It was I who shot the albatross of Coleridge's poem The Rime of the Ancient Mariner. I fired the crossbow myself. The guilt was burdensome; I felt like Atlas with the world on my shoulders.

Then there were two sublime weeks when I knew I was a genius. Beethoven had stolen those nine symphonies from me! There was no question about it, I was a brilliant composer, somehow composing these symphonies without ever having written a note of music. For two weeks I was in creative heaven and full of my own importance. It was marvellous. When I came back to reality, the facts that I had not composed the music, and I was not a genius, were truly disappointing.

I was Eve; it was I who gave Adam the apple. Therefore I was responsible for the human condition and all its failings. I felt compelled to apologise to God for what I had done. If I contacted the Pope in Rome, who at the time was John Paul II, he would be able to give me God’s email address and I could email him my apology. I couldn’t understand why I couldn’t find the Pope’s phone number in the Melbourne telephone book. (I can tell you that there are a lot of listings under ‘Pope’ in that directory, but none listed as being Pope, John Paul II. I have since thought that if God had an email address, it would be, God@heaven.com.uni).

Ends.