

Sweeping Away Stigma

Tackling mental health issues through film

by **Patricia MacDowell**, *Pointe-Claire, Que.*



When you are unable to do things you want to do, you know you have a problem. Everyone becomes anxious about certain things, like a trip to the dentist or an interview, but I would have a panic attack in the grocery store or while at the theatre and would avoid those places. As a result, my world kept getting smaller. I remained determined not to resort to medication, afraid the meds might prevent me from being the person I wanted to be.

TURNING POINT

A few years ago I finally began to take medication and my life changed. I wrote, produced and directed my first feature length film called *Sweeping Forward*.

While medication has helped me greatly, every case is different and should be treated differently. I don't believe, however, that anxiety can be overcome just with medication. Confidence is stronger than any drug.

Just before I started taking medication, I began writing *Sweeping*

Forward with a development grant I received from SODEC (*Société de développement des entreprises culturelles*) in October 2010. I finalized the script in April 2011.

At the beginning, it was hard to meet with people about the project and I kept envisioning worst-case scenarios. I was living in the west end of Montreal and I sometimes had to meet someone in the eastern part of the island—it seemed so far. I would invent drastic excuses to avoid going, such as “my dog died.” I tried to get a production grant through different venues, but I was refused. With my

previous experience of writing, producing and directing three short films that were shown at festivals, I decided to move forward and make the film on my own in February 2013.

THE FILM

Sweeping Forward reflects a bit of my own life. I manage the Baie-d'Urfé Curling Club in Montreal, though I don't curl. I know that curling is a team sport and every member must work together, making on-the-spot decisions to help the team achieve its goal. During times when I had a lot of anxiety I felt alone, so for my film's story, I created characters that helped each other, no matter their individual problems.

The film revolves around Beth Lavigne, a prodigy curler who stopped curling com-





petitively at a young age because of the crippling effects of panic attacks.

We filmed *Sweeping Forward* over 34 days, from April to June 2013, using equipment on loan from Michel Trudel of Vision Globale and with an amazing crew and talented actors who volunteered their time. During the last nine days of filming we had technical issues with the camera and lost crucial footage. This provided a good exercise in not freaking out. I stayed positive and we will be able to capture those images again, and maybe this time around they will be better!

So far, with the help of an experienced editor, a director's cut has been finalized. At just under 90 minutes, we still need three to four more days to re-shoot what we lost with the faulty equipment. Afterwards, we will need to do some post production work, such as colouring and music, to have the film

ready for release. My hope is that, once it's finally complete, *Sweeping Forward* will be an official selection in influential film festivals such as TIFF or Cannes.

MOTIVATION

During the filming of *Sweeping Forward*, I was approached by many individuals with their own anxieties, including worried parents asking for advice concerning their children also crippled with an anxiety disorder. This film is especially important to me, not only because it revolves around mental health, but because it sets a positive example that we can overcome fears and obstacles, no matter what shape or form, as long as we believe in ourselves. Through my film, I hope to inspire individuals afflicted with anxiety issues.

I've often been asked, "What was the deciding factor that motivated you to make this



Caption

movie—to face such a huge challenge?" The answer? I started believing in myself. I realized I couldn't remain in the clutches of my anxiety. I was determined to break out. I began taking medication and realized it does not have to define who I am. People need medication for many reasons—a heart condition, high blood pressure—it's the same thing with medication

to help you relax. I would not have been able to make a movie, be a guest speaker at various events or even be sharing my story in a magazine, if I had not taken medication.

Mental illness often carries a stigma and some people are even afraid of those who are mentally ill, but anxiety issues are not always readily visible. It's important for people to become more knowledgeable about anxiety disorders and hopefully *Sweeping Forward* will contribute to that journey of learning. ■

Email Patricia for more info at pmacdowell@videotron.ca.