

Shan MacDonald - transcription of Our Voices Matter Interview

Interviewer: Anna Quon

Clip #1

AQ- This is the Our Voices Matter Project, my name is Anna Quon and I'm going to be interviewing Shan MacDonald at Belmont House, on September 29, 2010. Hi Shan.

SM- Hi Anna

AQ- Thanks for coming in today. So we are going to start with some of the questions that I gave to you before, starting with your childhood. So can you tell me where and when you were born?

SM- I was born in Victoria, BC in 1956, during a snow storm.

AQ- Ok, yeah, and where did you grow up?

SM- In Victoria, also New Zealand, Australia, Cold Lake, Alberta, and then back to Victoria, all by the age of thirteen.

AQ- Right and was that, did moving around that much impact you in anyway?

SM- Yes, I can make friends easily, but you're always making new friends and going to new schools and it was difficult.

AQ- Ok, and what was it like growing up in your family?

SM- Well my mother, she had a, well she has an addiction to medications, like pills and that. So my grandmother basically brought me up. We travelled half way around the world because my mother was on her way to New Zealand to marry a man and found out he was married, then we moved to Australia where she married quite an abusive man, so I've had five fathers so I have never really settled down anywhere. Like, I still consider BC my home although I have lived my majority of my life now here in Nova Scotia.

AQ- And did you have brothers and sisters?

SM- I have half, two half sisters and two half brothers.

AQ- Are you the oldest, the middle child?

SM- I'm the oldest and the one half sister and two half brothers never knew about me till 1994.

AQ- And why was that?

SM- My father lived in another part of Canada and his wife wouldn't let him talk about me.

AQ- And so, when you made these moves from New Zealand to Australia was your grandmother with you at that time?

SM- Not at first, she finally came down to Australia and after we had been there for awhile. And she was kind of like my rock; I just needed her around because my mother was more involved

trying to stay married and if a marriage didn't work then basically I was blamed and I was a good little girl, so my grandmother was there kind of to be there for me but even, I think about it now even she had an impact because every time I was bad she would tell me that she was going to move back to Canada to be with my cousin because she was nicer, but I love my grandmother, and she passed away when I was seventeen.

AQ- And what was your relationship like with your siblings and parents?

SM- My one sister I still have contact with and we've been together her, until she moved back to Australia and with my mother and father, well I stopped talking to my mother for awhile because she's a dramatic queen, like she'll ask you how you are, and you start to tell her and all of a sudden it's all about her. And I stopped talking to her because my mental health was getting worse. And as to fathers, like I said I had five, one of them was an abuser, and the other ones I can't, two of them I can't even remember, including my own dad.

AQ- And can you tell me about your school days and did you enjoy them, were they difficult for any reason?

SM- Well I did my first years of schooling down in Australia and New Zealand. And they have a whole different, back then it was ok for if a student was bad you could cane them, so I didn't get done lots but I remember there was this one teacher that was very brutal and she loved caning people. And but otherwise when I moved back to Canada, it was, it was an ok experience. I was kind of the person thou that lost interest classes easy; I was in office quite a few times for acting up in class. And in my later years in school the biggest thing was to find out when the next party was on the weekend. So, then at the end I missed a lot of school.

AQ- Ok, and so let me go back a little, how, what were the years that you were in New Zealand and Australia? And when did you return to Canada?

SM- We moved down to Australia in, oh it would of been probably 1960, and we moved back when I was 12 so that would have been 67, 68 or something like that. Eight, we were down there for eight years. And then, I do know math, I just can't calculate it.

AQ- Yeah so eight years.

SM- And we moved right from Australia summer, which is like 120F in the shade, and we moved right to Cold Lake, Alberta which was winter and I have never seen snow before.

AQ- And what were your marks like at school?

SM- They were average, the subjects that I did like I got B's and B+'s, but mostly average and then later on they were D's and E's, because I had lost interest.

AQ- Ok, so when you say later on do you mean,

SM- In high school, but I have been back to technical school, ECT, since then and marks were all in top A's.

AQ- Right, ok, did you have any memorable like friendships, or teachers during your school years that had an impact, either positive or negative on you?

SM- There was the one who did the caning was definitely a negative. But I had two in junior high that I'll remember forever, because they did help me and they built up my confidence. Especially there was this one teacher it was almost like a grandfather figure to me.

AQ- Where you ever subject to teasing or bullying by schoolmates?

SM- Well when I was first back from Australia I was so tanned, I was so dark that people would call me, back then it was kind of a normal word, but now of days its derogatory, and they used to call me, I don't even like to say the word, but it was the "N" word, because I was so dark. And they used to tease me because I had an accent, and I was different. And bullying, I did have a bullying case once where the girl had told me she was going to meet me after school and beat me up, and I was terrified. So I stayed at school for as long as possible and that's when the male teacher helped me by you know, building the confidence by saying "Don't worry about it, you'll be fine, you can look after yourself."

AQ- Did anyone, where you ever ill as a child?

SM- Well just basically the normal things, I had scarlet fever when I was a baby, I had my tonsils out and I just found out recently, no, I still have my tonsils. And then just the usual chicken pox's, mumps, I had mumps when I was sixteen and that was about it, normal colds.

AQ- Ok, did anyone close to you die when you where a child?

SM- M grandmother died when I was seventeen, so I wasn't a child but it had a deep impact and still does to this day.

AQ- Ok, and was that you grandmother who was sort of you're...

SM- Yeah like a mother figure really.

AQ- Ok, did you ever have surgery for physical problems as a child or later in life?

SM- Yes, as a young teenager I used to have, my ears looked like Prince Charles, they stuck out. And I had plastic surgery and had them put in. That was the only operation other then supposedly tonsillectomy, but?

AQ- Yeah, right, where you ever institutionalized as a child or a young person?

SM- No. Never.

AQ- Ok, and now maybe we talk about your mental health history. Do you remember the onset of your mental illness?

SM- It was in 1988, I guess, and I fell into a depression and that was the first time I was ever put on medication. And then over time I had more problems, but they thought it was just depression. And it wasn't until 2002, when I went off work on having a breakdown that they discovered that I was bipolar, which I always kind of thought was my problem. And that's so.

AQ- Why did you think that was your problem?

SM- Because I had have, oh, extreme lows and then all of a sudden I would be like, I am a bit of a perfectionist anyway, but I would have these highs and I would spend money without thinking about it and like I didn't care if the family went without food, it was more important to buy like clothing and jewellery. And I just had no care and then right away I would flat line again down to depression.

AQ- Ok, so how long was it that you thought that you had bipolar, but you weren't diagnosed with bipolar?

SM- Probably about four years. Cause in 93 I was, was the first time I was put in the NS for having a breakdown. And at time they had tried me on lithium and I had lithium toxic reaction. But yeah I'd say from probably at least 2000, or uh 93 till, I had some kind of idea it was more than just depression. I was being treated, I was always treated for depression, and when you're high you don't want to tell people because you're doing well you figure.

AQ- Right, right. And did so, did you, so felt that there was something wrong before you were actually diagnosed?

SM- Yeah!

AQ- Did anyone or anything help you during that time to deal with your mental illness?

SM- No! Because my family doesn't like to talk about it. So I had no one to go to at that time. So that was, that was pretty hard. And that's why once I was in the NS, I was there for two months and even when I was in there my husband used to come in every day and go are you going to get out today, are you going to get out today? So I never had any support.

AQ- Right, Ok, did you have any experiences with the police or outside authority, authority outside the health care system during that time?

SM- No. Never.

AQ- Ok. Did you ever try to harm yourself?

SM- Yes, I did.

AQ- Can you tell me about that?

SM- Well I've tried, I've tried slitting my wrists, and that's one of the reasons I have tattoos now they're there to hide any marks. I've tried overdosing on pills like Tylenol, things like that. I've thought seriously about drowning, or, being in the garage and getting. But I still have these feelings even today. Every day I have those feelings.

AQ- Ok, so, does that ever go away, like on certain medications?

SM- It kind of goes away, I like, I don't think about it constantly. I may have a flash, maybe for 2 seconds during the day. But there's always that, I know it's always underlying thoughts so.

AQ- Did you ever talk to a counsellor or therapist at school when you were young before you were diagnosed?

SM- No. Never. I didn't tell them a lot of things when I was in school about what was happening.

AQ- Ok. And what were your first encounters with the mental health system like?

SM- I remember in 93, when I went into the NS, you go through the process, they ask you all the questions; and oh I was in terrible state. And I left the hospital, they told me to go outside for a couple minutes, have cigarette and then come back. And I went outside, and when I went to go back the doors were locked, and at that time I thought they don't even want me. And I remember going in and I was terrified because they're was people in their yelling, and people crying, and people that weren't really bi-polar they had other diseases, and then they moved me to a different ward, and in there was, I guess a young girl, but she was very aggressive and loud, so I was terrified the first time. And I have been in short stay, and that was scary because they don't, you can't lock your doors, and I would have people, sometimes males would come into people's doors, in rooms saying they were lost and I couldn't sleep and you couldn't put anything against the door to keep it closed.

AQ- Right, Ok, So how many times where you in the hospital all together?

SM- Twice. Once for the two months, and once for a week.

AQ- Ok, ok, So that first hospitalization was that the two month hospitalization?

SM- Yes.

AQ- Ok, and that's when you were diagnosed with bipolar.

SM- No. Nope just depression!

AQ- Ok, so what year was that?

SM- That was in 93, and even when I was in the hospital they didn't start medications till after I had been there a month, when I said look I need help here.

AQ- Right, ok, so how long after your first hospitalization was your second hospitalization?

SM- It was in 2004.

AQ- Ok, and were you diagnosed with bipolar at that time?

SM- Yes. I had been in 2002.

AQ- Ok, ok, and who diagnosed you?

SM- Oh goodness, Doctor...

AQ- You don't have to tell me the name but was it a family doctor, or?

SM- No, they'd had at that time a unit set up at the NS that dealt in basically diagnosing different patients if they were bipolar or whatever, and I did tests there and then a couple of, I was there maybe a month and half going in on a base kind of every two days, and when it was near the end

of my term, that's when we found out they were closing the whole unit down. So there is no unit anymore to find out, so. I don't know how many people are going around not knowing what they have.

AQ- Where you hospitalized voluntarily or involuntarily those two times?

SM- Voluntary.

AQ- And did you ever end up going to other mental health treatments besides medication?

SM- It was so bad at times that I ask to be given electric shock treatment because I thought it might help with depression, but they never gave it to me.

AQ- Did you experience any patient rights issues while in hospital?

SM- No, no, it was fine.

AQ- Where there any professionals like nurses or doctors or social workers, who were particularly helpful or unhelpful while you were in hospital?

SM- There was one nurse and she was great. And I can't remember her name completely; I think it was Monica or something like that. And she was great, I think she helped me get through the first two months, and there were a couple of other nurses there that were good, but I remember her name.

AQ- And how did she help?

SM- She was always cheerful, and you know she always had time, to listen to me, or you know, there was a couple like that they were really nice.

AQ- Ok, and did you meet anyone in hospital that remained a part of your life when you got out?

SM- I had made a couple friends and we stayed in contact maybe for a year or so, and then, I had never heard about them since.

AQ- Ok, where you ever, sorry, I had asked you about being institutionalized as a child, as an adult did you ever go through rehab centers, detox, or adult residential center?

SM- Well really the first time when I ended up in 93 in the NS, is because I had said, I was drinking heavily and taking drugs also and working. And I had, I was going to put myself into detox but I mentioned that I was thinking of suicide and that's when I ended up at the NS.

AQ- Ok, so what year was that?

SM- In 93

AQ- In 93, Ok, so maybe in general what is your mental health like these days?

SM- Well for Friday, or Thursday, when I last met you, was the first time I have been out of the house in three and a half weeks. My husband did all the work, and like I said I have no support at home so no one thought about it, but I've never, I can't remember staying that long, and I just

didn't want to go anywhere, I just, and I was depressed, and they just changed my medication and I am still going through depression. But yeah it was; it was the worst. It was terrible. And I gladly, mind you, and the scary part is I could start again tomorrow no problem, staying in.

AQ- Ok, so I'll return to that but I realized I haven't asked you about your marriage and having children and that kind of thing. Have you had one marriage or more than one marriage?

SM- I had, I was married when I was, just turned eighteen and we were married for a whole year, it was my first boyfriend even, and we were divorced, and I've been married to my present husband for thirty-one and a half years, we have four children and at the time my husband was in the navy until, he was in the navy till 2003. So he was always gone, and my children were the ages of 4 and under by the time I had the last one and I never, I probably had mental health problems then but I was so busy looking after the kids that I never thought about it.

AQ- Right, right. So what year was it that you had your second marriage?

SM- It, we were married in 1979.

AQ- Ok, ok. And what was it like being a young mother with a husband who was away a lot?

SM- Well you learn to do a lot of things, like fixing things and handling things, and it was tiring mind you with the kids and I also worked part-time at the same time. And, one of the biggest problems we have now is I am used to being alone, so I do things a certain way and then my husband is home most of the time now because he is out of the forces, and at times it drives me just crazy because he screws up my routines.

AQ- Yeah. Ok. You went back to school didn't you?

SM- Yes I did!

AQ- Ok, can you tell me about?

SM- I went back to school in 86, because I needed a full-time job and I had heard from someone if you took a non-traditional trade, which was one a woman wouldn't go into, that you would get unemployment and training. And at that time we only had my husband's pay, so I said why not and I did the test and it showed I'd be a great, I'd be good not great at machining, at being a machinist. So I made it through the course and it gave me two years apprenticeship as a machinist. But I couldn't get a job here. It was still quiet early for woman to be in "male" trades so I ended having to leave my family here and I went to Ontario and got a job immediately cause it was due to the company was having a fight with the labour board, because the labour board said there was no woman working there so they hired me figuring I would work a week and quit and they could say "see woman don't want it", but instead after a week I was given raise, allowed to choose my own shift and I was working with computerized machine, and back, I came back to here in 1990, like I was back and forth mind you, but then I took a, went to train at NSIT to become a computer CNC, which is a numerical machining, computer numerical machining. And I graduate from there and was hired on at the company that I worked for at, or still shown as an employee to this date.

AQ- Ok, what was it like for you to go from being a full-time mom to working?

SM- It was, I guess maybe I was bipolar, but it was a relief. I got to see people, and talk to people, interact with people. And also it made me kind of go back in my mind to be younger and I hung around with younger people. So it was, that's where my family suffered because I'd rather go partying then you know, be at home.

AQ- Ok, has that affected your relationship with your children in any way?

SM- I feel guilty and I'm, they know that so they kind of abuse that right. I am always paying for things, or getting them things, its guilt that I have. And it will probably never go away and my therapist says that I have to learn to say no, and I can't do that.

AQ- Ok, and you mentioned after you were a machinist, you switched careers.

SM- No, before I was a machinist I, when I first got out of school I didn't have a job and I joined the military, so that was my first non, come to think if it that was my first non-traditional trade because I became the first woman from BC to be a military police woman.

AQ- Ok, ok and how long were you living in BC and working at that job?

SM- Well I went from BC to Cornwallis here in Nova Scotia for training and then I was posted to Kingston in Ontario until I got out.

AQ- Ok, and you were married at that time or not?

SM- Yes. For a year.

AQ- Ok, so what is your life like in the community today?

SM- I, I slate myself when I am depressed and I've done different groups and things like that but if I miss it once I won't go back cause I figured I let everybody down. When I went off work, on disability, I cut everybody out of my life, even my friends from work. Some, I guess I am lonely. Because, there's really not that much to find to do, and volunteer work, like I said I'll do it then something will happen I'll probably get depressed and I won't go anymore. I am in Stand up for Comedy, but even now I am doubting, even myself in that and I also am in the speakers bureau for Healthy Minds.

AQ- Ok, so that's Stand up for Mental Health?

SM- Yes.

AQ- You had that training?

SM- Yes.

AQ- And you're in the speakers bureau?

SM- Yes.

AQ- Ok, do you find that being involved with those things helps your mental health or hinders your mental health?



SM- It helps because I can talk to people or joke with people about my mental health because I've, I am a strong person basically and if something can happen to me, it can happen to anyone and that's why I voice what I have, so people basically will come out and get the proper care.

AQ- Right, ok, and now that you're living in the community and out of hospital, who is there in your life that helps you?

SM- Well I had a therapist from 2002 till this summer and he was great, he was my only support system and he's, he retired. And now I have a new therapist who's female and so far we're doing great. And I have another appointment with her next week and so far so good. I am hearing the same things Don had said about, like I have to learn to look after myself and say no to people and sometimes I feel like people don't just, they don't understand where I am coming from.

AQ- And when you say where your coming from, where would you say you are coming from?

SM- Well I drive people, my family to work in the morning and pick them up at a certain time and do things like this, I am like a taxi driver or whatever and if someone phones, if one of my children phones up and says "I need this" I like basically go and get them right away so they can do it. And I tried to explain to the therapist is well I have to do these because people can't get to work or people, the baby can't get to the babysitters and I have to do that. And they can't understand that if I didn't do it, yeah probably in the long run people could look after themselves but the guilt, it's not worth the guilt.

AQ- Ok, and do you have any, you mentioned your on long-term disability, is that right?

SM- Yes.

AQ- Ok, are you, do you have any other supports like for housing, or for, or financial supports that help you?

SM- Just my husband, he gets paid so he looks after the rent and I make sure everything's paid thou, but the little extras he pays for.

AQ- Ok,

SM- I'm also on disability from the government.

AQ- Ok, yeah, have you ever experienced any emergency help, like soup kitchens, food banks, police lock-up, or mobile crisis unit?

SM- No. No.

AQ- Ok, have you ever experienced any peer support programs?

SM- I took a couple of courses but then again I never phoned the people back, like that I've met. It's like I'll take the course, make great friends then cut them off too.

AQ- Why, why do you feel that you cut them off?

SM- I don't like to bother people, so I don't phone people, I don't even phone my own children because I don't want to bother them. And I don't just drop by their houses because I don't want to bother them. So if someone doesn't phone me or whatever I'm on my slate.

AQ- Ok. What is your personal life like right now, I mean it sounds like, you said you're isolated, but are the important relationships in your life helpful or hurtful?

SM- If I can see two of my grandchildren I'm great. I have three other grandchildren and the, from my son and his wife, and for some reason, we, were, we don't really have contact with them. And she kind of like, if my son is going to bring the children in all of a sudden she needs the car, and I don't like to go where they live, I don't like there, that area. But even when we do go to visit and she there, were made to feel uncomfortable and the other day those grandchildren where in and the other grandparents see them all the time and there pictures are up everywhere all up on the walls and there's no pictures of my husband or myself with the grandchildren anywhere in the house. And my son doesn't seem to get, and my grandchildren where in the other day and one of them, we were talking about Christmas presents, and I said well you did pretty good last year for Christmas presents and I said you sweaters, cause I had special order sweaters, and he said yeah but my other granny and papa gave us better ones. And whenever they come to visit us, they always bring us something. And it was, I know he's young but it was hurtful and I was really upset about that I had to leave the room, and he was supposed to, his dad had got mad at him for being ignorant basically and he was supposed to apologize and he wouldn't and it didn't hurt me so much that he didn't apologize but I was so afraid like I've lost their love. Their mother treats, like almost that they'll catch this, like I am contagious. Yeah. And really it only started when we couldn't babysit anymore daily for them for free. My husband had to get another job and since then it's been distant. And I miss them. I miss seeing the boys, the youngest isn't a year old yet and when I hold him he screams. He doesn't know who I am.

AQ- Yeah, Ok, so it sounds, your family seems to be quite close geographically?

SM- Yes.

AQ- But it sounds like your relationship with them, would you characterize it as helpful or harmful to your mental health?

SM- Well in the one instance it's harmful and, but it's helpful when I can see them. Like physically see them. Like my granddaughter, my son says we spoil her, but I see her every day. So she is very special to me. And, it can be, well right now I guess it's harmful because it's really affected me not seeing my grandsons. So!

AQ- And, so how do you spend your days these days?

SM- I stay at home, I started smoking again, and I just stay at home, watching TV or I am on the computer.

AQ- Ok, do you have any leisure activities that you enjoy like hobbies or?

SM- Well there was there for awhile there, they had art classes and I took those and it was great cause I got out once a week and it was something I really love and I'd like to continue it but I haven't been able to find anymore art classes that I want and I used to read a lot but now I don't

even do that. And I have no other social contacts, outings, or groups. Or if, well there is a bipolar group, that I know of but it's over in Halifax and I live in Dartmouth and it's too far to go. And I used to go to AA meetings because I've had twelve years sober now, and I used to love going there because I'd see people and I don't even do that anymore.

AQ- Can you tell me about the AA meetings and how, what kind of part that had in your mental health?

SM- It was kind of almost like a stimulant because I knew I was going to see people and people were in the same situation, drinking as I was, and it got me out of the house basically.

AQ- Alright, when did you know you had a problem with alcohol?

SM- Oh, I've had a problem with alcohol since I was fourteen and I had alcohol poisoning. When my kids were younger I didn't really...

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Clip #2 (continuation of clip #2)

SM- ...Drink because something about waking up with a hangover and four little kids wouldn't help. But when I became a machinist I started drinking more.

AQ- Ok, so how long did you go to AA for over the years?

SM- Twelve, I've been going to AA for over twelve except say the last four or five months. I was sick last September so since then I really haven't gone, maybe twice.

AQ- Ok, and what kind of challenges do you face while living in the community?

SM- A lack of, like I said I feel like on the Dartmouth side there is a lack of support groups. And a lot of times I find there not well known of, you don't know it's there and that's about it. I can't think of anything to do, like I know there's things I'm supposed to do, activities wise, walking, etcetera, but it's just easier to stay at home in your pyjamas, especially lately.

AQ- Right, ok, have you experienced discrimination due to mental illness?

SM- No. Oh, well some asked me at work, a friend of mine had come to visit me and he went back to work and he had to mention to who I had thought was a friend, he mention to this person that they had seen me and he said, "oh like was she in the padded cell?" And that's why I am afraid to go back to work cause they'll know what I have been off for and to me that would be cause it's a high-tech job that I have, I can see them using it somehow to get me to quit work, so I guess in that way it would be a discrimination.

AQ- So how long have you been on disability for?

SM- Since 2002, January 26, 2002.

AQ- And you mentioned your GP I think it was, said he didn't think you would work again.

SM- Yeah my psychiatrist.

AQ- Oh your psychiatrist.

SM- Cause they send you this, these letters, the insurance people every once in a while, and I panic cause I'm sure that my doctor doesn't know what's happening or whatever, but no he told them honestly that I may never be able to go back to work. Because where I work, is shift work and I take medications at certain times and shift work would not be a good thing.

AQ- Right, ok, has, I sort of want to ask you to reflect on your life as a mental health consumer and how it's changed? One of the things I want to ask was has your mental health cause the way it's been treated like medically changed over time?

SM- It's like my body, lots of times gets immune to the medication and that's what I am going through right now, I think that's why I have been so depressed. I want to get off some of the

medications that I am on because I don't think it's working anymore and I've told my psychiatrist this and I told him I'd like to go back on another one that did work short time and then go back on this medication again because I figured that would kick start it. But it's like he won't listen to me, instead he gave me another medication to work with this medication that I figure doesn't work. He also had put me on some medication where I gained a lot of weight and it upset me so that's come down to the point that rather than gaining weight, I'd only take half the amount so it's not working basically. But he knows that.

AQ- Right, and has your experience like in, while I guess in hospital, did that change over time, I know you were only in there for two times but did you notice any differences from the second time compared to the first?

SM- The second time I just had to get out, so I wasn't fixed yet. I was just so, I wasn't sleeping, I wasn't, I found also that the nurses in the Short Term, at that time, there's was a male nurse, not very friendly so I just wanted...

AQ- This was the second time you were in hospital?

SM- Yes. That was the second time. And really I feel like ok, everything's going to be ok, especially after the first time, after two months, I thought "oh good, people know now, blah, blah, blah," and I got out, I had no support and at the doctors really, I wasn't seeing a psychiatrist anymore, I went to family doctor who don't, they don't really know about mental health issues.

AQ- No

SM- Cause it's all generalized for them, and so.

AQ- Has the quality of your life living with a mental illness changed over time?

SM- It seems like I can't remember in the last year when I've been happy. Really happy! I've felt depression since probably last September or so, I was going to, I was going to commit suicide in, I guess it was April. But I had forgotten that I had left the spare key with my daughter, but I had arranged everything, like I had put in envelopes jewellery and that, that I wanted the kids to have, and had everything settled up and my only decision was, because no one phones me, like the kids don't phone to see if I am ok and my husband was out west but I had so much happening in my life, I had said I was depressed and to me when I am depressed it's like if I die then you don't have to worry anymore. I'm not thinking of it as I'm going to get back at you, I think of it as if I die you don't have to worry anymore and you can be happy. And I had it all planned how I was going to die; it was just a choice between two ways. And my daughter and my son came in and they knew at that time that I was going to hurt myself cause no one could get a hold of me at the time. So it hasn't been easy this last year or so. I can't remember being happy. And I am the kind of person that I can look happy; I can hide behind a mask. But I am not.

AQ- So what do you think needs to changed in order for you to feel happy again?

SM- Definitely my medication. And I have to find something to get me out of the house but when you're depressed you don't want to leave the house, so I need my medication changed so that I can feel happy, I think that's one of my main problems right now, is my medication.

AQ- Right, and who's in charge of prescribing your medications?

SM- My psychiatrist.

AQ- And it sounded like you said you had a good relationship with her?

SM- Ah, that was my therapist and that my psychiatrist usually I only see for fifteen minutes every two months or three months, cause it's hard to get a psychiatrist in Nova Scotia, in the first place, so.

AQ- Has your quality or your access to treatment changed depending on where you've lived?

SM- No, no cause when I was basically diagnosed I was in Dartmouth anyway.

AQ- Ok, ok, have you, I know you have said you have experienced the stigma of the mental illness, was that one of your colleges at work?

SM- Yes (head nod)

AQ- Do you feel that the stigma associated with mental illness has changed over time?

SM- Well it's, I found with speakers bureau talking to people that it's coming a little better, but still you're afraid some people are afraid to say they had a mental illness, because they'll want people judging them. Whereas I want people to know that I have a mental illness because it can happen to me, it can't happen to anyone. And also a lot of the times what people think of mental illness they have just like a one set picture, you know in their mind of what a mental person would look like. And it's kind of basically like you don't tell anyone if you have a problem, so.

AQ- How long has it been that you have wanted to talk about your mental illness?

SM- Probably since I, since it was discovered what I had in 2002.

AQ- Yeah, is there anything that you would, that you would want that would make your quality of life better, either that can be provided in the community or the medical system?

SM- Well like I said, I don't like to bother people and I know I have an emergency team with mental health but when I am feeling really bad I won't call them, because I don't like to bother people. And in the communities, like I said, I wish they had more things to do with mental health, cause, I find here everything goes off to a great start, everyone's "yeah" and then after a few months it's like everybody is gone, and the group is gone, and the help is gone.

AQ- When you say here do you mean Dartmouth or do you mean in Nova Scotia?

SM- Yes. In Dartmouth.

AQ- Ok, so what group have you experienced that got off to a good start but then disappeared?

SM- Well we had a depression group basically on Octolony Street and it was doing great and then it became kind of, a couple people in it where only, they'd always be speaking and it wasn't about something that had to do with everyone, it was their own like, basically it was a whining period for them. And I belonged to a bipolar like class, which was supposed to turn into a group

at Cole Harbour and it died out of course. And then I just found recently that there still having meetings but like, who knew? No one knows what's going on, and I find a lot of mental health community things that they have are usually all over in Halifax. And all thou I am close to Halifax it's a pain, like going over there, being on time, doing this.

AQ- Yeah, ok, so when you look back on your life what are sort of the low points and high points?

SM- Low points, is with the depression and the guilt, and I wonder now if I should of had kids because a couple of them I can see different things in them and also...

AQ- Sorry, when you say you can see different things, what do you mean?

SM- Like depression, and kind of like bipolar in one of my daughters, and I have grandchildren and I am wondering "what if I passed on to them?" and I will probably get blamed for that. And the good thing I guess was when I was manic and also with this problem that I can't say no, I was in a pretty high spot with finance inspection for experimental parts that I was doing. And my daughter was rushed into the hospital with an asthma attack. And she was put into a drug induced coma, work phoned me and they said "oh well we need these parts" and I was at a high at the time, and I felt really important that they needed me at work, that I left my daughter to go there. Like I had this feeling like I am so important and but when I am depressed it's just I am so alone.

AQ- So how long has it been since you had a manic episode?

SM- I can't really remember, I know probably I've had maybe a couple of days or a week or so that I have been happy in the last year. But the depression, out weights that so I don't really remember it.

AQ- Right, ok, what kind of advice do you have for friends and family and mental health practitioners on how to help someone who has a mental illness?

SM- Well I guess with the practitioners to really listen, I know more about my own body basically then they do, and if I say over the years that my medication isn't working anymore it's not working. I know that. Due to my family and that or other people, I think they should learn about different things, different conditions, like my family never has looked up on the internet or whatever, about bipolar. We went to meeting once with another psychiatrist I had and one of my daughters wouldn't go, cause she figured that the psychiatrist was going to put all the blame on them. Like it was about her, and I was trying to tell her, no, it's to make you understand what bipolar is and that its nothing to do with you, it's me. And, I just think people should know more about it.

AQ- Ok, and when you look back at your life do you have a idea of where this bipolar might of come from or what might of triggered it?

SM- When I was fourteen, my mother was put into the hospital Eric, Martin and Victoria, which was an institute and supposedly it was just because she had a breakdown, and when I was diagnosed in 2002, she said to me, she said "ugh aint that funny I was diagnosed with that when, remember when I was in the hospital in BC?" She had been diagnosed with Manic Depressive then, and I was so mad because all those years I went with the wrong treatment, suicide attempts,

the basically, the abuse not physically, but mental abuse that I gave my family. And it could of been looked after before years ago. So I stopped talking to her from 2002 when I tried my last suicide kind of attempt in April, then I phoned her up just to see if she was still alive basically. And this time she actually admitted that she was sorry, I told her why I stopped talking to her and I tried to tell her before but she just ignored it, but this time she took, well not blame, she took ownership of she should of told me

AQ- So is your relationship with your mother better now?

SM- Its, its, I guess it's better; its still is a lot about her. Biggest problem is, I used talk, before we stopped talking, basically on a daily basis, but after all these years I not used to phoning her, so I may go a couple of weeks and all of a sudden it's like I'm going to phone my mother. Or she'll phone me because I'm not used to phoning her. So now it's just like with everybody else, I don't, I don't phone. I don't talk or see.

AQ- Right, ok, looking back is there anything that you would of changed and the way you approached your mental health?

SM- I would have probably insisted in the beginning that they find out, or they learn more, about different mental health issues.

AQ- Do you mean your family, or do you mean?

SM- The doctors, like I started with GP's and like I said they don't know much about mental health, and well my family they still won't talk about it. And I find now also with the health in here is one of the problems is that now if you have a mental health issue or depression and your suicidal you have to go to a main hospital to be diagnosed. When I am depressed I don't want to be with people with colds, or a broken leg, kind of like that so.

AQ- Ok, I just, I want to stop to make sure the camera is working, and then we'll continue.

SM- Yup!



Shan MacDonald - transcription of Our Voices Matter Interview

Interviewer: Anna Quon

Clip #3

AQ- We're back, I am with Shan MacDonald, this is our second, the second part of our interview at Belmont House on September 29, 2010, for the our voices matter project. Shan while we were breaking you mentioned that you wished there was a support group for people who tried suicide?

SM- Yes, because you have, and I've even had people phone around to see if any such group existed. And what had brought it up was there was gentlemen had come to Halifax to give a presentation, he'd written a book, how someone in his family committed suicide and he hadn't talk about it for years and years. And I know they also had something with one of the health groups lately about suicide prevention, and you think ok, that's helping people not to do it. But no it's for about again the survivors of someone who has committed suicide. Now if you've tried to commit suicide yourself, there's no one to talk to except a doctor or therapist or psychiatrist, or you go back into the hospital, or you manage to succeed the next time. I think there should be some kind of a group that can get together and know there not alone by doing this. So they're not, so people don't feel like there being watched all the time. Oh are they going to jump? Are they going to do this? Or that? And I think there should be a group made for that for support for each other. And there's nothing here and again I wanted to start it but then lately with my isolation, it was great guns, and I haven't done anything about it.

AQ- K, and when does the idea come to you for a support group for people who have tried suicide?

SM- Back in April, when I admitted out to people and it was also the first time I ever admitted to my husband that I tried, had plans of suicide. And that's when I got the idea, because I thought there must be a support group or someone you could talk to other than a doctor. And, there's nothing, nothing at all.

AQ- Ok, so how many, can you tell me how many times you attempted suicide?

SM- Oh god, probably, probably, a good five times that I've actually done something physically, but the amount of times that I thought of it, like I said I could have a flash of maybe committing suicide today and it'd be gone, but it's always there. Like the doctor will ask me, are you thinking of suicide, well I could lie and tell him "Oh no, I'm fine there" because basically I can think about it. I think about it all the time but it doesn't mean I am going to do it. And that, it's the scary times when I think about it, it continues longer than a couple of minutes, like it's all I think about cause I hurt so bad inside.

AQ- What, what is it that triggers these feelings of bad feelings inside? Is there any one thing, or is it?

SM- Well, I know when I am starting to go downhill into depression, but lately it seems I've always been, like I said, in depression for the last god knows how long, probably longer than a year, I've never really come up high-high. And I been maybe almost normal but I've never hit

the normal. So it's when I get really depressed and I have my family, I'm not close with my family, or I'm alone, or things are happening and I have no control over them. And that's when I think people do better without me. And it's a lot of time.

AQ- And you mentioned that you once phoned a crisis line for your friend?

SM- Yeah, at Christmas time a friend of mine, well colleague, whatever, had phoned me and she was wanted to commit suicide, she told me how she was going to do it, and when and the whole bit, and I had told her "go to hospital now, or I am going to have the police come over", and I couldn't go over because I had taken my medication for the night and I can't drive when I take that. And I phoned up the mental health crisis line, which there always saying phone if you have a problem, and I was told by the person on duty at that time, that unless she called them there was nothing they would do, or could do. And it upset me because what's the point of having a crisis line, if they can't do anything or help you, it just seemed like I was bothering them. And like I said it upsets me because when I feel suicidal or that bad, there proves right there no one wants to talk to you about it, no one there to help you, and they expect you to go to the Dartmouth General, and tell everybody in the whole waiting room that you have a mental problem. And I am not impressed with, it may have just been someone who just started with mental and didn't understand the concept, but I would of been glad even if they had phoned her, I even gave them her number, and her name, "well unless she phones us there is nothing we can do". And I don't even care if you're volunteering your time for that, you don't tell someone who's trying to help a person or like if I had phoned up because I was thinking of suicide, I wouldn't even phone them now, I wouldn't even. Like I said I have my therapist and that keep telling me, when I am feeling really bad I'm supposed to phone him and phone him and I don't like to bother him, that's why I would use the crisis line. Now that I know how they work, no, no.

AQ- Right, and that's the mobile crisis unit?

SM- I believe so, I believe that's the number that I called.

AQ- Ok, when you look back at your life with your mental illness, are there any positive things that have come out having mental illness?

SM- I guess it would be positive lately with the Stand up for Comedy or Stand up for Mental Health. People can see that I can joke about it and that. I have no problem joking about it, I have problem with people who have that idea that you know that you have to look or act or you can't reads or whatever, then you have mental illness. And also the speakers bureau is positive cause I can go talk to people about the stigma and I'm not afraid and I'd love it if more people would come out and say "I have this" And the thing that bothers me the most is, people won't because they're afraid that they're going to lose maybe family members, or worse, I think the biggest problem is they're afraid that they'll lose their jobs, and there will be no income. And even to get the Canada disability pension, usually the first time you apply your turned away and it's almost like, I've been paying in to CPP whatever pension government plan since I seventeen, that money is there for you know people to need at the time and even, and also when I hear people say that's my tax dollars paying for that, hello, I am on disability now and I am still paying taxes. I put into my health plan at work I put money into it, and it was for the purpose that if I got sick or whatever, I'd be covered. And that's why I really like doing the speakers bureau because I can

tell people that. Like they got to come, employers especially have to realise that you know there's people with these problems. And it just, I think out of anything that is what, what keeps me going with speakers bureau cause I can tell people. Like I have a show next week, with Stand up for Mental Health, and I am worried if I will even show up for because in that way I am doubting myself right now cause of the stage I am going through. And I know I am good at it, so I don't know why I am doubting myself. Once I am on the stage I am fine, but I guess the biggest thing I am happy about is that I'm out there telling people and I just wish that other than only having a couple of people show up to a speakers thing, that more people will show up that they could hear about different people with this disease. Well it's not a disease, but they treat it like a disease and it's not and people have to know about it.

AQ- Ok, and when you look back on the way the mental health system has dealt with you, or people you know, over the whole time you experienced illness, has anything changed for the better or for the worst?

SM- Well, I think the mental health practitioners most of them understand more. And they do try to help you, and that way yes, it's come out where you know there are specialized doctors now for it, where before it was just your general doctors, its people with more experience but its still. It was funny I went to the mental health office last year and they had posters up for mental health week, and I was looking at the posters and everyone of those posters had the person making, telling their little, a couple sentences about their illness. Not one of those posters showed anyone from the Maritimes. Not one of them. And I went to a couple of different places and I'm thinking here are our own mental health offices, and really there showing people, I don't care about people in Manitoba or Ontario that had mental health issues. I want to know were being represented and I just thought it was so ironic, yup. But no I think they learned a lot they gone, and even some GP's now are learning more about it. The biggest problem is you sometimes have to wait a long time to get a psychiatrist, cause there is not enough of them, Nova Scotia. And I don't think that's right. I think the government should be putting more money into mental health issues. They say they do, but they don't. And it's just, my name was brought up once in provincial house about when they were closing the bipolar group and at that time was brought up by Maureen MacDonald, who brought it up, what's going to happen to these people? And all this stuff, and there was a story in the paper, and people on the news talked to me. And, it's kind of funny now, she is the minister of health, and I can't see any changes or money going into mental health issues. It's just the same, as soon as they get in its not important anymore.

AQ- Right, and just to back up, that's the bipolar, the clinic for diagnosing bipolar that you are talking about in the hospital.

SM- Yes. That was brought up in the news, the media, and the media. Yea, it was closing and I'd written a letter to the editor and the next thing I knew I had TV channels phoning me for interviews, and also the papers. And like I said I had no problem telling me, cause with this closing down, how many other people had the same problem and don't know and are being treated with the wrong medications.

AQ- Right, is that a big, sort of, thing for you, the fact that you didn't have a good diagnosis like early in your treatment?

SM- That was one of them, but I think also a lot of blame of that would of been to my mother for not telling me to look for that diagnosis. And there's a lot of times I looked up more on-line, to find out what symptoms where, that I was having. Compared to what the doctors say no you're just going through a bit of depression, here's some pills, and if that's doesn't work here's some other pills. You know, it's better now because there are specialized therapists you could talk to. Rather than take a pill, go home, you'll be better.

AQ- And do you see a specialized therapist?

SM- Yes.

AQ- So she specializes in mental, err, bipolar?

SM- Yea. Well not bipolar all mental illnesses.

AQ- Is there anything else you'd like to add about your story?

SM- I have noticed a lot of people with mental health issues do have problems with other addictions, and I think a lot of people would rather, it's kind of funny, but people would probably say there a member, not a member, have an alcohol problem, or a drug problem rather than saying I have a mental illness problem. And I find that a lot and I find a lot of times what really upsets me now of days, just gets me so mad, is now whenever you read in the paper, if something's gone, like if someone's shot people or someone's done this or whatever the lawyers are using, well right now bipolar as a reason why their clients had done this and I am fed up of these people getting off by saying all of a sudden, Oh well I was insane. It's like, it's almost afraid, at one time, lately you're afraid to ask for like tobacco in stores, now it's almost going back again I guess, for the stigma, to tell anyone you have bipolar. I'm not going to go around with a gun and kill people but I don't want to be referred to, and I think too many people are getting away with it. And lawyers are using this card,

AQ- As an excuse?

SM- Yea,

AQ- Ok, interesting, anything else you would like to add?

SM- No, I will probably think of lots of things later on, but I think, and also a lot of mental health people, a lot of them were abused when they were younger. And I think that may have also got triggers going, cause you know, you never, and also a lot of people don't know there family history in this, like I said a lot of people instead where alcoholics or died of unnatural causes. And I think basically everything's been covered.

AQ- Ok, well thank you very much.

SM- Thank you, for taking your time to talk to me.

AQ- Your welcome!