

Coping with mental illness, both at home and at work

By Rita Poliakov, QMI Agency
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Laura Skye won't use the term mental illness. Not on her company's website and not in her documentaries, many of which centre on mental health.

"In our work, labels aren't helpful. It doesn't matter whether someone is schizophrenic or manic depressive. Really, the question is how can we be supportive and contribute?" said Skye, a documentary filmmaker with Skyworks Charitable foundation, a nonprofit documentary organization she started in 1983.

Her latest film, called *Working Life*, was created in partnership with Oolagen, a Toronto mental health centre that works with youth. *Working Life* is being screened throughout Ontario and has two screenings in Sudbury, one last night and one this morning.

"Every single film I've done since 2001, we've launched in Sudbury. Sudbury's my film home away from home," said Skye, who received an honorary doctorate of letters from Laurentian University in 2005 for her achievements in the documentary film area.

Skye's films focus on social issues, many of which involve mental health. Her latest movie, which launched in Toronto on April 17, profiles four people who grew up with family members suffering from mental health issues.

Throughout the 37-minute doc, Skye also explores how mental health is perceived in the workplace.

"If you have an employer who is committed to supporting people to stay in the workplace, it's a completely different experience than if you have an employer who doesn't want you around," Skye said.

In *Working Life*, we meet A.J., a Humber College journalism student who was put into CAS's care because of his mother's mental health issues.

"When I was, like, 14 or 15, they started calling it an 'intellectual disability,'" he explained in the film. "I believe that when they gave her a label they automatically thought she was incompetent ..."

"The vision I have in my head is her picture and then a red 'X' over it, because that's what it felt like. It felt like she was crossed out. She was cancelled out."

A.J., we later learn, went through 16 CAS placements and spent much of his time running away, trying to get back to his mother. Eventually, he was able to live with her again.

During the film, the four participants are asked to choose a colour and paint a wall with that colour. A.J. chooses red, because it reminded him of salmon.

"I consider myself like a salmon ... I think growing up in CAS, I swam around from place to place ... swimming against stream, which is so difficult."

In a way, A.J.'s story confirmed Skye's distaste for labels.

"You don't need to have a label. You can be dealing with anxiety or despair. It doesn't have to be a fancy process, you can just be struggling, she said.

Working Life also explores how the participants and their families coped in the workplace. Doug, who grew up in the 1950s, describes how his father's job held his position for as long as they could while he dealt with his mental health issues, then found him a position when he was ready to return.

A.J. had a different experience at his job. While he never mentioned his employer's name, A.J. explained that he asked for some time away because he was feeling depressed. Instead of empathy, he was put on internal probation and got written up.

"And when I had said to the manager, 'Am I not allowed to be depressed?' They had said, 'If you're depressed, come back when you're not,'" he said in the film.

For Skye, the film is a way to raise awareness about those with mental health issues.

"This is not about them. It's really about us ... (this) can happen to any of us, to anybody in our family," she said. "So, I think that breaks down the idea of ... 'Oh, that would never happen to me.' In fact that does happen to us.

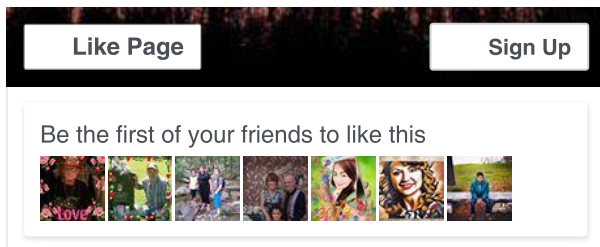
"I'm sure you've had days where you feel like this is going to be a rough ride today."

For more information

about the film, and to watch it online, visit

www.skyworksfoundation.org. The film's second Sudbury screening will take place at 10 a.m. at Rainbow Cinemas.

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