



Sandy Jeffs

Mental health survival and support

Sandy Jeffs is a community educator, speaking at numerous AGMs of Doctors and Psychiatrists, as well as community health centres, high schools and other associations about madness. She strives to make people understand the experience of insanity, and combined with humour and down to earth language has an amazing success in this, drawing on her own experience of bi-polar disorder. Sandy also contributes to a poetry collective called Loose Kangaroos which combines the efforts of several individuals and their experience of mental illness.

Sandy has contributed to the mental health community in a very significant way. She has been a member of the Board of Management of the Schizophrenia Association of Victoria; and is a regular spokesperson on mental health matters on television and radio. Sandy has been interviewed by *Triple J*, *The Age*, *The Big Issue*, *Good Morning Australia*, and numerous ABC radio stations across Australia. She combines seriousness and humour in her approach, speaking on behalf of those suffering from mental illness. Her poetry is also widely known by medical and psychiatric practitioners who she addresses at numerous AGMs.

Sandy was born in 1953 and grew up in Ballarat, Victoria, with her parents, a brother and a sister. A good student, talented musician and a very keen sports player, Sandy excelled in softball, women's cricket and tennis, primarily to distract herself and others from happenings at home. With an alcoholic mother and a violent father, Sandy and her siblings survived rather than thrived in their home environment.

After studying history at La Trobe University Sandy had her first psychotic incident and was hospitalised, ironically only a few years after her father had taken her to play music for patients at a Ballarat asylum. For the next twenty years Sandy was dogged by recurring episodes of madness resulting in numerous hospitalisations.

During this difficult period Sandy wrote poetry, which was published in magazines and anthologies. In 1933 Spinifex Press published her first collection *Poems From The Madhouse*, a thought-provoking collection. This collection won second prize in the Anne Elder Award, and also received a Highly Commended Human Rights Award. Her poetry explores the bleak despair and the black comedy of lunacy, the stereotype of the mad woman in the attic, the containment of madness in language and the clash in the mind between sanity and insanity.

After her parents' death in the early 1970s Sandy began to revisit the terror of her childhood, and her second poetry collection *Blood Relations* explored the topic of domestic violence.

Her poems express the dual sympathy and revulsion ignited by her parents' relationship and the fallout after their deaths.

She has suffered and triumphed. Her words have helped numerous sufferers of mental illness feel that they are not alone, and their carers understand what the experience of insanity is like.

For someone like Sandy, survival has been an achievement. For her to do so with such generosity of spirit and humour is remarkable.