

Trudeau faces her demons with hope, humour

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THERE'S been dope smoking. There's been bouts with anorexia and a 40-pound weight gain from anti-depressants.

And then there was leaving her three young sons in Ottawa in the '70s so she could party in New York, Paris and London.



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Margaret Trudeau tells Winnipeg audience of living with bipolar disorder and the ugly glare of politics. (Ken Gigliotti / Winnipeg Free Press)

Wednesday morning, Margaret Trudeau frankly discussed the controversial subject matter – all chalked up as manifestations of her decades-long battle with bipolar disorder – with a well-heeled audience at the Fort Garry Hotel.

The 35-minute speech was sprinkled with humour and jokes.

"I took to marijuana like a duck to water," admitted the ex-wife of late former prime minister Pierre Trudeau to warm audience laughter, and explained she smoked pot throughout her life to self-medicate herself in her battle against despair.

"It doesn't work, there's always a crash and the crashes get bigger and bigger."

Margaret Trudeau spoke at a breakfast fundraiser for the Laurel Centre, a non-profit counselling centre that helps adult women who were sexually abused as children.

Trudeau, 59, talked to about 300 attendees about her own mental recovery after a series of events shattered her personal stability.

Those events included the death of her son, Michel Trudeau, in 1998 in an avalanche, as well as her dislike of living in a "political fishbowl" after marrying then prime minister Pierre Trudeau in 1971, culminating in a very public separation from her husband in 1977 and their subsequent divorce in 1984.

At one point following her son's death, Trudeau said she was so encompassed by grief she stopped eating and could not leave her house. It was only after a close female friend contacted one of Trudeau's children that she was forced to go to hospital, she said – after police were called.

"After all the years, I finally accepted that I have a mental-health problem... you have to be your own advocate," she said. "I am bipolar, and I have got to make hard choices, and I've got to make strong choices and tough choices about how I'm going to live the rest of my life to be a whole person."

The way people who have mental-health issues are treated has changed dramatically since she began grappling with bipolar disorder in 1973 following the birth of her second son, Alexandre Trudeau, she said.

Trudeau said she was prescribed powerful medication that dealt inadequately with her bipolar disorder, she said, and was hospitalized in an executive suite for men with prostate and urinary problems instead of in a mental health-care facility.

"It was no solution for a young woman who was terrified of what was happening to her," she said.

After her divorce, Margaret Trudeau said she stayed in close contact with Pierre until he died in 2000, and was at his bedside when he passed away. She remarried and had two more children with her second husband, then divorced again.

"We can't be narrow-minded in our search for solutions," she said, adding in her quest for mental balance she's started exercising, consulted an aboriginal elder, and layered Buddhist beliefs over her existing Christian faith.

"Life is mostly mundane, and mostly ugly and mostly hard... my message is that you can get past the terrible things that happen to you."

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