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Personal Tragedy Inspiration for Holistic Health Tour
by Sheryle Carlson

Two years ago, Angela Bischoff lost her husband, former Edmonton city councillor Tooker Gomberg, to suicide. It was a tragic end to Gomberg's three-year long struggle with depression.

His death inspired Bischoff to learn all she could about the dangers of antidepressants.

She discovered that just three weeks after her husband's death the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) linked certain antidepressants, including the one Gomberg was taking at the time of his suicide, to increased suicidal tendencies.

Her research led Bischoff to a simple understanding: "Antidepressants may work for some people, but they don't work for everyone."

What she learned through months of research, along with a desire to spare others from what she and Gomberg went through, led Bischoff to launch the Health Mind, Body, Planet tour.

"The tour was my attempt to give meaning to Tooker's death," Bischoff explains. "If I could save lives, or bring awareness to others so that they might avoid similar pain, then his passing wouldn't be completely in vain."

Bischoff, along with companions Kelly Reinhardt and Bridget Haworth, have spent the last three months touring Canada coast to coast, presenting their research on the issue as well as exploring the problems with and personal stories about antidepressants through listening to public testimonials and conducting interviews on the issue.

Approximately 40 to 50 million people worldwide use antidepressants. In Canada alone, there was a whopping 80 per cent increase of antidepressant prescriptions from 1999 to 2004, and now that pharmacists are able to prescribe drugs in Alberta, that number may rise even more.

Dr David Healy, in his book *Let Them Eat Prozac*, estimates that as many as one in four people taking antidepressants will experience adverse effects, including major health problems and even suicide.

Recent studies have shown that individuals are twice as likely to attempt suicide while on an antidepressant compared to a placebo.

If information like this gets out, it could have major impacts on the pharmaceutical industry and its lucrative \$15 billion global market.

"What we have found on our tour so far, especially in conversations with Dr Michele Burill-Edwards, former Health Canada physician, and Dr David Zitner at Dalhousie University, is that the pharmaceutical industry wields an enormous amount of power at all levels of society," Reinhardt explains.

"Especially by the influence of regulators both covertly and overtly to ensure their products come onto the market. The pharmaceutical-industrial complex controls the choices we have for our own health."

The three believe that alternative treatments-which would mean fewer people popping pills-are being suppressed.

Bischoff says that exercise, a proper diet high in essential fatty acids, vitamin B and cognitive behavioural therapy or other talk therapies are often more effective, and safer, ways to deal with depression.

"You really get to deal with a problem at its root without trying to mask the symptoms," she says.

Bischoff remembers Gomberg's struggle with depression and his use of alternative remedies.

"Following the 2000 Toronto mayoralty campaign, where Tooker came second to the incumbent, Tooker crashed for the first time in his life," she recalls.

"At the time, we had a huge community of support, and we had a drug plan, and so he was able to access a whole variety of alternative health treatments such as naturopathic remedies, bodywork modalities, and talk therapy. He came out of this depression."

But a year later, Bischoff recalls, Gomberg crashed for a second time.

"This time we were in Halifax, a new city for us, and we didn't have a community yet," she explains. "We also didn't have a drug plan or financial resources. So his only option, we thought, was a psychiatrist

and his drug of choice, pharmaceutical drugs."

Bischoff hopes that the tragic consequences this option had will lead more people to ask questions and seek out safer alternatives when faced with depression.

"I really encourage people to be self-aware of how the drugs are reacting to you and to consider what all the alternatives are before you turn to a pill."

After visiting 22 cities, the tour concludes in Edmonton on Jun 20, which Bischoff says is an appropriate ending.

"It seems fitting to close the tour in the city that held such significance to his career. He always said that the three years he spent on Edmonton city council were more productive than all his years as an activist combined," she says.

"With this tour he's still contributing."

More information about antidepressants, along with audio and video podcasts of the tour are available at www.greenspiration.org.

Tue, Jun 20 (7 pm)

Healthy Mind, Body, Planet

Stanley A Milner Library Theatre

(7 Sir Winston Churchill Square)

Edmonton