



## Head Strong Speakers/Bios



**Name:**

Leslie Bennett

**Location:**

Toronto

**Bio:**

How does one decision change your life? How does a motorcycle accident lead to a life of drug addiction, homelessness and mental illness? .... And a single act of kindness lead to an unexpected diagnosis, then healing, growth, and a new lease on life that followed?

Life in Toronto was good, even great. Growing up in an affluent family in an upscale neighbourhood in Toronto, Leslie was destined to have it all. Things were going well for this 26 year old, who set out west to experience life on her own in a new city, Vancouver.

Soon after, a motorcycle accident caused life to take a turn. For awhile she was able to self-medicate to manage the chronic pain resulting from the accident... Then Leslie was fired from a catering job and began a slow slip into depression. Unable to find a reason to work, to be responsible for herself or her life, endless nights of partying came fast. Little did she know, the choices she was making would be her ticket off the edge of reason and sanity. Literally.

It seemed like she was living in her own bad dream, unable to wake up! One day working, then two, three, partying and eventually a life on the street. Friends and family didn't know what was going on and neither did she. Leslie was caught in a vortex of depression and drugs. A cocktail of ecstasy and pot fuelled her highs and lows hits bottoms she had never new were possible.

Coming from a family with a legacy of propriety and secrets, no one dared to link Leslie's behaviour with mental illness. If it hadn't been for one close friend who did dare to reach out - Leslie's story could have been yet another life lost to the streets... and to our shame and denial of an illness, not unlike allergies and diabetes that affects - affects 1 in 3 Canadians, and is treatable.

Currently, Leslie Bennett enjoys a successful career, is happily married to a loving husband and takes great solace in sharing her story with others to ensure their journey is lighter and less harrowing than her own...



**Name:**

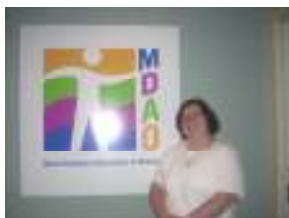
Jane Bailey

**Location:**

Kingston

**Bio:**

Jane Bailey is a writer and editor living in Kingston. The daughter of a father with bipolar disorder, she was diagnosed with rapid-cycling bipolar in 1998, and has campaigned passionately for the rights of mental health service consumers ever since. Jane has written about mental health care from a consumer's perspective on The Globe and Mail's Facts and Arguments page, and was a key interview subject in the CBC Radio One Ideas program on Mood Hygiene. Jane experiences long periods of health between bouts of sickness, with each episode strengthening her resolve to increase public awareness and understanding of mental health issues. Jane participates in the Talking About Mental Illness (TAMI) program in Kingston, in which she and other mental health care consumers are invited into area schools (grade schools, high schools and universities) to speak about their experience with mood disorders and the mental health care system. Jane is also participating in a documentary scheduled for release in 2009 regarding the forms of stigma encountered by people with mood disorders. Jane has gone from the depths of depression, having contemplated suicide on a daily basis for the two years following her diagnosis, to feeling healthy and blessed to be alive, and able to watch her children play and grow. Jane's overarching message is that all people encounter challenges during their lifetimes, and sometimes these are mental health issues. She believes that mood disorders are a life experience, not a life sentence.



**Name:**

Laura Adamson

**Location:**

Coldwater

**Bio:**

After changing her lengthy career in banking 4 years ago, Laura has been a mentor in the Mental Health Community. Laura returned to college and obtained her certification as an Addictions counsellor. She is currently a Peer specialist/Case manager, for the Canadian Mental Health Assertive Community Treatment Team in Barrie. Her passion as an advocate, educator and group facilitator make her indispensable to the team and clients. In 2007 Laura received the Central Ontario Mental Health and Addictions Award for her contribution to mental health and addictions care and understanding within the community.

Laura has recovered from a life long journey with Bipolar Disorder, an eating disorder and post partum depression after the birth of her second son. Laura overcame these obstacles and is a wonderful wife and mother to her 2 sons. Laura and her family currently reside in Horseshoe Valley, Ontario.



**Name:**

Beth Lyster

**Location:**

Windsor

**Bio:**

For over 20 years, Ms. Lyster's career in the not-for-profit sector has taken her across Ontario and Canada. A founding member of the AIDS Committee of Windsor, Beth helped establish its support, education and volunteer coordinator programs. In Hamilton, she continued her commitment to the AIDS movement at HANDS by developing HIV prevention programs, and coordinating volunteers in Vancouver at Friends For Life, a holistic wellness centre for those living with life-threatening illnesses. A graduate of the University of Windsor Drama / Communication Studies Honours Program, she has produced topical videos on social issues and organizations. As Public Education Specialist with the Canadian Mental Health Association – Windsor Essex County Branch, Beth pursues a very personal purpose in challenging the stigma and silence surrounding mental illnesses, having struggled for over 30 years to find relief and recovery. She is thrilled to have been chosen as the Mood Disorder Association of Ontario Head Strong 2008-2009 Windsor-Essex County's spokesperson.



**Name:**

Amy Hallman

**Location:**

Sudbury

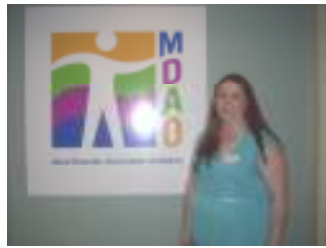
**Bio:**

Amy Hallman grew up in Sudbury, Ontario but is a citizen of the earth. Fresh from a philosophy degree at McMaster University in 1996, she began to wonder and wander her way around the continent. From organic farms in the west of Canada to Zen Buddhist centres in New Mexico and California, she has been driven to new encounters of the 'other' and the 'self' ever since. Five years in Montreal from 1997 to 2002 saw her working in the kitchens of a vegan restaurant and a meals-on-wheels and furthering her Zen training at a live-in centre on the Plateau. She also greatly improved her French, met wonderful people, and survived the ice-storm!

By 2003, Amy was back in Sudbury, enjoying the proximity of family after many years away. She decided in 2004 to start her own garden project – a CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) where customers receive a box of produce every week for the summer and fall months. In 2005, she also decided to go back to school in between gardening seasons. She is currently in the process of completing a Master's Degree in Environmental Studies at York University, Toronto. Her focus here is on environmental education, eco-consciousness, and food/gardens.

Through all of these experiences, mental illness through depression has played an unwanted part, and the acceptance of this part of her life has taken a long time in coming. Amy is excited

about this opportunity to engage with others and plans to stress the educational value of 'illness' in her upcoming speaking engagements.



**Name:**

Jennifer Coons

**Location:**

Guelph

**Bio:**

Jennifer Coons grew up in Thunder Bay, ON and moved to Guelph in 1999 to attend university. It was during her second year at university that her battle with depression and ultimately a bipolar 2 mood disorder began. Jennifer continues to take courses at the University of Guelph and a goal of hers is to complete her degree in Environmental Science: Earth and Atmospheric Sciences.

Currently, Jennifer is the President of the Mood Disorders Support Group of Guelph. It is here where she first found the knowledge, understanding, comfort, and support that she sought in a journey that was often very isolating and lonely. Jennifer feels that her association with the Mood Disorders Support Group of Guelph has helped to give her a voice: as a group facilitator, as an advocate, as a leader, and now as a spokesperson for Head Strong.

Jennifer has kept silent about the challenges she has faced and now wants to share her story to break the silence and the secrecy that surrounds mood disorders and mental health.



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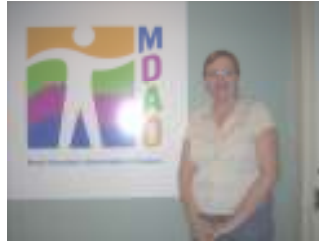
Katherine Kersteins

**Location:**

Ottawa

**Bio:**

Born and raised in Hamilton, now living in Ottawa; Katherine has battled with Mood Disorders since grade school. Almost lost to these disorders, she has come back with head held high to speak of hope and perseverance that mood disorders don't have to be a death sentence.



**Name:**

Laura Coughlin

**Location:**

Kitchener

**Bio:**

A brief overview of Laura's story/history/life:

- Secretary
- Organized Santa Claus Parade in Cambridge
- Charter President of Cambridge Jaycettes
- Taught in a private school for 3 years
- Foster parent of 27 years. Married for 25 years to a wonderful husband and his 1946 Pontiac.
- Worked at Waterloo Region Board of Education as a software/hardware technician for 10 years. Left to become a full-time mother of 8 children (7 surviving)
- Past president of Autism Society Ontario, Waterloo County Chapter
- Sit on Special Education Advisory Committee (SEAC) for Waterloo Catholic School Board
- Sit on Centre of Excellence for Kids Ability Centre
- Fibromyalgia survivor
- Member of Families for Awareness, Change and Education (FACE) at Grand River Hospital
- Facilitator and founder of Mood Disorder Parent Support Group of Waterloo Region
- Member of Parents for Children's Mental Health (PCMH)
- Volunteer at Public School in class, Strong Start reading program, in office
- Head Strong Speaker for Mood Disorder Association of Ontario
- Passionate about the needs of Children and Mental Health being addressed
- Advocated for my daughter through her journey through the mental health system.

**Name:**

Michelle Solomon

**Location:**

London/ Toronto

**Bio:**

Michelle grew up in the city of Mississauga where she accomplished many of her milestones. At the age of 15 she began facing the challenges of manic depression. Despite her struggles, early intervention, support from family, and academic accommodations contributed to her successful completion of high school. Today, Michelle is working to complete her BScN and aspires to complete her PhD and work in areas of psychiatric and community nursing. From an early age Michelle knew she wanted to effectively care for others but little did she know it would be in this way. Michelle is the founding president of CONNECT, a mental health outreach group in London, Ontario. A group pioneered by young adults to raise awareness, share, and reach out to the public in creative ways-their mission: to create a brighter legacy for people affected by mental illness. Michelle is breaking the barriers of shame, loneliness and discrimination by promoting early intervention, spreading hope, teaching resilience and ultimately, by sharing her story. Michelle is happy to be a part of revolutionizing mental health with the MDAO.

Picture  
Coming soon !

**Name:**

Melanie Jackson

**Location:**

Oakwood

**Bio:**

Melanie is an artist, writer and dedicated animal welfare advocate as well as an experienced educator and counselor. She has worked in the social service field for almost two decades with a wide variety of client groups, ultimately finding herself hoisting the mental health banner. Believing in the importance of mental health education so strongly, Melanie became a victim of her own success, in a role with ever increasing demands without the resources to meet that demand. Eventually, the chronic stress generated by trying to meet a multitude of demands led to a potentially life threatening situation.

Melanie's primary goal in life at this time, aside from maintaining a peaceful happy home for herself, her husband and numerous four legged family members, is to inform people everywhere that stress insidiously undermines our well being and is, indeed, a potential killer. Anyone who has ever felt overburdened at work and in their private life will relate to Melanie's message and find much of what she says will resonate in their own life.

As part of her work as an educator Melanie designs and delivers educational programs about a wide variety of health/mental health topics on a regular basis and is very comfortable sharing her personal and professional experience with groups. She is honoured to have been chosen as part of the Headstrong team.