

PROFILE Bipolar Disorder

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Hollywood Scribes, Producers Come to Washington



Left to Right: ER Writer Karen Maser, EIC President and CEO Brian Dyak, JOHN Q Writer/Co-Producer James Kearns, HOUSE Producer/Writer Lawrence Kaplow, EIC Executive Vice President Marie Gallo Dyak

HOUSE Producer/Writer Lawrence Kaplow, JOHN Q Writer/Co-producer James Kearns, and ER Staff Writer Karen Maser represented television and film at PICTURE THIS: BIPOLAR DISORDER, an exclusive meeting of mental health experts.

EIC President and CEO Brian Dyak opened the meeting and delivered the goal of the event, "to identify the top three priorities concerning bipolar disorder so that EIC can convey these priorities to the entertainment industry's creative community in a manner that is clear, engaging, accurate and national in scope."

PICTURE THIS was held at the National Association of Broadcasters in Wash-

ington, D.C. NAB President and CEO David Rehr welcomed guests, inviting participants "to use this PICTURE THIS forum as an opportunity to engage in a vibrant dialogue for depiction suggestions that will increase coverage of bipolar disorder onscreen and help set a direction for the potential radio and television public service endeavors." Rehr recently came onto EIC's Board of Trustees, committing himself to EIC's mission to bring the power and influence of the entertainment industry to bear on health and social issues.



National Association of Broadcasters President and CEO David Rehr with EIC President and CEO Brian Dyak

Karen Maser discussed Sally Field's recurring ER role as Maggie, Abby's (Maura Tierney) mother who has been seen struggling with bipolar disorder over the years. Maser revealed that Maggie will return on the second episode of the fall 2006 ER season, and will be shown to be making great progress with her treatment. PICTURE THIS participants, including mental health experts and people living with bipolar disorder, were glad to hear that ER is showing a side of mental illness that almost always goes unseen: That successful treatment is possible, and that bipolar disorder is a real disease, however difficult it may be to diagnose.

"EIC's 'Picture This' event was a wonderful collaborative and thought-provoking experience," said Ms. Maser. "The knowledge, dedication and enthusiasm of all the attendees was truly inspiring. I came away

with a greater understanding of bipolar disease and, as a writer, was reminded that showing the humanity of people with this disease is not only a responsibility, but an absolute obligation." The new episode guest starring Sally Field is called "Graduation Day" and will air on Thursday, September 28 at 10:00pm Eastern. (Check local listings for other time zones.)

Lawrence Kaplow noted at the end of the meeting that he got a lot more out of it than originally expected; in fact, he said that he had taken a lot of notes and that the PICTURE THIS meeting gave him a lot to think about.

"The problem with incorporating content from health and political organizations," said Kaplow, "is that as storytellers we tell stories, not messages. But in this type of roundtable discussion, competing messages gave rise to controversy, which was when I started to pay attention, as participants began substantiating their opinions with their own experience. And since whenever there's conflict, there's story, I probably walked away with four or five pretty good story/character ideas. Plus they fed me."



Sally Field's bipolar character "Maggie" returns to ER on NBC. Make an appointment at the ER on Thursday, September 28 to see how things unfold.





Mr. Kaplow observed, to the approval of the experts in the room, that bipolar disorder, just like everything else in life, can be taken seriously while at the same time addressed with humor. It is not hard to imagine Dr. House (Hugh Laurie) taking jabs at the issue while at the same time treating it. Several participants at the meeting mentioned that

people living with bipolar disorder are often highly functioning, highly productive individuals who may be overachievers—sometimes even comically so.

James Kearns, who knows something about health care having written *JOHN Q*, which, when produced nearly 10 years later, starred Denzel Washington and received great critical acclaim. Mr. Kearns shared personal stories about the process of writing and researching a movie based around health and social issues, and explained to attendees the great difficulties and great rewards that may come from it. Mr. Kearns noted that, “as a Hollywood writer, access to research is the single most critical component to my work. In order for there to be dramatic truth, a writer worth his or her salt must have access to as much factual, or in this case, psychological truth as possible.”

Because of Mr. Kearns’s devotion to health care, as evidenced by his work on *JOHN Q*, he was selected to serve as a member of the NIH

Director’s Council of Public Representatives (COPR). The COPR advises the NIH Director on cross-cutting issues related to medical research and health issues of public interest that ultimately promote individual, family, and community health. Examples of such broad issues that the Council has been involved with include public trust in the research enterprise, public input and participation at the NIH, enhancing public awareness and education about the NIH, clinical trials recruitment issues, and aspects of the NIH Roadmap, such as reengineering the clinical research enterprise.

More than anything, *PICTURE THIS* participants stressed that people with bipolar disorder are, above all else, human, and that they should be treated as such in storylines and characterizations. Writers, actors, directors and other creators should not be afraid to take risks with creating compelling depictions—but they should be attentive to the risks of self-inflicted injury that people with bipolar disorder are prone to, as well as the great achievements that they can make.

EIC will soon issue *PICTURE THIS: BIPOLAR DISORDER*, a report highlighting concerns voiced at the meeting, as well as providing more in-depth information about bipolar disorder, personal stories about those who live with it, and suggestions for creating onscreen depictions.

For more information about bipolar disorder, go to www.eiconline.org.



PICTURE THIS: BIPOLAR DISORDER is part of the Entertainment Industries Council, Inc.’s Bipolar Depiction Project, a public awareness campaign supported by AstraZeneca Pharmaceuticals, LP.



The *Picture This: Bipolar Disorder* panel of writers included *HOUSE* Producer-Writer Lawrence Kaplow, ER Staff Writer Karen Maser, and *JOHN Q* Writer James Kearns

PICTURE THIS!

FADE IN: A large room at the National Association of Broadcasters in Washington, D.C. Three Hollywood writers sit at a rectangular table. **WIDEN TO REVEAL** forty or fifty mental health professionals, psychotherapists, members of advocacy groups, research scientists, journalists; and most importantly, individuals who have or continue to struggle with bi-polar disorder.

CUT TO: A very attractive moderator, let’s call her Sarah Peterson, who for the next two hours, will oversee a stimulating, bi-lateral discussion on manic depression/bipolar disorder.

As a Hollywood writer, access to research is the single most critical component to my work. In order for there to be dramatic truth, a writer worth his or her salt must have access to as much factual, or in this case, psychological truth as possible.

The Entertainment Industries Council (EIC) is to be commended for opening the doors of perception and sponsoring this timely debate. As a screenwriter and a father of a 22 year-old daughter who is bipolar, I can’t tell you how liberating it was to openly discuss this much misunderstood, highly stigmatized illness.

What did I learn? That bipolar disease, true to the American spirit, is very democratic. It does not discriminate. On the contrary, it affects people from every walk of life, across all racial, social and economic strata. That we probably all know someone who suffers and struggles from it. That despite firmly entrenched taboos surrounding mental illness, they are not and should not be treated as second class citizens.

And that, as a person and a writer, it is incumbent upon me to understand this affliction from the inside out, so that if I one day decide to write a bipolar character, I will endow that person with all the grace, humanity and dignity I can muster.

James Kearns

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