

Survival in the Urban Jungle.

My bipolar story.

Chris Werner.

It was in February 2006 whilst on a countrywide business tour where I, at the age of 55 was training our sales teams on the technical aspects and sales techniques of our products that it was brought to my attention by my superiors that I was acting "out of character".

On my return from my business tour, I was called in to a meeting where my superiors suggested I should take 1 month's "leave". None of us knew at the time that this was the beginning of my 1st episode of what later was classified as Bipolar Mood Disorder type 1. One month later I was welcomed back to work by all my peers, superiors, suppliers and distributors. To my horror, I found out that I had been rude to certain people. I made it a point to visit each person face to face and apologize. It was a huge relief that everyone accepted my apologies. Within a couple of days everything was back to normal and I went to all lengths that this would not occur again. I took my meds daily (Lithium), joined a Bipolar group and visited a psychologist and thereafter saw one of the top psychiatrists in Johannesburg as recommended by my psychologist.

In 2007 I met the Head Geologist of a well know South African mining company who suggested that I should visit EXPOMIN, the most important Mining Exhibition in the world that takes place bi-annually in Chile. I started to prepare myself well in advance, knowing that I'd have serious competition. I informed my psychiatrist of my intentions. I needed to be 100% sure that there would be no possibility that I could have another BP episode.

During each visit he said that I appeared to be progressing very well and consequently he lowered my dosage. By September 2007 I got the most enlightening information: He said, Mr Werner, I do not know what happened to you but you do not appear to be Bipolar. Well, this was the most wonderful news for me, however he said, "You could go off you meds now, but to err on the side of caution, rather stay on this dosage until end of August 2008 (one year later)". Under my own insistence and concern, I made 2 further appointments prior to departure to Chile which was in April, 2008 because I insisted to be 100% sure that I would be ok. He gave me the green light.

I travelled to the Exhibition which lasted for 4 days and exceeded our expectations, and thereafter the GM returned to

week in June. In along the length of with their needs. At the returned to Chile and taking Lithium, as By end September I things were thought.

episodes were haunting me again. It started to run out of close friends and my promised to double

income came in. My pleas were turned down; possibly because they thought that my business progress was a figment of my imagination. Of course I became very angry. I could not understand



RSA. I stayed on till the 1st addition I visited customers Chile to familiarize myself beginning of August I at that month end stopped recommended. organized contracts and felt progressing very well, or so I By mid-October my BP (unbeknown to me) was at this stage that I also money. I wrote emails, to family to assist me. I their money as soon as my

why they were not prepared to assist me, so my emails became more aggressive. On the 23rd October I asked the company we had signed a contract with to pay for the samples I had supplied to them. They agreed, but instead of paying me on the 23rd as promised they said they could only pay me later. I said it was unacceptable. So, now in my BP state, I thought I had the power in my hands to cancel the recently signed contract. This of course was a huge mistake and after all the good relationship building, they told me they no longer wanted to do business with me. In my BP state, I just did not care!

On that day, I had enough money to buy a sandwich. Eating my sandwich on a park bench I contemplated my future. Here I was, about to become very successful and the unthinkable happened. So, I had 2 options: Either wallow in self-pity, or embrace this challenge. I decided on the latter.

To add to my challenges, I had also been kicked out of a cheap B&B because I could not pay. As part payment, my suitcase was confiscated. Probably a blessing in disguise because dragging this along



with nowhere to stay would have added to my dilemma. So, all I had were the clothes I was wearing, my fancy laptop and a red bag which carried my passport and miscellaneous, which probably made me more of a target for a thief. The first night that I slept in the street was amazing. I recall that somehow shelter became more

important than hunger, so I walked for many hours in the darkness contemplating that God had given me this ultimate challenge; my reaction was that there was no way that I would fail. So, it was past midnight that I found an alcove in a side street that was quiet. My laptop became my pillow and inside my red bag I had a newspaper that was my blanket. This was the beginning of my Survival in the Urban Jungle. There was a difference though; I did not know how long this would last and there was definitely no known US\$ 1 million for a winner like in the TV Lotto.

There were many amusing anecdotes that happened to me as I learned to be streetwise. One of these was on a Friday in mid-November, 2008. I had previously been a student at one of the top private schools in Chile. Adjacent to our school was a Country Club where we used the swimming pool for regattas. It was here at the CC that I had renewed friendships in 2008 with old school mates from 42 years ago. Since I was not a club member, friends would invite me in on Fridays, the day members could invite non-members. What I had forgotten though, was that our school was commemorating their 100 years that evening on their grounds and all were invited. So, I arrived at the CC after having walked many blocks only to find none of my mates there, they were at the school grounds. In my BP state, I felt snubbed and refused to go over to the school buildings. I must mention that someone had lent me money to pay for another "flea ridden" B&B more than 50 blocks away in one of the seedy parts of Santiago, the capital of Chile. The problem was that it was past 22.30 hrs and buses and Metro underground trains had closed down for the night. What could I do? I remembered that there was a MacCafé some 20 blocks away which was open 24/7. This was at least shelter for the night. So, I arrived there around midnight and turned my PC on. I wrote emails the whole night without stopping. The next morning people started arriving for breakfast and I was not only starving but very tired. So, I left the Mac and got onto a bus. I told the driver that I had just arrived from Africa where I was a great white hunter. I did this often which led to a free ride. They were fascinated by my stories which seemed very believable, so by the time I finished my story I'd get off without paying and had made a "new" friend. Anyway, eventually I got to my B&B, exhausted and starving. The low class B&B manager started swearing at me, asking where I had been and why

I had not paid. At this stage of unprovoked rudeness, I also got angry and demanded greater respect. All of a sudden, five men grabbed me and pinned me to a wall. Out of nowhere I let out the greatest roar of a lion. Where this came from I have no idea, but they all released me and covered away. I then laughed and said "Ok, come on you cowards, do your worst". The looks on their faces was very amusing.

Living without shelter and food was not easy, in one occasion I went without food for three days, so my strategy was just to



pass a restaurant and take in the smell of good food. It goes to show how one can overcome hunger psychologically. At least it worked for me. Under these conditions I was given shelter in a "Home for the Homeless" and a Salvation Army which was

not much of a Salvation Army but a den for thieves and cut throats. One night whilst at the Home for the Homeless called "Hogar de Cristo" (Home of Christ) and when everybody except 4 of us had gone to bed, we were sitting in the canteen and discussing philosophy and world politics (it is amazing who one meets at these places), one was a company MD who had decided that life in the streets was a better option, an accountant who had lost his job and run out of money and a Peruvian construction labourer. As we sat deep into conversation, out of nowhere appeared a huge bear of a man. He had a scar across his forehead and a well weather-worn face. He spoke loudly trying to intimidate us. The guys said to me "ignore him", but I stood up, walked over to him and my hand outstretched. He looked down at me scowling. I looked up at him, smiling, still with my hand outstretched. Interestingly he then smiled and with a huge hand shook mine. I then laughed and he laughed; I slapped him on the shoulder and he did the same. Just like that he disappeared, never to be seen again. I returned to my friends who said to me "how did you do that?" "Ag," I said, "he was just a real life Shrek."

Although I have always had respect for my fellow man, I now really learned how important it is to respect the poorest of the poor. I have been there.

As time passed, I started to get tired of my situation and somehow I decided to visit a psychiatrist (paid by my family) and to my horror I realized what damage I had done to myself, the business contacts, friends and family. This was my worst nightmare becoming real. I fought these demons that were in my imagination daily. In early August, 2010 I returned to RSA via a plane ticket paid by friends. I have learned that Psychiatrists and Doctors can also make mistakes. I am still aiming to get my life back even though I am nearing retirement age. Learning more about my mental disability and sticking to meds is of prime importance now. Support of the Mental Health system has helped give me a safe haven for now.

Christopher Werner, formerly a street person in a foreign land.