

It would take a book to adequately describe Meri Nana-Ama Danquah's struggle to overcome depression. Fortunately, Danquah, an essayist, poet and journalist, eloquently chronicled her story in the 1998 book *Willow Weep for Me: A Black Woman's Journey through Depression*.

"Everything in my life has been shaped and informed, both positively and negatively, by depression," she says. "I say 'positively' because through everything I've gone through, I've been able to restructure a life, knowing what it is to have been depressed, and to be depressed, and to structure a life that is quite satisfying and filled with a lot of happiness."

Danquah was born in Ghana and raised in Washington, D.C. Looking back over the years, she cannot pinpoint when depression first crept into her life. It seemed as if introspection and melancholy were always part of her character. As she entered adolescence, however, she realized that she was not like other young women.

"I remember feeling things really deeply even when I was young," she recalls. "It always cut so deep. I remember looking at other people, thinking, how can they not feel their feelings so intensely, like I do?"

These intense feelings persisted through adolescence and high school. At 20, she moved to Los Angeles, "to get away from it all," and start over. But as she notes, "Wherever you go, there you are."

Hampered by her depression, she moved from apartment to apartment, from job to job. At 23, Danquah became a mother. The challenge of trying to make ends meet as a single mother on a limited income eventually became too much and she returned home to Washington, D.C. to be closer to family and friends. Danquah suspected she had depression, but the episodes always passed.

Throughout her time in L.A.--and then D.C.--a friend and fellow journalist, Eugene Bledsoe, repeatedly urged Danquah to accept that her depression was a real illness. Danquah cannot pinpoint a moment when she took his advice to heart, but an encounter with Bledsoe's mother, a woman who had been battling clinical depression for 30 years, was pivotal. Over time, this encounter, and the urging of her friends toward a greater awareness and understanding, helped transform her views toward depression as an illness--and to the eventual acceptance of professional help.

Unfortunately, when she did finally seek help for her depression, she could not afford any consistent, quality care. Clinics offered a shifting cast of mental health professionals, making therapy difficult. She would become discouraged, and eventually her symptoms would return. But then she would try again. Danquah's healing has been a process that is years in the making.

"Before my depression was diagnosed," she writes, "I had suffered at the hand of ignorance and fear. I never wanted to feel that way again. I never wanted to be deprived of knowledge that could be beneficial to my well-being. If I could help alleviate anyone else's suffering by writing the article, then I wanted to do it."

Danquah's award recognizes her determination and perseverance in overcoming clinical depression and returning to normal activities. Her work appears in publications across the country, including the *Washington Post*, *Village Voice*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *Allure* and *Essence*. She is the founding curator of the "Writers in Focus" reading series at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and has toured extensively as a speaker and mental health advocate on behalf of the National Mental Health Association's Campaign on Clinical Depression.