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—Maurice Benard

ENTERTAINMENT MATTERS

An Interview with Maurice Benard
by David Michael Conner

Emma- and [PRISM Award](#)-winning actor Maurice Benard made his first appearance on [General Hospital](#) in 1993. Maurice has played [Sonny Corinthos](#) on the show since that time, with a year-long hiatus from August 1997 through 1998. In 2003, Maurice received the [Soap Opera Digest Award](#) for Lead Actor and won his first [Emmy](#) for Outstanding Lead Actor. He was nominated for a fifth Emmy in 2006.

In addition to his outstanding acting career, Maurice is committed to spreading the word about bipolar disorder, a mental illness with which he is intimately familiar. Maurice suffered his first nervous breakdown at age 22, and as he explains in the candid interview that follows, he was shortly thereafter diagnosed with manic depression, now more correctly called bipolar disorder.



Maurice credits award-winning former *General Hospital* Executive Producer [Wendy Riche](#) for supporting him through difficult times on the set, and in the interview he also talks about how, through treatment, people with mental illnesses can function as competently—and far beyond that, going by his multiple awards—as all other professionals.

Maurice has been very open about his bipolar disorder. In both magazine articles and personal appearances, he has been straightforward in discussing the difficulties that he's been through and encourages others to seek help if they need it. He is a spokesperson for the [Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance](#) (DBSA, formerly the NDMDA), and gave the closing address at the 2000 Annual NDMDA Conference in Boston. He also was honored with the Lionel Aldridge Award by the [National Association for the Mentally Ill](#) (NAMI) in 2001 and received the Didi Hirsch "Erasing the Stigma" Leadership Award in 2002.

In 2003, Maurice joined forces with the [National Mental Health Association](#) (NMHA, now called Mental Health America) to campaign for bipolar disorder awareness with the "Do You Know It?" campaign.

Maurice carved out time around his busy shooting schedule to talk about his *PRISM*-winning depiction of Sonny's struggles with bipolar disorder on *General Hospital*...

David Conner: Could you talk a little bit about your character and how he came to be diagnosed with bipolar disorder?

Maurice Benard: It's tough, but I'm kind of proud of it because it's given me strength. You know, your moods are up and down [when you live with bipolar disorder] and I have to take lithium to keep my own moods from being up and down as well.



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Maurice Benard accepting the *PRISM* Award for his characterization of Sonny's bipolar disorder on *General Hospital*

DC: So in developing your character's bipolar disorder, did you face any challenges? Was it your idea, the writers'...

"I think the stigma's kind of slowly going away now that people...If you look now...on TV, they're talking about bipolar."

MB: I had been thinking about it for a while but I had forgotten about it, and a writer brought it up last year. We talked about it for a while and I thought it would be great, but...It was amazing. It was over two months of having to go to those places...that I probably shouldn't have gone to. It turned out to be too much because I had an anxiety attack.

DC: You had an anxiety attack from playing the character, from the storyline?

MB: Yeah because...it was difficult to do that for so long.

DC: What made you finally decide to do it?

MB: It's something that I had been wanting to do for a long time, so when they brought it up, I said, 'Let's do it!'

*DC: A lot of people are really grateful for it. I know you won a *PRISM* Award—congratulations!—for that characterization. Being here at EIC, I've been on the receiving end of quite a bit of fan mail for you. We've gotten post cards from people and emails from people saying they're so excited that you're being recognized for this and that they're really proud of you for this characterization. Actually, a couple*

people that have contacted us who are big fans of yours have said that they have bipolar disorder and the storyline really affected them.

MB: Well, first I have to say that I have the best fans in the world. They totally supported me in this. It's great to have people who are bipolar help [others who have bipolar disorder]. It makes what I do worthwhile because I hope it helps people and hopefully educates people.

DC: As far as educating people, like you just said, what EIC does is try to give people incentive to address different health and social issues accurately, and that's definitely something you've been able to do on GH. How do you think seeing television shows, movies and other entertainment addressing health and social issues accurately can actually affect the public?

MB: It's simple. I got a letter once from someone who said that they thought that their husband was bipolar and she could never get him to get help. But she sat him down to watch that storyline that I did and afterwards he looked at her and he said, "I need help." And that's the way that you help people: You educate people because they see it right in front of them. You know, you can talk all you want but unless someone visually sees something, sometimes they need to be forced to get help almost.

"I'm happy to do it and I'll continue to do it. It's bigger than anything that I've done in my life."

DC: We've seen over the year as we've addressed drug abuse and different forms of substance abuse and now that we're branching into mental illness, we've seen powerfully how these types of depictions can really affect people's lives.

MB: For me, doing a character that's bipolar, having bipolar myself, I think you can bring more truth to what you're doing.

DC: As far as daytime dramas go, what are the advantages to doing an ongoing storyline?

MB: I think it's amazing because you can almost get the plot in real time. For instance, we did a storyline with a kid who was dying of AIDS. We played it out for a year in real time and at the end of the year, he died. It's amazing, it's a phenomenon. You get to see so much more throughout a whole year than you would in a two hour movie.

DC: And it seems like a lot of your fans feel that you're really a part of their life...

MB: Yeah, especially with my character...[the fans] have been with me here for fifteen years and I hate to be cliché about it, but it's like a family, this relationship that I've had with my fans. It's phenomenal.

DC: That's amazing, and thank you again for speaking out about this.

MB: I'm happy to do it and I'll continue to do it. It's bigger than anything that I've done in my life.

DC: You're a very strong person. I've got another question and if you don't want to answer this, you don't need to...we had a meeting on bipolar disorder and a lot of people were talking about misdiagnosis being very common. On average it takes ten years, including several misdiagnoses over those years to actually realize that somebody has bipolar disorder. Was your diagnosis along those lines, or how did you come to be diagnosed with bipolar disorder?

MB: For me, I had a nervous breakdown when I was 21 or 22. I was 22 when I had my big day in the mental institution. In the beginning, nobody knew what it was—they thought it was drugs, they thought it was alcohol and it wasn't, and then they figured I was having a nervous



PHOTO CREDIT: SCOTT GARFIELD/ABC

Maurice Benard as Sonny in a scene from General Hospital with co-star Natalia Livingston

breakdown, which I was. But even in the mental institution that I was at for two and a half weeks they didn't really...you know, at that point it was manic depression but they still didn't know what it was. And then when I escaped from the hospital, I went home and about two, three weeks later, I met this doctor, Dr. Charles Noonan, a psychiatrist who was phenomenal, and he right away looked at me...we talked for a little while and he said, I think you're manic depressive and I said what the...whatever it is, I'm glad I'm *something*. [Laughs.]

DC: Right. Having that identity—

MB: Right. And he just put me on lithium, man, and it worked for me, thank God. And then I would go off the lithium and have a breakdown. So...needless to say, I've been on lithium for fifteen years straight.

DC: It's great that you've stuck with it. I was going to ask about that...it works that well for you?

MB: Yeah, it works that well. I mean, one time I went off [the medication] for almost two years and it took about that long for me to have another breakdown. And then it took eight or nine months, so I just don't go off it now. Because, you know, I don't want to have another problem. Now I have kids and it's not good for them to see their father in that state.

DC: I think it's really great for them too that you're able to speak so openly about it, because the stigma that goes along with it is so strong...

MB: I think the stigma's kind of slowly going away now that people...you know, if you look now, it's funny, like on TV, primetime they're talking about bipolar. My favorite primetime drama now is *Friday Night Lights* and they talk about bipolar...bipolar's kind of becoming the new...I don't know, whatever it is, it's hip. At least people are talking about it, and people are aware of bipolar. I think it's good.

DC: That's why it's so important and commendable that you've been able to incorporate this into your character. Because that is what breaks down the stigma.

MB: I think so. I mean when I did *Oprah*, I don't know how many men [at the time] said they were bipolar. Women, mostly women talked about it. For men, it's a feeling of feeling weak and, you know, if you're mentally ill it means you're not strong or something...

DC: Well obviously that's not true...

MB: No, because I'll kick anyone's... [Laughs]

DC: Have you learned anything new about bipolar disorder since you've done the characterization of it?

MB: That's a good question...there's something that I picked up, that I read. I get literature and I read it sometimes and I'm like 'oh, I didn't know that.' I just can't remember [anything specific].

DC: Do you feel like your character before the diagnosis, looking at his behavior over the years, did you see signs of bipolar disorder in him?

MB: When I first started the show, I played the character bipolar.

DC: You did...

MB: But nobody knew. You know, you do a little thing on the character—what is he like, so I figured it would be interesting if he was having these issues. And over the years, I had relationships with the writers and producers and they knew I was bipolar—I came out as being bipolar and all that—so I started writing it in, but never saying he was bipolar. My character would go to these dark sides...he'd have depression, but they never really said that was it.

And then last year they decided, well, let's put a name on this. Let's work it out. And we did it.

DC: That's really cool...so going back and looking at older episodes, do you think those signs are probably all there?

MB: Well, when I started the show, about three weeks into the gig I had a breakdown and had to quit the show. But before the three weeks was up I had a scene with this girl and she was crying, telling me that she was abused by her father. When I was holding her, I had in my mind that my character also was abused. The audience doesn't know, but that's what I'm playing so when I'm holding

her you see these two people, one crying—the girl—and the other, Sonny, the character, was ready to blow. To start crying himself. But he didn't. But I think what happened with me was that I was holding all that in and then I had my third breakdown. The rest is history.

“You can be successful, even if you're bipolar, even with mental illness, don't let that stray you from achieving what you want to achieve in your life.”

DC: You know, back to your real experiences and your real breakdowns, you're actually commenting in a very strong way on mental illness in general in a professional setting. I think there's still a lot of stigma about that. People wonder how dependable an employee can be in any setting and I think that your openness about all of this and the way you're building this into your character is really, it's really affecting people. I hate to keep going back to it, but the fan mail we've gotten has just been so...really moving.

MB: In a nutshell what I'm able to say to everybody is, if you get treatment, if you're on your medications, I've been great for thirteen years now, since I first started. I've been successful and I come to work, I'm a professional, I'm recognized as...whatever in this world. And you can do it. You can be successful, even if you're bipolar, even with mental illness, don't let that stray

you from achieving what you want to achieve in your life.

DC: Currently scientific research is going into that it may be true that bipolar disorder—and other mental illnesses, but specifically bipolar disorder—kind of has another term for it called 'the creative disease' and a lot of creative people have been diagnosed post-mortem.

MB: Yeah, you know, a bunch of people—Van Gogh and Einstein—they say they were all bipolar and I get it because what it is, is your emotions become so heightened and especially when you go into a manic episode or something. I think you have to have the emotions to begin with in order to get that high, so I think that's why a lot of bipolar people are creative. I can imagine if I knew how to paint, I'd probably paint some abstract, cool stuff, but especially in a manic episode—I'd make a lot of money! [Laughs]

DC: Some people actually have taken themselves off of treatment or refused treatment because they were afraid it would get in the way of their creativity.

MB: Yeah, I've heard that many times and I've read about that many times but...[big sigh]...you know what? I've done probably the best work I've done—I won an Emmy here—on medication. So I don't believe that if I were off medication that my acting would be better. What would happen is, the acting would be...just kind of...a little...off. And probably I wouldn't be able to get my lines. When I first started here, I had my breakdown and I was here. And I

looked back once—this is the truth—and some of the scenes I did right when I was having the breakdown, they weren't great. My eyes were black. I looked intense. But there was a tightness to it. So I'd rather just stay on the medications.

DC: That's a really strong statement.

MB: Some people ask me, “Did you ever think about getting off the medications for the breakdown story?” [Laughs.] I just think that's way too method. I don't think that's worth it.

DC: That sounds kind of dangerous.

MB: I was on medication and I *still* had an anxiety attack at the end. If I hadn't been on medication...boy, it would have been ugly. [Laughs.]

Visit Maurice Benard's official Web site at <http://mauricebenard.tv/>.

For more information about bipolar disorder from EIC, go to www.eiconline.org/issues/bipolar/index.php.



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