Trustee Profile: Andrew Solomon

Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory (CSHL) trustee Andrew Solomon never expected to think about chemistry and biology after high school. “I thought of myself as a literature and arts person,” says Solomon, who dreamed of becoming an accomplished author. In 2001 Solomon achieved this goal, winning the National Book Award. But it turned out that his book and most of the articles he wrote for The New Yorker, New York Magazine and The New York Times Magazine were steeped in science. “Strangely,” he continues, “my life now consists of writing about subjects that are rooted in these areas.”

What draws Solomon to science is a deep interest in neurobiological disorders and the way individuals and society cope with them. He is inspired by his own experience, the topic of his international bestseller,
"Depression. Out of the Shadows" (produced by TPT and WGBH Boston) tells the dramatic stories of people of different ages and backgrounds who live with various forms of depression — and explores the causes, treatments and reasons for hope.

Solomon’s book is a 2001 National Book Award winner and 2002 Pulitzer Prize finalist.

The Noonday Demon: An Atlas of Depression. After surviving multiple episodes of severe depression in his early 30s, he found “There were all these different writings about depression, but there was nothing that pulled it all together. There was chaos and a need for a unified field theory. I wanted to combine all of the different languages that were used to talk about depression.”

Solomon has embarked on a Ph.D. in psychology at Cambridge University and continues bridging science and popular culture with his in-depth articles on health. He has appeared on a number of television programs on depression, including the acclaimed 2008 PBS series, “Depression: Out of the Shadows.”

When describing his depression, Solomon expresses deep affection for his father, his closest ally and primary caretaker during his episodes. “My father was unflagging in his efforts to give me the sense that I was loved and that there was a good life to be had on the other side of this illness.”

It was Andrew’s father, Howard Solomon, chairman and CEO of Forest Laboratories since 1977, who introduced him to CSHL. Today, Andrew is a leading advocate for CSHL’s neuroscience research. He has interviewed CSHL scientists for articles on depression and autism, and he hosted a spring cocktail party for CSHL benefactors at the historic Greenwich Village townhouse he shares with his husband, John Habich Solomon. “Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory is doing more than almost any other place to increase our fundamental knowledge and understanding of human beings and how we function in the world,” Solomon says. “I am involved in a variety of philanthropic activities, but none is making more of a difference in the world than CSHL.”

These experiences of darkness make the light more beautiful. The pain of being acutely depressed allows you to experience an unbelievable happiness every day when you aren’t depressed and a sense of those days as a gift. That’s the real message of hope: that you can get better and when you get better, not that you will look back on it with great longing, but you may look back on it and think, ‘I learned a lot by going through that, and I am a better person because of it.’”

~ from Depression: Out of the Shadows

[Editor’s note: Watch the program or a preview, or read the transcript at www.pbs.org/wgbh/takeonestep/depression. Learn about the book at www.noondaydemon.com.]  
Kiryn Haslinger