

# BREAKING AWAY

***A young scientist swims against the current of family and culture***

By Bill Ibelle

**T**HIS WASN'T supposed to happen. Raised as a Jehovah's Witness, Judah Weathers wasn't even supposed to go to college, let alone earn a degree in behavioral neuroscience from Northeastern, a doctorate from Oxford, and a medical degree from Yale.

After all, if the world was about to end—as his church preached—a Jehovah's Witness should dedicate his remaining time to spreading the word, not to pursuing higher education.

But during senior year of high school, a friend dragged Weathers, AS'04, to an open house at Tufts University. He was wowed by the energy and self-confidence of the students he encountered from all over the country.

"I was torn," he says. "So I decided to apply to one college—and if I didn't get in, then it was not meant to be. If I was accepted, well, I didn't know what I was going to do."

That college was Northeastern, and as fate would have it, he did get in. Now he had a decision to make. His parents were ambivalent about his attending college, but said they would not stand in his way. He decided to go.

## **ANOTHER BOMBHELL**

For the first six months of his freshman year, he remained severely torn. He enjoyed his classes, but assuaged his guilt about going to college by attending a Jehovah's Witness church in Back Bay.

Then, halfway through his freshman year, the world started to fall into place for Weathers. His mentor, James Stellar, dean of the former College of Arts and Sciences, turned him on to the world of behavioral neuroscience. Weathers devoted all three co-ops to working in Stellar's lab, using rodent models to study the effects of addiction on the brain.

But two more monumental decisions were weighing him

down. During his sophomore year, he left the church and disclosed he was gay to his parents. Although most of his family embraced his new identity, his sexual preference ran counter to the church and led to a four-year rift with his father. (They have since reconciled.)

Meanwhile, Weathers graduated from Northeastern with a new research interest. "Of all the psychological disorders, there seemed like more cause for optimism with bipolar disorder," he says. "I felt like there was reason to believe that I could help people regain healthy functioning and return to their work and family."

But there was also a personal motivation. One of his family members had suffered from the disorder for as long as he could remember.

"It's difficult to grow up around people who suffer from mental illness because their distorted perception of reality is your reality," he says. "I lived with those who have dramatic changes in mood

and behavior. I lived with the intense bursts of energy, excitement, and productivity, punctuated by periods of intense despair."

## **NEW GROUND**

Through four years at Yale School of Medicine, five years earning his doctorate at Oxford, and now three years into his residency at Yale, Weathers is using the latest imaging technology to study differences between the normal and bipolar brain. Specifically, he is interested in how the bipolar brain processes emotion and how the disorder develops over time. He was lead author on papers published in the *American Journal of Psychiatry* and *Psychiatry Research: Neuroimaging*, which were first to report direct comparisons on these subjects.

As part of a six-year residency program at Yale, he now divides his time between clinical work with patients and his work in the lab of professor Hilary Blumberg.

"I love working with patients and listening to their stories, but for me, research is more stimulating and creative," he says. "I love putting together the pieces of the puzzle. My aspiration is to be the director of my own lab someday, and use MRI and other imaging technologies to study how mood disorders develop across a person's life span."

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