

Sharing Secrets . . . Saving Lives

By Brigid A. Duffield

In three short months, between March and May 2007, our legal community lost three vital, promising, passionate lawyers to the disease of alcoholism. These are three individuals we know about; chances are, there were more.

First: my friend, a forty-year-old attorney, sober for fifteen years. My friend had four children, lived in a house worth more than a million dollars, and had a successful practice. Sometime during the week of March 1, 2007, she wrote the directions for the guardianship and placement of her four children, went into her garage, and in an instant, put a bullet in her head. The manner in which she killed herself devastated me. I had no idea that she was in that kind of pain or mental anguish. I never saw her suicide coming.

Shortly thereafter, another attorney, a high-profile state's attorney, left for lunch in a county car in the middle of the day following a bomb threat that closed the courthouse. She enjoyed lunch with other state's attorneys and had a few drinks. When lunch was over, colleagues attempted to take her keys but she successfully managed to fight them off. She left, drove her car across two lanes of traffic, and injured another driver. She died instantly at the scene. Her blood alcohol level was three times the legal limit. No

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one in our community saw it coming.

Shortly after that, a well-respected defense attorney, one who handled cutting-edge death penalty cases and other complicated criminal matters, died in a local nursing home. Five years earlier, after seventeen years of continuous sobriety, he had decided to take a drink, never to get sober again. Sadly, many of us saw that coming.

Three successful, promising attorneys met premature deaths due to alcoholism. These Illinois tragedies propelled a handful of us to share our secrets and tell our stories. Each of us brings a different expertise on the topic of alcoholism and each has a different story that needs to be told. We worried about what you might think of us. We worried that you might harm us with this information. We worried about what you might say or do with our secrets, how you, our brethren, might treat us. We worried about what effect it might have on those we love. Still we could not sit by and watch other lawyers suffer when there are some solutions. We are no longer willing to let our fears dictate our actions.

Breaking Our Silence

The legal community has paid, and will continue to pay, a very high price if we remain silent. It is our hope that, as we break our silence and as we walk through our fears, we might inspire you to have the courage to intervene if necessary. You may have an opportunity to reach a lawyer, repair a family, save a license or even a life. To shatter the myths and the distorted images of what alcoholism looks like, we are willing to share our secrets. In doing so, we hope that we will raise attorney awareness about the issue of alcoholism in the profession. We hope judges, attorneys, and legal staff will better understand how to recognize when a

colleague is not functioning as he or she should. These colleagues may be at risk. They may be our colleagues in crisis. When we have open, honest dialogues about the insidious disease of alcoholism, we can help inspire more recovery options, more opportunities for success for impaired lawyers everywhere.

We were gratified to see that, when we conquered our fears and mustered the courage to share our secrets, the local legal community welcomed our stories. We hope that by continuing to tell the story of our community, it will become safe for others in other communities to talk about their stories. We hope you, too, will create safe environments for lawyers to have honest and open dialogues about this deadly disease and our friends who are affected by it. By doing so, we can help our brethren before lives are lost and make the legal community better for each other and the public we serve.

The Illinois Judges Association, the Illinois State Bar Association, the Illinois Supreme Court Commission on Professionalism, the Illinois Attorney Registration and Disciplinary Commission, the 18th Judicial Circuit, the DuPage County Bar Association, the Illinois Lawyers Assistance Program, other local Illinois Bar Associations, and the Judicial Division of the American Bar Association have embraced our efforts and we are forever grateful for their support. As our professional associations have opened doors for us, we have learned that when we tell other lawyers our secrets, it is harder for them to have distorted ideas of what an alcoholic looks like and what alcoholism is all about. Armed with this knowledge, we all limit alcoholism's ability to take the lives of our brethren.

As legal professionals we are twice as likely to be affected by alcoholism as the general population. We are also at risk

for depression, abuse of drugs, and other addictions, such as gambling.

Many of us, spared from the ravages of the disease, are protective of our restored reputation. We keep secret and are reluctant to talk about the alcoholic despair and the tragedies that we once suffered which brought us to our knees. We also have kept

until I was spared an early death from alcoholism that I learned the biggest family secret. That secret was that countless members of my family had been afflicted with and died from the disease of alcoholism.

Drinking was acceptable as long as I did not do anything to embarrass the

know it was an illness and neither did they. Their well-intended attempts to save my life frequently fell on my deaf ears and often backfired.

Paradoxically, during the same period, only a few people at work saw the signs of my dysfunction. Those who did shied away from acknowledging my problem. My family had long since determined that they could not get through to me and did not want to be around me. Similarly, my friends decided it was too hard to deal with me. It was not long before I was going home night after night to drink—alone.

Denial is an amazingly powerful thing. Even as my life came crashing down around me, I could not see that I had a problem, especially an alcohol one. In those rare moments when I questioned why I was doing certain things, I was sure I was not an alcoholic. What I did not know was that my reality was based on my distorted view of alcoholism. I believed that an alcoholic was a man. An alcoholic was old and drank wine out of a bag. An alcoholic had no job, no friends, no family. I could not be an alcoholic. I was a young woman, who drank beer and Southern Comfort. I was a respected professional and a skilled attorney with a great job. I came from a large family and had plenty of friends. I just drank because I was Irish.

Being a lawyer and having a job kept me from seeing the truth of my illness. Because I was a lawyer and as long as I was working, I believed I was okay. And until the final stages of my impairment, I was. Despite the incredible amount of alcohol I was consuming, I was still functioning at a very high level. I was the staff attorney, lobbyist, and vice president of a trade association. Outwardly, I looked successful. Inwardly I was dying. I was suicidally depressed, regularly fearing that someone was going to discover that my life was a sham.

During the late stages of my drinking, there were times that I thought death was more attractive than life. I was less worried about dying than I was about living. I thought about what people were going to say standing at my casket. I scripted their

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secret the gifts we have been blessed with as we recover from alcoholism.

My Story

My story is similar to many others. I come from an Irish Catholic family, the oldest of eight, and the product of a parochial education, strict family rules, and specific family secrets. Integrity, hard work, and ethics were drilled into us. We were expected to do better than our best, to be honest without revealing family secrets, and to be hard working.

Alcohol had a special place in our home. That was not a secret. It had a space in a decanter on the door of the refrigerator, another on the shelf under the bread drawer, and another in the cabinet under the sink. It was out when my father came home from work, for parties, for Saturday nights, and other occasions, festive or not.

I do not remember how old I was when I had my first drink, but I remember the toothaches that required whiskey at a very young age. From the day I started to drink to the day I stopped, I drank a lot, never feeling like it was enough and always looking for more. I loved to drink. I never knew it was a problem for me. In my family, we never talked about alcoholism, and I did not understand the genetic predisposition I had to this disease. I never knew it was a disease. It was not

family. I learned how, or perhaps was just innately able, to out drink everyone. I prided myself on the fact that I could hold my liquor as well as most men and better than others.

In college I sold pop cans for MD 20/20 and Everclear. When I had extra money, I bought a case of beer and a fifth of Southern Comfort. That seemed normal to me. I was completely oblivious to the idea that there might be something wrong with that. Loved ones excused my behavior because I was in college . . . I was supposed to do things like that.

Through law school, I worked full time. Though I altered and controlled my drinking, I never stopped.

My family and friends innocently, perhaps naively, did things that made it possible for me to keep drinking. Friends drove me when I could not drive. When they could not get me up the stairs to my third floor apartment, they drove me to my sister's house. When my sister could not get me into her house, she let me sleep on her front yard.

People cared about me and tried to help me. They just did not know what to do and they couldn't reach me. Their idea of helping usually included trying to figure out how to make me stop drinking. None of those well-intended people had any idea how to deal with someone with an active drinking problem. I didn't

sentiments. I obsessed about how much they would miss me and how sorry they would be for not treating me the way I thought I should be treated. I contemplated suicide as I stood on the deck of a luxury cruise ship in the Pacific Ocean.

My moment of clarity occurred at the precise moment I realized that if I did not stop drinking, I would die. At that moment, the words and actions of the people who loved me and who cared enough to try to help me, echoed in my ears. I finally heard the voices that I had revolted against and arrogantly refused to listen to. This lifesaving moment is different for everyone.

Statistically, alcoholics like me do not stay sober. We do not survive. If we live, we do not live long, sober lives. Seventy percent of us will drink again and never recover. My miracle is that twenty-one years ago, I had what I pray was my last drink. I cannot pretend that I am safe, that I am immune, or that I am never going to pick up a drink. I am an alcoholic. The most natural thing for me to do is to drink and the most unnatural thing for me, like any alcoholic, is to not drink.

The Unpredictable Path of Alcoholism

There is no predictable path the disease of alcoholism will take. For some, it might be a long, slow progression. For others it may start later in life when a life event creates the need to seek relief, to escape. For some it is genetic. For others it is a short but devastating descent to Hell. But whatever form it takes, if a person is an alcoholic, lawyer or not, once he or she takes that first drink, willpower alone will not be enough to solve the problem.

Without recovery it ends up the same . . . jail, insanity, or death. The visible manifestations of a lawyer's impairment include misuse of client funds, missed court appearances, disrespect to the court, counsel, and staff, missed deadlines, fabrication of elaborate lies, and disciplinary matters. The unseen manifestations include a hell defined by despair, depression, and suicidal ideations.

Similarly, there is no predictable path recovery will take. For some, a call from

a judge may stop excessive, irresponsible drinking. For others it may be the tears of a spouse, a parent, a child. For some, inpatient treatment will be required. For others it will be participation in a twelve-step recovery program. But once an alcoholic begins a journey of recovery, he can once again live a joy-filled, productive, and service-filled life. Recovery often means reunited families and useful lives. It can mean peace of mind, serenity and tranquility for the individual lawyer, her clients, and all the lives they touch.

I suspect many readers—perhaps you—may have a secret. Perhaps you are concerned about another lawyer. Perhaps you are beginning to understand that the disease of alcoholism defies lawyer logic. Perhaps you have a family member who has been touched by this disease. Perhaps you are wondering if you have a problem. Perhaps you are struggling to find the courage to help another lawyer. Perhaps you may be hoping that there will be a simple solution. If you are, there are things you can do.

What Can You Do?

Know what you are willing to do. It will be different for each one of us, and it will be different in different circumstances. It will be different in different communities. Assess your comfort level as you help someone. What is your sensitivity to sharing your story? Be realistic when deciding how far you can stretch yourself to be of service to a lawyer in need, a colleague in crisis.

Be courageous. Don't let the alcoholic off the hook. Confront the impaired lawyer. Use your words, emotion, and personal experience to carry a message of hope—but also set limits. Establish firm lines in the sand. Impose and follow through on realistic consequences. Set boundaries you can stick to no matter what. Calling a colleague on his inappropriate or less-than-professional behavior may one day save him from ultimate destruction.

Call your lawyers assistance program. Whether you are a lawyer, a spouse, a partner, a secretary, or a parent,

your local lawyers assistance program (LAP) has professional help specific to lawyers. LAP will put you in touch with a clinician, an intervention team, or an experienced lawyer. These people will help figure out how best to help your colleague or loved one.

Talk to others who care about your loved one. Perhaps a judge, another lawyer, a disciplinary commission administrator, or a therapist can help. As a community we need to be safe with each other, safe enough so we can talk about important personal things—our secrets. We need to be vulnerable to each other to have a heartfelt honest discussion if we are going to save lives.

Be trustworthy. Draw on your experience, your humanity. We are all flawed. Look in your heart for your passion and responsibility to the profession. Let your colleagues trust you enough to share their secret. Allow yourself to be vulnerable as you talk with them; help them talk to you about their important issues. What would you want us to do if you were the colleague in crisis?

Find a recovering alcoholic. If you don't know an alcoholic, find a recovering one. The disease of alcoholism touches us all. We all know alcoholics who are actively drinking and those who are recovering. Pose your questions to someone who has experience with the illness and its insanity.

Go to an Open AA Meeting. Go to Al-Anon or a twelve-step program like Families Anonymous. Hear about the insanity of the illness and what an alcoholic is capable of doing. Getting support from like-minded people and people with similar experiences will save your sanity. You will be amazed at what you think is real, isn't.

Trust your gut. If you smell what you believe is vodka and Altoids it probably is. No matter what an alcoholic tells you, vodka and Altoids smells like vodka and Altoids.

Don't engage in the debate. The more you tell alcoholics they have a problem, the more they will tell you they don't. When you are dealing with alcoholics, remember that they will give you all the reasons why you are wrong,

defending their actions and the insanity of what they are doing, even when the truth is a better answer. If the alcoholic is a lawyer . . . multiply that by ten.

Read the literature. In addition to professional publications, volumes of literature on alcoholism and other mental illnesses are available from lawyer assistance programs and professional treatment facilities across the nation.

Prepare for Failure. Sometimes, many times, despite your best efforts, you will fail, like I did with my girlfriend. Statistically, chances of recovery for an alcoholic are not good. Worse, if the alcoholic is an isolated solo practitioner, it is bleak. Sometimes alcoholics don't want to be, or cannot be, saved from themselves or the illness.

The Challenge, If You Are Willing

To the judges: Make it safe for lawyers to talk to you about impaired colleagues in your jurisdictions. Help your trained interveners be beacons of hope in your community. Establish and honor rules for confidential, safe communication. Borrow

the Illinois Supreme Court rules about confidentiality if you don't have any.

To Bar Association leadership: Be vigilant and responsible in your communities. Reach out. We know which lawyers, our friends, are not functioning. Resist the hesitation to walk away. Say, "You have a problem . . . I am taking your keys . . ." If an impaired lawyer resists your attempts, don't stop. Keep them accountable. Suggest alternatives. We are our brother's keeper.

To lawyer assistance program volunteers: Renew your commitment to your LAP and to lawyers everywhere. Be mindful and alert to our friends in need. The person next to you may be suffering in silence and need your help. Share your experience, strength, and hope. Those lawyers who die cause us to redouble our efforts, to step out of our comfort zone, and to raise our consciousness—but we don't need them to die for us to share our miracles.

To the reader who may be suffering: Find the courage within yourself to walk through your despair and paralyz-

ing fear. Call your state Lawyers Assistance Program. Find one of us to talk to. Let us help you until you can help yourself. We know your experience and, when you are ready, we have a solution.

To the families: Thank you. We truly appreciate and are grateful for what you do. You are in the forefront of our colleague's pain and crisis. You are the gatekeeper. Do not be afraid to work with those of us who can help you. Let us help you. Help us fulfill our obligation and our mission to your loved one.

While we hope that no other legal community suffers the immeasurable loss ours did, we hope that, if the day comes that you have the chance to save a suffering alcoholic lawyer from unpredictable but certain death, you will be ready, willing, and able. If you are, you might witness a talented lawyer, once caught up in the throes of alcoholism, get help, get on the road to recovery, and be restored to the productive human being and attorney he or she was destined to be. That is a miracle worth being a part of. ■