

A Year in the Life of a Lawyer Wife

BY ANONYMOUS

I am a wife. I am a lawyer. I am the wife of a lawyer. My father is a lawyer. My husband's father is a lawyer. My first cousin on my mother's side is a lawyer. If you have ever seen the movie *My Cousin Vinny*, you know where I am going here. Despite all of the legal subject matter expertise running around my family tree, I was in no way prepared to be the wife of an alcoholic lawyer in need of in-patient treatment.

Yet, that is exactly where I found myself on a Tuesday night in February last year. After putting my kids to bed, my husband cracked open a beer (his 11th of the evening—yes, I was keeping a tally at that point in time), and proceeded to tell me that he had decided that he needed to go to rehab. My first reaction was one of relief. I had known for a long time that my husband was an alcoholic and that he needed treatment, and I was glad that he finally agreed. I also knew that the NC Lawyer Assistance Program (LAP) could help us initiate treatment (as the LAP had assisted when my husband attended outpatient treatment a few years earlier—a treatment attempt which obviously did not stick), and I knew that my health insurance included coverage for inpatient substance abuse treatment. That night I slept like a baby, content with all of the things I thought that I knew. Then came Wednesday and reality hit me squarely between the eyes.

Reality Check #1: My Husband. He was in the midst of a complete mental breakdown. He was drinking 18-24 beers each and every night. His law practice was in the toilet. He had not answered any mail, email, or voicemail since before the holidays. He wasn't paying his bills at work or his half of our household bills. He was drinking in the office. He was drinking in the car, while driving our kids home from school. He was angry, ashamed, and completely overwhelmed. Once he made the decision to enter treatment, he became completely

unable to function. He stopped going to work and alternated between being passed out and watching TV until he went into treatment. In the 12 days between his decision to get treatment and actually entering treatment, my husband consumed 252 beers at our house (trash day was on Tuesday, so I had a good baseline when I counted the empty bottles in the recycle bin).

Reality Check #2: Treatment. Based upon my husband's lengthy history with alcohol abuse and unsuccessful attempts at outpatient treatment, we were advised that my husband's best chance at recovery was to attend a 90 day inpatient, residential program geared towards professionals. The LAP recommended two treatment facilities, and both required up-front payment for at least the initial six weeks. Both facilities recommended immediate admission into medically supervised detox followed by residential treatment. Neither program accepted insurance.

Reality Check #3: Money. In short, we didn't have enough of it. I needed to pay for treatment in full, in less than two weeks. I needed to pay our household bills while my husband was in treatment and pay the bills that he had let lapse over the past few months. There would be no income coming in from my husband for at least 90 days (he was a solo practitioner), and he had barely enough money in his operating account to pay his receptionist and paralegal for the next month. We had less than \$5,000 in savings between the two of us and really had nothing of value (other than our children), so making a quick sale to raise funds was out.

The sense of relief that I had felt the night before fled quickly, and I was in an absolute panic as to how I was going to make this work. My husband was completely checked out, so it was all up to me. During the next few days I turned off all emotions and went into hyper-focused problem-solving mode. I methodically



worked through all of the possibilities for paying for treatment and somehow found a way to borrow the money. I wrote out a daily schedule, including when I would work remotely from my husband's office, and when I would enlist my parents to pick the kids up from school so I could work in his office in the evenings. I went through our expenses and cut all non-essential expenditures. I dictated a letter to my husband's clients about his unexpected medical leave and advised his staff of the same. I had a very frank discussion with my three young children about "daddy going to treatment." I finalized the details of my son's sixth birthday party, which was scheduled for the following Sunday, and I also completed my remaining six hours of CLE (it was the last week in February, after all). When the following weekend rolled around and we were traveling to the treatment facility, I was on autopilot. My kids were upset, my husband was terrified, and I knew it was up to me to hold it together.

I spent the next week balancing my job, working through my husband's files, and fielding calls from his irate clients. I had a vague notion that the LAP could assign a volunteer lawyer to assist with my husband's cases during his absence, but I didn't really want another lawyer digging into his files. I was concerned any competent lawyer would quickly uncover (as I had) numerous instances of neglect. Worse, I feared they might find actual malpractice or trust account violations. Even though I had not practiced law in five years, I took it upon myself to manage my husband's practice in

his absence. I honestly believed that it was my responsibility to keep his practice afloat and to remedy as many problems as I could, because I believed that my husband's law license depended on it. I was already pushed to the limit with my own full-time job, parenting my three small children, and maintaining our household/bills by myself, but somebody had to keep the wheels on the bus. The madness went on for about a month, during which time I didn't sleep for more than three hours a night; I completely lost my appetite and dropped 15 pounds in as many days; and I began to develop an ulcer. Finally, I was overcome with sheer physical and mental exhaustion and knew that something had to give or I was going to end up in the hospital.

Reality Check #4: Help Needed. I could no longer do the professional and personal work of two people. Something had to give. I needed to ask for and accept help from other people.

First came the tactical help—such as accepting an offer from a friend to drop off dinner, enlisting the assistance of the LAP to get a few of my husband's litigation cases continued, and asking my retired father to pick up mail and phone messages from my husband's office so that I didn't have to drive across town. (By this time I had let my husband's staff go because there wasn't any money left.) These acts of generosity definitely lightened the load to some degree, but I still kept most of the burden of my husband's practice for myself, fearing for his license. I was "stressed," but I thought I was coping pretty well under the circumstances.

People around me suggested that I go "talk to somebody" or go to an Al-Anon meeting. First it was my mother, then a friend who made these suggestions. I insisted that I was "fine," I just needed help with the "to-dos." After all, I wasn't the one in rehab. I was the responsible one. I was paying the bills on time. I was effective and successful at work. The kids were getting fed and bathed. I certainly wasn't the one with the problem. Around the same time, I attended a family program at my husband's treatment center. A number of participants in the program mentioned that I seemed angry and very hurt. I just assumed that they were projecting their own feelings on to me, because I wasn't angry at all. Sure, I was tired, but I was happy that my husband was finally getting the treatment he needed. I also met with my husband's

therapist that weekend, and her first comment to me was, "Wow, you seem really pissed. Are you talking to someone about that?" I was confounded. Why didn't these people understand? I was stressed about our finances and I was exhausted from doing the work and parenting of two people, but I wasn't mad at my husband. I was fine.

Then, a week later, it happened—I snapped. A bank teller wouldn't allow me to transfer money between my husband's accounts, despite the fact that I had a Power of Attorney, so I shouted that she was a moron and stormed out of the bank branch. Later that afternoon I hung up the phone on one of my co-workers mid-sentence for disagreeing with me. I left my office, and before I could drive out of the parking deck, I was sobbing uncontrollably.

Reality Check # 5: I Needed Help. Me. Not my husband's caseload. Not my budget. Not my to-do list. Me. I was emotionally overwhelmed and I didn't know how to cope. I did not know that one of the effects of the disease of alcoholism is that the non-alcoholic begins to assume all responsibility, taking on far more than is reasonable.

I found a counselor who specialized in addiction and joined a therapy group specifically for family members of alcoholics. I did not know at that time that the LAP could have directed me to resources like this for myself. I knew that the LAP could help my husband, but I did not realize I might receive help as well for being affected (overwhelmed) by someone else's alcoholism or addiction. I quickly learned that years of living with an active alcoholic had impacted me. I learned that I was indeed angry, not only that I had been left with all of the responsibility and burden of my husband's abrupt departure for treatment, but also that alcohol had been the most important thing in my husband's life for so long. I also learned that underneath the anger were a lot of fear and sadness. Through regular group therapy sessions and with the support of other spouses of alcoholics, I learned a lot about myself and learned how to work through the anger and other emotions that are so common with those affected by the disease of alcoholism.

This has not been an easy journey for me, and there have been some fairly large bumps in the road, including substantial financial challenges and my husband's relapse (which thankfully was not prolonged and he is back

working on his own recovery). I am still a work in progress, but for the first time in my life I truly understand the meaning of serenity and the joy has returned to my life. I am now able to take ownership of what is mine and to let go of the things that are outside of my control (like my husband's recovery or the status of his law license). I have a sense of gratitude for the small, everyday things in life, and I am able to live in the present. Gone are the constant "what if" worries that so often plague those impacted by alcoholism.

In addition to the personal growth and insights that have come from my getting help, I have learned a lot about the LAP and the resources and support that it can provide. For example, I learned that had I enlisted the assistance of volunteer lawyers through the LAP, our communication would have been confidential pursuant to Rule 1.6 and the LAP staff and volunteers are duty bound to preserve the confidentiality of anything I needed to discuss with them. I did not have to take on the added burden of my husband's law practice. Most importantly, I have learned that I am not alone. There are a lot of us out there. We are lawyers, but we are also wives, husbands, siblings, parents, partners, and friends of alcoholics. Some of us are in crisis due to the consequences of active addiction or the sudden upheaval caused when a lawyer or family member seeks treatment. There are others who are adjusting to life with a recovering alcoholic or addict who don't know where to turn to get help for themselves or a loved one. There is help available to us through the Lawyer Assistance Program, Al-Anon, mental health professionals, and through the support and friendship of other lawyers with similar experiences. All we need to do is ask. ■

The North Carolina Lawyer Assistance Program is a confidential program of assistance for all North Carolina lawyers which helps lawyers address problems of stress, depression, addiction, or other problems that may lead to impairing a lawyer's ability to practice. If you are a North Carolina lawyer, judge, or law student and would like more information, go to www.nclap.org or call toll free: Robynn Moraites (for Charlotte and areas west) at 1-800-720-7257, Towanda Garner (in the Piedmont area) at 1-877-570-0991, or Ed Ward (for Raleigh and down east) at 1-877-627-3743.