

My Journey from Alcoholism to Sobriety, Recovery, and the Bench

BY ANONYMOUS

Standing at the doorway of the courtroom, I reflected on how I had come to be here as a civil court judge. My reverie took me back to another time when I stood at the door of a different room, where a meeting of recovering alcoholics was in progress. I recalled wondering how I had ended up there as one of them.

My background had all the classic signposts for this journey into alcoholism—an alcoholic father and assorted alcoholic aunts and uncles. But when did this happen to me? How had this happened to me?

Like many young girls, I started drinking at parties with my boyfriend. Unlike most adolescents, though, I experienced blackouts at age 14. Despite this horrible side effect, far more important to me was the way alcohol made me feel—freer, happier, less gawky, and more like I belonged.

I married young, became a mother at age 17, and continued to drink. While I usually drank until I was drunk and often did things I was later ashamed of, drinking was still fun and thrilling. Orange juice and vodka was an exotic concoction to an inexperienced teen-aged mother who was suddenly in charge of another human life. Drinking also made my marriage more bearable.

Curiously, while my marriage was deteriorating, I found that I had a desire to achieve, in part because I knew I would eventually have to take care of myself and my young child. This drive spurred me to finish high school and enroll in college. When my marriage finally ended, I started raising my young daughter all alone. While taking evening classes at law school, I worked full-time to pay for tuition. In the short span of five years, I had transformed myself from a naive, dependent wife into a disciplined, motivated superwoman. I could do anything!

In spite of my new confidence and

ambition, I continued to drink. Now I drank to relieve the stress of constant study, work, and classes. So what if I was hung over occasionally and short-tempered at my job? I deserved a little fun. So what if my school attendance fell off? I could always make it up. So what if stops at a bar became increasingly frequent, evening-long activities? So what if I stumbled home long after midnight, leaving my sister to care for my daughter by default? So what? I was a single, working mother who planned to join a noble profession—I was going to be a lawyer. I was on the ladder up, a trailblazer, a woman on fire.

I graduated and moved to a new city where I held a variety of legal jobs in city and state government, including working for a judge. I had new friends, a new boyfriend, and what I hoped would be a new relationship with my daughter and my drinking. This time, I told myself, I would take the upper hand and control how much and how often I drank.

When that didn't happen, I recognized that my drinking was out of control. People were starting to tell me that I might have a problem. Maybe, I thought, but I found a quick solution to deal with it. Anyone who mentioned my drinking was cut out of my life forever—cleanly, swiftly, sharply. Those people were replaced by new "friends" who drank like me. And I spent less time with my daughter, boyfriend, and old comrades.

As things continued to worsen, I shifted the blame for my need to drink onto my boyfriend, the weather, my boss, the grocer, the bank teller, and even the mayor. When more and more people told me I had a problem, I stopped drinking in public. I stopped going out, preferring to spend evenings alone in the privacy of my home. I felt safer there, since I was afraid of where I might end up in a blackout if I



went out drinking.

At about this point I realized I couldn't stop drinking. I was addicted. So I started going to therapists and psychiatrists. I stopped and started drinking many times. My continued drinking completely wreaked havoc with my relationships. My daughter left home at 20 and moved across the country to escape. I was asked to leave one job. At the next one, I managed to work fairly steadily, but my behavior was such that people, like my daughter, stayed far away.

At my sister's insistence I agreed to enter a five-day hospital detoxification program. I was afraid if I refused, she, too, might leave. Once in detox, the doctors convinced me that I would benefit by going to a rehabilitation center. I did, spending a month there. When I returned from the rehab center, my boss was hesitant to let me return to work. He didn't want an alcoholic working for him. His reluctance fueled my desire to stop drinking for good in much the same way that my divorce motivated me to finish school so many years before.

In sobriety, I became active in bar association activities, including the State Bar Association's Committee on Lawyer Alcoholism and Drug Abuse and the American Bar Association's Commission on Impaired Attorneys. I also began to explore the possibility of becoming a judge.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 56

Harrelson Receives Professionalism Award



Wallace "Wally" C. Harrelson has been selected as the 2008 recipient of the Chief Justice's Professionalism Award. This award is presented annually by the chief justice of the North Carolina Supreme Court at the

Annual Meeting of the North Carolina State Bar.

Harrelson earned an AB degree in Political Science in 1959 from Duke University, and his LL.B. degree from Duke University School of Law in 1962. He started his law practice in Guilford County as a clerk-solicitor (district attorney) in the Guilford County Domestic Relations Court. After that, Wally entered the private practice of law in Greensboro, where he had a varied practice including indigent court-appointed work.

On January 1, 1970, Harrelson began

what has become a lifetime commitment when he was appointed the first public defender for North Carolina. He still holds this position and has nurtured one of the top public defender offices in the state year after year.

Harrelson's devotion to the court system, and to indigent representation in particular, can be seen through his tireless efforts to improve the system. He has participated in many committees involving the indigent system. These committees have been enhanced by his independent thinking, toughness, and vision in bringing about the best indigent representation.

Harrelson's professionalism reaches much farther than his outstanding legal advocacy skill and superior management style. He has continuously been deeply involved in volunteerism in a variety of community activities. Among these activities are past chairman of the Area Board of Mental Health, Mental Retardation, and Substance Abuse of Guilford County, appointed by the Guilford County Board of County Commissioners. Also, Harrelson is

a present member of the executive committee of Fellowship Hall, Inc. (a private, non-profit organization for the treatment of chemical dependency). He served a total of eight years on the Board of Directors of the Youth Services Bureau of Guilford County (now Youth Focus) and twice served as chairman and/or president of the board. Harrelson is a former member and vice-chairman of the Board of Directors for Women's Day Care Center (now Summit House), and is a past member of the Board of Substance Abuse Services of Guilford. He is a former member of the Chief Justice's Committee on the Defense of Indigents and past member of the Chief Justice's Administration of Justice Study Committee.

Harrelson has been honored with many legal awards, including the prestigious Outstanding Lawyer of the Year Award from the Greensboro Criminal Defense Lawyer's Association in 1983, one of only three lawyers ever to receive that honor. In 1983 Harrelson also received the Order of the Long Leaf Pine Award from Governor Hunt. ■

Lawyer Assistance Program (cont.)

The application forms for appointment included questions about treatment for alcoholism, which I answered truthfully. When I was interviewed by the appointment committee, no one asked me about my recovery. I was not appointed that year or the next time I renewed my application, and I didn't know exactly why.

Undaunted, in the twelfth year of my recovery I decided to run for an elected position on the bench. My entire campaign—except for the manager—was run by people I had met during recovery. To say that the experience of my recovery gave me courage and strength to do this is an understatement. The emotional support I

received from my friends in recovery and the members of the State Bar's Lawyer Alcoholism Committee was beyond any that a political committee or party could have provided. I found that the alcoholism recovery principles worked even under the most stressful circumstances. They gave me the energy and the attitude to finish the race. I won the election.

It has now been many years since I've had a drink, and my life today is unrecognizable from the old one. I live by a set of spiritual principles that have seen me through the many difficult days of recovery. My recovery process has not only put my life back on track, but I also have healed and grown in ways far beyond anything I could ever have imagined in an alcoholic haze. I have a close, loving relationship with my daughter. I have sober,

caring friends. I have a busy life and a career that continues to amaze and astonish me. I am happy and relieved of the stress and worry that plagued me in the years that I drank.

My tenure on the bench has been exciting, challenging, and rewarding. The opportunities to be of service to others have been too numerous to recount here. Every day I see how the results of the disease brings so many people into contact with the legal system. I can only hope that reading this personal story of my alcohol abuse and subsequent recovery will encourage others to reach out for help themselves or for another lawyer who is suffering. ■

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