

Being a Lawyer Saved My Life

BY ANONYMOUS

I am a lawyer and an alcoholic, but not necessarily in that order. I was an alcoholic long before I even considered becoming a lawyer. I don't believe that the inherently stressful nature of the practice of law caused or even exacerbated my alcoholic drinking. I do believe that because I am a lawyer I was offered the care and assistance of the Lawyer Assistance Program of the North Carolina State Bar, and that the program, quite frankly, saved my life.

I grew up with few challenges. My father was a doctor, and my mother stayed home to raise me and my three older brothers. We lived in a nice neighborhood with great public schools. My parents loved and respected each other and never raised a hand in anger to us or each other. While my father was far from savvy as a businessman or investor, finances were never an issue. I always felt loved and watched over.

Alcohol was present in the home, but not of particular importance. My mother and father frequently shared a drink together after he came home from work while she was preparing dinner. There was an occasional beer on summer evenings while they sat in the yard listening to the ballgame, or played Yahtzee with my aunt and uncle. I have no recollection of either of them exhibiting mood changes related to their alcohol consumption.

Like many alcoholics, I remember that in my childhood and adolescence I had distinct feelings of emotional unease. I felt I was somehow different from, and did not measure up to, the other kids in my neighborhood and school. While other kids seemed to carry themselves with confidence and ease, I was self-conscious, a bit depressed, and just uncomfortable in my own skin. Just after I turned 15, my father went to work one morning and suffered a massive heart attack, dying on the spot. My siblings were already in or past college, so the household was suddenly just me and my grieving mother. She was

amazing in her grief, and managed the home with quiet care and grace.

It was in the year following my father's passing that I began my relationship with alcohol. My very first time drinking alcohol was the typical experimentation with friends—a carefully-planned outing with a stash of alcoholic contraband. My recollection of the intense feeling of that first intoxication remains to this day more vivid than any other childhood or adolescent memory. At that moment, I felt accepted, self-assured, and connected to my friends as never before. I did not know it at the time, but a switch was thrown in my brain that would affect and direct my decision making for many years to come.

High school became a framework for alcohol-related social functions. Weekends were for drinking with my close-knit group of like-minded friends, either at parties or otherwise. The excitement would begin with the anticipatory planning, peak with the consumption, and continue with the talk about it the following week. I went to college because everyone did, and relished in the freedom it offered me. I was 300 miles away from home and could pursue my passion for alcohol as an adult and on my own terms. I took college seriously and did well enough, but pursued and obtained a degree with no thought of its use.

After college I married a woman with a decent job, and continued my life of underachievement. After several years my wife pushed me to obtain a graduate degree. It seems ridiculous in retrospect, but the choice of law school resulted primarily from my inability to come up with any profession I really wanted to pursue. I did not even intend to practice law, but as fate has it, I was accepted into law school and my journey with the legal profession began.

Law school demanded more effort and focus than I had ever been called on to give to that point in my life. I took it seriously, worked hard, and achieved a modicum of



success. Looking back, I think the concentration of time and thought required from me to make it through was healthy for me, and upon graduation I felt a real sense of accomplishment for the first time. Armed with the degree and licensed to practice, I took a job with a local firm and joined the fraternity of lawyers. Learning to practice law was not without its challenges. It is for many of us another opportunity to feel that we don't measure up, to wait for the curtain to be thrown back, displaying for the world that we have no idea what we are doing. But the fraternity of lawyers in the local community proved to be helpful, accepting, and friendly, and I felt both proud and comfortable to be one of them. What I lacked in brilliance, I made up for in work ethic, and I did well for the firm.

A few years into practice my marriage began to go downhill, and my alcohol consumption began to grow. I focused all the energy necessary to continue performing well in my practice, but beyond that I spent most of my time drinking. While it might have seemed obvious to those around me that I was on a path to destruction, we alcoholics are masterful at segmenting our lives to hide what is really going on. I was not a social drinker and rarely drank in public. I drank by myself, where I did not have to be concerned about anyone forming a judgment about the amount or frequency of my consumption.

In another few years the trajectory of my drinking really took off, and it became more and more difficult to be in an alcohol-free office all day. I began drinking before work,

coming in later, drinking at lunch, and leaving the office early to drink. At this point, even I could not ignore the fact that I could not manage my drinking. I was not ready to admit I was an alcoholic, but I knew I needed to change my drinking or I was going to wreck my career, cause an accident, or become sick. I began a series of attempts to curb or stop my drinking by the sheer force of my own will and the power of decision. Night after night I swore off the alcohol and prayed for an end to the drinking. I was convinced that if I could only stop long enough for the alcohol to get out of my system, I would be free to not drink again. These were futile efforts. If I was determined enough to make it through the next morning without a drink, I might get by for a few weeks. However, I never lasted more than a couple of weeks on average before I was back to my normal routine.

My “bottom” lasted about a year. First came a car accident resulting in an arrest and conviction for Driving While Impaired. I earnestly told the judge I had learned my lesson and that this was the wake-up call I needed. I earnestly believed it. My limited driving privilege allowed me to drive to work and back, and I did not miss a beat. My law partners were relieved and appreciative when I told them the good news that I was dedicating myself to cleaning up my act. I attended my first 12 step program meeting, listened intently, and tried to fit in. After about ten meetings, I stopped going. I was not like these folks. I was a professional with an important job that took up all of my time. After a few weeks of doing it on my own, I began drinking again and embarked on my final spree.

I separated from my wife and moved into a small apartment. The second arrest came less than a year after the first conviction. The humiliation and fear that followed the arrest were unbelievable. The house of cards that was my life was collapsing before my eyes, and I was seemingly powerless to stop it. I was sure my career was over and that I would lose everything. The morning after the second arrest I walked into my senior partner's office and told him I had been arrested again, certain the result would be my immediate termination. In an act of absolute grace, rather than terminate me, he told me to call the Lawyer Assistance Program (LAP). I made the call and asked for a call back. Within an hour I received a call from the

LAP director. He explained that everything we discussed would be subject to attorney-client privilege and held in strict confidence, and I told him I needed help. In a matter of days, we met in person and he laid out for me the framework for a plan of action. He arranged an appointment for an alcohol and substance abuse treatment program, leading to my enrollment in an intensive outpatient program.

I was introduced to a LAP volunteer who took me to dinner and an AA meeting. We spoke freely, and for the first time I was able to share the secret of my alcohol addiction with a fellow lawyer. The things I shared with him that I thought were unique to me he could immediately relate to. When we walked into the meeting, it was clear he was completely at home with the members of this same fellowship I had felt so uncomfortable with on my own. After the meeting we went for coffee and we talked about what the Lawyer Assistance Program could offer me. The program would be an advocate for me as I worked through my legal challenges. In exchange, I would be expected to follow a regimen of recovery actions. I was introduced to the LAP “contract”—a written contract between me and LAP in which I agreed to complete my outpatient treatment program, attend regular peer support meetings, and submit to random chemical analysis to confirm my abstinence. In addition, I was assigned to a monitor—a LAP volunteer in my community who would monitor my compliance with the terms of my contract.

The first six months of sobriety were filled with extreme emotions. Work served at times as a distraction from the fear, anger, and remorse typical in early sobriety, but only at times. With the legal consequences of my actions still in front of me, I had no choice but to soldier through it. But the newfound fellowship and support of my colleagues in the LAP enabled me to face the consequences from a position of increased personal strength. With a statement from the Lawyer Assistance Program confirming six months of abstinence from alcohol and compliance with my LAP contract, the court exercised the little discretion it had and allowed me to do my time monitored at home followed by probation. The relief of putting this behind me was almost indescribable, and marked the beginning of the process of putting my life back together.

The next few years were spent doing the right things. I attended peer support meetings, met with my LAP monitor, worked hard in my practice, and stayed clean and sober. I remarried, had two children, and came to know a peace in my life that had previously eluded me. After I successfully completed my LAP contract, I was asked to become a LAP volunteer. As a LAP volunteer I have the privilege of helping other attorneys imprisoned by their addiction. When an attorney's struggles come to the attention of the LAP, volunteers reach out to the attorney, share with them their stories, and let them know of the opportunities the Lawyer Assistance Program has to offer. For those attorneys who are ready to accept help, volunteers work with them as mentors, contract monitors, friends, and colleagues. As any alcoholic in recovery will tell you, working with other alcoholics is an integral and essential part of successful, long-term recovery, and being a LAP volunteer provides a continuing opportunity to do just that.

I began my story by stating that becoming a lawyer and having the opportunity to reach out to the Lawyer Assistance Program likely saved my life. Like so many active alcoholics, I would not allow myself to open up to and become part of a recovery fellowship of which I (incorrectly) believed I had nothing of significance in common. It was only when I finally asked for help from my fellow lawyers that I was able to see that I was not so terminally unique. Had I not gained the ability to accept the grace of the fellowship of recovery, I'm convinced I would have long ago met an all-too-common alcoholic death. It was the Lawyer Assistance Program that gave this alcoholic lawyer that ability to reach for the prize, and for that I will be forever grateful. ■

The North Carolina Lawyer Assistance Program is a confidential program of assistance for all North Carolina lawyers, judges, and law students, which helps address problems of stress, depression, alcoholism, addiction, or other problems that may lead to impairing a lawyer's ability to practice. If you would like more information, go to www.nclap.org or call: Cathy Killian (for Charlotte and areas west) at 704-892-5699, Towanda Garner (in the Piedmont area) at 919-719-9290, or Ed Ward (for Raleigh and down east) at 919-828-6425.

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