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OREGON ATTORNEY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

IN SIGHT for Oregon Lawyers and Judges

IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF YOUR PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL LIFE

A LAW STUDENT'S JOURNEY TO RECOVERY

My grandmother's best friend gave me my first drink when I was 13 years old: a shot of whiskey to ease the pain of my menstrual cramps. I remember the warmth it sent down my throat and the buzz it jolted to my brain, taking away all my pain. I chased that buzz for 17 years. I had my last drink at age 30, on June 6, 2008.

I am an alcoholic. I am also a law student, a sister, a daughter, an art lover, a sailor, and a world traveler. My alcoholism does not define me, but my unwillingness to accept it until that June day in 2008 wreaked havoc on my life and on those people who love me.

The American Medical Association (AMA) defines alcoholism as a chronic disease. That means it never goes away. The disease, which is often progressive and fatal, is characterized by impaired control over drinking. For me, this meant that I could not permanently stop drinking when I "quit" or, on various occasions (although not every time), when I set out to drink a certain number of drinks, I was unable to adhere to my predetermined "limit."

The AMA further defines the alcoholic as someone who is preoccupied with alcohol. For me, this meant that I spent large amounts of time planning my next drink or coming up with ways to try to drink safely. For instance, I drank beer only, created elaborate schemes to count my drinks, aimed never to drink alone, tried never having alcohol in the house and drinking only at restaurants or parties, tried drinking only at home, drank only white wine or clear-colored liquor, went to therapy, and went to church. Because I am an alcoholic, none of these efforts to keep alcohol in my

life worked. The only solution is never to drink again.

In addition, an alcoholic uses alcohol despite adverse consequences. For me, this meant that I continued to drink despite the terrible hangovers, the lack of direction in my life, the broken relationships with friends and family, the harmful romantic relationships, the mounting depression, and the growing void I felt inside myself. Because denial is a primary component of the disease, I continued to justify my drinking (something that law students and lawyers are very good at) and tricked myself into thinking that somehow, someday, I would be able to control and enjoy my drinking. That is the great obsession of every alcoholic – that she or he will find a way to beat the game.

Looking back, I can see that all the signs of alcoholism were present long before my last drink. After that shot of whiskey at age 13, I did not drink again until age 16. It started off looking "social," but it never was. I drank to get drunk. I drank to avoid feelings of anxiety. I drank to change my personality. I drank to feel like I fit in. Alcohol quickly became my magic elixir. The quantity and frequency of my alcohol intake went up and down over the years, but the feelings remained the same.

Although I had already experienced blackouts and driven drunk numerous times, I did not suffer any "outside" consequences from my drinking until age 19. I continued to get top grades in high school and went to an Ivy League university. But at age 19, I had a terrible breakup with my boyfriend as a result of my drinking. That

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led to my first “swearing off,” followed by a return to drinking a few months later because I did not accept that I was an alcoholic or that I could never drink again. I spent the next 11 years trying to figure out a way to drink. I graduated from college in the top 10 percent of my class, got two very competitive jobs in the first two years after graduation, and went to law school for the first time in 2001.

Alcohol controlled me and took priority over school. I nearly flunked out after the first semester, and my parents forced me to withdraw. I was pleased to do so – that meant I could drink more. I moved from town to town, job to job, and boyfriend to boyfriend for the next six and a half years. I was unsatisfied, often listless, and got more and more depressed as the years wore on.

Nothing disastrous ever happened as a result of my drinking: I never got a DUI, never got fired from a job because of my drinking, never got into a car accident drunk, and never lost my home. Even the law school that I attended in 2001 urged me to stay in school. What happened is that I began to lose the desire to try. My 20s had been one false start after the next, and I simply did not have the energy to keep doing what I was doing.

My last drink was nothing spectacular, just another night when I promised myself I wouldn’t drink but ended up doing so. The next day, feeling shame and regret, I surrendered. I really am an alcoholic, and I can never drink again.

I cannot stay sober alone, however, and I am an active member of a 12-step group. I have taken the 12 steps and go to four or five meetings a week. The meetings I attend are full of people in their 20s and 30s (many of them students), all walking the path of recovery. Working a program of recovery saved my life, and the fellowship I discovered there continues to offer an amazing community where I have made many great friends.

By getting sober, I was able to return to law school; rebuild rotting relationships (including with myself); form new, fulfilling friendships; and become a happy, productive member of society.

This article originally appeared via a link in the Massachusetts Lawyers Concerned for Lawyers (LCL) blog on March 22, 2012, and a link in the Boston University’s Law Student Affairs blog on March 21, 2012. Reprinted with permission.