

IN SIGHT for Oregon Lawyers and Judges

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MARIJUANA: MY PATH FROM ADDICTION TO RECOVERY

Marijuana was a lot of fun for me at 14. The first time I smoked pot, my friends and I went to a bohemian park in the city to get it. We bought a dime bag and got high. The light went on! At the time, I had a generally positive outlook on life – and still do – but the effect produced by marijuana was magnificent. It made me feel funnier and brighter and enhanced my innate sense of optimism. It also felt harmless. All my friends were doing it, and the collective sense about this soft drug was that it was no big deal.

There were drug addicts in the rough neighborhood in which I grew up, but I was not like them. I had potential. My goals were to stay busy at school, do well, and get out of that neighborhood. I wound up attending college in the city, near the park where I first got high. Pot was available and affordable, but my focus remained on doing the work.

In college, I pledged a fraternity and made friends with guys who drank a lot. Most of these guys were from privileged families. Everyone worked and partied hard. I wasn't much of a drinker at the time, but I held my own to get along. Although, like life in the neighborhood, I didn't feel that I truly belonged in the fraternity either. Drinking and smoking pot allowed me to feel at ease.

My pot consumption was moderate throughout college but increased towards the end of law school and at the beginning of my legal career. I was then married to a woman who smoked pot, so the amount we smoked at home seemed normal. The pot use went from weekends to small amounts during weekday evenings. I then

considered it to be the equivalent of an after-work martini. Although buying and using pot was illegal, I rationalized it to be a victimless situation. I wasn't hurting anyone. Regardless, I kept a tighter reign on where and with whom I smoked. Most of my colleagues and clients were pretty straight-laced. It was rare to see a career person in his early thirties getting high. My pot use became more isolated, done mostly at home with my wife and close friends.

When that marriage ended in divorce, the pain was great. I began smoking more regularly to numb my feelings. At the same time, my career was progressing. I developed a niche practice that I was good at and began making money. As things at work got better and better, I smoked more and more to reward myself for a job well done. I ultimately married again – to another pot smoker – but after we had kids, she became critical of my excessive pot smoking. My living at home was ultimately conditioned on attending a drug rehabilitation program.

Although rehab educated me on the adverse effects of drugs and alcohol, it did not cure my problem. I mainly attended to get the heat off, not because I really wanted to quit. After the program ended, the counselor suggested that I attend a 12-step recovery program. At first I did so and enjoyed the fellowship. Recovery meetings are structured in such a way that personal stories of experience, strength, and hope are shared with the group. I related to stories about the negative effects of marijuana use – the isolation and sense of despair that come from wanting to stop, but not being able to. However, I didn't feel a part of the group. I was enjoying success at work,

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and the family situation stabilized. I had the illusion of functionality because I was not like the people in recovery who could not get or keep jobs or who didn't have resources. I then thought that marijuana use had not prevented me from doing what I set out to do. After a couple of years, my attendance at recovery meetings eventually dropped. I also hadn't done any of the things they suggested I do to stay sober.

I then began to drink socially. My wife did not complain because my addictive behavior involved pot rather than alcohol. I quickly began to drink less socially and more alcoholically. Ultimately, the door opened to getting high again. Pot was being passed around at a party one night. I was already drunk and thought, "Sure, why not?" I then began sneaking pot behind my wife's back, getting caught, promising to stop, getting caught again, being asked to leave our home, and on and on. This nasty cycle lasted for about four years.

It ended abruptly. While high and drunk, I engaged in inappropriate behavior which led to severe consequences. The pain and embarrassment I caused opened my eyes to the fact that I have no off-switch for drugs or alcohol. I needed to stop doing both and was finally ready to do what was necessary. I sought help at the Oregon Attorney Assistance Program and began attending recovery meetings. This time was different because I was out of bright ideas and was ready to listen to what people had to say. A successful recovering lawyer related to me that his recovery began when he realized a simple truth: "I am not special and I need help." Another one said, "You don't have to live like this anymore." Those sentiments hit home and at the right time for me.

I also began taking the actions suggested to me to stay sober. I got a sponsor and worked the 12 steps of my recovery program. I also stay connected to other recovering people, including other lawyers. Some days when I am feeling low or disconnected, I just don't drink or use drugs. When playing my "A" game, I am on the beam, spiritually, and live life in the moment.

I have now been on this road for a little over five years and, over that time, I have grown up. I now feel a wide array of emotions. I have better laughter and joy than I ever did while high. However, being sober also brings into sharp relief the resentments, fears, and insecurities that I used to numb out. I try to deal with these issues head-on when they come up. I also consciously

avoid making messes. When I do (and I do), I clean up my mess. I work at communicating appropriately and authentically. In short, I recognize that I have very little agency over anyone or anything – including my own feelings. With the help of others, I take better care of how I act. I feed my spiritual essence by attending recovery meetings, which serves to reinforce in my heart and mind that living a sober life is the better path. Among my tribe of recovering people – red ones, blue ones, rich ones, poor ones – I relate and belong. Today, I am comfortable in my own skin. This allows me to be better in all aspects of life.

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