



# IN SIGHT for Oregon Lawyers

IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF YOUR PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL LIFE

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## THE GROUND FLOOR

When I was drinking, I thought that everything looked just fine on the outside: I had a partnership in a well-respected law firm, a wife, two kids, and a house in the suburbs. In reality, I was the only one being fooled.

I began drinking as a college freshman. The first time, I drank enough to black out. But I didn't think that was significant. I just thought that was what it meant to "party hard." I crashed a car and made a fool of myself countless times. But none of these events ever made me think there was anything odd about my drinking habits.

After graduating from college, I worked for a while, got married, and went to graduate school. I seldom drank during this period. It just wasn't part of my lifestyle. At one point I contracted hepatitis, and the treatment required that I abstain from alcohol for one year. No problem.

Eventually, I decided to go to law school, and once I arrived, it didn't take me long to find the heavy drinkers. Even though I was getting drunk with my classmates, it didn't adversely affect my performance. My grades were always good. In fact, I graduated first in my class and accepted an offer as an associate in a small, well-respected law firm.

Imagine my pleasure in finding my office building had a bar on the ground floor that was an informal gathering spot for other lawyers. Immediately, I fell into the habit of stopping in for "a drink" at the end of each workday. The waiters and bartenders all knew me, and my favorite drink would appear without my ever hav-

ing to say a word. I took that as positive recognition of my status.

Some mornings I woke up and actually remembered getting home. Other times, I'd have no recollection. Still, I somehow managed to function. I'd get up early and leave the house around 5:30 every morning. I'd work hard through the day. But I was unhappy and irritable, for no particular reason that I could pinpoint.

Then one night I was at fault in a slight fender bender. A policeman stopped to see what had happened and immediately realized that I was drunk. I flunked all the field sobriety tests. I was placed under arrest and taken to jail, where a Breathalyzer test showed that my blood alcohol content was .22, more than twice the legal limit.

I spent the night in jail. In the morning, when I was allowed to make a phone call, I called my law partner, not my wife. I considered that arrest the most embarrassing thing that ever happened to me.

I tried to minimize the importance of the DWI. The court ordered that I participate in an alcohol and substance abuse program, which required attendance at AA meetings. I had to go at least once a week and write up a report of topics discussed and my responses. I put off going to my first AA meeting for as long as possible. My first written report was due on Tuesday, so I went on Monday night.

When I first entered the meeting, I thought I was in the wrong place. The premeeting hubbub sounded like the noise of a cocktail party. I sat quietly in the back row and tried not to draw any attention to myself. After all, I was only there as an observer. At one point, the

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man chairing the meeting asked if anyone new was present. Meekly, I raised my hand. I was given a copy of the AA *Big Book* and other literature, all of which I kept hidden under lock and key in a drawer in my office.

The one thing I hadn't expected was that as I left the meeting that night, I felt better about myself than I had in a very long time. I was amazed that the man sitting in the front of the room, dressed in a Brooks Brothers suit, had once felt the way I often did. I always assumed that I was the only one who felt inadequate about not knowing how to handle every situation that might crop up.

During one of the AA meetings that I was required to attend, I heard someone say, "Don't judge your insides by other people's outsides." That hit me with the force of revelation. It was the most reassuring, useful statement I had ever heard. It summed up perfectly the way I had been living my life. It explained to me why I felt like such a fraud. My insides were sick and crippled by my alcoholism, even though I thought I was putting up an impressive front.

After one meeting, I walked part of the way back to my office with the man who had led the meeting. He did not tell me who I was or wasn't or what I should or shouldn't do. He simply said that coming to the meeting was the best thing I could have done for myself. I didn't understand him fully, and I certainly didn't believe him. After all, I was just there to fulfill an obligation imposed on me by the court.

But I kept going to the meetings, and after every meeting I felt better. Now, with the benefit of 15 years of hindsight, I can say that I understand exactly what he meant and that he was absolutely right. I've come to understand how great a life without alcohol can be. Over the years, I've developed a close relationship with my wife and kids, the kind of relationship that wasn't possible when I was drinking all the time. I also have wonderful friends with whom I can share intimate thoughts and feelings. I've discovered that I no longer have to keep the real me hidden from others.

At the time of my arrest, I never thought that getting hit with a DWI would prove to be the best thing that ever happened to me. But it was.

#### Feeling on Top of It Again

*If you are concerned about your drinking or about the drinking habits of someone you care about, call the OAAP at 503-226-1057 or 1-800-321-6227 for experienced, confidential advice. We also offer confidential 12-step meetings for lawyers throughout the week.*

*This article was reprinted with permission from "Finding the Solution," Washington Lawyer, May 2003, published by the D.C. Bar.*