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OREGON ATTORNEY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

IN SIGHT for Oregon Lawyers and Judges

IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF YOUR PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL LIFE

CLUES ABOUT ALCOHOLISM

I should have had a clue about my alcoholism when I got drunk while preparing for my first moot court appearance during law school. I got so drunk that I don't remember confessing to my sister how scared and intimidated I felt as I headed toward the courtroom. Nor do I remember what I said at oral argument or even how I drove myself home afterward. What I do remember is that I insulted the judicial panel and embarrassed my co-counsel, and that absolutely nobody confronted me about my drunkenness.

I was older than most of my fellow law students when this embarrassment occurred, with a successful husband and two young children. I had grown up in a loving home reared by parents who didn't drink and had no experience with any form of excess, particularly alcoholism. Years later, when I finally realized I had a "drinking problem," I didn't feel there was anyone I could ask for help. As my alcoholism intensified, I grew increasingly ashamed, unaware that I had a disease, not a moral problem.

After graduation I got a prestigious first job in private practice. Several other equally desirable positions followed. I made a point of never drinking at work, but there were countless exceptions to my rule. Besides attending Friday afternoon "happy hours" and receptions for clients and distinguished office guests, I did a lot of traveling. The minibars in my hotels were always well stocked, and I justified nights of binge drinking as well-earned relaxation after long work hours. I once had a government job in a building with a ground-floor liquor store, so I never had to worry about my

supply at home.

I never lost a job because of my alcoholism, but over the years it took a personal and professional toll. I could no longer get a good night's sleep, and when I woke up drunk – which occurred with increasing frequency – I had to remember where the wastebaskets were located in the subway stations on my commute, just in case I had to stop and vomit. My marriage ended, my children left home, and I eventually found myself doing most of my drinking alone. I couldn't afford to humiliate myself in public.

My honesty during an annual physical in my early fifties prompted a doctor to suggest that I attend Alcoholics Anonymous, but I didn't go. A year later, when I took my first real vacation in several years, I had a wonderful time and drank surprisingly little. On the way home, however, the plane experienced engine failure twice. Safely on the ground, I spent the night in an elegant hotel with a free minibar, and I drank myself senseless.

I arrived home chastened, badly hungover, and grateful for a second chance at life. For several days I drank nothing alcoholic, but I panicked because I knew I couldn't "stay stopped" by myself. In desperation I called the only recovering alcoholic I knew. This lawyer and former colleague quietly but firmly convinced me that I had nothing to lose by trying AA. This time I followed the suggestion, and I've kept coming back ever since. It's been over five years since I had what I hope will be my last drinks. (I never had just one.)

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One of AA's big surprises is that not only has it taught me about my disease and how not to drink; it has helped me learn how to live. With a support group and the guidance of a 12-step recovery program, I can confront daily anxieties without fear or shame. Today, for me, "surrender" doesn't mean capitulation, but rather knowing that, as an alcoholic, I can't ever drink again, under any circumstances. By acknowledging my powerlessness over alcohol, I can finally put my life in order.

I wish I had known about the lawyer assistance program, because it might have shortened my long drinking career. As lawyers, we routinely confront stress, anxiety, loneliness, and challenges to our self-esteem. The temptations to relieve such conditions through substance abuse are great, and it's often possible to do so without risking economic ruin or professional disgrace. Sometimes, even when we realize we need help, it's difficult to know where to turn. Lawyer assistance programs are there to help solve that dilemma.

If you have concerns – for yourself or someone you know – call the OAAP and ask to speak to an attorney counselor. Their assistance is free and strictly confidential. They are here to help. Call 503-226-1057 or 800-321-6227.

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