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IN SIGHT for Oregon Lawyers and Judges

IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF YOUR PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL LIFE

I FINALLY FEEL LIKE I FIT

I got sober the last day of finals during my second year of law school. I was at school, getting ready to take my last final of the year. But instead of studying, I was staring at a poster advertising an end-of-the-semester party for law students at a bar downtown. As I read it, something inside me said that if I went to that party, I would not stop drinking for a long time.

About a week prior, I had set out to prove to myself that I could control my drinking. I knew that other people thought I had a drinking problem, but I also knew that they were wrong. So I went to a bar to have dinner, and told myself to have just one beer and then go home, just to show that I could. It worked! In fact, it worked so well, I tried it again the next day. Same bar, same dinner, same result. By the third day, the thought occurred to me that maybe I could have just two. By the time I ate my dinner, I was drunk, and even though I wanted to stop, I knew I was going to keep drinking. And I did. In three days, I went from having one beer with dinner to staying out all night and getting about as drunk as I could get at a time when I was supposed to be studying for finals. It wasn't until that moment that I finally knew, deep down inside, that everybody else was right and I was wrong. I could not stop. I was an alcoholic.

I started drinking "for real" when I was 14. I grew up in a small rural town in the Midwest. From a very early age, I remember feeling like I was somehow not good enough – like I was different. From the outside, things looked normal. I had a family who loved me, and while we didn't have a lot, we always had enough. I didn't have to try very hard in school, but I never felt like I fit. I started smoking cigarettes

occasionally and drinking a beer or two once in a while when we could sneak one from my friend's house.

I remember the first time I got really drunk. I was a freshman in high school and got drunk enough to get really sick during a football game. Instead of thinking, "I'm never doing that again," I remember waking up the next day thinking, "That was great!" Getting sick was just part of the deal. And so it started. From that point on, I often drank until I got sick.

I tried a few other substances – smoked a little pot and huffed a little gasoline. But neither of these made me feel like alcohol made me feel. I'm not sure it "made me feel comfortable in my own skin," as some people say, but it sure made me not care that I didn't.

In high school, drinking seemed normal. The drinking age was 18, but a few places didn't pay much attention, so I was going to bars pretty regularly from age 16 on. I tended to hang around with people who drank more than I did. When my best friend went to treatment at 17, I thought, "He's an alcoholic – I'll never be that bad."

At one point, though, I remember looking at these two old guys, sitting where they always sat at the end of the bar they always went to, and thinking, "If I don't get out of this town, I'm going to become an alcoholic, just like them." So I went away to college, thinking things would be different. They weren't. After four years of "party drinking" (most every Thursday, Friday, and Saturday; passing out in strange places; occasional blackouts; constant hangovers), I thought to myself, "If I don't get out of this state, I'm going to become an alcoholic."

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Which is how I found myself in Oregon. I was married at 22. For the next 14 years, things looked pretty normal from the outside. I had a decent life, a decent job, a couple of decent houses – and I drank. Some periods were worse than others. Sometimes I drank in nice places with good-looking people. Other times, I would go out with friends to have “one or two” but not come home until 3 a.m. I sometimes liked to go where nobody knew me or just drive around by myself. Too often, I drank whiskey at home by myself, staring at the TV until I passed out. But I always made it to work. There were no arrests, no lost jobs. I couldn’t be an alcoholic, but most everything I did involved alcohol.

In retrospect, so many of the decisions I made, both large and small, were based on my drinking. When I was 36, I made an impulsive decision to apply to law school, in part because I was on a bowling team with two lawyers. We would drink beer, and they would laugh and tell great stories and tell me I would be a good lawyer. But mostly, I went because I didn’t like being me very much, and I thought being a lawyer could change that.

So I went to night school. For a while during my first year, I felt like I had it all together. Working during the day, school at night, partying afterwards, decent grades. I found my people! They were smart and fun. However, by the end of the first year, my marriage ended. I started a new relationship, but it didn’t take long for that person to realize that my alcohol use was out of control. I tried to stop on my own several times that year, but I couldn’t “stay stopped.” When I didn’t drink, I was depressed, anxious, fearful, angry. It’s no surprise, then, that by the end of my second year of law school, that relationship ended as well. That person was the first in my life to have the grace to tell me to my face that I had a problem with alcohol.

So there I was, staring at this poster. I knew I needed help, but I didn’t know what to do. Then I remembered that one of my professors had mentioned in passing that he hadn’t had a drink in something like 15 years, which seemed unimaginable to me. It also happened that it was his final that I was about to take. Not knowing what else to do, I went to his office. I told him I needed help. He sat me down at his desk and made a phone call. I found out later that he had called the OAAP. He gave me the address of a lawyer he knew. He told me to go to that address at 6 p.m. that night, and that they would help me. That’s how I made it to my first AA meeting.

I was terrified to go in. I had no idea what to expect. When I finally sat down and started to listen, I heard a person celebrating his one-year sobriety anniversary. He looked nothing like me, and his experience was little like mine. However, as I listened to him speak, *he seemed to know exactly how I felt*. But instead of being depressed and miserable (like I was), he seemed genuinely happy and full of gratitude! *By sharing his story, he told me he had found hope and that I could, too. Right then, I knew I was in the right place*. I came back to that meeting the next week and the next. In fact, the lawyer holding the meeting in his office became my sponsor and, eventually, my employer and friend. I haven’t had to take another drink since that time. I’ve been to a lot of other meetings, too. I am so grateful for the people there who helped me – who have shared their experience, strength, and hope with me.

For me, AA isn’t really about quitting drinking. I had done that plenty of times before. I just didn’t like “sober me” very much most of the time. Each time I stopped, I would just get more and more miserable until I started drinking again. AA teaches me how to live my life in such a way that I am happier being sober than being drunk. Because of that, my life has changed. As a person in long-term recovery from alcohol, I have learned that I have a substance use disorder, just like approximately 9% of U.S. adults, and that it can be treated. I am surrounded by friends who care for me and share my values. I’m married to a wonderful person whom I met at an AA meeting. I have work that I truly love, and I get to be of service every day. I finally feel like I fit.

A GRATEFUL LAWYER IN RECOVERY

The OAAP supports recovery by providing individual counseling and referral to treatment, and by offering weekly recovery support groups and events for lawyers, judges, and law students. If you would like more information, or would like to be notified of upcoming OAAP recovery events, please contact Doug Querin, douglasq@oaap.org, 503-226-1057, ext. 12, or Bryan Welch, bryanw@oaap.org, 503-226-1057, ext. 19.