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IN SIGHT

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IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF YOUR PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL LIFE

MY JOURNEY FROM ALCOHOLISM TO SOBRIETY, RECOVERY, AND THE BENCH

Standing at the doorway of the courtroom, I reflected on how I had come to be here as a civil court judge. My reverie took me back to another time when I stood at the door of a different room where a meeting of recovering alcoholics was in progress. I recalled wondering how I had ended up there as one of them.

My background had all the classic signposts for this journey into alcoholism – an alcoholic father, assorted alcoholic aunts and uncles. But when did this happen to me? How had this happened to me?

Like many young girls, I started drinking at parties with my boyfriend. Unlike most adolescents, though, I experienced blackouts at age 14. Despite this horrible side effect, far more important to me was the way alcohol made me feel – freer, happier, less gawky, and more like I belonged.

I married young, became a mother at age 17, and continued to drink. While I usually drank until I was drunk and often did things I was later ashamed of, drinking was still fun and thrilling. Orange juice and vodka was an exotic concoction to an inexperienced teen-aged mother who was suddenly in charge of another human life. Drinking also made my marriage more bearable.

Curiously, while my marriage was deteriorating, I found that I had a desire to achieve – in part because I knew I would eventually have to take care of myself and my young child. This drive spurred me to finish high school and enroll in college. When my marriage finally ended, I started raising my young daughter all alone. While taking evening classes at law school, I worked full-time to pay for tuition. In a short span of five years, I had transformed myself from a naive, dependent wife into a disciplined, motivated superwoman. I could do anything!

But in spite of my new confidence and ambition, I continued to drink. Now I drank to relieve the stress

of constant study, work, and classes. So what if I was hung over occasionally and short-tempered at my job? I deserved a little fun. So what if my school attendance fell off? I could always make it up. So what if stops at a bar became increasingly frequent, evening-long activities? So what if I stumbled home long after midnight, leaving my sister to care for my daughter by default? So what? I was a single, working mother who planned to join a noble profession – I was going to be a lawyer. I was on the ladder up, a trailblazer, a woman on fire.

I graduated and moved to a new city where I held a variety of legal jobs in city and state government, including working for a judge. I had new friends, a new boyfriend, and what I hoped would be a new relationship with my daughter and my drinking. This time, I told myself, I would take the upper hand and control how much and how often I drank.

When that didn't happen, I recognized that my drinking was out of control. People were starting to tell me that I might have a problem. Maybe, I thought, but I found a quick solution to deal with them. Anyone who mentioned my drinking was cut out of my life forever – cleanly, swiftly, sharply. Those people were replaced by new "friends" who drank like me. And I spent less time with my daughter, boyfriend, and old comrades.

As things continued to worsen, I shifted the blame for my need to drink onto my boyfriend, the weather, my boss, the grocer, the bank teller, and even the mayor. When more and more people told me I had a problem, I stopped drinking in public. I stopped going out, preferring to spend evenings alone in the privacy of my home. I felt safer there, since I was afraid of where I might end up in a blackout if I went out drinking.

At about this point, I realized I couldn't stop drinking. I was addicted. So I started going to therapists and psychiatrists. I stopped and started drinking many times. My continued drinking completely wrecked

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havoc with my relationships. My daughter left home at 20 and moved across the country to escape. I was asked to leave one job. At the next one, I managed to work fairly steadily, but my behavior was such that people, like my daughter, stayed far away.

At my sister's insistence, I agreed to enter a five-day hospital detoxification program. I was afraid if I refused, she, too, might leave. Once in detox, the doctors convinced me that I would benefit by going to a rehabilitation center. So I did, spending a month there. When I returned from the rehab center, my boss was hesitant to let me return to work. He didn't want an alcoholic working for him. His reluctance fueled my desire to stop drinking for good in much the same way that my divorce motivated me to finish school so many years before.

In sobriety, I became active in bar association activities, including the state bar association's committee on lawyer alcoholism and drug abuse and the American Bar Association's Commission on Impaired Attorneys. I also began to explore the possibility of becoming a judge. The application forms for appointment included questions about treatment for alcoholism, which I answered truthfully. When I was interviewed by the appointment committee, no one asked me about my recovery. I was not appointed that year or the next time I renewed my application, and I didn't know exactly why.

Undaunted, in the twelfth year of my recovery, I decided to run for an elected position on the bench. My entire campaign – except for the manager – was run by the people I had met during recovery. To say that the experience of my recovery gave me the courage and strength to do this is an understatement. The emotional support I received from my friends in recovery and the members of the state bar's lawyer alcoholism committee was beyond any that a political committee or party could have provided. I found that the alcoholism recovery principles worked even under the most stressful circumstances. They gave me the energy and the attitude to finish the race. I won the election.

It has now been many years since I've had a drink, and my life today is unrecognizable from the old one. I live by a set of spiritual principles that have seen me through the many difficult days of recovery. My

recovery process has not only put my life back on track, but I have healed and grown in ways far beyond anything I could ever have imagined in an alcoholic haze. I have a close, loving relationship with my daughter. I have sober, caring friends. I have a busy life and a career that continues to amaze and astonish me. I am happy and relieved of the stress and worry that plagued me in the years that I drank.

My tenure on the bench has been exciting, challenging, and rewarding. The opportunities to be of service to others have been too numerous to recount here. Every day I see how the results of the disease bring so many people into contact with the legal system. I can only hope that reading this personal story of my alcohol abuse and subsequent recovery will encourage others to reach out for help themselves or for another lawyer who is suffering.

Grateful for the Opportunity to Serve