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The Human Face of Addiction, Recovery, and Advocacy

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MY STORY

I was recently invited to be a guest speaker for the small break-out groups at a lecture and tutorial titled “The Human Face of Addiction” for the UBC Faculty of Medicine’s Doctor, Patient, and Society course. I shared some of my personal story with the students in a small group, and we discussed why I believe so strongly in Twelve Step programs, such as Alcoholics Anonymous (AA).

Like many addicts and alcoholics, I have a background. Environmental stressors and my personal history, combined with genetic factors, have made me especially susceptible to addiction. The American Society of Addiction Medicine states that two key factors leading to addiction are “exposure to trauma or stressors that overwhelm an individual’s coping abilities”, and that the result of exposure to these trauma and stressors is “disruption of healthy social supports and problems in interpersonal relationships which impact the development or impact of resiliencies”.¹ In other words, due to

a lack of healthy coping mechanisms, addicts turn to substances or addictive behaviours to help them deal with the ups and downs of their lives—or not deal with them at all by numbing everything out.

The students I interacted with were interested in my history and how it related to my alcoholism. My exposure to trauma and stressors began when my parents divorced when I was very young. After being separated from my birth father from the age of three, we finally reunited when I was 21 years old. I didn’t understand it at the time but the sense of loss deeply affected me. My older brother was in a serious car accident when we were both in high school and was in a coma for several days. It took him years to recover. In my early 20s, I lost my brother to the disease of addiction and his death has profoundly affected our family.

After my brother’s death, I remember drinking for the effect for the first time: to numb the pain. Drinking became more and more a priority in my life. I was a weekend binge drinker who, for a long time, believed I was simply having fun. It was easy for me to look at my life and think that I had everything under control. It was my sister who finally persuaded me to go to my first AA meeting.

I entered the meeting skeptical, embarrassed, and full of fear. In the meeting, I heard people share their experiences and stories of strength and hope. I was able to look at the similarities of my situation and not dwell on any of the differences. I identified with how people said they felt when they were still actively drinking, waking up in

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the morning and trying to piece together what happened the night before, and the feelings of dread, remorse, guilt, and shame. Hearing people share at such a deep level of honesty shocked me at first but I quickly realized the honesty was what gave me hope and made me feel safe. One of my fears was that life without drinking would be dull and boring. However, when people shared about how their lives had dramatically changed for the better, and I could actually see that they really were happy, it relieved my fears. I left the AA meeting with an overwhelming sense of relief and hope.

The work of the Twelve Step programs provided meaning, structure, and joy to my life. It also provided a connection to a supportive community of like-minded people who were taking action to improve the quality of their lives. There are approximately 500 different Twelve Step meetings in the Greater Vancouver Area every week, including Narcotics Anonymous, Overeaters Anonymous, Gamblers Anonymous, and more. However, AA remains the largest, with meetings in over 180 countries around the world. There are meetings that target specific populations, which include men only, women only, gay/lesbian, and professionals. There are also meetings designed for families.

The first step of AA is “admitting we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives have become unmanageable”.² To become a member of AA, the only requirement is for a person to have a desire to quit drinking. Although most meetings are closed and for members only, there are open meetings where non-members may attend. Open meetings are an excellent resource for medical professionals to learn more about recovery programs available in the community for patients who are struggling with addiction. A pamphlet to introduce AA as a resource for health care professionals is available through the AA website at: http://aa.org/pdf/products/p-23_aaasaresourceforhcp1.pdf.

Today I am proud to identify myself as a person in long term recovery and what that means for me is that I have not used drugs or alcohol for over 23 years. I believe that recovery is a life long journey and therefore I continue to attend Twelve Step AA meetings. The gifts of my recovery are that I am the proud mother of three wonderful adult children, the Executive Director of the Orchard Recovery Center, a passionate speaker for recovery advocacy, and one of the founders of the Recovery Day event in Vancouver and the non-profit organization Faces and Voices of Recovery Canada.

ADDICTION RECOVERY ADVOCACY

My passion for recovery advocacy is deeply rooted in my family history and really took off when colleague AnnMarie McCullough and I were linked to a page on the website Kickstarter. This fundraising webpage featured a trailer for a film project called *The Anonymous People*, which documents the Addiction Recovery Advocacy Movement and aims to help break the stigma of addiction.

We invited the film’s director and writer, Greg Williams, to speak at the REEL Recovery Film festival, which is now in its third year. Through Mr. Williams, we were reacquainted with an organization called Faces and Voices of Recovery, a recovery advocacy group in the United States. Aware that the United States Government recognizes September as Recovery Month, we aimed to spearhead a similar movement in Canada. An official proclamation was issued by Mayor Gregor Robertson recognizing September 30th, 2012 as Recovery Day in Vancouver. The Recovery Day event drew more than 1,000 people to the Vancouver Art Gallery and was documented by Williams for his film. Recovery Day has now spread across Canada, and 10 cities will be hosting events on September 8th, 2013.³

I am honoured to be a part of an amazing group of people who are committed to the emerging recovery advocacy movement in Canada through Recovery Day events and the formation of Faces and Voices of Recovery Canada.

I strongly believe in the vision of Faces and Voices of Recovery Canada which states that “recovery works and saves lives. The organization envisions a world in which recovery from addiction is both commonplace and a celebrated reality—a world where no person will ever feel shame when reaching out for help”.⁴

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Student Career Planning and Networking Events

Save the Date:

- **Surgical Journal Club for Students**
MSAC, October 7th 2013, 5:00-7:00PM
- **Global Health Journal Club for Students**
Date: TBD
- **Pediatric Surgery and Pediatric Anesthesiology Career and Summer Student/Faculty Mentor Speed Networking Night**
MSAC, February 3rd 2014, 5:00-7:30PM
- **Global Health Symposium**
Date: TBD
- **Surgical Skills Night**
CESEI (VGH), March 24th 2014

RSVP: Nathan O'Hara at NOHara@cw.bc.ca

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