

The Voices of Lawyers Who Suffer From Addiction and Mental Health Problems

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It was 10:30 at night and lawyer J.B. Burtch had yet another gin and tonic (mostly gin) in his hand as he conferred with a colleague about a brief. The colleague was a recovering alcoholic and the conversation went like this.

Colleague: “J.B., you’ve been drinking, haven’t you?”

J.B. “Yes I have.”

Colleague: “Do you want to do something about it?”

J.B. “Yes, yes I do.”

That was the last day that J.B. Burtch had a drink. He had known for more than two decades that he had a problem. He had tried to stop drinking himself, to no avail. He suspected that his wife was thinking about arranging an intervention.

He was depressed. On a gray day, his soul was grayer still (his exact words) as he drove home from work, knowing that he would go home and drink. He was a high-functioning alcoholic. He didn’t miss days a work, never got a DWI, handled his legal

work well, and didn't drink before 5. But then he drank until he went to bed.

His colleague's question "Do you want to do something about it?" resonated. He did want to change his life. He poured the remainder of the drink in the sink.

September 29, 2003 is J.B. Burtch's sobriety date. He went into a recovery program and has remained there – because an alcoholic is always an alcoholic, whether he drinks or not.

He says his road was easier than most – he knew he didn't want to go back to the life he had. He also resolved to give back by helping those in trouble –and was a recent President of Lawyers Helping Lawyers.

Though he had never told his story publicly, he did so at the February 2014 VSB Council Meeting – and the applause was thunderous. Henry Willet, who as a young lawyer had been mentored by J.B., was the next speaker at the podium and could not keep his voice from quavering as he recognized how much J.B. had given him without Henry ever knowing that he was struggling with alcoholism.

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Paul (not his real name) is in his 40s and a partner with a large firm in the Roanoke area. He started drinking as a teen and continued drinking through law school but didn't seem to have problem.

Suddenly, life got hard. There was more pressure at work. He was fighting with his wife. He coped by drinking.

Sometime before he went into treatment, he went out West with a partner. He drank a lot. When he got back, the partner asked if he had a problem.

Paul went to see Jim Leffler (Executive Director of Lawyers Helping Lawyers) and took some tests. He was not a blackout drunk, he didn't drive drunk and he hadn't been in trouble with the law. He was not entirely candid about the fact that he drank from the time he got home until he went to bed – and then got up at 5 a.m. every morning to work out and sweat out the booze. He “fooled” Jim, as he put it.

While he was not excelling at work, he was getting by. At that point, he didn't see that he wasn't as focused and productive as he should have been.

Here's how he bottomed out. He went to a partners' meeting out of town. There was a fair amount of alcohol consumed. He didn't think he was drinking more than his colleagues – but clearly he was - and they noticed. He was basically dead drunk two days in a row. A lot of folks saw his condition.

Later that week, he was called into the managing partner's office. Two other lawyers were there. They had talked to LHL

first. They gave Paul a choice: Get fired or go to a treatment facility and follow its recommendations.

He went, thinking it would only be a week. Once he was there, he realized how much help he needed. He voluntarily stayed for 10 weeks. His firm generously funded the treatment.

Paul signed a one year contract with LHL promising not to drink, agreeing to random screenings and pledging to go to 90 AA meetings in 90 days. He still goes to AA meeting once or twice a week.

He still has lunch with Jim Leffler from LHL whenever he's in town.

His parting grateful words to me were, "LHL gives law firms a road map – an option other than firing a lawyer who represents a liability – firms just don't know what to do until they talk to LHL."

He is celebrating more than four years of sobriety.

Bob (not his real name) is a solo attorney in the Richmond area. His marriage went bad in 2007. Then his mom died. He lost focus, cut back his practice and became isolated. He didn't file pleadings when he should have. Finally, and inevitably, there was a Bar complaint. After talking to Bob, the Bar investigator

suspected he was suffering from depression and urged him to talk to LHL.

Like so many lawyers, Bob had no idea that LHL helped those with mental health issues. He filled out a questionnaire and began meeting with a therapist.

Bob knows he is not “cured” but he doesn’t need medicine. He knows what the warning signs of depression are. He attended years of LHL meetings and signed the same sort of long term contract that Paul had.

He describes the people in the LHL meetings as his extended family.

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Dick (not his real name) is a corporate lawyer with a large firm in Richmond. He suffered from both alcoholism and depression (which people often self-medicate with alcohol). That’s what Dick did – starting in high school.

Though he drove drunk dozens of times, he was never caught. He drank only after work. He kept a bottle of vodka in the refrigerator – to keep it cool. He pulled it out periodically all night long and took a long pull. This kept him from knowing how much he was drinking.

His hangovers got worse, and sometimes he drank in the morning to ease them. He knew not to go to the office when

he'd been drinking, but one morning he violated his own rule and went to work. His intoxication was clear.

He went to talk to a partner and then attended an AA meeting the same day and picked up his first white chip (a pledge not to drink for a day). He picked up many more over time.

He too met with Jim Leffler of LHL and signed a one-year contract. He agreed to the same random tests, 90 AA meetings in 90 days and attending LHL meetings.

He said he especially loved LHL because people there are peers – they understand how frightening it can be when a major client is angry with you or when you have too many deadlines in too short a time. He has been sober for more than five years and credits LHL for getting him there.

Adam (not his real name) is a young lawyer in a Richmond area small law firm. He had started drinking at 14. He was a blackout drink. As he told me ruefully, "I got in a little trouble with the law."

He stopped drinking for a time after graduation from law school and thought he could manage his problem.

That didn't prove true. Before he actually became a lawyer, Adam went to Costa Rica – as he flew back, he got blind drunk on a plane and passed out. As he said, "I had a meltdown on the plane – when I arrived at Dulles, I was arrested, charged

with a felony count of interfering with flight attendants and taken to jail – I pled guilty.”

As he said, “I regret it happened but I am grateful that it happened. I could no longer deny I had a problem.”

Adam has been sober for more than six years. He credits LHL, with which he signed the usual contract. As he notes, many people don’t know that LHL helps law students as well as lawyers. He too attended AA and LHL meetings and talks about recovery being easier when you have peers to talk to.

He wanted me to deliver this message: “Not everyone needs LHL, but someone they know does. LHL benefits the profession and helps people recover so they can practice law – and it’s a cost-effective measure.”

Sherise Powers does criminal and traffic work. She suffers from depression. She knew that her mother had been strangled to death when she was 45. Five years later she learned that her mother had been violently raped before being murdered.

What happened to her mom ate at her. Ultimately, she became suicidal. A judge referred to her LHL.

She felt sick, she had no energy, she missed court and missed days at work. Her finances were in a bad way.

She went to see Jim Leffler and took a battery of tests, indicating her suicidal tendencies. She began seeing a therapist and taking medication.

What sustained her? As she emphasized, “I didn’t want to leave my grandchildren with the legacy of a grandmother who had committed suicide.”

As she learned through LHL, there are a lot of lawyers who suffer from depression. She still goes to the LHL meetings and finds support there.

Her plea to her colleagues? “If you see someone who shows signs of a problem, reach out to them. If they don’t respond, contact LHL so **they** can reach out to them.”

She also points out that there is a bigger stigma to mental health issues than addiction – this can make it harder to come forward and admit a problem.

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Steve Roberts cites February 11, 1997 as his first day of sobriety. He is a solo practitioner and litigator in Williamsburg.

He didn’t drink every day but would sometimes go on a three-day binge. At a duck-hunting camp, he was drunk every day. When he went on a two-week beach vacation, he drank every day.

His alcoholism became so bad that he drove drunk regularly. He would wake up in his car in the driveway having no idea how he had gotten home. He lied to his wife chronically and committed adultery.

He avoided a Bar complaint and a DWI charge – but there was no way to avoid an intervention by 10 friends, including a client and an LHL volunteer. They didn't even tell his wife – she was informed as they talked to him.

Reluctantly, at the urging of his friends, he went to Father Martin's Ashley in Maryland – for five days (he thought). He didn't even get to say goodbye to his wife. In fact, he was angry thinking (erroneously) that she was part of a “conspiracy” to get him treatment.

But he was angry and determined to leave. By chance, he ran into Father Martin in the kitchen. He asked if he could go to a confession and Father Martin said, “Come see me Monday.” He explained that he intended to leave.

Father Martin looked thoughtful. He invited Steve to witness a graduation ceremony for people who had been there for a month. He kept saying, “Everything will be ok.” And he told him, “Jesus Christ died for alcoholics and addicts too.” Steve, deeply religious, was moved.

He went to the ceremony and saw people wearing medals. One woman seemed to be looking directly at him. She was expressing her appreciation to those who had helped her husband and one of the things she said was, "Thank you for giving my son his father back." He thought of his own children. Suddenly, he wanted one of those medals.

At 10 a.m. on Valentine's Day, he prayed to God to help him. He later learned that at 10 a.m. on the same day, his wife sat rocking in a chair he had made for her, and pleaded with God to help her husband.

Steve was clinically depressed as well. He was prescribed Wellbutrin but hesitated to take it. He had the irrational fear that they would stop making it. His therapist told him that if they stopped making it today, there was still a 200-year supply.

He began taking the medication. He lost a lot of weight. He separated from his wife. "She deserved better," he said sadly. He has remarried happily and is thankful that he is still friends with his ex-wife. He has a lot of regrets. "When I was drinking," he told me, "I was as sharp-tongued and mean as a snake."

He knows (now) that he was angry because he was sick. For others, he advises, "you have to admit that you have a problem before you can begin solving it."

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These are the stories of our colleagues who have struggled with mental illness and addiction. They take it a day at a time, recognizing that their illness or addiction may rear its head at any time.

There were tears and broken voices as lawyers told their stories in the interviews. Tears ran down my cheeks unbidden and unseen as I listened to the struggles of colleagues I didn't know.

I hope the voices of our colleagues touched you as they did me. One in three attorneys admits to having a problem with alcohol, drugs or mental health issues. Surely we owe it to our profession to provide as much help as humanly possible. Also, hats off to those individuals and firms for stepping up to the plate. As for Lawyers Helping Lawyers, I knew of it in general, but had never heard the stories of people LHL had helped.

I took on this task because I was asked to. What I heard were seven compelling human stories that I will never forget. Godspeed to LHL for helping so many on the road to recovery. It's a hardscrabble road full of potholes – I hope all my new friends, with the help of LHL and others in their lives, will find the strength to find their way safely to the end of road.

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