September 19, 2019

I drank every day, almost without exception, and for the express purpose of getting drunk, for over 31 years. Every male on my father’s side of the family drank. Every male on my mother’s side of the family drank, too, but so did all the females. Even my mother’s cats would dip into her wine glass from time to time. My earliest memories include numerous and varied social gatherings, parties and simple summer afternoons with my parents and their friends sitting around the table drinking, talking, smoking and socializing. The 1981 Superbowl was a milestone moment in my life. Couldn’t tell you who played, it wasn’t Green Bay, so who cared. But I had my first beer with dad. I’d had sips before, but this was different. I would not turn 10 till June, five months away.

This is the way life was, for me anyway, in the late 70’s and early 80’s. By age 14, I was drinking at least a little every day and was drunk every weekend. I could write a book for parents on how to grow the perfect addict. My childhood was rough. But that’s another discussion.

I would require a thousand pages to go over my history and discuss all the people I have wronged and all the awful things I have done in my career in active addiction. It seems that every day I am reminded of some stunt I pulled or some kindly boss who I did wrong. But suffice to say that by age 45 I had drunken away two wonderful wives, three careers, 2 houses, all my investments and retirement accounts, half a dozen or so nice cars, 45 years of personal property including family photos and keepsakes. And I felt I had lost every friend and loved one that ever even pretended to care about me.

To make matters worse, when I was in my mid 30’s, I had just been fired from a lawyer job and I found employment running heavy equipment on a strip mine in Kanawha County. I’m basically a blue-collar guy with a JD, so I’m comfortable working with my hands. I got hurt in an accident while running a Caterpillar 777 rock truck when the loader operator accidently ran into the side of my truck and I ended up with a ruptured a disk in my lower back. Six months later, I’m back practicing law but with the additional handicap of a major Percocet and Xanax habit on top of my 30 beer/fifth of bourbon a day alcohol addiction.

Life became a blurry, downward spiral. Alcoholism as a disease, affected me like cancer—slowly eating away at my mind until everything I held dear was lost to me. By Halloween night, 2016, all I possessed was a laundry basket full of worn out clothes, a computer so old pawn shops wouldn’t take it, a box full of hand tools, a couple hundred in cash and a 2002 Celica with about 280,000 miles on it that was so beaten up It would take nearly $1000.00 to get it to pass inspection. Tthe only thing that I actually cared about was my dog, Hellie, who I rescued after my mom, her namesake Helen, passed away the preceding winter. I was broken in every conceivable sense of the word.

That Halloween morning, I was asked to leave the only place I had left to stay. So, I did what cowards do when they realize that they are finally beyond redemption[[1]](#footnote-1), I drove way out into the woods with a bag of weed, a bunch of $0.99 high alcohol content beers, a half-gallon of Jim Beam and a bag of ice. I had called a friend from a church I knew about who took Hellie for me upon the condition that “when I get back on my feet,” I’d get her back. One more lie in a lifetime full of them. November 1, early in the morning, deep in the woods, I ran a hose from the exhaust of the car to the window, taped it up real good, and set out to die. The last memory I have as a drunk was trying to light a cigarette and failing because there was so little oxygen left in the car it wouldn’t light.[[2]](#footnote-2)

I have no memory of what happened afterwards. I remember coming awake disoriented and very ill, but obviously not dead. I have absolutely no idea where I am or how I got there. It takes all my strength to remain calm enough to gather my wits and begin to take in my surroundings and gather information. It’s pitch dark. I fumble around and find what feels like a lamp on a table next to me and when I find the switch and flip it on, I realize I am alone in a room with two beds in it and an adjoining bathroom. It was a nice place, like a hotel of sorts. But. . . not. On the other side of the bedroom door, which I was surprised to find was unlocked, was a common room. A couple of tables, a coffee pot, a couch I think, but not much else. I found a clock and it was 4:45 a.m. No one else was awake and the place was utterly silent. Creepy. There were two or three other rooms attached to the common room and a door that led outside. I go outside, late November. Cold. No coat. Mountains, but not West Virginia—low rolling hills. That much is clear. Then real panic sets in. I see a few other cottages and a main building. Absolutely no Idea how much time had passed between the woods and this place. Then it hits me, I couldn’t even accomplish this one, simple task.

For a moment I thought I might be incarcerated; the place was set up a lot like Alderson and it was too dark to see if there were fences or anything. Sixteen days of my life an utter mystery. I have no memory of the ER, of my stay in Highland Hospital or the first few days after release. Soon other patients began to wake up and told me I was in a rehabilitation facility in Pennsylvania. It took a long time, several days, to piece it all together by talking to the doctors and staff. I was at Brightwater Landing outside of York, PA. It turns out that some kindly man, who just happened to be out that morning looking for a place to put up a tree stand, found me in my car 10 miles from the nearest hard road, pulled the hose from the exhaust pipe and called 911. I spent a day and a half to two days in the ICU and then was “mental hygiened” and sent to Highland to detox. I was told that, upon admission into the hospital, my BAC was over 0.45%. The attorney who represented me in the hygiene proceeding contacted the WVJLAP as, clearly, I was in need of assistance. Upon release from detox after 9 or 10 days the JLAP folks arranged for my stay in York and, miraculously, somehow arranged it so that Brightwater would comp the stay.

I really don’t remember much about my 28 days there. But the snip-its I retain are all positive and I remember generally being happy there. I was released on December 10, 2016. I had no home. I had no family that would ever speak to me again. I had no friends to call upon for help. I had about $150.00 left after cigarettes I had purchased in York. But I had one thing--conviction. I had been given a great gift. Even at the time, as screwed up as I was, I knew this with all my being. I had no idea what I was going to do, how I was going to do it, or even where, geographically, I was going to go. But I was done drinking. Never again. And I was going to get my dog back. That was the first and only goal I could manage.

The first year out of rehab was a blur. There is a condition that many alcoholics and addicts suffer from when they finally dry out called PAWS, or Post-Acute Withdrawal Syndrome. It is a cast iron devil. It took about 18 months for my brain to rewire itself to function semi-normally without alcohol and drugs. I lived in homeless shelters and flop houses and “sober living homes” and spent a couple periods living in a tent. But I never stopped working. Immediately upon release from Brightwater I got a job at a pizza joint as a delivery driver and worked my butt off. Soon I was the lead driver at a busy store and was making some OK money. This plus the odd jobs I was getting from customers who would pay me to fix a car here, or repair a faucet there, was enough to get a stable room and that’s all I needed to get Hellie back. And about a month later I got her a little sister, Abby. On paper I rescued Abby, but, really, she helped rescue me. She was my miracle. She was a three-month old Golder Retriever mix who loved me more than anything or anyone except my mother ever had.

 At first, I was mostly living on food the place was going to throw away because it was a mistake or not picked up by a customer. The dogs thought I was a demigod: Papa John’s five nights a week! Yeah Daddy!! But these were real hard times. I had to do some unspeakable things to survive those first few months. People I was forced to room with, places I was forces to stay, real hunger, real pain. But soon I was able to get my own place and I began to acquire stuff. Most three-year old’s own more stuff than I did. I didn’t know how exciting getting a microwave could be!

Somehow, in the 21 years I have been a lawyer, nearly all of it representing indigent defendants, I have only had one ethics complaint, which was summarily dismissed before I even knew about it. I chose this line of work because, deep down, I just get off on helping other people. There are times when it is the only thing that brings me any joy, so I did work hard for my clients. My license had lapsed for a while, but I paid my dues and got reinstated after about a year had passed. I did have a couple of things going for me. First, somehow over all that time I was in active addiction, I was never charged with anything more serious than speeding and no insurance. Not even DUI. God loves drunks and small children. Second, the lack of ethics issues. And third, even drunk all the time, it seemed that most people thought I was an OK lawyer. When I had been sober and reasonably stable for what felt like long enough[[3]](#footnote-3), a bit over a year, I wrote to a few judges in surrounding counties and candidly told them my story and asked for their help. And a few of them agreed to give me a shot and began appointing me on minor criminal cases.[[4]](#footnote-4)

For nearly 18 months, I worked days as a panel attorney and evenings delivering pizza. Over that time, things slowly got better and better. There were major setbacks. I was briefly reunited with my brother and sister for a few months but when my 19-year-old nephew passed away from a heroin/fentanyl overdose it brought my own issues back to the forefront of their minds and I became outcast again. My beloved dog Abby was lost to me right after my nephew passed away and I became distraught for a brief time. Eventually, I could no longer work both jobs and lost the pizza gig, and I began to suffer financially and mentally. But I never gave up.

Over the last two years, 8 months and umpteen days, however, every single time that life would turn black, right in the nick of time, a doorway would appear out of the abyss and, as if guided by the most gentile of spirits, I would reach yet another milestone. My car finally died, but it lasted just long enough for me to get a high interest auto loan and I ended up with a better car. My landlord decided to sell his house and retire out of state suddenly, leaving me homeless, just in time for an apartment that would accept my dogs to become available, leaving me with my own place. And then God gave me Malcolm, an Australian Shepherd puppy who needed a home. He’s now 9 months old it’s back to three of us again. Most recently, I was offered a full-time job, which I gratefully and with all humility accepted. It may as well have been custom tailored both to my wishes and my strengths. I get to provide real help to people, including other lawyers, without direct client representation.

I’ve got a great friend who is a veterinarian in Putnam County. He told me I was a hero to him one day about a year after hearing my story when I brought Hellie in for a check-up. Other people have told me I was a miracle, including my Psychiatrist and many friends in the profession. I disagree with all of it. What I am, however, very, very lucky. I believe in a higher power, but I am a spiritual rather than religious person. All I really did was do exactly what they taught me to do in rehab and in the 12 step programs. Admit I was defeated, ask my higher power for help in rising back up and honestly admit and deal with my own shortcomings and be there to help others who might be in need. The program of Alcoholics Anonymous is not voodoo or witchcraft. It simply puts you in touch with other people who are suffering or who have suffered before, often just like you, for real emotional and spiritual support. It provides a safe and comfortable environment to get your demons off your chest without risk of judgement or ostracism. The steps are just a proven process for how to accomplish these goals. It’s all about accepting responsibility for your own role in your life. For every horrible experience I have shared with my brothers and sisters in the programs I have heard 10 other stories from other people that were just as horrible. We are there for each other and we find that when we are sincere about our desire to improve our situations, and back up those desires with real actions, things get better. We get better.

I really have not craved a drink since I was released from rehab. Maybe my bottom was just that horrific. I don’t know. But this disease is never cured. It never fully heals. Pain is dulled, scars fade, memories of loves lost weaken and lose their impact. But I am now, and always will be, an addict. I will always be one drink, one pain pill, one Xanax away from death.

If you know anyone in the practice who is suffering, placing that phone call to Robert Albury at the WVJLAP could very well save a life. This writing is anonymous. But I don’t hide from any of this. If there is someone out there suffering, lawyer or otherwise, and they might benefit from hearing my story, I will gladly and humbly talk to him or her anytime. Please contact WVJLAP. They will know how to contact me.

1. No one is beyond redemption. That is what this story is about. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Now, this is a serious subject, but I like to try to find humor where I can. It’s helps me process. If I had just stuck with the bourbon, I’d be dead. That is simple fact. When you drink a lot of beer, you produce a lot of pee. When you are trying to kill yourself with carbon monoxide, you can’t open the damn car door, or you’ll let fresh air in and ruin hours of hard work. But I was so drunk, and had smoked so much pot, that I never fully connected any of these facts. If I’d have just stuck with the more bladder friendly whiskey, I would not be writing this. Anyway, a new take on the old “switch to beer” theory. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. As it turns out, while necessary to my survival at the time, I freely admit that it would have been better if I had taken at least another six months. I jumped back in too soon and it showed in the quality of my work. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. It is my hope that those who gave me this chance will read this and know that I owe a debt that I can never fully repay. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)