

JWA Remarks
Faces and Voices of Recovery
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Crystal City, Virginia

This Is Where We Stand

I am truly honored to be a member of this group and very humbled to have this opportunity to share. Today we step out, carrying a positive message of recovery to America's policy center – the Congress of the United States.

I'll begin with my own story and reason to be here. In 1933, my father was attending a small Pennsylvania college on a football scholarship. He had the prospect of being the first of the Allem family to become a college graduate. That was not to be.

Prohibition had recently ended. His father, my grandfather, a successful insurance salesman with a paid-for home, remembered his higher calling – to consume alcohol. Within a short period of time, the job and the home were gone. My father was called from college to help support the family of nine.

My father never drank a drop of alcohol. His worst nightmare, however, came true. His son turned out to be alcoholic – just like his father.

For me, however, there was a solution. A solution that even today reaches only a few. Because of this solution, I am blessed to have lived long enough to see grandchildren. They bring me great joy. But I know where their genes come from. They don't come from the GAP. I work today so the solution will be more readily available for them and their generation.

We are not the pioneers in this endeavor. We follow giant footprints in the sands of America's social history. Reflect with me for a moment on the lives and actions of three of our forerunners: Marty Mann, Brinkley Smithers and Harold Hughes.

In 1969, these three culminated 20 years of work to see passage of the Hughes Act by the Congress of the United States. Senator Hughes, a gregarious, straight-talking "Mr. Smith," chaired hearings on the then taboo subject of alcoholism. Marty Mann led a parade of recovery witnesses that included Bill Wilson, Mercedes McCambridge and dozens of foot soldiers in the recovery movement. Brinkley Smithers provided financial support and wisdom to a national strategy. He then used his influence within the Republican Party to get President Nixon to sign the legislation over the protests of his cabinet.

How these three came together is a fascinating tale that is instructive as we journey from here today.

Harold Hughes was a mid-western populist who lived in a mild rage most of his life and loved every minute of it. A truck driver from Ida Grove, Iowa, he visited numerous jails on his way to sobriety, but never forgot his roots, his story, or his passion for leaving things a little better than he found them.

The story of Harold's election as Iowa's governor is a classic in politics, one Brinkley Smithers noticed early. He flew the Governor to New York to share his vision of an America that better understood addiction as a disease. He introduced him to Marty Mann and other principles of the National Council on Alcoholism. And he encouraged Hughes to run for the United States Senate.

It certainly would have been fascinating to be a fly on the wall during that meeting. Here was Iowa's answer to Huey Long meeting the ultimate establishment investor, whose father had hired Tom Watson to build IBM. They built a relationship that benefited people with addictions and all of America for the next 30 years.

They shared recovery. But they also shared an interest and passion for reaching the public with the positive message that addiction is a disease with a solution.

For Smithers, getting that message was his life's turning point. By 1952, he had been admitted to the Charles B. Towns Hospital in New York City fifty times within five years. Each "drying out" seemed only a brief interruption in his drinking career. He landed there again shortly after the death of his own father. This time, he was visited by Yev Gardner, an ordained minister, a person in recovery, and Marty Mann's executive assistant at the National Council on Alcoholism.

There is a clear message in this for me. Advocacy is no substitute for service. It has been my observation that successful advocacy leaders tend to their own health – including service to others on a one-to-one basis.

Smithers was shocked to learn that alcoholism was considered by science a disease. Why doesn't everyone know this, he asked Yev. His long-term recovery began with that hospitalization and he soon made himself useful assisting Marty and Yev in the business side of NCA. While the financial contributions of Smithers and his foundation are historically significant and very well known, his wisdom and strategic thinking probably were the greater gifts to our field.

Marty Mann appreciated this gift. Her own father was a financial wizard in the retail department store business. The family's wealth was directly responsible for her ability to overcome tuberculosis as a teenager, transporting the entire family to Santa Barbara, California, for state-of-the-art treatment then available. Her father later lost everything to drinking and gambling, dying as an indigent patient.

When Marty began the national campaign to educate Americans about addiction, she drew on her experience and knowledge of society's experience with tuberculosis. Once regarded as a sin, TB was redefined in the public mind through the efforts of a voluntary health movement dedicated to education and change.

That vision is what drove her tireless 20-year, cross-country crusade to establish local committees, often speaking more than 200 times a year. Her stamina was legendary. Her message was riveting. She would accept transportation money from recovery groups to tell her story so that she could also visit non-recovery groups to spread the disease message. Though often criticized, she never publicly identified herself as a member of Alcoholics Anonymous even as she demonstrated her recovery to all. Her interpretation of AA's traditions has stood the test of time.

Reflect on these giants. Each passed through failure – as society defines it – to practice courage, wisdom and action on a national stage. Their talents and contributions built on each other. They demonstrated tremendous egos and awesome humility. They didn't always agree.

Marty and Brink had serious disagreements over issues regarding alcohol products. She believed in staying away from product issues – particularly the wet-dry political fights of the day. Smithers was a pioneer in alcohol policy, working to restrict sales to minors, product labeling and appropriate taxation. The Smithers Foundation today continues that interest.

Likewise, Smithers was little interested in Hughes' brief campaign for President in 1972. Though he helped finance some of the Senator's faith-centered projects in the 1980s, he seriously objected to the founding of SOAR, the Society of Americans in Recovery.

Why am I talking about Marty Mann, Brinkley Smithers and Harold Hughes today? Because it is useful for each generation of leaders to reflect and recall the work they build on.

Hank Aaron said:

“I used to have talks with Jackie Robinson not long before he died, and he impressed upon me that I should never allow myself to be satisfied with the way things are. I can't let Jackie down. The day I become content is the day I cease to be anything more than a man who hit home runs.”

The day I stop caring about the chances for recovery in the next generation, I will cease to anything more than an alcoholic who doesn't drink. I believe Marty, Brink, and Harold are here today, cheering us on to take a stand.

We are often molded by the stories of our culture. I am a Southerner. This is my favorite.

Two southern capitols escaped capture during the Civil War, Austin and Tallahassee. Near the close of the war, an attempt was made to capture Tallahassee.

Troops sailed around Florida, up the Gulf, landing at the mouth of the St. Marks River where Apalachicola is today. Leaving their ship, they marched up the river toward Tallahassee. About half way, the river goes underground for about a quarter of a mile. They call this place Natural Bridge, and the troops found this a convenient place to bed down for the night.

Word reached Tallahassee that soldiers were coming up the St. Marks River. But there were no able-bodied men left to defend the city. A few grandfathers mobilized young students at the Tallahassee Normal School, which today is Florida State University. Twenty-seven boys aged ten to twelve, carrying a strange collection of pots, pans, whistles, washtubs, and school drums, marched to Natural Bridge.

They were hiding in the trees and bushes when the Union soldiers made camp. At a signal during the night, they turned on the noise. The soldiers – not too motivated for this exercise anyway – woke up and ran back down the river.

During the 1930s, families from Tallahassee still celebrated the Victory of Natural Bridge with all day games and dinner-on-the-ground. The story is told how children laughed and teased one old man who simply danced around his cane by a huge live oak tree.

“This is where I stood. This is where I stood,” he would chant as he danced around his cane. The children thought he had escaped from the nearby state mental hospital.

He was of course, one of the students from Tallahassee Normal School. We don't know the course of this man's life, the challenges, the successes, the dreams, the disappointments. But we know one thing: He knew where he had taken a stand, and no one could take that away from him.

I hope to God the same can be said of me, when they take me to the Home. That I can still find places along this journey where I put my stick down – took a stand for things that matter.

We are here today to celebrate our stand. Thanks to our experience, our preparation together, and our time together this week, we are the faces and voices standing for recovery.

When it is time for people in recovery to demonstrate freedom from disease... let our brothers and sisters in recovery hear: This is where we stand.

In the fight to address symptoms of addiction disease when they first occur... let the nation's health system hear: This is where we stand.

When we include families and community in healing... let those still in pain hear: This is where we stand.

When we call on schools, doctors, employers, police, and counselors to join us in appropriately recognizing first symptoms of disease... let the leaders of business hear: This is where we stand.

As we call on America's health reimbursement system to meet their obligation to fund addiction treatment on parity with all chronic illness... let the Congress hear: This is where we stand.

To our professionals in the addiction recovery field who deserve dignity, honor and decent pay... tell the President: This is where we stand.

And to help demonstrate that faith and science meet in powerful ways, to help us conquer addiction in our lifetime... let all the people know: This is where we stand.

I have a dream, sisters and brothers, that a future President of the United States... will raise her pen... in a Rose Garden full... of faces and voices of recovery... and sign legislation... that frees us and future generations... from discrimination against addiction disease.

Because of you, I believe this dream will come true in my lifetime.

Press on. Be well. God bless.

Thank you.