

RECOVERY STORIES

**Recovery
Advocacy Toolkit**

MAKING OUR VOICES COUNT

Recovery

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Growing numbers of recovery advocates are telling their stories in the media – sometimes to give “human interest” to a story or because of growing press attention and coverage to our recovery advocacy activities. People in recovery and their family members are also telling their stories to friends, co-workers and neighbors. Their stories have the power – to reach policy and decision makers; educate the public and recruit new members to our growing movement.

As you organize events such as town hall meetings, public policy panels, and forums, we encourage you to identify people in your community who will share their stories. Growing numbers of people are speaking out because through our silence, we let others define us. The compelling stories of individuals and family members who have experienced long-term recovery can change hearts and minds. For too long, our recovery stories and advocacy successes have been missing from the conversation.

Please also see the “Talking About Recovery” section of the Recovery Advocacy Toolkit for language that you can use to talk with the public and policymakers about recovery from addiction to alcohol and other drugs. While we know that everyone is not comfortable talking publicly about their recovery, if you are interested in telling your recovery story, we encourage you to use this “messaging” or language to share more stories or recovery with your community if you are speaking out as a person in recovery or a family member or friend.

TOM CODERRE (*Providence, RI*)

By the time I was thirty years old, I was pretty successful by most people’s standards. I came from a good, loving family and had many friends. I worked in non-profit management and development for many years and was the executive director of a large non-profit agency in Providence. I was very involved in my community and had a love of politics. I was elected to serve as a Rhode Island State Senator. On the outside, my life looked perfect, but on the inside I was tortured. So, I turned, first to alcohol and then to other drugs to cope with the stresses I was experiencing. Underestimating the power of these substances, I quickly became addicted and my life started a downward spiral. As my life unraveled, I started to lose the things that were most important to me. When my family and friends tried to help, I pushed them away. I lost interest in politics. I lost my job and my position in the Senate. My health deteriorated. I lost my apartment and became homeless. I lost my spirit. I lost my freedom. In the end, I lost everything. My life, which at one time was so full of hope, became hopeless.

Fortunately, my story doesn’t end there. Because I was able to get the help I needed, today I am a person in long-term recovery, which means that I haven’t used alcohol or other drugs since May 15, 2003. And equally important, I’ve been able to create a better life for myself, for my family and ultimately for my community. I believe that recovery is so much more than just not using alcohol and other drugs – it’s about creating a better life. Today, I have stability in my life, a job; I’m active again in my community and enjoying the things I love.

My road to recovery has been long and winding. No one waved a magic wand and all of a sudden I instantly became well. It happened over time. And it happened because I had support. I didn’t know how to stop using and if I hadn’t been arrested and offered an opportunity to get treatment for my problem, the chances are that I wouldn’t have found recovery. After I stopped using drugs, other supports came into play. I needed detoxification services, psychiatric help, and substance abuse treatment – three of the most difficult services to get when you need them, even when it’s determined they are medically necessary. That’s a tragedy and we need to change that.

After I completed treatment I was accepted into a recovery house, where my journey continued. I lived there for 6 months, became the assistant house manager, then the house manager and ended up staying there for 2 years. This was so critical in my recovery. I became active in a recovery community organization in Rhode Island, Rhode Island CAREs, and started to advocate for policies to help people

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who were seeking recovery. I went back to school and finished my bachelor's degree. I started working again, which helped restore my confidence. I started taking care of myself. I attended twelve-step fellowship meetings and started to socialize with other recovering people. My hope was restored and these supports were key.

Today, I have been able to regain the things in my life that are most important to me. I've become a productive member of society. I head up Faces & Voices of Recovery's organizing efforts as National Field Director and travel all over the country working with the recovery community. I'm active again in the things I love – politics, friends, family. This is what recovery is all about to me.

SHARON AND TONY DEMBINSKI (*Webster, MA*)

I have many roles in my life; mother of five, grandmother to three, wife to my husband John, friend to many and that of a professional in my role as a nurse practitioner practicing Addiction Medicine. All of these roles bring me joy, but none like the joy of motherhood. The joy of recovery has been added to my list of the many joys of motherhood through my 25 year old son Tony's recovery from heroin addiction.

Tony has been in recovery for more than 4 years. Just prior to being introduced to heroin Tony was a typical American college student from a typical (if there is such a thing) American middle class family. He has a Mom and Dad, one older sister and three much younger adopted brothers now aged 10, 8 and 5 years old.

When we discovered Tony's heroin use in 2003 we were shocked and devastated and did not know where to go for help or where to turn for guidance. He went into a detox and then a rehab and then on August 18th, 2003, I almost lost my son to a heroin overdose. He spent five days on life support and his doctors told us that he would most likely die or at the very least have very serious brain damage if he survived.

While my son was unconscious, I stood hour after hour at his bedside promising him and anyone that would listen that I would do anything I could to help him and anyone who needed help if he would be spared. During his seven month struggle, he spent five months in rehabs and suffered two more overdoses before finally achieving a sustained, long term recovery.

I am thankful for his recovery every day. While I was frantically trying to learn more about his illness, I felt helpless and alone. I turned to the Internet and online message boards for support and education. People reached out to me in ways that no one had ever reached out to me before. One group of people, in particular, stood out for their dedication, passion, and level of knowledge about this disease and its treatment. That group was the National Alliance of Methadone Advocates. They supported me through all my fears of relapse and overdose and explained what my son was going through in ways that I could understand. Their help was what got me through it all and helped me to help my son. I credit them with saving his life and for that I will be forever grateful. I am blessed with the fruits of their labor every time I see my son smile, hear his goofy laugh, hear the "I love you's" on the other end of the phone or take pleasure in the rare hugs he bestows on me. I no longer have to worry about imagining life without those blessings because he is here with me today in recovery looking toward his future and no longer living in the past.

The future for my son is even brighter since he became a father to his son Jack in July 2007. Tony has fought hard for what he has and what he has become – a strong, loving son, and wonderful father. Today I am fulfilling my promise. I am active in the recovery community. I serve on Consumer Advisory Boards and attend conferences. My relationship with recovery has evolved into a professional one as well. At Kent Hospital in Warwick, Rhode Island, where I practiced as a Nurse Practitioner in the Special Care

Nursery when we first discovered Tony's heroin addiction, I developed the *Mothers On Methadone* or MOM Program. It's a support and education program for expectant women receiving methadone maintenance treatment. It supports them in their recovery, educates them about methadone maintenance therapy in pregnancy and prepares them for the care of their newborns. The program was well-received by the community and it has been supported 100% by Kent Hospital and the National Alliance of Methadone Advocates.

I am also an Administrator for a mutual support message board titled "Methadone Pregnancy Info," which is supported by Methadone Support Org; I serve on the Advisory Board for this organization as well.

Two years ago I left my 20 year practice of caring for newborns and started practicing Addiction Medicine at Discovery House Clinics in Rhode Island. This new career has fulfilled me in ways that are indescribable. I practice using a caring, nurturing philosophy and approach that my patients respond very well to.

My son's illness has brought me many tears, but the joy it has brought into my life inspires me with hope to continue my fight for the patients I care for now, the patients who give back to me 100 fold what I give to them. I plan to continue my recovery advocacy in the future and of course keep my heart open, lap occupied, and ears filled with the joyful noise of a very busy home and life filled with children.

DAN DUNCAN (*St. Louis, MO*)

The story of my addiction disease is not unlike many, many others. I drank as a young man for fun and conviviality. I had a very active, even vibrant social life throughout my twenties but very slowly, so much as to be imperceptible, I found myself losing the important things in my life. I sought help, received treatment and plugged into the world of self-help for alcoholism; became a student of recovery and very gradually most of what I had lost or thought I'd lost, returned. I went back to school, got a degree, pursued a new vocation and today, I have a wonderful family, a beautiful home, friends, respect for myself, happiness and peace of mind...all due to and thanks to recovery. In 2008, I'm celebrating 28 years of sobriety. I am so, so grateful for the help that I received and to all the people I have learned from, sitting around tables and sharing what we've learned with one another, for ourselves and for one and all.

LACHELLE EDWARDS (*Pennsylvania*)

I am 33 years old and I have 10 years clean. My life has changed so much in recovery for the better and I know that the longer that I stay clean the greater life can get. I would not change a thing, not even my past. The past has allowed me to build on top of those experiences and have the strength to find hope and bring hope to others seeking recovery. Being young and in recovery has shown many other young people that there is life after addiction, without the pressure of our peers and we can have fun in it, we just have to make it.

WALTER GINTER (*Westport, CT*)

I am 54 years old and married. I work in New York City, where my wife and I own and operate a small search firm. We live in Westport, CT. I participate in civic activities and have a subscription to the Westport Country Playhouse. Most days, along with hundreds of other Westport residents, I commute on Metro North to Grand Central Station in New York City.

I am indistinguishable from the other commuters and completely typical in every way but one. Each day I take medication for a chronic medical condition. Taking a maintenance medication is hardly atypical, I am sure that many of my fellow commuters take maintenance medications for blood pressure, diabetes,

anxiety and countless other medical conditions. The difference is that I take a medication to treat my opioid dependence.

I first became dependent on opioids in 1971, when I was in the service. I spent the next 20 years in and out of various treatment programs. I felt that I couldn't remain opiate-free because I was weak. I didn't understand that my opioid use had caused changes in my brain. Eventually, I came into contact with recovery advocacy and I learned that taking a medication to restore normal brain function wasn't really different than taking a medication for any other chronic medical condition. I learned that thousands of people have achieved abstinence and sobriety with the assistance of medication-assisted treatments but very few of them consider themselves as recovering persons. This is because they have never learned about medication-assisted recovery as I did. It became my goal to educate those patients so they too can experience what it is like to be a recovering person.

Towards that end I served as Vice President and Director of Training of the National Alliance of Methadone Advocates and developed the Certified Methadone Advocate training. I am a consumer representative on numerous government committees concerning addiction treatment and recovery and am involved in federal and state efforts to move medication assisted treatment toward a more recovery-oriented model. Today I'm the Project Director of the Medication Assisted Recovery Support (MARS) Project. M.A.R.S. Project is a SAMHSA/CSAT-funded project designed to educate MAT patients about recovery and provide peer recovery support services.

SUSAN MCKEOWN (*Manchester, NH*)

I am a parent of a graduate of the Adolescent Substance Abuse Treatment Program. I don't think there is a bumper sticker for that. Every Tuesday my husband and I meet with other parents dealing with the issues around drug addiction in the family. We were the first parents when the group began. After three or four weeks another couple came, followed by a single mother. And so it grew, single parents, married couples, divorced couples – working to save their children even when their own marriages had failed. There are half couples too, the other parent either working, doing supervision at home or in denial, a common thing with parents of a drug-using child. For who among us, in even the most exasperating moments of parenthood, ever pictured our loving, cherubic-faced child fighting the devil of addiction. Not I, not my husband and none of the other parents who show up each week. They aren't there for the pizza.

Although our son has been clean for over three years we have continued to attend. Drug addiction is never cured. It is faced every day, one day at a time. We need to remember that for our son. We have also realized that others are not yet able to see that recovery is possible. Almost every week we have a new parent hemorrhaging from the devastation of this disease. We feel such a responsibility to be there for them, to help in any way; to give hope and courage them to continue their fight to help their child get clean. To keep the faith that recovery is indeed possible and even likely given strong, loving, consistent support amidst the inevitable, tough, painful decisions that will have to be made.

Having the privilege of witnessing active recovery, we are able to see more objectively what every family endures as they face addiction head on; anguished parents trying to help drug-using children, ignoring themselves as they try to hold onto their marriage, family and jobs; siblings, who have been ignored by loving parents while they focus all their efforts to save this sick child. Things getting so out of control under their own roof, they can hardly recognize their family. "How did we get to this place?" the distraught parent asks. "No one else could possibly be experiencing this hell," they incorrectly assume. The shame is overwhelming. How can you talk to extended family and friends about this? They would either never believe it or offer an undeserved critique on your parenting skills.

Spending one evening in a group with parents who are traveling your road can offer solace and strength like few other things. We would be the first to say that faith in God gave us the courage to take action in ways we could never have imagined but the parent group offers humanity and humor in a situation where

there is none. For parents dealing with an addicted child it is about the loneliest road they will ever travel. People will argue that drug addiction is a weakness in moral character, a choice that one makes or a result of poor parenting. Research tells us otherwise. Those of us who have been through it know differently. Firm, consistent, loving parenting will always, always be important. But sadly for those individuals with the biochemistry for addiction it is just not enough. Nevertheless, the stigma remains very real.

There is no parity in health insurance for treating addiction or the often accompanying mental illness. If one can pick his/her disease, he/she would be well advised to choose one from the neck down. For conditions like asthma and diabetes, a good health insurance plan will provide unlimited coverage until the condition is stable. Not so with addiction. Residential programs are few and carry an exorbitant price tag that is prohibitive to most families. Community based programs, which have been shown to have as good an outcome as residential, are far too few. For the parent with a child suffering from drug addiction there are no fundraisers. No neighbors or civic clubs organize a bake sale or golf tournament to ease the anguish or assist with the often not -covered expenses. It is a painful path a parent walks alone. That needs to change.

Communities are really the places where children should receive treatment. For it is here where they live, go to school, work and will eventually raise their own families. It is in this real world in which they need to develop the skills and tools to live a clean and sober life. As citizens, we would be very wise indeed to take this issue head on. Call addiction what it is, a disease: A disease that deserves the same treatment that we afford other incapacitating illnesses. Work to remove the stigma from addiction. Assist families to address the impact this disease has on the family structure. Create and support community treatment programs for teens and adults.

This is not a case of "them" verses "us". Few families escape without some member in the extended family experiencing drug or alcohol addiction. The return of productive individuals to their families and the workplace is a win/win for society. Let us not waste any more time and energy with denial. Addiction is real and it is depleting our resources, our children. They are not just our future. They are our present.

JEFF TUTTLE (*Hendersonville, TN*)

I am an Entertainer (singer/songwriter/recording artist). I am also in recovery from addiction using medication. In the mid 90's I became addicted to hydrocodone. As time went by my addiction grew to the point that I was doing illegal things to feed my habit. I tried several ways to overcome and kick this addiction, while my life and my relationship with family and career was quickly going down the drain.

Admitting that I had a problem and my life now out of my control, I wanted my life back and to be free of this addiction, so I turned to methadone treatment. Unfortunately that didn't work because I felt like my life was on hold and my career in the Music Industry became just a memory.

In late 2004 I had heard about buprenorphine through other patients at the methadone clinic. I was ready for a change. In January 2005, I found a doctor who had just started a Suboxone (buprenorphine) treatment program and I was the second patient to join. I was so excited about the prospects of this "new" treatment being available, and the hope of maybe getting my life back and being free of having to go to a methadone clinic everyday. It sounded too good to be true!

Within two months of being in Suboxone treatment, I was back to my old self and pursuing my music career like never before. My family life was back and within two months I had a recording contract and was working on my new CD, "Livin' Like A Millionaire (ain't got a dime)".

After finishing what was to be a 10 song CD and reflecting on how my life had changed in such a short time (thanks to buprenorphine), I went back in the studio and recorded a song, "First Hand" and I have dedicated this song to drug rehabilitation programs. Based on my experience, I believe buprenorphine

should be readily available to anyone needing it. I am and will be forever grateful for buprenorphine, Thank You, you saved me and gave me back my life!

DARREL WILLIAMS (*Springfield, MO*)

I wrote my story seven years ago. I don't want to alter its meaning by updating it, but I will share my thoughts about writing this. The word that comes to mind is "fear"; fear of letting my story be known, fear of my peers in my recovery community being angry with me for "breaking my silence," and fear of doing something new. This fear was overridden by my conviction to "break the silence." I was amazed that most people I knew could talk at length and in detail about the drug addict or alcoholic in their lives but very few people could have a meaningful conversation about someone in recovery. I was fearful of letting my family down, of blaming my addiction on someone else – but this is what recovery is all about – being honest with no shame or guilt, being free.

When my son was five years old, some friends were over and we were having a picnic and I had a pop can in my hand. I'm a pretty large guy, so my hand completely covered the can. One of my friends said to my son: "Look, your dad has a beer in his hand." And my five-year old said: "No my dad doesn't drink; he teaches people not to."

I read somewhere that if you ever want to know what kind of parent you are, listen to your kids describe you to their best friend. That really hit home when Kyle said that. Not even trying, just being there, is making a humongous impact. The same way my father made an impact on me, I'm making an impact on him. We're just doing it in a different way.

As a little kid I actually dreamed of being like my father, sitting in the bar and talking to the buddies and having a drink. My father owned and operated a semi so he was home maybe three or four days a month until I was about 12 years old, and when he was in, he was always at the bar. When I turned 16, I was the sober driver for my father. One day he said, "Here, have a drink." That's how it started but I took it way to the extreme.

I've had three car crashes and by the grace of God, I never ran into anybody. They were so late at night I just ran off the road and wrecked myself. I got four DUIs in the course of about four years. The end result was a Class B felony in the state of Missouri that resulted in a five-year prison sentence. They sent me to prison.

The lawyer worked out a deal to get me into treatment in the department of corrections. I was there for 82 days and was released to probation. In May 200 I completed college; I earned my bachelor's degree. I was able to buy a house through a friend of mine in recovery. He actually sold me the house and helped me with that. Then in January of this year, 2002, I completed probation.

Now I'm in a master's program in clinical psychology, and things are unbelievable. I can't even tell you how I got here or how this is happening. Coming from a scared, shamed, beat down little boy, to a flourishing young adult and all because of recovery.

Since I've been in recovery and since the negative consequences have happened, my father and my two uncles, who have all had issues with alcohol, have not touched a drop. They don't drink and their lives have also changed.

KEVIN YOUNG (*Trenton, ME*)

I'm Kevin Young and I am in long-term recovery, which means that I have not used opioids, alcohol, and other drugs for more than 19 years. I am very committed to recovery because it has given my family back the hope and trust in me they used to have, and it has made me a stable, responsible person with great

promise for the future. I speak out now because I believe that long-term recovery is possible for all and I'd like to help make that possible.

Like a lot of people I had a tough time before I found recovery. The truth is that I had isolated myself from family and anyone who wanted me to be healthy. I honestly wasn't sure how I could ever change my life. In the summer of 1988, I sought a geographical cure by moving to Maine where it appeared life might be simpler. Six months after the move, I finally found recovery on Thanksgiving Day, 1988 with the help of some very supportive people already in recovery, and my girlfriend who wanted the best for me but also didn't want anything to do with me. I started attending support group meetings and learned that I had to change my behaviors in order to change my attitudes and thinking processes. I found that by surrounding myself with others who were in long-term recovery, the road was possible for me.

Today I'm respected by my family and others. Long-term recovery has taught me to hold my head high and deal with life as it comes. I'm able to hold a good job, make and keep friendships, and have awesome relationships with those close to me. Two and a half years into my recovery that girl I chased when I first moved to Maine married me. Today we've been married over 16 years and have a devoted and fulfilling relationship. She's not in recovery, but supports me 100% in all I do that is recovery-related.

I lost my Mom two years ago quite unexpectedly and my Dad has moved in with us while he determines his next move in life. It's such a gift to be able to help someone who years ago I hid from so he wouldn't see me at my worst. Today, I have the ability to look beyond myself and see others' needs as well. I'm so happy, and Dad and I have the best relationship we've ever had.

I am able to be supportive and help others find recovery for themselves.

I spend some time doing service work for my support program as well as being on the advisory board of the Maine Alliance for Addiction Recovery.

I produced and maintain a website for a local intensive outpatient program for alcohol or drug addicted persons, as well as one for the local recovery center. I'm able to support both websites with my time and money because I'm so healthy today.

I enjoy attending and participating in recovery conferences and most recently completed training by Faces & Voices of Recovery to learn messaging and techniques in dealing with the media to become a better recovery advocate. I'd like to further the message that recovery works and it's awesome!

When I first found recovery, I had no material possessions. Today I have a wonderful house with the mortgage almost paid for. Summer is spent on the ocean in a beautiful old cottage just 30 feet from high tide. I have a beautiful sailboat and kayaks to share with friends when they visit. I have hiked to the top of the tallest mountains in Maine and run many marathons. I've been sponsored by several racquetball companies while pursuing my love for that sport. This year my wife and I bought motorcycles and explored the Maine coast in all its beauty.

Today I have a life second to none. I love my life and everyone in it. My dream is that this way of life is available to all who have suffered like I have. Today anything is possible.