

Recovery Advocacy in Richmond, VA

In 2003, John Shinholser left a successful career to co-found the McShin Foundation with his wife, Carol McDaid. In a few short years, McShin, a Faces & Voices member and NCADD affiliate, has put recovery on the political and social map of Richmond, VA and surrounding communities. John was interviewed by Faces & Voices Executive Director Pat Taylor.

Pat Taylor: John, Can you tell me where your passion for recovery advocacy comes from?

John: For me, it comes from a deep, deep part of my soul. My wife Carol really got me rolling with it and of course SAARA (the Substance Abuse Addiction and Recovery Alliance in VA). They were looking for people who might want to be part of their organization so I was invited to go there. Policy makers are making all these decisions, trying to get the sick people to long time recovery, it seems to me the long time recovering community ought to be part of the decision making process, after all we got what everyone wants, recovery.

You need to get this desire somewhere along the way, you know. Then of course you could always throw the 11th step in there and pray to God for what his will is for you today and sometimes the answer is advocacy.

Pat: So why did you decide to found the McShin Foundation? Can you tell us a little bit about what your dream is and where you would like to be, say ten years from now?

John: Time and again, groups of us were always saying, there aren't enough services for folks and bad choices and decisions are being made on how to help folks that need help. And we thought, why don't we do something about it, we've all got our heads on our shoulders here.

We'd like to see people seeking long-term recovery having access to substance abuse funds, as well as dictating where they're going and actually being part of the process of facilitating the services. McShin itself can continue to be a growing recovery center and with the advocacy, having the stigma reduced.

Pat: McShin hasn't been around that long and you've done so much already. You have used events to build a community of recovery enrichment. You've held pool parties, auctions, run/walks, you had the most incredible screening of HBO's Addiction. Why do you spend so much time putting on events?

John: Now addicts know that addicts like to do things, they don't like to sit around and talk about 'em. When you want to carry the message to an addict and get a result, you ask another recovering addict to do it and that will give you the best outcome that's practical.

You know, bureaucracies, they talk. So it's not by accident that within two and one-half years McShin has exceeded the numbers that others have been working on for seven years. Remember, we have a true organic recovery organization made up of nothing but recovering folks basically and some parents. So, the addicts are going to get involved in things that they think are theirs. Here at McShin, everybody owns everything and it fits principle wise to combine our organization's growth and event planning.

Pat: About the work that you did around HBO's Addiction and the premiere, can you talk about who was involved in planning it and how you were able to make it such a success?

John: I'll tell you what really helped. When you all provided the money (a \$3,000 grant) that allowed us to designate Daniel [Daniel Payne is the Executive Director of the McShin Foundation] the project manager, he basically went full time on doing the necessary steps to ensure the best outcome. Now, as it turned out, he didn't get no money because we spent all our money on advertising and renting a facility and what not. But we were operating like he was a paid manager so that he got to comfortably work full time. But the real key is you have to be enthusiastic and the people you are trying to reach to get involved, will absorb that energy. You know they want to be part of something exciting. But you've got to stay on people. You've got to call them, write them, you've got to remind them, you've got to show up in their life, you know, just to stay moving and stay on them to deliver. We did that and we also reached organizations that we weren't accustomed to reaching.

Pat: Like who?

John: Well, we reached out to groups like the Mothers Against Drunk Driving, Parents Against Drugs and some of the under-aged drinking groups. All of these years, people have been telling us to reach for the same market of folks, so to speak. It feels like we've been deliberately scared away from available resources. So we were able to do this [over 1,100 people showed up for the local premiere of HBO's Addiction at a Richmond, VA movie theater] without the assistance or influence of self-seeking organizations. We were able to think freely and reach the places we weren't seen before, which turned out to be the real gem in all of this.

Pat: Switching gears a little bit, can you tell us about what a day is like at McShin?

John: I usually get in about 9:00 every morning, sometimes earlier depending where I've got to be, like yesterday I was in court out in the county early in the morning. When I roll up, we usually have half a dozen of our home occupants here already starting their day. They're looking for jobs or going to the Probation Officer or getting their appointments straight. You know, they're just doing their early recovery foundation building and during the course of a day we'll get about 100 people coming through here. Many of them are people in recovery running up in here to say hello. They want to see if anybody needs anything. A lot of these recovering folks are self-employed folks looking for help, they'll come to see if anybody needs to make money that day.

And, we usually get one or two families who roll up in here in a crisis mode, like yesterday two girls came in out of the mental hospital in town and another came in off of a 3-day detox bus ride from California or Colorado. And you just never know what's coming through the door, but there's always energy, always bodies in and out, in and out, always things going on.

Pat: I was reading on your website that you have something called a Recovery Action Plan. What's that all about?

John: We sit down with the consumers, which is what the Department likes to call them, we let them participate in envisioning what their plan for recovery is going to be. They tell us what it is and then we'll talk about what we know works.

And together we will work on a plan of action. We are not a group of sitters and bullshitters. No sir. We want to know what you're going to do about your recovery, when you're going to start, what our timeline's going to be. It's the simple stuff you know. I need to see my Probation Officer. OK. I need to get a place stay. OK. I need, and no matter what we do we always got time for a meeting in there, whether it be at lunch time or in the evening. We want to know, have you heard about sponsorship, home group service work, step work. We basically map out in an hour what they end up doing the rest of their lives. You let them participate.

Pat: The last time I was in Richmond I met the pastor at Hatcher Memorial Baptist Church. McShin is operating out of their basement. That's an unusual kind of relationship. How'd you make that happen?

John: We basically came over and asked the preacher and he said yes, but we had to run it by the church. So I had to show up at their church board meeting, where there were about 100 church members. They asked me questions. I gave them answers and they let us be in here. It's a big basement, about 6000 square feet.

I told them that we wouldn't cost them any money, that we'd make sure we carried our fair load and that they'd have the benefit of letting us educate the pastor and the church, on how to speak the language not only of addiction, but the language of recovery. That way they could translate our organization of recovery to help them better reach folks if they wanted to. And that's exactly what happened, you know how recovery is a program of attraction. Well that church and its congregation is about attraction.

It's been a learning experience for both of us and as a result of that, lives have been saved and touched. The reverend is this year's recipient of the NCADD's Key Award. And he plugged me into the neighborhood Preachers Association. So, they're all talking about recovery at their pulpits and letting them know how they got recovery in the neighborhood. I'm trying to get them to sponsor some beds now, help finance some of them. That hasn't happened yet, but it might.

Pat: One of the things that strikes me is you're right there for people when they're really needing help Why do you think that's true?

John: Virginia as a state has very poor access to recovery and services. I mean it's one of the worst states in the country and so by the time someone goes through the process of hitting bottom and by the time they come here, they really want help. People don't come through our door that have resources or have using left in them. It's just because there's nowhere to go around here. You go to jail or prison, that's it. And if you've got a lot of money, you go to treatment. There's nothing in between. They beat you so bad here, they do all the get ready work for us actually.

We've eliminated denial coming through the door, so we don't have to mess around with that, we go right into the Recovery Action Plan.

Pat: You've been really great at building relationships and one is with Sheriff Wade, the Henrico County sheriff. You've got a program with folks who are inmates at the jail, can you tell us a little bit about that?

John: The sheriff did all the work getting the program running in the jail. It's turned out to be one of the best in the country. We're really no more than just a recovery support service, you know, reentry, for him. It doesn't cost him, or anybody else for that matter, anything. You know, we started the good recovery meetings in the jails. We go right up in there and run meetings and he's even extended us professional visit courtesies. We can go in there any time we want basically, we just have to let him know. He's just 100% cooperative and he also let us start an open speaker meeting of Narcotics Anonymous in the lobby of his jail on Saturday nights. It's the only open speaker meeting in a jail's lobby in the country that I know of and we get over 125 people every Saturday night.

He brings down the weekenders, the work relief folks in recovery can come down, and some of the trustees. And he's just this guy. If every sheriff was like him we would reduce recidivism by 50% within 3 years straight across the board all across the country. They just have to adopt his model and his open-mindedness and his willingness.

Pat: Well, sounds like we've got to get Sheriff Wade on the road.

John: We need to. But there are a whole lot of egos out there blocking that from happening. It's hard to get the people in charge of the message and the money off of their high horses and out of their ivory towers – to do the people's work and the people's will. Sheriff Wade is awesome. And we also have Sheriff Woody at the Richmond City Jail. He's coming along too. You know, he leans heavily towards the faith-based community, more so than the 12-step base. He's pretty open minded too and he's our next build up target area.

We've also got some politicians coming in line with our thinking too. You know the Lieutenant Governor is our guest speaker this year and at our Christmas event, we had the

Attorney General here. At our first banquet we had our Congressman here. I mean these guys are all warming up to recovery.

They've know about the problem, but they just really weren't quite feeling the solution. These events are very powerful. You get to know your policy makers and they feel your events, they experience them. So we try to take full advantage of that and that's something we do better than anybody.

Pat: Could you talk a little bit about why you think our national recovery advocacy movement and Faces & Voices' efforts are important to support work like what you're doing in Richmond?

John: You're out there stimulating people in recovery to take ownership of the outcome of these policies and decisions and to get more involved in the recovery process itself. You don't discriminate against these people like others.

And more and more people are getting the agenda, like Sheriff Wade. He tried to get some movement in the General Assembly to get some more funding for jail programs like his. He's trying his best to get the criminal justice side to do more of these jail programs. And the only people that opposed him was the Department of Mental Health, Retardation and Substance Abuse. If you've got these state agencies pitted against one another, in the meantime, the things that need to get done, don't.

You know, we'd love to be funded, but we self-support through our own contributions. We decide what we're going to do and we do it. Faces & Voices encourages liberty, freedom, yet unity. You know I'm a real rebel and freedom fighter.

Pat: For a lot of people, being interviewed in the media is a very big deal. You and Daniel and a lot of the folks who are part of McShin have been really willing to talk about your recovery in the media. Can you tell a little bit about why you are doing that?

John: Mainly because recovery is out of the public's eye – it's nameless and faceless and as a result, the stigma increases. By the very act of not being visible in public, you are actually encouraging stigma, which is killing us more and more. Getting good services to those who need them is a responsibility thing here. Just think about the Jerry Lewis Telethon. Every year they raise a bunch of money. It's not a new model. He puts children out there on TV and says, folks, can you help?

And look at the work Betty Ford did with breast cancer and addiction. This can happen to anybody and it doesn't need to be kept a secret because secrets kill. So advocacy is what gets the job done and there's no place for anonymity when it comes to advocating. And we get that. Now, if people want to help us, you know they really do. I think human beings in general got a good heart. But they've got to know what they are helping before they are going to.

We're out there advocating for the recovery phenomenon, we're not advocating a particular 12-step movement. With reporters you've got to remember that they have family members that they don't know what to do with. It appears that the Richmond Times-Dispatch is running an article a week on some kind of recovery story, something we have been encouraging for some time.

Pat: Thanks so much for the interview.