

People in Long Term Recovery

Why We Are Worth the Investment

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I was struck recently by a moving pictorial essay in a Time Special Report, Opioid Diaries, photographs by James Nachtwey. It was filled with evocative and wrenching images of the ravages of treatment, it was a convincing argument for intervention into a devastation of entire communities. The helplessness of the first responders was palpable on page, as they are overwhelmed by the body count. I was overwhelmed and heartbroken as each page was more urgent than the next. I felt the way I feel in the face of the animal rescue commercials during the holidays as my indulged cats curl on my lap in front of a warm fire. Most of the time I have to hit the mute button – and I felt relieved when I finished the pictorial essay for the same reason. (1)

I started to wonder, “Do other people turn away for the same reason?”

People in Long Term Recovery often disappear from view in the media, and sometimes even from the rooms of recovery, as we become successful and stable. The policymakers, families, struggling addicts, the media, school boards, NIMBY community, and your neighbors don't see images of successful recovery in a time when the opioid crisis is killing thousands of addicts a day. Frequent images of broken addicts and families contribute to the internalized stigma the alcoholic/addict and the community carry. While we need to intervene and treatment is vital, people need to see how the story continues.

We are only addressing one half of the story.

We are addressing the illness, and we are begging for desperately needed treatment. Often we are doing so through “scared straight” stories and videos. Yet where are the images of the contribution recovering people make? What does the community GET for the investment in us?

Here's what the community “got” because I stopped binge drinking alcoholically by the time I was 27. I entered the rooms of recovery through a Twelve Step program and I believe this has allowed me to:

- Work in every level of addiction treatment from Intake to Counseling to Clinical Supervision to Program Ownership. I have been able to participate in the recovery of thousands of addicts over almost 30 years.
- Start and maintain the largest addiction counselor training program through San Jose City College since 1990. We have largely staffed the addiction treatment programs in our county for years.
- Write multiple recovery books, some of which are using in academic settings to train additional addiction treatment counselors.

- Train addiction recovery counselors in India and Indonesia, at time being the first to introduce professional addiction counseling standards to the region.

These are just the professional ways I have been able to participate in my community. It does not outline the contribution to my relationships, my family, and the children in my life. I own a home, pay taxes, and I am NOT unusual. In fact, I'm rather typical. Recovering people tend to be generous with service, donate to charities, and are aware of social and economic inequity. We tend to value our relationships because we have often had to rebuild them.

It is time to shine a light on people who are in recovery and, in doing so, expose the long-hidden reality that people actually do recovery from drug and alcohol addiction; that it's a chronic disease that can be successfully managed for life; and that it affects individuals who are every bit as moral, productive, intelligent, talented – and humanly flawed – as the next person. (2)

Recovering people are more likely to help you jump your dead car battery or give you a ride and actually show up on time. We tend to have a skewed sense of humor, and often possess an unusual humility about ourselves. There can be a gratitude for life people who have fewer scars and rough edges cannot have. We have fabulous bullshit detectors, and acute sensitivity to other people's "energy." We are resourceful and have difficulty coloring inside the lines sometimes. We may not always be as politically correct as we should be, and often have colorful language.

Are there recovering people who are none of these things? Still as narcissistic and as "jack-assy" as they were when they were using? Maybe even worse? OF COURSE. We're people.

But what you need to know about most people in recovery, particularly if they got clean and sober through a Twelve Step program, is that service and personal accountability through the Steps are key to long-term recovery. People who are not in recovery do not have these ethics at times, which is why we're such a good bet. When we're committed to long term recovery, we are committed to taking responsibility for ourselves, "keeping our side of the street clean," which is rare in a litigious society filled with ways to blame other people for bad luck or personal discomfort.

Recovery needs to come out of the basement. We need a new language, a logo, T-shirts, a theme song, websites, TV ads, posters in buses, sobriety bars, sober sporting events, a sobriety lobby, a recovery caucus, celebrity spokespersons, and corporate sponsors. We need the public relations of attraction, not invisibility.
— Rob Fleming, Advocate, Recovery Works, Washington, D.C.

Society is repaid ten-fold for their investment in our early recovery. I'm not the only one that thinks so— keep reading!

"Every American is acutely aware of the negative impact of drug and alcohol addiction; it's impossible to ignore. Yet we have somehow missed a very positive story about addiction that is right in front of our nose: Tens of millions of our fellow citizens come out the other side to live substance-free, healthy and productive lives. This study {OASAS} is a wake-up call to the reality of recovery in America, as well as a source of hope for the millions of American families who are

currently struggling with drug and alcohol problems.” — Keith Humphreys, Professor of Psychiatry at Stanford University School of Medicine (3)

Survey data released in 2012 by the Partnership for Drug-Free Kids and The New York State Office of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Services (OASAS) show that 10 percent of all American adults, ages 18 and older, said yes to the question, “*Did you once have a problem with drugs or alcohol, but no longer do?*” and consider themselves to be in recovery from drug or alcohol abuse problems. These nationally representative findings indicate that there are 23.5 million American adults who are overcoming an involvement with drugs or alcohol that they once considered to be problematic. (4)

“This research marks a vitally important step for those who are struggling with addiction by offering clear evidence to support what many know experientially – that millions of Americans have found a path to recovery,” said New York State Office of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Services (OASAS) Commissioner Arlene González-Sánchez. “It is my hope that this new evidence will strengthen and inspire individuals and those that provide treatment and recovery services to help the broader community understand that treatment does work and recovery is possible.” (5)

Who are these recovering Americans?

We are business owners, teachers, hi-tech managers, union presidents, parents, counselors, coaches, medical professionals, attorneys. . . People in Long Term Recovery are a quiet backbone that provides needed stability in our communities. We are proof that recovery works, and money invested in addiction treatment is money well-spent!

For this purposes of this discussion, I am defining successful long-term recovery as 5 years or more:

- Stable co-occurring or addiction recovery over 5 years through a range of recovery traditions (AA, NA OA, Celebrate Recovery, Red Road Recovery, Dual Recovery Anonymous, etc.)
- Stable participation in work, volunteer work, or school over this period of time
- Stable and growing relationships with family and friends
- Successfully discharged criminal justice obligations

Why 5 years or more?

According to AA World Services, about 40% of all AA members who have already been sober for less than a year will remain both sober and active in AA another year; 60 percent of this group will either lose sobriety or stop participating in AA during the next year, or both. About 80% of those participants who have been sober between one and five years will remain both sober and active in the fellowship another year. About 90% of the members who have been sober five years or more will remain both sober and active in the fellowship another year. (AA's survey could not

determine the number of people who remain sober but discontinue participation in AA groups). These figures have been repeated within a few percentage points using the same calculations since 1974. (6)

There are famous people, of course:

Singer and songwriter, Eric Clapton, has been sober for nearly 3 decades. He struggled with heroin in the 70s and later turned to alcohol, before finally getting sober once and for all. He now demonstrates a strong commitment to recovery, holding benefits and even opening his own treatment center.

"I thought that if I stopped drinking and I stopped using drugs...I would not be able to play anymore. In other words, those were things that were necessary for inspiration. But it was a shortcut. My experience now tells me in a long time of being in recovery, that I can be a good musician with or without that philosophy." – [The Fix Article](#), 2013 (7)

Actor, Bradley Cooper, struggled with an alcohol and painkiller addiction prior to getting sober at 29 in 2012. With over a decade of sobriety under his belt, he says that he wouldn't be where he is today without his recovery.

"I wouldn't have been able to have access to myself or other people, or even been able to take in other people, if I hadn't changed my life. I never would have been able to have the relationships that I do. I never would have been able to take care of my father the way I did when he was sick." – [The Fix Article](#), 2015 (8)

Actress, Jada Pinkett Smith, admits to struggling with addictions in her youth. Her younger days were difficult, due to her mother being addicted to hard drugs. There were times that she didn't imagine she would make it to 21. Now at the age of 45, she has almost 19 years of sobriety.

"I had many addictions, of several kinds, to deal with my life issues, but today, at 42, I have my wisdom, my heart and my conscience as the only tools to overcome life's inevitable obstacles." – [Los Angeles Times Article](#), 2013 (9)

Athlete, Chris Herren, was addicted to cocaine and Oxytocin, which eventually turned into full-blown heroin addiction. After a severe overdose in which the former athlete had to be brought back to life, he realized it was time to get clean. Now sober, this former athlete created Hoop Dreams with Chris Herren, a basketball camp, and became a motivational speaker for others in recovery. He started The Herren Project, a non-profit offering scholarships and teaching children about health an addiction. Herren as also the focus of Unguarded, an Emmy-nominated ESPN documentary about his career and recovery. (10)

Most of us aren't famous. However, we might be in our own circle of influence. Some people say that every addict or alcohol affects at least six people. That means every recovering person might affect at least six people.

I am asking people with long term recovery to participate in a project, People in Long Term Recovery (piltr.org). I am asking you for the greatest service you can offer to the families who need hope, to a correctional system that is threatening to return to mandatory sentencing, to political policy makers, to the newly recovering person who looks into the media and has very few role models. We need YOU to be willing to step forward and claim your recovering success.

- Maybe you addressed your gambling addiction years ago and have moved on to a successful financial and personal life.
- Maybe you picked up your last DUI and divorce years ago and are now happily married and professionally stable.
- Maybe you haven't been in a courtroom for years due to your addiction and sit in a boardroom instead.
- Maybe you stopped relapsing by addressing your mental health issues years ago and your psych meds have given you back your life.
- Maybe you found Al-anon years to stop crying all the time, and have gone on to have more joy in your life, and are surrounded by healthy relationships.

At piltr.org, we have provided a template for you to create a 2-3 minute video and we are asking you to send it in to be part of advocating for us, for your own people, by publicly proclaiming that recovery works - and we pay taxes! Send your video to mary.cook@sjcc.edu.

You are what William White calls a, "Recovery carrier."

In the closing of the keynote address at the NorthEast Treatment Centers (NET) Consumer Council Recognition Dinner celebrating the recovery progress and service activities of NET members and the 40th Anniversary of NET, April 14, 2010, Philadelphia, PA. William White offered the following comments during his presentation, *Recovery is Contagious*. (11)

*The contagion of addiction is transmitted through a process of infection—the movement of addiction disease from one vulnerable person to another. The contagion of recovery is spread quite differently—not through infection, but affection. Those who spread such affection are recovery carriers. **Recovery carriers**—because of the nature of their character and the quality of their lives—exert a magnetic attraction to those who are still suffering. Recovery carriers affirm that long-term recovery is possible and that the promises of recovery are far more than the removal of drugs from an otherwise unchanged life. They tell us that we have the potential to get well and to then get better than well. They challenge us to stop being everyone's problem and to become part of the solution. They relate to us from a position of profound empathy, emotional authenticity, respect and moral equality—lacking even a whisper of contempt. Most importantly, they offer us love. - William White*

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