

JLAP: One person's story of alcohol addiction, recovery

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Editor's note: *This is a first-person account of someone who got help through the Judges and Lawyers Assistance Program. To protect confidentiality, the author's name is being withheld.*

I don't know the exact date things changed. I can't pinpoint the day when "normal drinking" in my early 20s morphed into a disease that would challenge me for the next 20 years of my life. I do know that at some point drinking was no longer fun or reserved for holidays and parties. Drinking became a requirement, something I needed to do to help pass time or deal with life. Having a good day or bad day became an excuse to drink. The line between drinking and alcoholism became blurred. This article is meant to discuss the Judges and Lawyers Assistance Program, but first, I think you need to know how I got here.

I attended my first Alcoholics Anonymous meeting when I was 25 years old. Sitting in a room full of strangers who were struggling with alcoholism, I was quick to deny that I had a problem. After all, I was on my way to a successful career, I was not on parole, and my family life was intact. What I refused to acknowledge was that my "social drinking" was no longer limited to weekends, I had a DUI, and my family and friends were increasingly concerned. But no, I did not have a problem.

The prism through which we view addiction is constantly changing. In the early 2000s, studies suggested that lawyers were at an increased risk of substance abuse and mental health disorders. (Connie J.A. Beck, et al., "Lawyer Distress: Alcohol-Related Problems and Other Psychological Concerns Among a Sample of Practicing Lawyers," 10 J.L. & Health 1 1995-1996.) Data showed substance abuse issues and mental health disorders were at the heart of many lawyer disciplinary complaints. (Mary Robinson, "Discipline and Disability: When is a Disease a Defense," GPSOLO October/November 2009.)

But resources for helping lawyers with substance abuse and mental health disorders were scarce. When I sat for the bar exam, states were in the early stages of establishing resources such as JLAP. My DUI, coupled with counseling for alcohol abuse, made me the exact candidate the Board of Law Examiners saw as an elevated risk for substance abuse problems during my legal career. I was allowed to sit for the bar exam with certain conditions. It was those conditions that originally introduced me to JLAP. For two years, I was required to take random alcohol screenings, report to a monitor with JLAP to evaluate my compliance and attend support groups like Alcoholics Anonymous.

I passed the bar exam and complied with the terms of my conditional admittance. Unfortunately, my sobriety was short-lived. I will get to JLAP's role in my recovery, but I still have a few years left to explain.

As I continued with my career and life, I also continued drinking. I would leave work many nights by 6 p.m. and head to a local bar. Sometimes I would drink alone and other times I would drink with colleagues. I would leave the bar only to continue drinking at home. This became a daily ritual that would continue into the weekends. However, I was sure that I did not have a problem because I could go for days or weeks at a time without drinking. I wasn't facing consequences in my professional life or my career. In my mind, I had nothing in common with those people in my first AA meeting.

It's difficult for an alcoholic to explain to a non-alcoholic how our minds work; in the face of so many consequences, why we can't stop drinking. Here is my best effort at an explanation. If we were sitting at dinner and you ordered a glass of wine and didn't finish it, I would struggle to understand why you stopped. If I ordered multiple glasses of wine, you would not be able to understand why I can't stop. Of course, that doesn't make sense, because nothing associated with alcohol and substance abuse does.

As my alcoholism progressed, my relationships deteriorated. I jumped from one failed relationship to another, and I completely withdrew from my family. I went through two rehabilitation programs, both unsuccessful. I was isolated and alone with nowhere to turn. I knew that I was the cause of my own problem, but I was too ashamed and embarrassed to reach out to family and friends for help. Sitting alone on my couch with a bottle of vodka on a Thursday night, I realized I did have the same problem as everyone else in my first AA meeting. Fifteen years after that initial meeting, I finally accepted the fact that I was an alcoholic.

Without hesitation, I picked up the phone and called JLAP because I knew I couldn't do it alone. I was introduced to a volunteer who wanted to help me. The process was discreet and completely confidential. That volunteer eventually became my first sponsor. I am proud to say that I am in my third year of sobriety, and the resources of JLAP played an important role in my recovery.

Many assume that alcoholics are out of work, without families and living on the street. Those are common misconceptions. Substance abuse has no socioeconomic boundaries. I have enjoyed professional success in my career while developing a national practice and remaining with the same firm for over 14 years. We are good at hiding our disease, but in the end, that isolation is our downfall.

Sometimes, I think about what my life would have been like if I had stuck with JLAP 17 years ago. However, "could haves" or "would haves" are rarely helpful. When all other measures failed, JLAP was there to provide a resource I desperately needed, and I will be forever grateful. For those who are struggling or question the existence of a problem, I encourage you to turn to JLAP for help. It provided me with resources to turn my life around, and perhaps it could do the same for you. •