



# MY STORY: What I Was, What Happened and What I Am

*By Jim R.*

## My name is “J.J.,” and I am an alcoholic.

I am an Alabama lawyer. I am 50 years old. I was born into a “normal” two-parent home. My father was a college dropout who worked two or three jobs until sometime after I graduated high school. He had a “steady paycheck and benefits” job, and he started his own business on the side in the ’70s. That business eventually boomed and he did quite well until the market crashed around 2007.

My mother was a stay-at-home wife and mother despite her college degree. My school years were spent growing up in suburbia with my parents and younger brother. It was a nice neighborhood. We played with neighborhood kids. My parents socialized with neighbors.

It was a good childhood. I got the hand-me-down family cruiser for my first car at age 16. My parents paid for my college. There was no abuse in my home growing up that I saw or recall.

Drinking in my home was not hidden, though. My dad had a beer or two in the evening from time to time, or drinks while socializing. My mom would have a glass or

two of wine. I learned to like beer by occasionally stealing sips of my dad's when I was young. I only saw my father drunk one time in my entire life. As a kid, I saw my mother get "tipsy," but never sloppy drunk. She did later on in life, though, and it worsened over time. She has admitted to me she thinks she's an alcoholic, but she is untreated. Her father was an alcoholic, and a violent one.

I had my first drink when I was 13. My best friend and I got someone to buy us some beer and we drank a six-pack. I don't recall getting drunk that time, but I do recall a feeling of "fitting in." I remember that at every significant party, concert or weekend event in high school and college alcohol was involved, or we tried to involve it. There were a few times I got drunk before school, as well.

When I turned 16, I got my first job working in an ice cream parlor. One night the owner's nephew, who worked with me, brought a bottle of scotch to work. We all took turns holding our nose and taking swigs, and got pretty drunk at work. The hangover was horrible. The owner found out, and I got fired the next day. My very first real job ended due to alcohol involvement.

I played sports in high school, but was not really athletic. I was once at a tournament in Montgomery with some other teammates. We were all 15 to 18 years old. A group of us decided that the oldest guy, who had a fake ID, would get us some beer, and we'd have some fun the night before the tournament. I was one of the oldest, and participated in the purchase. We were all caught, and dismissed or forced to withdraw from the tournament. One of my cohorts was favored to win his bracket in this state tournament; the fact that the number one seed had to suddenly withdraw without reason even made the local papers.

When I was 19, I started working in a very popular bar in Birmingham. I was a pretty recognizable face among the night club and college crowd in those days. Though it was common to have a drink on the job while working in a bar, one night I got so drunk on the job that I had to be sent home.

I was in a popular college fraternity. Alcohol fueled the romance of my whole college era. Outwardly, I played it like I thought I was a pretty big deal. Inwardly, I felt more and more like I had in high school,

which was struggling to fit in. I always had a sense of feeling "less than." It was not uncommon to drink before or during classes.

Alcohol seemed to be a "normal" part of my high school and college existence. I saw no difference in the way I drank versus anyone else I was around. I had brushes with legal trouble, but was always able to get out of it some way. Over the years after college, I dialed it back, as most "normal" drinkers do. I could have a couple and put it down on most occasions. I had control over my drinking. I never got a DUI. If there was one saving grace to all that time, I was not one to get behind the wheel drunk. I'm not saying I never did. Some drunks seem compelled to get out and visit, bar hop or run the roads when they drink. I was not one, thank God. I was an isolation drinker after my social drinking turned to alcoholic drinking.

Post-college, I tried my hand at sales, and failed. I felt more like a failure than ever at that point. I got married and had a child. I got a job as a police officer. Things rocked along pretty well for a time, and my drinking was mostly social or "normal."

I went to law school during that time. I passed the bar on my first attempt in my mid-30s, and so the law career began.

I got divorced about the same time I hung out my shingle. Anger was a major issue in my life. I was single in my late 30s and early 40s and a lawyer. I enjoyed some fun times but I also still felt "less than." I was not prospering in law, just surviving. My drinking ramped up.

It was sometime during this time that the "switch was flipped." A bottle of wine became a nightly thing. I had a second marriage that went bad and ended quickly, and during that time I began to drink daily and/or nightly, and now like an alcoholic. This was also when I first met Jim S., a recovering alcoholic who told me about his story, sober living and AA. This meeting would probably save my life down the road.

Over the next couple of years, I floundered around in a law practice, making enough to pay my meager bills, but not much more. When I was able, I pretended to be more, but inside the feeling of being less than held on. During this time, on a nightly basis, I would drink until I passed out, get up, go to the office

and do it all over again. On weekends, I stayed drunk. I completely withdrew socially because I was obsessed with drinking and didn't want others to know how much I drank. Occasionally, at night, I'd wake up needing a drink, and have to calculate how long I had to sleep it off before court—would I be sober and not reek if I had a glass of wine at 3 a.m. to get back to sleep?

In 2006, an opportunity of sorts presented itself to take a lawyer job with a steady check. It came with a little prestige, or at least it did in my mind at the time. I also figured if I actually had a boss to answer to and a regular schedule to keep, I might better control my drinking. It helped for a little while. Then I got moved to a position where I had a lot of autonomy, and little supervision. Again, like in private practice, with the exception of court dates, I had lots of control over my schedule, and I used my spare time to drink. It was during this period that I resigned myself to being an alcoholic. I knew I was. I actually took some pride in the fact that I was and could still function, and at times function very well professionally.

After asking Jim S. about it from time to time, I tried AA in 2009. I was tired of hangovers. I was actually able to remain dry (as opposed to sober) for a year and a half, but I wasn't working the AA program, and not involved in ALAP. I went to meetings now and then, and I didn't drink, but little else changed in my life. I didn't enlarge my spiritual life, and I didn't avail myself of my sponsor's guidance. After a year and a half, I relapsed.

As we are told in the AA Big Book, I picked up right where I left off. It was like I had never quit. I planned that relapse. I've learned that, too, is common among our kind. And we alcoholics *are* different. We are bodily and mentally different. When we are in active alcoholism, our minds obsess over the first drink of the day until we get it, and once we take that first drink, our bodies have an allergy that causes us to have physical cravings for more and more. It's not

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that 15<sup>th</sup> drink that gets us drunk, it's the first one. If we could only just not drink that first one! And many of us have sworn we would not.

I would wake with the best intentions of abstaining that day, and find myself drunk that night, again. I drank again for about 18 months and things got much worse this time. There finally came a time where I could no longer function. I couldn't go to work without getting the shakes during the day. I was skipping work for all but my court appearances. I once had to take a break from striking a jury due to getting the shakes so badly that I couldn't function. I played it off as low blood sugar. I don't know who

bought that, and who didn't.

This time I discovered the real meaning of a phrase I'd heard in AA: "Drinking against my will." I no longer had control at all. I had to drink to ward off the shakes, or worse. The final straw was a 10-day binge where I only left my apartment to buy more alcohol. I couldn't hold down food, and I couldn't function. I would wake up surprised to be alive. I got scared! I was in a death spiral and sure I'd die in this binge. I was also certain I would eventually lose the one thing I really had left that I thought made me somebody, my job. However, at this point, I became so scared for my life that I actually concluded my job wasn't as important. I was willing to get fired to get some help. My relationships with my family and friends were all but a little phone contact. In a moment of mortal fear for my life and half sober, I made a phone call or two, got connected with Michael S. in ALAP and checked myself in to Bradford two days later in December 2012. I should note here, because it was so important in my getting sober, that my boss was fully supportive of my rehab and I suffered no ill effects on the job from my time in rehab (despite the fact that I was five days into rehab before I told him where I was on my "vacation"). People do actually understand, and more so when you want to get help.

I've always been told by my AA mentors and sponsor that when giving my story I should focus on the solution, not the problem. Don't make my story so much about my drinking, but make it about sobriety. At the same time, I feel that I need to connect to those out there like me. I want to relate to that lawyer out there who is feeling like I felt, and let them know help is out there and things can get better, much better!

The solution, for me, is a simple one. It's simple, like dead-lifting a 1,000 pound weight. It *is* simple, just not easy. I knew of AA, and I knew of ALAP. After a time in Bradford, I got reconnected with each. I got *involved* this time.

I worked the 12 steps. I got a sponsor and talked with him. I went to 90 meetings in 90 days, and I still go to two or three a week. I met my girlfriend in recovery. I mix in ALAP meetings, too. AA keeps me in the solution. ALAP keeps me connected with people who are dealing with the same life and professional stresses I am and who are living in the solution, too. AA and ALAP are not the only ways to recovery, but it's the way for me. I know lawyers staying clean and sober in ALAP who are not active in AA, and vice versa. At the core of AA is my spiritual growth. I'm not a religious person, and never have been, but my connection with a higher power—God to me—is how I not only stay sober, but prosper in life and this profession. I now have a life that involves daily prayer and meditation. My sobriety and my serenity are directly connected to my spiritual condition, which requires daily maintenance.

I have daily contact with alcoholics like me who are also living in the solution. I sponsor people in AA. Working with other alcoholics helps ensure my sobriety. My relationships with family and friends have improved beyond my dreams. I'm a social person again.

My professional situation has improved greatly, too. I am back in private practice, and I'm actually prosper-

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ing. My new boss hired me knowing of my recovery, and of my prior drinking reputation. In my final interview, she said she'd done some research on me. She told me of some very good things people had said about me professionally, and then she said, "I also heard you used to drink, a lot, and had a bad temper." She asked if that bothered me. I said, "As long as people aren't lying about me, how can I be upset?" We talked about my recovery, and she hired me.

She did so not just as an associate, but as someone who will eventually take over the bulk of her practice as she slows down toward semi-retirement. She's put me in a position to instantly make money and grow professionally, and my sobriety has allowed me to take full advantage of the opportunity. All of

this is due to God's doing for me what I could not do for myself, and I found this in recovery through AA and ALAP.

I am grateful for what I have monetarily, for the renewed relationships with friends and family, for new relationships and for the professional opportunities. I give great thanks to my former boss who let me go to rehab without holding it against me, and to my current law partner for giving a recovering alcoholic a chance. I'm most grateful for the programs of AA and ALAP making my recovery possible. AA and ALAP help keep me in the solution and around people like me who live in the solution, and give me the tools to stay sober.

I socialize with other alcoholics/addicts, and we have fun without involving alcohol or drugs. I have real fun with no pressures to drink, and no desire to drink. I have been able to help a sick relative through a very tough time during sobriety. I can help people in recovery. I can assist my clients. Life isn't all pink clouds, rainbows and unicorns, but I can work through bad days or rough times with the tools I have. I am now a part of...I fit in. ▲