



The Journey

By Billy O.

It was 4:30 in the morning,
August 1, 2005.

The fear, loneliness and despair I was experiencing was indescribable. I had been struggling for five hellacious years to get clean and sober. I thought I hit bottom in 2000, but that was a walk in the park compared to the emotional depths I had now reached. It seemed the harder I tried the worse it got. Addiction stripped everything away that was important in my life. I became emotionally, financially and, more importantly, spiritually bankrupt.

In the year 2000 I went from living the American dream, a family with three beautiful children, a beautiful home, a law firm with three partners and numerous other staff members, to being divorced from my family and co-workers later that year. A wise man once told me, “Anything I put ahead of my recovery would cause me to not only lose my recovery, but to also lose whatever I placed in front of it.” I found these words to be true the hard way. I was devastated and overwhelmed with shame.

Even after all the destruction addiction brought my way, I was still blind to the truth. I was trying to do things my way. I knew I had a



problem, but I failed to face or accept the severity of the situation. My intentions were to recover and be the father and co-worker I knew I could be. Unfortunately, I would often put saving my marriage, saving my law career, saving whatever standing I thought I had in the community ahead of my recovery. This was a recipe for disaster. It was the fuel to the fire that allowed my addictions to escalate, causing my condition, both physically and emotionally, to become chronic. I was engulfed in the cycle of addiction and self-pity.

From April 2000 until August 1, 2005, I would go from treatment center, to halfway house, to living with my mother at the age of 41, back to treatment centers and halfway houses. The cycle of addiction was escalating. I was unwilling to surrender. I thought I could overcome this my way. Everything had always seemed to work out by working hard and putting my mind to it. I thought I had to “put up the good fight” to win the war with addiction, never understanding what it truly meant to “surrender to win.”

Ultimately this led me to that frightful summer morning in 2005 where I reached a place I thought I would never be. My addictions and everything that I thought I knew about recovery led me to finally being alone (emphasis added on “I”). After being on my addiction rollercoaster for five sad years, I was hoping that my

children, who were now 12, nine and seven, would be able to accept their dad for who he was, an addict who may never recover. I was hoping my children, mother, sisters, extended family and friends and others who had been praying for me during that time would still love me and accept me, despite never recovering.

I started driving that morning with everything I had to my name: 86 cents, a car that my mother had helped me purchase when I was having a good 90 days a year or so before, the clothes on my back, a full tank of gas and two large lawn trash bags with clothes. I was now 44. I was tired, lost, confused, baffled and broken and the will to live was low. The hideous four horsemen had finally appeared on that day, “terror, bewilderment, frustration and despair.”

The Alabama Lawyer Assistance Program (“ALAP”) had been trying to help me for about four years. I met an amazing woman, Jeanne Marie Leslie, the executive director of ALAP. She worked with me through the ups and downs and never gave up hope in me. She kept telling me I had so much to offer others, that I was a good person, that I was worthy of a good life. She would always help me to refocus my efforts and not give up. She placed me in groups, hoping I would hear something that would help me to see the truth, or that it would finally “click.” It took an addi-

tional four years, but everything Jeanne Marie did for me helped me to continue to pursue recovery and not give up; even during that darkest of times in August 2005, Jeanne Marie and ALAP were still there for me.

I called Jeanne Marie at 6:30 that morning after I had driven to an exit off I-65 near a treatment center here in Alabama. I told her my life was in ruins. I had nowhere to turn and I was more or less homeless. I was scared and tired of fighting. In her own “unique style” she told me to get to the treatment center *now*. Jeanne Marie was special. She walked the walk and always worked tirelessly to ensure lawyers in Alabama who struggled with addiction, depression or other forms of mental illness always had an opportunity to recover. I was one of the lucky ones; I had finally surrendered and had a chance to finally begin a life in recovery.

I entered my fourth treatment center in five years on August 1, 2005 and the journey of recovery has been nothing short of amazing. Prior to completing my stay at the treatment center, Jeanne Marie, once again in that “special way” that only she could do, told me I was going to a state-funded halfway house and I was going to stay there as long as I needed to build a foundation I could carry with me in the days and years to come. It was a 90-day program, but I remained there for a year and a half. ALAP led me to recovery, which led me to a new way of life.

At the age of 44, after all the education I had in my life, after all the sports accomplishments I had received, after being an accomplished lawyer from 1988 to 2000, the day I entered that halfway house was the day I started to learn how to truly live life in recovery. Through surrendering, others were placed in my life to help guide me along the way.

I met a mentor while I was at the halfway house who took me under his wing, another practicing lawyer who gives freely and unselfishly of his time to help other lawyers in recovery. His selflessness amazed me. He told me about his life and journey in recovery. I watched his walk and I wanted what he had.

He taught me how to laugh again. More importantly, he gave me the courage to face myself, to do the work necessary to recover, to learn to live a new way of life and to finally have freedom from the “bondage of self.” He helped give me the courage to face those I had wronged and ask them how I could make it right. He then shared with me the true gift of recovery, the gift of giving back to others who were

also lost in the depths of addiction. He gave me the opportunity to begin practicing law again. He helped me find me. I would tell you he saved my life, but he would humbly tell you that he just happened to be the teacher who was there at the time when the pupil was ready to listen. Not a day goes by I don’t thank God for placing him in my path. We remain close today and I am forever grateful for our friendship.

In 2007, I was blessed to return home when the time was right, working in a state position that not only allowed me to give back to my community, but to also help others who had lost hope. Thereafter, in 2010, I was appointed to another state position and was elected to that position in 2012. I was also married in 2011 to an amazing woman who loved me despite everything I had been through. She also brought three more children into my life when we married. I prayed for my three children to be back in my life and today I am married with six children and two grandchildren. I have been blessed more than I could ever imagine, dream or deserve.

In August 2005 I was homeless and lost, never thinking I would be able to ever recover, be a father, a husband, a son, a brother or worker among workers ever again, or for that matter, a part of life again. Through the help and guidance of a loving and merciful God, ALAP, mentors who are still a part of my life, the support and love of family and friends that never lost hope, a 12-step program that helps me to continue to keep the truth right in front of me and a job where I am blessed to give back to my community, I have remained free from the bondage of self and my addictions since August 1, 2005. As my mentor friend told me before I moved back home in 2007, “Whatever you do, don’t ever forget to enjoy the journey.” Today, thanks to those God has graciously placed in my life, I am enjoying the journey of life!

My aim in sharing my story is to inform other lawyers who may be suffering from addiction and/or other mental health issues that they don’t have to continue to live in despair, fear, shame and hopelessness. You are worthy of a good life. The Alabama Lawyer Assistance Program was there for me and they are also there for others who may be struggling. My prayer is that those who are also suffering like I was suffering will also reach out for help. When you do, be sure to hold on because the journey in recovery is an amazing ride! May God bless you all. ▲