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The Unbar Attorneys Come Together to Take On Alcoholism

BY DAN CRYSTAL

I changed jobs a few times . . . I changed cities. The business failed. My wife and I fought a lot and separated. Along the way, I was arrested for drunk driving and did some embarrassing things after I drank too much. I became increasingly aware that my drinking might have something to do with it. I found the AA Big Book in my mailbox, with some overdue bills, the day after an evening of heavy drinking and a partial blackout. I took the arrival of the book as a message from some higher power and went to my first AA meeting.

— WSBA member George Tamblyn, who recently celebrated 35 years of sobriety

Attorneys and alcoholism tend to be an unfortunate pairing. It is widely acknowledged that attorneys engage in problematic drinking at rates two to three times greater than the general

public. There are a lot of reasons. Some of this stems from the drinking culture in law school and law firms. Some of this results from the pressures and responsibilities attendant in the practice of law. To address these concerns, lawyer assistance programs (LAPs) are part of the state bar in all states. In addition, attorney-specific AA groups have sprung up around the country. In King County, The Unbar has been meeting every Wednesday for almost three decades, assisting thousands of attorneys in recovery.

Jerome Jager has been a WSBA member for 55 years and recently celebrated his 35th year of sobriety. Recognizing a lack of attorney-specific resources, he and his friends Wes Holbein and James Hanken founded the Unbar in 1985. Now 78 years old, he still attends most Wednesdays. Jerry reflected, “For anyone who has been in the program for any length of time, a common thing we have is a sense of gratitude for finding a program that has changed our lives for the better.”

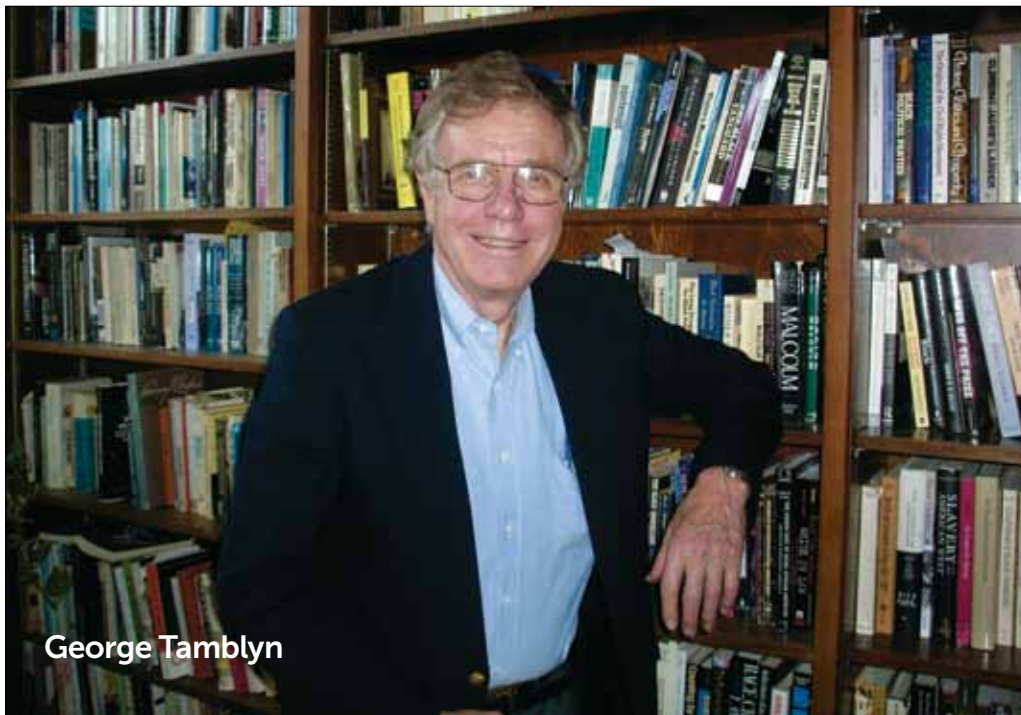
Jerry has the no-nonsense candor

that is common within the AA community: “The very first word in the steps of AA is ‘we,’ so you know you’re not alone when you come to an AA group. It’s about one alcoholic talking to another . . . it’s a miracle that it works! There’s no leaders, we’re all trusted servants, there’s no big shots.” He said he likes the simplicity of the AA message: “My take on the first step is simple: Don’t drink, go to meetings, and your life gets better.”

Most Wednesdays, about 15–20 attorneys attend, although the community is much larger, with about 70 people attending the annual luncheon. Hundreds of attorneys have achieved enduring sobriety through the years. The format of an Unbar meeting is simple: a different leader chairs each session and introduces a topic — typically, something relating to how to live sober. Some common themes include resentments, denial, taking another person’s moral inventory, and gratitude. Then each person in the group, sitting in a circle, speaks to this theme. There is no cross-talk,

no commentary on what is shared. Everything is shared in confidence. It is an open-ended witnessing that stands in contrast to other forms of treatment. The Unbar is an “open” group, meaning any attorney can come. After creating a healthy connection with AA, one can then turn to other AA groups, to “closed” AA groups (open only to AA members), and to working the “steps” of 12-step recovery with a sponsor (a mentor in the program).

Not all Unbar attorneys are like George and Jerry. Many are early in their recovery or have not achieved abstinence yet. One female attorney with 11 months of sobriety shared, “I was miserable and knew I needed to stop drinking. I was drinking heavily every day. I couldn’t sleep through the night without waking up and having a drink or more to get back to sleep. I had trouble eating. My hands would tingle. I dreaded mediations. What if one ran



George Tamblyn

long or someone asked me to draft the settlement agreement and saw my hand shaking? The one thing I knew was that AA wasn’t an option for me. I envisioned a giant prayer circle where people earnestly read passages from the Bible.”

And yet, her experience was very different: “AA is nothing like I thought it would be. I have never felt so much general goodwill as I do at meetings. One of the things you are advised is to listen for the similarities when someone shares in a meeting. Now I get to live without being obsessed with when I am going to get my next drink and how I am going to hide the amount I was drinking from others.”

Alcoholics and other addicts in 12-step programs see service to other addicts in need as the vi-

tal 12th step of recovery. With this in mind, Jerry was an integral member of the King County Bar Association’s Fitness Committee in the late 1980s. This monthly group of a dozen attorneys was Washington’s first step towards addressing attorney alcoholism. Over time, the Fitness Committee gave rise to a steering committee at WSBA that brought about the formation of the WSBA Lawyers Assistance Program. Barbara Harper, Andy Benjamin, and Jerry, among others, played a formative role.

When attorneys contact the WSBA Lawyers Assistance Program (LAP) about a problem with alcohol, they are invited in for a consultation to assess their problem. A combination of individual and group treatment is usually recommended. Groups provide support and accountability that is different than individual counseling. Some attorneys are leery about the use of the term “Higher Power” in AA. There are quality non-AA-based interventions such as Smart Recovery, Rational Recovery, and A Positive Alternative that are available. But most alcoholics find a way to make peace with the “higher power” concept by acknowledging that they cannot master their drinking on their own.

For these attorneys, AA is a unique grassroots organization that provides sponsorship, support, and recovery, all at an incredible price (it’s free).



Jerome Jager



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... it helps to have someone walk you to a meeting. LAP has a network of more than 50 peer volunteers (PVs) throughout the state. One can have coffee with a peer volunteer, learn a little bit about AA, and then go to a meeting together.

And, as the name states, Alcoholics Anonymous is just that — anonymous — so that attorneys in recovery do not have to worry about jeopardizing their careers by seeking help in recovery. That said, some alcoholics like George and Jerry are perfectly happy to use their full names. They see no shame in their recovery from a progressive and potentially fatal illness, and are grateful to have the opportunity to help others as well.

It is not uncommon to postpone one's first AA meeting. Some people may not want to admit they are struggling with a problem, or perhaps they just don't know what to expect. For this reason, it helps to have someone walk you to a meeting. LAP has a network of more than 50 peer volunteers (PVs) throughout the state. One can have coffee with a peer volunteer, learn a little bit about AA, and then go to a meeting together.

One of our peer volunteers reflected upon his own past: "I was a practicing alcoholic and drug addict — and, astonishingly, an attorney — for almost 30 years. For most of those decades, I hated my job as a lawyer and longed to find work in a helping profession; I felt my life was meaningless. I was a depressed, mean, and dysfunctional

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mess. But now my life has been utterly transformed through recovery in AA. I now understand my purpose is to be of service to others. AA, my work with LAP, and the Unbar all give me opportunities to try to help other addicts who have reached bottom and want to turn their lives around. It's truly rewarding, it gives my life meaning, and it helps me stay sober."

Attorneys struggling with alcoholism often develop an avoidant relationship with their job, procrastinating responsibilities or feeling like they have no way out of a high-pressure situation. Sobriety can help an attorney re-engage with what brought them to be an attorney in the first place. One peer volunteer reflected, "I no longer wrestle with my addiction and its destructive side effects on a daily basis. And, as a bonus, I have now come to love my life as a lawyer, the challenges it presents, and the service opportunities it offers. I owe it all to the Unbar — which is where I first found my recovery — and of course to the AA program, which has saved my life."

Peer volunteers have been trained by LAP counselors in basic conversation techniques for providing support, but more than anything PVs have their own recovery experience to trade on in making that connection. If you have reached the end of your rope and are ready to try something different, it helps to have a peer volunteer to talk to and to walk you to your first meeting.

While the Unbar is the main AA group for attorneys in Washington, there are many AA groups for professionals that LAP can put you in touch with. Dan is a Spokane attorney with 24 years of continuous sobriety. While nearly 200 recovery meetings are offered in Spokane each week, his preferred groups have met continuously for 30-plus years and tend to draw professionals from seemingly all disciplines. In reflecting upon his AA experience, Dan offered, "At this point, I can see both humor and sadness in the fact that invariably when we first address addiction issues, we present with a sense of 'terminal uniqueness.' A general skepticism that 'I'm different. It may work for you, but....' I mean how crazy is it to think an approach that has literally helped millions could possibly help me? It couldn't be as simple as reaching out and asking for

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help, right? Well, 25 years ago, I went to great lengths to hide my problems — my approach almost killed me.”

For many attorneys, the first step is the hardest. They fear that word will get around that they have an addiction or, worse, that they cannot handle their own problems. Dan has seen this many times, “Anonymity is a huge issue for most professionals in early recovery. Don’t let your fear prevent a positive life change. LAP is a great resource and maintains a cadre of peer volunteers that know community resources and are sensitive to issues of anonymity.”

George offered in summary: “The meetings helped me to appreciate that alcohol was cunning, baffling, powerful, and, for me, extremely dangerous. New ways of looking at life gradually were absorbed and I found that my reactions to life’s problems became less intense. Anger became much less frequent and I became more tolerant. I found it was possible to admit when I was wrong. Concern for the welfare of others increased. I became less fearful of economic insecurity. I was not as anxious about things and began to enjoy my work as a lawyer.”

Seattle: The Unbar meets Wednesdays from 12:15–1:30 p.m. at the Municipal Building — 700 Fifth Ave, Ste. 2750, across from the Columbia Center.

WSBA Lawyers Assistance Program: 11th Floor, WSBA Office, 1325 Fourth Ave., Seattle, 206-727-8268, lap@wsba.org wsba.org/lap. You can also contact LAP for information about groups in Spokane and around the state. 

Dan Crystal has been working with the WSBA since November 2008. He received his Psy.D. in clinical psychology from the University of Denver in 2007 and completed a postdoctoral fellowship at the Seattle VA Hospital in 2008. His areas of expertise include addictions, post-traumatic stress disorder, and forensic psychology. At the WSBA Lawyers Assistance Program, Dr. Crystal provides individual consultations, leads job seekers groups, and outreaches to bar groups statewide on mental health issues. He also works with the WSBA Office of Disciplinary Counsel as its diversion administrator.

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