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TLAP and the Miracle of Recovery

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On Aug. 31, I received a wonderful text message from a lawyer we'll call "Robin":

"5 years sober today. You were my first angels in recovery. Don't you ever forget it. You saved my life."

The message was sent to me as well as Robin's Tennessee Lawyers Assistance Program (TLAP) volunteer peer monitor (also another lawyer in recovery). Robin has now established long-term full remission from the disease of alcoholism by following TLAP's clinical recommendations for diagnostics and treatment and then entering the TLAP monitoring program for post-treatment support and accountability.

On its face, the message appears to be just another recovery anniversary. On the contrary, five years of full remission (with no relapses whatsoever) is a huge milestone. Like all lawyers who have successfully completed TLAP's programming, Robin's recovery from addiction is robust and durable, fitness to practice is fully restored, and the threat of relapse is extremely remote.²

These reliable outcomes require a long-term commitment of trust and tenacity. The path to solid recovery is often treacherous and scary, and it pays to have a trusted resource like TLAP for sound advice, especially if you are a legal professional like Robin.

TLAP is a confidential and unique Tennessee Supreme Court program that is specifically designed for lawyers. We provide "gold standard" proven clinical programming based on well-established medical best practices for helping legal professionals. We are very experienced in traversing reliable paths that lead someone out of the deep woods of addiction.

The very first steps toward recovery are often hampered by impairment and denial. It is common for people in active addiction to suffer from impaired perception and they cannot accurately gauge how serious their addiction issues have become. They are simply not prepared to make hard decisions about the actual level of care that is really needed to robustly address the extent of their illness. Minimization and denial of the severity of the situation are common.

Alcoholism is a disease that tells its victims they don't have a disease, and it is routine for the victim to be incapable of being honest with themselves about how sick they have become. Unfortunately, this level of denial can also result in the person not reaching out for help until consequences are so severe that the person can't handle the situation alone and needs help. Robin describes that turning point:

My life imploded. I lost my job, had no future prospects and my home life was a mess. I knew I had two choices: give up or get some help. I've never been one to ask for help, and it was one of the hardest things I've ever done.

Once a problem and the need for help is acknowledged, the next phase of the journey involves making important decisions about what level of care to utilize. The path you choose can significantly impact the chances of success or failure in recovery. This period is often fraught with resistance, misguided expectations and fears.

When you are in intense emotional and physical pain, it can be very hard to know who to trust. There are mood swings and unpredictable “fits and starts” about what action to take. Also, well-intentioned but inexperienced family, friends and professional peers may unknowingly harm the alcoholic or addict by shielding them from consequences and joining them in minimizing the problem.

These friends may also unknowingly harm the process by endorsing or encouraging support for lower levels of care that are risky and not appropriate. Licensed professionals place a terrible bet if they try a “fail first” plan of an easier and softer way that, on its face, renders a statistically higher risk of relapse. Licensed professionals should not take any chances at all with their life and fitness to practice. Taking any such risks reflects a lack of education and respect for just how cunning, baffling and powerful the deadly diseases of alcoholism and addiction really are. You would not settle for anything but the best cancer treatment. Alcoholism and addiction are no less serious.

At TLAP, we have the expertise and resources to stand up to addiction. We provide reliable support to the person, and we also help educate family, friends and peers about clinical best practices. TLAP will facilitate excellent referrals to diagnostics and treatment. These facilities have specialized programs for licensed professionals that not only generate exceptional recovery rates but also render reliable expert opinions on restoring fitness to practice law.

With TLAP's support, the person will be better able to take the threat of alcoholism and addiction seriously and make sound clinical decisions that will be invaluable in the long run. Here's what Robin experienced at that juncture in the process:

TLAP's team embraced me wholeheartedly, and over the course of the next few months, they spent countless hours communicating with me, helping to educate me about my substance use disorder, and ultimately, helping me get treatment so that I could start a journey of recovery. There were several times during those early days when I wanted to give up, tell TLAP that their recommendations seemed excessive or too time-consuming, and try to find my own way.

There are always significant ups and downs, because alcoholism is not treated overnight. It is an ongoing process, not an event. And all the while, the disease whispers lies into everyone's ears: "things aren't that bad; you don't need to do all of this; give yourself a chance to try an easier path; with just a little support you have the willpower to overcome this; you've got this." Those are the cruel lies told by a cruel disease that is relentless in trying to talk everyone into halfway measures that give the disease a better chance to keep a grip on its victim.

Taking the first step and confidentially contacting TLAP is an amazing opportunity for lawyers, judges and law students. With TLAP's help, they will receive objective, reliable and trustworthy information and clinical advice for specialized diagnostics, treatment and recovery monitoring that they may need. On a case-by-case basis, TLAP provides individualized support and recommendations.

At TLAP we have scores of current monitoring participants, and over the years we have helped save hundreds of lives and careers. These cases routinely start with the lawyer, judge or law student at their wits end, mired in severe emotional pain, perhaps also experiencing licensure issues, and in some cases they are contemplating taking their own life. From their perspective there often seems to be no real hope for a future at all, much less fully regaining their former station in life. They are simply lost in the deep, dark despair of alcoholism or addiction. Where should they turn? Who can they even trust? It is profoundly isolating, depressing and dangerous. Without effective help they can remain stuck.

After fully stabilizing in recovery in TLAP's monitoring program, lawyers can often see their journey clearly and share what it was like, what happened and what it is like now. Robin's report in this later phase of TLAP monitoring reflects quality recovery:

Today, I'm sober, employed and have the support of a loving family. I still work with Buddy and my TLAP support crew on a regular basis in order to maintain my sobriety. My one wish in writing these words is this: if you have any concern about reaching out to TLAP, please know that they care; they will bend over backwards to help you, and in doing so, they will maintain your anonymity and treat you with respect. They did it for me.

Robin's success story is not the exception at TLAP, it is far and away the rule. It is with great gratitude and humility that TLAP waits and prays that there will be a simple movement of grace and that by some miracle of recovery a lawyer, judge or law student who is suffering (or someone who is concerned about them) will confidentially reach out to TLAP and let us help.

TLAP's know-how, resources, tools and proven best-practices programming will help you reliably assess your clinical needs, find the best resources and providers, and then TLAP will walk with you on a solid clinical path that climbs out of the dark woods of despair and back into the sunlight. With TLAP's support, you never weather that journey alone.

If you think you have (or are concerned about someone else regarding) a problem with alcohol, drugs, depression, or any other mental condition, contact TLAP. Your call or email is confidential. You do not even have to give your name. Whether you need immediate help or want general information, TLAP is here for you! Call (615) 741-3238, email to Tlap@tncourts.gov or visit us online www.tlap.org. |||



Buddy Stockwell was appointed by the Tennessee Supreme Court in July 2020 as executive director of the Tennessee Lawyers Assistance Program (TLAP). He comes from south Louisiana where he has been a volunteer and program monitor for the state's Committee on Alcohol and Drug Abuse and the executive director of Louisiana's

comprehensive Judges and Lawyers Assistance Program (JLAP) peer professionals' program. He is a certified clinical interventionist through "Love First" training at the Betty

Ford Center and has personally been in recovery from alcoholism for over 38 years. Stockwell earned his law degree from LSU Law School in 1993. He practiced in both large and small firm settings, including a solo practice in Baton Rouge where he focused heavily on domestic litigation. Read more about him at tba.org/Stockwell.

NOTES

1. We have permission to share information, but we will use the fictitious name “Robin.”
2. By utilizing clinical guidelines that support licensed professionals, TLAP’s monitoring participants are supported by extremely high rates of recovery. Last year TLAP’s program had an average 89% no-relapse rate.

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