





SPOTTING ATTORNEYS IN DISTRESS

Before It's Too Late

By Maya J. Brown

Laurie Besden doesn't look like a woman who needed 55 pain pills a day just to function.

"I share my personal story, and everything is factual. The facts are what they are," the deputy executive director of Lawyers Concerned for Lawyers (LCL) disclaimed at the beginning of her story, which to some may sound like something out of a Lifetime movie. She recently spoke to members of the Philadelphia Bar Association's Women in the Profession Committee.

Laurie opened by explaining that her notion of a drug addict when she was growing up was a "guy with long hair in a Metallica T-shirt." Laurie experienced what she described as the "first taste of euphoria outside of myself" during a routine dentist appointment when she was no more than 10 years old. After receiving a standard dose of nitrous, Laurie remembers feeling paralyzed. Rather than being scared, she tried to figure out how to intensify the feeling and get more nitrous. This would be the first of many drug abuses that ultimately led to her losing her freedom in 2004.

Laurie graduated from the University of Maryland College Park with a Bachelor's degree in criminology and criminal justice in 3.5 years with a 3.97 grade point average. Before graduating, she began experimenting with alcohol. Laurie lived in a suite with five other girls. On Thursday nights, they would go out and drink so heavily that she resorted to taking naps in the public restroom stall the next day at her internship with the Silver Spring (Md.) Parole and Probation Department. Laurie also admitted to drinking in the shower (in

preparation for going out with friends for the night) which she then viewed as “time management.”

After college, Laurie began dating a doctor’s son. While in his home, she found Vicoprofen. As Laurie described it, she was “diligent in her theft – take just enough so they wouldn’t know if they were missing.” What should have been another red flag indicating Laurie had a serious problem went unnoticed.

The first encounter with LCL came when Laurie was a first year at the Dickinson School of Law at Penn State University. She recalls sitting in orientation listening to an LCL representative speak, annoyed, thinking, “We’re in law school, do they even know who we are? What is this drugs and alcohol?” During the mandatory program – she wrote a note to the student next to her that read, “this is a waste of time.” The school had a keg in the curtilage following the presentation and Laurie was already there, in her mind.

LCL is an independent, nonprofit corporation run by judges and lawyers for the benefit of the Bench, Bar and law students. LCL is made up of men and women in recovery from stress, anxiety, depression, bipolar, substance abuse, alcoholism, addiction to medication or other drugs, problem gambling, eating disorders, compulsive behaviors and various emotional or mental health disorders. “We understand these illnesses and we understand the pain, fear and frustration of the lawyer or judge who is in distress. We offer nonjudgmental, discrete and confidential assistance,” according to LCL’s website.

In her third year of law school, Laurie’s addiction reached new, dangerous heights. While on winter vacation in Miami with her boyfriend, a law student, Laurie, experienced ecstasy for the first time. This was her first taste of recreational, non-prescription drugs. “I did it. I was hooked!” Laurie explained. Also in year three of law school, Laurie was involved in a car accident that resulted in a minor leg injury. She used the non-life threatening injury to convince the emergency room doctors to give her Vicodin. Even after the pain from the accident had subsided, Laurie found herself sitting in the emergency room quite often. She would take her law books with her for validation, and convince the doctors she had reoccurring pain, then walk out with more pain medicine. At the time, the bar exam was approaching and Laurie thought she would just continue taking the pills, like Tylenol, until she got through the exam and then quit them.

However, that was not the case. Eventually, Laurie grew tired of sitting in different emergency rooms waiting for the pills. Through an online blog, she found out about a pharmacy in Texas that would send 100 pain pills with three refills for \$176. By the time Laurie sat through the bar exam, she was taking 25 pain pills a day and no one had any idea.

The addiction had become so out of control that Laurie

found herself using multiple identities to order the pain pills from the pharmacy in Texas. She even wore doctor’s scrubs during her bar exam with 25 pain pills in the pocket. “I didn’t realize at that time, I actually needed them to breathe,” Laurie said. She was taking three 10-milligram pain pills each hour during the exam.

After passing the bar, Laurie began an appellate court clerkship. During this time, the pill use not only continued, but her tolerance increased. The DHL deliveries were, at the time, delivered to chambers. Laurie assured the staff the deliveries were vitamins. By this time, the deliveries were coming in Laurie’s name, her mother’s name and even her dog’s name.

“I did the best I could with my job. Although when the one-year clerkship came to an end, I was told that I was the only employee ever to use every sick and personal day,” Laurie said. By the middle of the clerkship in December 1999, Laurie was taking 40 pain pills a day simply to function, breathe and appear normal. Unbeknownst to Laurie, this would soon come to an abrupt stop.

One day, when Laurie called to refill her prescription from the Texas pharmacy, she was told the doctor that had been prescribing her pills had been suspended and that no more prescriptions would be honored. Laurie remembers thinking, “I have a 40-pain-pill-a-day habit. What am I going to do? I needed to find a way to continue this. I thought I was so unique and no one would ever understand what happened. I still thought I could get myself out of it.”

She then became the doctors and called in prescriptions in very large unheard of quantities to pharmacies from Collegeville, Pa., to Margate, N.J.

Her situation continued to escalate. One night, Laurie ended up experimenting with cocaine with a friend. Before she knew it, she was calling the friend’s drug dealer –

looking for more.

At this time, Laurie was beginning another one-year clerkship in Philadelphia. She was down to 110 pounds and remembered times she would go to meet with judges while dressed in sweaters, sweating in the summer. She had been awake on cocaine for four days at a time. Laurie reflected on the days she would enter the Criminal Justice Center with cocaine and Vicodin on her person with no regard for the drug dogs or for possibly killing someone while driving to and from work. She said she “was no longer capable of thinking rationally.”

At the conclusion of that one-year clerkship, Laurie was unemployable. She did nothing but “the getting of drugs, using and planning to get more.” Laurie described this time as “being in a personal prison and feeling death was the only way it would ever end. I would look outside and see life going on and all I wanted was to be that person that actually woke up, walked my dog and went to any job and did not need drugs

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to breathe.” She feared it was too late and there was no way out. In the years following, Laurie was arrested five times – four for felony prescription fraud and one for driving under the influence of drugs. She was involved in 29 car accidents and spent time in three rehab facilities and was incarcerated three times. The final incarceration was in Montgomery County. Laurie’s family sent her to rehab but she eventually re-violated.

January 29, 2004 is a date Laurie Besden will never forget. It is her sobriety date. She was being arrested for her second violation and she knew it was over when Plymouth Township Police came to her home to arrest her for violation of her probation. When Laurie was being arrested, her father answered a phone call from J. David Farrell, a local LCL volunteer who was informed by John Carroll that “there was a Montgomery County attorney that may be in trouble.”

When Laurie arrived at the police station, she received a call from Dave. When she picked-up the phone and asked, “Who is this?” Dave replied, “You don’t know me, I’m with LCL. John Carroll told me to find you and go see you. I’m an attorney. I’m 30 years sober. I’ll tell you when I get there.”

Laurie finally met Dave when she was notified she had an attorney-visit while sitting in jail. He walked up to her whistling and said, “I’m a drug addict 30 years sober. I am also an attorney and volunteer with LCL. I’m going to stick through this process with you. This is what we do at LCL.” Dave later spoke at Laurie’s sentencing hearing. She was sentenced to 11.5 months in jail. She recalls thinking Judge Carpenter was throwing the book at her because she was a lawyer. Laurie later realized that she could have been sent upstate for many years instead.

After serving her time and a short stay with at the Caron Foundation, Laurie began to get her life back in order. With Dave’s help, she was attending support group meetings, filing for bankruptcy and even getting a job as a paralegal. However, Laurie had an obligation to report her series of unfortunate events to the Disciplinary Board. The result of her report was a three-year joint suspension in New Jersey and Pennsylvania.

During her suspension, Laurie became a volunteer with LCL. She became one of the people LCL would call upon in Montgomery County who would reach out to an attorney in need who was struggling with addiction. She recalls one story that she will never forget. “I ended up getting a call to follow-up with a woman who had a daughter and was struggling with drug addiction. The woman was detoxing herself at home and told me it would be most helpful if I could deliver a pizza for her teenage daughter.

“I was like, ‘I can do that!’ So, I did. I told the woman’s daughter: ‘Oh it’s your 10th one, it’s free.’ That woman is sober today and now one of our volunteers at LCL. That was 2006.”

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It eventually came time for Laurie’s reinstatement hearing. Dave was one of five people who spoke on her behalf. The others were her mother, her sponsor, a partner in the law firm where she worked and the Plymouth Township detective who arrested her. After an eight-hour hearing, she received the news that she was unanimously recommended to be reinstated in Pennsylvania. New Jersey followed suit. Laurie later contacted Judge Carpenter, who sentenced her and thanked him, telling him, “Never underestimate how powerful your job is. You literally saved my life.” In fact, she presented him with one of her 10-year medallions.

Laurie is now the primary contact for intervention services at LCL and JCJ. She speaks at many of the county bar associations across the Commonwealth, participates on panel programs with the Pennsylvania Bar Association, speaks at the orientations of the nine law schools, presents at professional responsibility classes and hosts “student hours.” She has graciously shared her story of recovery with the Hearing Committee members of the Disciplinary Board to show that recovery is possible. She was on a panel with Judge Carpenter at the Criminal Justice Symposium in June 2015. During student hours she is available on campuses for students to come speak with her in a private, tucked-away room. She noted that help-line statistics are up 40 percent as a result of the “student hours program.”

Laurie said LCL pays for an evaluation with a health care professional and says people can remain completely anonymous. “We handle anything substance use/mental health disorder. We will accommodate anyone willing to get help. As long as someone is still breathing, there is hope,” she said.

In 2013, LCL received 305 hotline calls. Of the 91 calls that were intervention calls, 79 of those people were approached and accepted help.

Laurie emphasized the importance of calling LCL/JCJ if you have concerns about your colleagues or family members. She said, “In 2013, 79 people were helped because a third party cared enough to call and help someone they were concerned about.” Laurie encouraged the attendees at the program to be that person. “No one has ever been turned down for treatment if they are willing to get help. If someone does not have insurance and no other options to fund treatment – LCL applies to the M. Patricia Carroll Fund,” Laurie said.

“The moral of the story is addiction does not discriminate. I am proof of that. Recovery does not, also. I am not unique; I was very blessed that John Carroll reached out to Dave Farrell and that Judge Carpenter sentenced me to the option of a new life,” she admitted. ■

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