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Recovery Mobilization within Predominately African American Communities: An Interview with David Whitters

William L. White

In the early 2000s, I was invited to speak at a meeting of the Center for Substance Abuse Treatment's Recovery Community Services Program (RCSP) grantees. It was at that meeting that I first met David Whitters. I was captivated by his passion for recovery advocacy and his early vision of mobilizing Black churches as resources for addiction recovery support. To fulfill that vision, David founded and until recently, directed, Recovery Consultants of Atlanta, Inc. (RCA, Inc.) Over the past decade, I have visited him many times and helped support his work there. David recently left RCA, Inc. just prior to completing his PhD in social work. I interviewed him in June 2010 with a request that he reflect on some of what he has learned as a recovery advocate.

Bill White: David, let me take you back to the beginning. What led to the founding of Recovery Consultants of Atlanta?

David Whitters: I graduated with my Master's Degree in social work from Michigan in December 1998 and returned to Atlanta, where my recovery started in 1984. Almost immediately after moving back to Atlanta, I went to work at Morehouse School of Medicine, which was operating the Center for Substance Abuse Treatment's Southeast Addiction Technology Transfer Center (ATTC). Cathy Nugent, who was the project officer for CSAT's Recovery Community Support Program (RCSP) at that time, invited me to an RCSP grantee meeting after she learned of my personal recovery and my work at the ATTC. It was in that project that I was introduced to the recovery advocacy movement. Shortly thereafter, I created an organization called Recovery Consultants of Atlanta, Inc. (RCA), in hopes of someday applying to CSAT to become one of the RCSP sites. I started RCA, Inc., in June 1999 with three friends in recovery who had also earned their graduate degrees as a result of their personal recovery.

Our initial mission was to identify individuals in 12-step recovery who aspired to go to school and combine formal education with their personal experiences. We knew that there were a lot of people like this because many would come up to us all the time and say, "I want to go to school, but I don't know how to start the process," and that's initially how RCA, Inc., started. In early 2001, we applied for one of the RCSP grants. What happened in the interim was that the original RCA, Inc., board members all dropped off by the wayside. Additionally, I had applied to a PhD program at the University of Georgia. I was left with managing RCA, Inc., by myself even though we didn't have any funding, and I had just starting my doctoral studies in August 2001. In

October 2001, I got a call from Cathy Nugent. She said, “Congratulations, David. Your RCSP grant got funded.”

Bill: Talk about being drafted by a movement!

David: I know! That’s what it felt like. I had expected a call from CSAT telling me all that was wrong with our proposal and to apply again in the future. What happened is that we got funded the first time out. I had never written a grant before and didn’t really know what to do. I was a full-time doctoral student, and that was my top priority. I had cut back my hours at the ATTC to 20 hours a week, and suddenly I had a project to run. No office, no staff, no resources, just me and the grant and a makeshift Board of Directors. So that was the beginning of Recovery Consultants of Atlanta, Inc.

It has since grown to become one of America’s leading recovery community organizations. The advocacy work taking place now is exceptional. The peer-led support services that they offer are recognized nationally for their innovation and creativity. The organization has expanded and now has three other SAMHSA grants in addition to the RCSP grant. Out of the 11 2001 RCSP cohorts funded by CSAT, we were the only one re-funded in 2006. Now, that doesn’t necessarily mean we were the only ones doing wonderful work, because we weren’t, but it does mean we have been funded to do recovery advocacy and support projects for nine consecutive years.

Bill: What was the initial response of the recovery community in Atlanta to your project?

David: It was really interesting. Most of the recovering people in Atlanta had never heard of recovery advocacy. They knew a lot about 12-step recovery, but they didn’t know that there were groups of people across the nation beginning to educate and advocate on addiction recovery. Most were not aware of the discrimination that existed for people who suffer from addictive disorders. Most were unaware of the recovery advocacy movement. So we started mobilizing folks, and two things happened.

First, we had this large group of people who were extremely interested, which kind of blew my mind because I thought I would find more people who would resist this movement. They agreed with us that it was a shame that the only people who knew the living reality of recovering from addiction were individuals who sat in circles with one another each night and shared their stories of recovery over and over and over again. We told them we wanted to mobilize people in recovery and then teach them how to become advocates for treatment and recovery options. We created a vision of engaging legislators and other policymakers, sharing our stories with them, and eliciting their support for treatment and recovery support services. We created a vision of recovery speakers carrying a message of hope throughout Atlanta. And many folks were inspired by that vision.

Second, we were met by others in 12-step recovery who opposed this movement because they were misinformed about advocacy and the anonymity principle of 12-step fellowships. They initially felt that the anonymity principle prohibited them from sharing their recovery status outside the confines of their 12-step fellowship. Because of the training that we’ve done with recovering people here in Atlanta, many of those individuals no longer subscribe to that belief. They know now that you can share your

personal story of recovery outside of your respective 12-step fellowship without ever identifying the program that you are a member of. We teach people that you can't go out and say, "My name is David; I'm a member of NA, and this is my story," but you can say, "My name is David. I'm a person in long-term recovery, and this is my story." As long as we don't ever mention the name of our fellowship, we're okay.

Through this process, Atlanta has developed an extremely large volunteer base—more than 200 individuals trained as recovery advocates who travel throughout Atlanta and all across the state helping people come to understand that addiction is a disease that people recover from. And that movement has evolved. Initially, it started out as just folks in 12-step recovery, but because Atlanta has such a large Christian base, we were approached early in this process by individuals who wanted to be a part of this movement who claimed that they found recovery from their disorder through a Christian conversion.

That was an interesting experience, Bill, because when we invited them to the meetings, they would come, and they would essentially say things like they don't identify as alcoholics or addicts anymore because through their new relationship with Christ, they don't believe that they have to identify that way. Well, that created some discomfort for those who found recovery in AA and NA and felt that unless you found your recovery in AA or NA, you didn't have real recovery. At the time, there was a belief in some 12-step fellowships in Atlanta that if you started your recovery in AA or NA but decided to sustain your recovery by going to religious meetings, you were setting yourself up for relapse. So, some of us were taken aback by these folks who came to the meeting and wanted to be a part of this movement but claimed that their recovery had been delivered through their involvement in the church. When we decided to allow all individuals—however they defined and sustained their personal recovery—to be a part of the movement, we lost some of the people who thought there was only one way to recover. We lost a few, but we gained an invaluable group of individuals who became a very important part of this movement. What happened as a result of that was the creation of a peer-based recovery support program that we offer at Recovery Consultants of Atlanta that's called Christians in Recovery. Every year, we hold an annual event in April that brings together more than 300 Christians in 12-step recovery, people who are in a Christian-based recovery program, or a combination of the two. This event is an awesome experience, and including Christians in Recovery within the advocacy movement has greatly enhanced our credibility. They are a powerful group of individuals in this town.

Bill: David, is this when Celebrate Recovery really began to grow in Atlanta?

David: That's absolutely correct, particularly in the African American community. Celebrate Recovery is a program that was founded by Saddleback Church in Southern California. Most of the individuals involved in Celebrate Recovery nationally are white Americans, but here in Atlanta, a large number of African Americans have become involved in Celebrate Recovery meetings held at Peace Baptist Church, Recovery Consultants of Atlanta's lead faith-based partner. Every Friday night, we hold a Celebrate Recovery meeting from 7 o'clock to 8:30. That meeting started out with four or five of us about six years ago. There are now 30 - 40 people there every Friday, and when you get recovery anniversaries, you can get more than 100.

One of the things that's really amazing about this program is how it leads to subsequent peer-based recovery support services. For example, there is a women and children's treatment program east of Atlanta in DeKalb County whose leaders heard about our Celebrate Recovery meetings. They contacted us and wanted to know if they could send their clients to our Celebrate Recovery meetings. The clients showed up one night, but they didn't tell us that they were bringing their kids with them. There were 20 single mothers and about 30 children. None of us had the courage to say that we were uncomfortable with these women bringing all these kids and the disruptions to the meeting. We shared that story with the pastor of the church. He said, "What do the children do while the meeting's going on?" We said, "Well, they run around, and they make a lot of noise, and they distract us." He said, "What a shame. I have a room right next to the room that y'all meet in that does absolutely nothing on Friday night but collect dust. I have several congregants in my church who are teachers. Why don't we have a simultaneous meeting going on for the kids with a focus on prevention?" We said to ourselves, "What a wonderful idea." The pastor made an announcement during one of his church services, and we got several volunteers. We now run a simultaneous group for young people that we think of as pre-recovery—a prevention effort so you won't even need recovery.

Bill: How did you come to provide transportation for the Celebrate Recovery meetings?

David: The pastor asked us, "How do the women and children get to the meeting on Friday nights?" We said, "Our church is right in front of a bus stop. We're only a mile away from a train station. So they catch a bus to the train station. Then they catch a train to another train station and catch the bus to us." He said, "What a shame. I have five vans that do absolutely nothing on Friday night other than collect dust. Why don't I see if I can identify some volunteers who will pick the women and children up every Friday night? That way, I can go to bed at night knowing that they made it there safe and made it home safe." So now we not only provide a simultaneous support group for the children, but we also provide transportation for both the women and their kids. In doing so, we have addressed two of the challenges that make it most difficult for single parents to be involved in recovery support services: the lack of child care and the lack of transportation.

Bill: My impression is that many people you are describing are simultaneously involved in NA and Celebrate Recovery, although people often think of those as two very different recovery pathways. Is that correct?

David: That's absolutely correct. Almost everybody who comes to our Celebrate Recovery meeting is also a member of Narcotics Anonymous. We have a small group of folks who are members of Celebrate Recovery who aren't members of Narcotics Anonymous, but the majority of them are members of both. Several of the individuals who became a part of our recovery advocacy movement who were part of Celebrate Recovery and found their recovery solely through a Christian conversion are now members of Narcotics Anonymous as a result of hearing the stories of the folks who are primarily in NA who come to Celebrate Recovery. Some of them say, "I love that

Celebrate Recovery is here for me. It makes it possible for me to talk about my Higher Power, Jesus Christ, and I can come to an environment where I'm not going to hear any profanity, but there's only one Celebrate Recovery meeting in my area a week, and one meeting a week just doesn't work for me. So I'm grateful that Narcotics Anonymous is there for me the other nights of the week."

Bill: Has this cross-fertilization created a greater tolerance in Atlanta for the idea of multiple pathways to recovery?

David: Absolutely. In the 26 years that I've been in recovery in Atlanta, I've witnessed the evolution from the belief that there is only one way to recovery to people now accepting that there are many roads to recovery. Today, we have folks in NA and 12-step recovery in Atlanta who work in needle exchange programs. That would have never happened in the past. We have a ways to go, but we've made great progress on the tolerance front.

Bill: David, describe some of the other programs that emerged over time within Recovery Consultants of Atlanta.

David: We initially started with our street outreach program, which is still today my favorite of all the peer-based recovery support programs. We have six full-time staff who work across two CSAT-funded grants who literally spend almost all of their 40 hours each week canvassing inner-city communities, engaging active drug users, and using their motivational interviewing skills to literally talk them into recovery. We have partnerships with three publicly funded detox programs in Atlanta, and the outreach workers link people they engage with detox, where they get to stay for three to seven days. This literally takes people off the streets and subsequently links them with our peer-led transitional housing program that's also funded by our RCSP grant. We have 11 apartments where homeless substance users seeking recovery live, and then we have two CSAT-funded outpatient drug treatment programs that they attend daily for treatment.

Recovery Consultants of Atlanta also started two HIV prevention programs that serve homeless drug users, one of which is specific to homeless drug using African American women. We compared women who self-identified as individuals who had been sexually assaulted with women who tested positive for HIV. We discovered a clear correlation between those two variables. We published these findings and then prepared a grant application to CSAP based on the data. The grant funded what has become known as the SAVED SISTA Project. It's a faith-based street outreach project where women in recovery (referred to as peer specialists) canvass homeless communities of Atlanta engaging female drug users and talking them off the streets and into detox. Once they complete detox, they are linked with our RCSP-funded peer-based transitional housing located in a suburban Atlanta apartment complex. Next, they are linked with our CSAT-funded outpatient treatment program and to our peer-based recovery support services.

The other one that I'm most proud of is RAW, Recovery at Work. It's our social entrepreneur program where about 15 guys in recovery work full-time doing either roofing, landscaping, or pressure washing and painting houses.

Bill: Describe how RAW came into being.

David: In the beginning, we used to get our guys off the streets and put them in our apartments, and after they were clean for a while, we would ask them to start finding work to support the program by paying service fees. Well, we had a difficult time with helping guys get jobs. The guys often had low education levels, multiple felony convictions, and poor work histories. Well, the minister of Peace Baptist Church, the same minister who came up with the second room for the kids in our Celebrate Recovery program and vans to transport them and their parents to our meetings, suggested that we create a business. We said, “Yeah, right. Everybody wants to create a business.” He said, “No, really.” So we started our guys out with pressure washing and painting houses across Atlanta. The minister gave us one of the minivans that he had that they weren’t using, and we bought two commercial paint machines and two commercial pressure washing machines using some of our CSAT funds. We created and passed out flyers to see if we could get folks to let us pressure wash and paint their houses. Next, the pastor preached a sermon about RAW and challenged his congregants to use our services. The very next day, the phone rang off the hook, Bill. We got more calls than we had men who could work. This went on for an entire week.

The key to getting this going was Jimmy, one of our regular staff people at Recovery Consultants of Atlanta, who was also a third generation painter and who led this initiative. He was also one of our early recovery advocates, a member who found his recovery through a Christian conversion and evolved into one of our biggest advocates. Today, RAW has its own LLC; it’s not funded in any way by our RCSP grant. They generate close to one hundred thousand dollars each year in revenue. About five years ago, they had a contract to tear down, rebuild, and stain 400 privacy fences at a condominium complex in south Atlanta that had 400 units. I don’t know if you can hear the banging going on in the background, but I’m actually home today having the roof on my home repaired by RAW. They are the ones repairing my roof as we speak. They are amazing. They have a wonderful reputation throughout the city. They’ve cornered the market on roofing in metro Atlanta.

Bill: David, one of the memories I have from an early visit to Recovery Consultants of Atlanta was of a recovery mural project that I think was between a police station and a pawn shop. Can you describe that project?

David: In the early 1990s, there was a project in Atlanta called the Atlanta Project, funded by Jimmy Carter. It was a beautification project to prepare the city of Atlanta for the 1996 Olympics. A mural was painted at an East Atlanta location, but the mural had deteriorated into an eyesore. So in preparation for one of our Recovery Month celebrations, we decided we wanted to beautify the city with a recovery mural, and we wanted to use the location where this worn out mural existed, between a pawn shop and a police station. We had the hardest time trying to find out who owned the building, but it turns out it was owned by the DeKalb County Police Station. We got excited because we just figured we’d tell them who we were and what we wanted to do and they’d say, “Yeah.” So we went there and told them we wanted to paint a recovery mural in

recognition of Recovery Month, and explained to them what Recovery Month was. We told them we weren't sure what we wanted to paint, but that it would be something promoting recovery from drug and alcohol addiction. They looked at us a little weird, and said, "Ok, we'll get back to you." Well, several days went by, and they didn't get back to us. We called them, and they wouldn't answer the phone. They wouldn't return our calls.

One day, I told that story at a DeKalb County Commissioner's Meeting, where we had been invited to come and talk about Recovery Consultants of Atlanta. After the meeting, a Commissioner came up to me and said, "Meet me tomorrow at that police station. I'm going to get you that wall." So we show up at the police station and he's there chewing out the police chief. Now I was a little nervous because we didn't want to get the police on our bad side, but we got the wall.

We had a member of Atlanta's recovery community from New York who was a graffiti artist who agreed to help us conceptualize this mural. We first tore down the old wall and rebuilt it and painted it white. We then met with our graffiti artist, who listened to our ideas and started pulling out paint cans and spraying. At the end of what only took about an hour and a half, he painted this beautiful mural celebrating the men in the Recovery at Work program.

Before we started, the director of the police precinct had said, "The only thing I need you all to do is repaint the wall white at the end of Recovery Month." We said, "Cool. No problem." So, when we put up that first mural, it was so nice, that the police chief asked us if we could paint a mural on the two adjoining walls, and we agreed. We didn't even tell the graffiti artist what we wanted on the other two walls; he just started doing his thing, and these beautiful murals evolved. When he finished, the police chief came out, and there was this tree that prevented you from seeing the mural until you got right up on it. He asked us if we could cut the tree down so that you could see the mural from several blocks away. So we did. I'm happy to say that these murals lasted for five years, until the building in its entirety was torn down. This proved to be one of our best examples of the power of advocacy. What started out as a group of "not so sure" public officials turned into an open-minded group of people supporting recovery from addiction.

Bill: Another thing I recall was that there were bricks by the murals, and people entered their first name, last initial, and clean date on those bricks.

David: Between murals one and two was a wall of bricks. We painted it white and then came up with an idea for a fundraiser. We announced all over town throughout the recovery community that on the Saturday following our annual Recovery Month event, we would allow individuals to sign their first name and last initial in each brick in colored ink in exchange for a small donation of any amount. We had paint brushes and different colored paint, and you could paint your first name, your last initial, and your sobriety or recovery date and make a donation. People were painting names and recovery dates of sponsors and friends who had died and gone on and making donations in their names. It was absolutely awesome. We have beautiful photographs of that event and a video recording. More than 400 newcomers and old-timers in recovery from all over the city came out, and we raised over \$1,000 that day. We call it the Recovery Wall. Those names and recovery dates remained until the building was leveled some years ago.

Bill: David, you talked earlier about enrolling in school at the same time Recovery Consultants of Atlanta came into its own with the CSAT grant. You have advocated recovering people getting back into school to enhance their own lives and their effectiveness as advocates. Could you talk about that?

David: I'm a part of an advocacy movement that welcomes all folks in recovery. However, I don't believe that personal recovery in and of itself is the most adequate way to prepare us for the work that we have to do. There is an important role for people in recovery who've also obtained or are obtaining formal education. We know it; it's called social action theory. We must remain a grassroots movement, but we need a vanguard group that includes individuals with advanced education who can interact with legislators and other important decision makers.

I had to start with myself. An African American professor had heard about my work and asked to meet with me. She had a doctorate degree in social work and after we had talked, she said, "I want to get you in the University of Georgia." I said, "I already have an MSW degree." She said, "No. I'm, talking about the PhD program." I said to myself, "I don't want to be in no PhD program!" But I couldn't tell her that because she was this powerful, really strong-willed woman who was real active in the community—a member of an African American Episcopal Church, the National Association of Black Social Workers, and on and on. So here she was with this young man, who had all these years in recovery, who also had a Master's degree, who was doing what she thought was some pretty good work in the community. Well, I reluctantly applied to the University of Georgia PhD program because I didn't have the courage to tell her the truth, which was "I'm not sure I'm committed to this." I said yes to her when she asked me if I would apply when I really wanted to say no. The next thing I know, I get a letter in the mail that says, "Congratulations. You've been accepted to the PhD program of the University of Georgia." Now, this was the time that I had just received the RCSP grant from CSAT—the one that I did not expect to get. I'm on my way to class in September 2001—after only being in my PhD program for one month—when I get a call from Cathy Nugent at CSAT informing me that my RCSP grant just got funded. Needless to say, I was feeling a little overwhelmed with responsibilities and tasks.

The first person hired at Recovery Consultants of Atlanta, Inc., was Cassandra Collins. Shortly after she came aboard, she decided to pursue her MSW degree at the University of Georgia. We established a mandate at Recovery Consultants of Atlanta that required staff to take at least one class at a community college each semester that's paid for by us. You get to take it during regular work hours as a way of staying committed to our mission and belief that formal education combined with personal recovery is the best preparation for the work we do. I'm very proud of this. One of our current staff persons was brought to us many years ago in handcuffs by her parole officer. She was one of our first service recipients to receive peer-based recovery support services offered through our RCSP grant. Just recently, she celebrated five years of sustained recovery and through this process, has earned her Associates degree in business from Georgia Perimeter College. She is now enrolled in a 4-year program at Clayton State University. This sister just got off parole a year or so ago, and she was let off early because of the major progress she has made in her recovery and education. We believe in education at Recovery Consultants of Atlanta, Inc.

Bill: David, you've had some wonderful opportunities to participate at the national level since your involvement in the national recovery summit in St. Paul in 2001, and your work has been acknowledged within the America Honors Recovery program of the Johnson Institute. What's been the experience of participating in that larger national movement?

David: There's a saying, "To whom much is given, much is required." I used to believe that my personal recovery was a gift from God for me to help people in Atlanta find recovery from their addiction. I'm learning now that my service responsibilities are broader than that. My life and work here in Atlanta have afforded opportunities I could not have dreamed of. I have been in 25-30 cities across the country representing CSAT and talking about this national recovery advocacy and peer recovery support movement. My involvement in the national movement has been one of the greatest experiences of my life, and I have also had the opportunity to visit Faces and Voices of Recovery in Cape Town, South Africa, and contribute to the international recovery movement.

Bill: David, one of the contributions you've made, among many, is to coach people on how to work within African American communities around recovery advocacy issues. What are some of the important lessons you've tried to convey when you've talked to others about that work?

David: First, I think it is important to acknowledge that non-white Americans have played leadership roles in the recovery advocacy movement since its inception—that this is a movement alive within communities of color and that lessons learned there have relevance to all communities. Second, in the African American community, we have a responsibility to step outside of the comforts of our 12-step recovery communities and let our legislators, our business leaders, our faith community, and our communities in general know that addiction is a disease that flourishes where excessive alcohol and drug use are viewed as the norm and tolerated or even celebrated. We knew we were in trouble in Atlanta when you could find areas of the community that had more liquor stores than churches—and this is Atlanta, a city where we love our churches. Part of my responsibility has been to teach other African Americans that we do not have to tolerate such conditions and that we can get help to those in our community who are suffering from addiction and provide them opportunities to give back to their community once they find recovery.

Being a recovery advocate in the African American community is slightly different than being an advocate in non-African American communities because we have more to deal with than just advocating for treatment and recovery. We have to deal with demoralized parts of our community that have come to tolerate open-air drug markets, parts of our community that continue to view addiction only in moral terms, and parts of our community that don't believe that addiction is an illness or that recovery is possible. We have to find a way to place this advocacy work within the larger cultural renewal of our community and our history as a people.

Bill: David, have you been able to recruit young people into recovery in Atlanta through the work of the advocacy movement?

David: There has been a wonderful program in Southwest Atlanta that has a strong youth focus that is actively introducing young people to recovery. Historically in our community, our approach has been to wait until addicted people get into their mid-30s when they're sick and tired of being sick and tired, and then we hit them with the intervention. But that's a concept that's too little, too late. There is a strong movement by several community-based organizations to intervene at younger ages and to get young people actively involved in recovery activities. That movement is giving us a new generation of young people in long-term recovery who will be the future of this movement.

Bill: David, talk a little bit about your future aspirations in recovery advocacy.

David: Personally, I'm interested in expanding the work that is being done at Recovery Consultants of Atlanta. I have been gone from there these past months and now have a PhD in social work and some research experience. I'm interested in pursuing funding that will allow me to conduct randomized clinical trials of different types of peer-based recovery support services that are being provided by these wonderful recovery organizations across the country. Few of these services have been evaluated, and it is time we began to conduct such studies.

Bill: That would be wonderful. David, thank you for sharing your advocacy story and the early story of Recovery Consultants of Atlanta.