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Reflections on the Alliance Project and the 2001 Recovery Summit: An Interview with Jeff Blodgett

William L. White

Introduction

If there was a point of ignition for the new addiction recovery advocacy movement in the United States, it was undoubtedly the 2001 Recovery Summit in St. Paul, Minnesota. The key figure in planning and facilitating this event and paving the way for the creation of Faces and Voices of Recovery was Jeff Blodgett. Jeff brought great passion and extraordinary skill as an organizer to help launch this movement. Through such passion and skill, he brought together diverse elements of American communities of recovery in a way that had never been done before. In the spring of 2012, I had the opportunity to interview Jeff about the Summit and his views on the movement it helped birth.

Bill White: Jeff, the Alliance Project played a critical role in the rise of the new recovery advocacy movement. Could you describe how you came to be involved in that project?

Jeff Blodgett: Sure. My whole career has been in community organizing or politics, working on campaigns, elections, elected officials and on issues I care about. I had just finished years working for Senator Paul Wellstone. I ran his first campaign in '90 and his second in '96 and served as his state director in between. I left that job in '97 and went back to the Kennedy School of Government and got my Masters in Public Administration, thinking that I would shift gears and do something else. I came back to Minnesota in search of new opportunities when I was approached by William Moyers. William is an important figure in the recovery advocacy movement and played a key role in my involvement with the Alliance Project. William was working with Paul Samuels and a small group of folks looking for someone to run a new initiative funded by the Johnson Institute to strengthen advocacy around addiction and recovery and related issues.

Bill White: If I remember correctly, the Johnson Institute at that time had just shifted its mission towards recovery advocacy.

Jeff Blodgett: That's right. In earlier years, they had produced educational materials on alcoholism treatment and recovery with a particular focus on interventions. The Johnson Institute (JI) pledged significant resources—a hundred thousand a year for three years—to create this advocacy-focused Alliance Project.

Bill White: How would you describe the JI vision that led to the 2001 recovery summit in St. Paul?

Jeff Blodgett: The summit was the culmination of three years of effort at the Alliance Project. It started with a general charge of helping figure out how the broad recovery community could be mobilized to do better advocacy for issues related to addiction, addiction treatment, and addiction recovery. The project started with the more organized elements of that large community. We brought together the treatment and prevention professional organizations that were scattered around the country to talk about how they could get stronger as an advocacy force. One of the elements identified was the need for an organized constituency of people directly affected by addiction and recovery. That did not really exist at that time. The focus then turned to, “How do we identify and mobilize such a constituency?” That was a long conversation and prompted a long learning curve for me as I tried to offer my analysis and suggest a strategy. Ultimately, the summit came out of that thought process and our hopes to spark an advocacy movement within the recovery community.

Bill White: What was the process for planning the summit?

Jeff Blodgett: We had been working for some time to find and connect with grassroots recovery community people. There was already a burgeoning grassroots movement, and that was really exciting to see. CSAT's Recovery Community Support Program was providing seed money to grassroots organizations that were doing recovery advocacy. So, I did a lot of work building relationships with those folks around the country. I began to find people who shared this vision of knitting these grassroots initiatives into a larger national movement. Out of that process came a number of emerging leaders who we were able to engage in a conversation along with those allies who started the Alliance Project. Our conversations with those leaders

generated the idea of a national gathering at which people could meet each other, build working relationships, and do some planning and strategy work.

Bill White: I recall a lot of behind the scenes tension between key organizations over planning the summit. Did it take a lot of work on your part to keep everyone engaged in the process?

Jeff Blodgett: The whole three years leading up to the summit and the subsequent launch of Faces and Voices of Recovery as an organization was a long conversation with many different elements of the emerging movement. There were definitely differing views and tensions all along the way. First of all, just the whole question—you wrote about this in your papers around that time—the idea of holding up recovery as the focus as opposed to just treatment. Treatment was really the focus of the conversation because that community was very well organized. This shift in focus from treatment to recovery was itself something new. Many people in the organized professional community wanted to see an empowered recovery constituency, but getting that meant that they would have to share power. There were definitely tensions there.

The other thing we were going through was elevating this idea that there are many paths to recovery. That was a really important and liberating idea. We weren't talking about any particular recovery program or path, but the idea that recovery happens in a variety of ways to millions of Americans in all walks of life. That helped create an inclusive movement and, from a strategy standpoint, a much larger movement. Opening the movement to all paths of recovery was very important. There were debates around the different recovery modes and how people would be involved, but we managed to actually have a very strong and diverse group of grassroots leaders from around the country represented in St. Paul.

Bill White: After the culmination of three years of effort, you must have had a lot of anticipation about how the summit would go. What memories stand out for you about the summit?

Jeff Blodgett: A couple things. It was first and foremost a place to bring together emerging leaders and give them organizing tools and an organizational structure and then to get out of the way and let conversations happen. And that's what happened. Witnessing that was really exciting to me. Leadership emerged before our eyes drawn from people working at the

local level. These were people who had taken the leap to public recovery and taken the leap into advocacy as a form of recovery service work.

The other thing I remember was that we had during the summit a series of people on stage tell their recovery stories. We had done a fair amount of work with the planning group and the leadership team about demonstrating how to tell our stories in a public way. We wanted to illustrate the power of stories as an organizing tool, and I recall those very powerful stories as one of the highlights of the summit.

Bill White: What impact do you think the presence of Senator Paul Wellstone and Congressman Jim Ramstead had on the summit?

Jeff Blodgett: They provided inspiration and encouragement. Community organizing requires a good strategy, planning, and figuring out how to use power, but it also involves inspiration and motivation, and those two really provided that at the summit. I think it's particularly powerful when elected officials turn to a community and say, "I believe in what you're doing. I want to be your champion, but I need you to build your strength as a movement so that I can be an effective champion for you in the halls of Congress." That's a great message. We're used to turning to our elected representatives and looking for the answers, and in fact, they were turning it back out to us. I thought that was a great message and an important encouragement to keep going.

Bill White: You and I have spent far too much time in our lives attending meetings that really didn't amount to too much. I'm wondering if at the end of the summit, you had premonitions that this meeting might be historic?

Jeff Blodgett: I remember the great positive feelings that people left with. I remember people leaving the meeting really energized and ready to go. You don't always get that at the end of a meeting. A lot of times, everyone's exhausted and can't wait to get the meeting over and get home. The summit was quite the opposite. I go back to the critical ingredients of leadership. This is a community organizing process. Community organizing is really about building authentic leaders who step up and take power and lead others in that process. We were definitely seeing that happen. I look at the Faces and Voices of Recovery website, at the board list, and it makes my heart sing to see those powerful, courageous leaders who have led this movement into something.

Bill White: Faces and Voices of Recovery was really the product of that summit. Do you think it was important that a new organization emerged at that point to lead the movement as opposed to the Alliance Project/Johnson Institute, NCADD, Legal Action Center, or another existing organization?

Jeff Blodgett: I think we all came to the conclusion after several years of planning and extended conversation that there needed to be a new organization organized by and for people in recovery and their family members and allies. That was definitely a missing piece. There was really no way to fill that piece except for it being a separate and equal powerbase of people in recovery representing the power and the possibility of recovery. That needed to happen, and the only way to do that was to start from the bottom and build it up so they can feel like they own it. That's what happened. It took three years to launch that, but that was time well spent. Faces and Voices of Recovery emerged out of a grassroots network, so it was the right sequence.

Bill, one of the things I did when I started was I looked at other movements with some similarities—the mental health movement, especially the founding of the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill (NAMI), and the disability community. Two things stuck out for me. One with NAMI is they started also as a network of local self-help and advocacy organizations, mostly families with mental illness getting together to struggle together. That got knit together, and then they came to Washington, DC. So, it started local and went national. So, I thought that was an important lesson of how you build such an advocacy movement. The other movement I looked at was the disability community. There is an amazing story within that community about their struggle to claim their own language—for instance, from crippled to disabled—and to claim their own definition of themselves. This movement has had to do the same—for instance, from substance abuser to person with addiction.

Bill White: Following the summit, the first people working in staff roles as we transitioned to Faces and Voices of Recovery were Rick Samson and Susan Rook. What do you recall about their early work?

Jeff Blodgett: I knew little of their work because I left the Alliance Project to run Paul Wellstone's third election for the US Senate in 2002. I'd vowed not to return to Paul's campaign, but he and his wife Sheila were hard people to say no to. So, I ran that campaign, which ended in tragedy, with he, his wife, and daughter dying in a plane crash just 12 days before the election in

2002. I then formed an organization called Wellstone Action, which was an organization to carry on his and Sheila's legacy by encouraging people to be active in politics and public life.

One of the unique aspects of the recovery advocacy movement that emerged was the mix of grassroots recovery leadership and early national positions filled by myself and Pat Taylor who brought credentials as professional organizers.

Bill White: I can recall some very early discussion that you and Pat were in national leadership roles and yet were not in personal recovery and whether people in recovery should fill such roles. In retrospect, we did not have people in recovery with the kind of skills you and Pat brought to that stage of the movement.

Jeff Blodgett: I actually think there's a distinction between leaders and organizers. Now, good organizers also can have great leadership skills, and that's important. There's not a crystal clear line. But in terms of the function and the job, there is a difference. You need both to really get the job done, and good organizers also recognize that they're actually not the leader. Leaders are the authentic, organic folks who actually have a following and can help move a group from A to B. The organizer is one who helps when the rubber meets the road. So, there are different roles to play, and successful movements have both of these key roles.

The way we talked about this was people in recovery, their families, and allies. Just as important as elevating people in recovery into leadership positions was assuring family members and allies that there were also roles they could play in this movement. This was an important step from a strategy and power building perspective.

Bill White: Were there other lessons learned in your role at the Alliance Project that might be of help to others who are trying to do this organizing on a local basis?

Jeff Blodgett: One is the importance of time and patience. There is also a learning curve or a process involved in getting people who are in recovery and possibly steeped in their own recovery in a self-help way. It takes time for such people to think about the public side of their recovery and the responsibility and importance of advocacy so others can get well too. That conversation needs to constantly go on because it's making the case for the advocacy side of this movement. People don't necessarily come to that right

away naturally. That's why leaders and organizers are needed to stir that level of consciousness and readiness for public advocacy.

Bill White: What is the value and danger of working with the media in this kind of recovery organizing?

Jeff Blodgett: I think one lesson that the whole recovery community was learning when I was doing this work with the Alliance Project was the danger of relying on celebrity recovery. Another was that the press was always eager to write about the ravages of addiction but not much about recovery. So, there was an opportunity to push the media to add the power of recovery to these stories—to tell the end of the story. There's still a big opportunity for that type of work with the media. That requires building relationships with the media and the reporters, and helping reporters understand the same thing that we are understanding. I think Faces and Voices of Recovery has done a great job with that. There is a lot more media attention in addiction recovery than has ever existed. Today, the media feels more compelled to show the recovery side of things.

Bill White: As you look back on your experiences with the Alliance Project and what's unfolded since then, are there other things you'd like to share with our readers about your experiences during that time?

Jeff Blodgett: Only that I met some great people who are still friends. Ten years later, it's really great to see Faces and Voices going strong. I appreciated the great benefit of the doubt I was given. I wasn't from this community at all. I wasn't in recovery. It was all new to me. I made a lot of mistakes, and it took a long time to really learn all that I needed to know. People were very nice about that. I will say too, Bill, that your role in all this is really very important to me. Your papers were hugely instructive for me and influential. You provided an intellectual and research underpinning to this movement, which was really important. Everyone had a role to play, and you had a huge role. I was just looking back at your paper, *Toward a New Recovery Movement*, and remembering how many times I read through that and how that helped frame things for me.

Bill White: Jeff, thank you for your willingness to do this interview, and thank you for all you have done for the recovery advocacy movement.