

White, W. (2016). A life of recovery activism: An interview with Stacia Murphy. Posted at www.williamwhitepapers.com.

A Life of Recovery Activism An Interview with Stacia Murphy

Introduction

It is difficult to talk about the modern history of recovery advocacy without repeated references to the contributions of Stacia Murphy during her tenures with the national office (1999-2006) and New York affiliate (1984-1999) of the National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence and her service to other leading organizations within the addictions field. She played a seminal role in the rise of the new recovery advocacy movement through her ability to forge diverse constituencies into common cause through the power of her vision and her voice. It is not an understatement to suggest that there may have been no new recovery advocacy movement without her enduring commitment and competence. I recently (March 2016) had the opportunity to interview Stacia Murphy about her life's work. Please join us in this conversation.

Background

Bill White: Prior to 1984, your work focused primarily in the criminal justice system. How did this early work inform your later work in the addictions field?

Stacia Murphy: The work in the criminal justice system involved getting top management to understand that many individuals were leaving prison only to return because of their use of alcohol and subsequent impaired judgment. The opportunity in a controlled environment to educate the inmates and staff about the signs and symptoms of alcoholism could dramatically influence the recidivist rate of a significant number of parolees. This training and education approach resulted in the establishment of education programs about alcohol and its harmful effects in all of the New York State prisons. It began my intense belief in prevention and advocacy in the field.

Bill White: What factors influenced your subsequent transition and sustained commitment to work in the addictions field?

Stacia Murphy: The most dominant factor was seeing successful recoveries and the transformation of the lives of individuals and families.

Bill White: How would you describe the state of addiction treatment and recovery support in New York when you began work at the Fellowship Center in 1984?

Stacia Murphy: The state of addiction treatment at that time was pretty dismal. There was limited availability of treatment programs, poor attitudes of treatment professionals, and limited belief in the possibility of recovery. There was also strong social stigma in general and particularly for the formerly incarcerated.

Advocacy Career

Bill White: In 1990, you became Executive Director of the Alcoholism Council of New York. How did this opportunity arise?

Stacia Murphy: It resulted in the merger of the Fellowship Center, which was experiencing great success in its work, and the Alcoholism Council, which was in transition. The two organizations had worked together over the years, had both been supported by the Smithers Foundation, and had Board members in common.

Bill White: Could you describe some of the central activities of the Council and its local New York affiliates during the 1990s?

Stacia Murphy: The Council was the New York affiliate of the National Council. It provided prevention, education, and training programs to schools, nonprofits, city government, religious institutions, and professionals seeking credentials in alcohol and addiction counseling. It worked with EAP programs in the corporate sector and was deeply involved in advocacy, particularly with city and state governments in such areas as introducing and changing laws about drinking among young people and pregnant women.

Bill White: In 1999, you became President of the National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence. What was it like for you to work at such an iconic organization?

Stacia Murphy: First, I saw it is a gift--an opportunity to work on a national level, expand partnerships, and increase a sphere of influence. Working with other individuals and institutions was an enormous opportunity and challenge.

Bill White: You have often mentioned that we must acknowledge the work that came before us and not forget the legacies of people like Marty Mann, Harold Hughes, Brink and Adele Smithers, and others. Why are those legacies and past lessons so important?

Stacia Murphy: These individuals through their work and steadfast unwavering commitment educated and changed attitudes toward the disease and toward those persons who were afflicted and affected. They laid the foundation that helped make many of the advances that have been made and are still being made. One of those not often-mentioned achievements is the support they garnered for funding of important research in the field.

Bill White: What would you consider your most important achievements during your tenure with NCADD?

Stacia Murphy: I think my most important contributions were increasing and improving the visibility and exposure of NCADD; strengthening relationships with the NCADD state and local affiliates, communities, and the government; and remembering and celebrating the achievements of Marty Mann.

New Recovery Advocacy Movement

Bill White: After coming to NCADD, you were involved in planning and participating in the 2001 Recovery Summit in St. Paul, Minnesota. Looking back, what do you see as the historical significance of that meeting?

Stacia Murphy: It was the coming together of major organizations in the field and the acknowledgment of recovery as a successful and long term result for millions of persons who had stopped using alcohol and other drugs! It changed the emphasis of the disease.

Bill White: Some have lamented the inability of the addictions field to speak with one voice. In the advocacy arena alone, we have NCADD, Faces and Voices of Recovery, Facing Addiction, Young People in Recovery, the Legal Actions Center, the National Alliance for Medication Assisted Recovery, and others. Do we need a single organization or a mechanism to speak with one voice?

Stacia Murphy: I've never been quite sure about this. This is such a complex medical problem. I think we should agree on the common aspects of the course of addiction. We need to put more emphasis on the spectrum of addiction. We should clearly articulate our different roles, highlight our progress as has happened in other diseases, and continue to shift emphasis away from the pathology of the disease to the reality of long-term recovery.

Bill White: One of the goals of the grassroots organizations represented at that meeting and that were created in the wake of that renewed advocacy movement was to reduce the social stigma attached to addiction, addiction treatment, and addiction recovery. How would you critique our level of success to date in achieving that goal?

Stacia Murphy: No doubt progress has been made, but more has to be done. I think we need to hold sustained conversations about stigma, addiction, and recovery.

Bill White: You and I have witnessed a dramatic growth of new recovery support institutions—recovery community centers, recovery residences, recovery schools, recovery industries, recovery ministries, recovery cafes, etc.—and new recovery support roles such as the recovery coach. Do you think these new resources will have a significant effect on the future of recovery in the U.S.?

Stacia Murphy: I do--again in the context of understanding this as a complex medical problem and normalizing recovery.

Bill White: You and I both had the opportunity to work with a brilliant young filmmaker in producing the documentary *The Anonymous People*. Could you describe the experience of working with Greg Williams and your thoughts on the impact of his film?

Stacia Murphy: I am very impressed with his commitment, sincerity, his openness to advice and counsel, and his great organizing skills, as well as his humility.

Bill White: Greg was also the driving force behind the Facing Addiction Together rally on the mall in Washington DC in October 2015. What is your view of the significance of this event and how we might increase the impact of such events in the future?

Stacia Murphy: The event was significant for many reasons, but most importantly that it happened. This was an idea that had been talked about for many years. It was well-marketed and the follow-up with those who attended should reap benefits for years to come.

Bill White: One of the founding goals of the new recovery advocacy movement was to promote the viability of multiple pathways of long-term addiction recovery. What degree of success have we had to date in achieving that goal?

Stacia Murphy: The evidence is the research that has been done (though not widely published) and the conferences that have this as a theme! This is somewhat of a change in the thinking of addiction professionals.

Bill White: One of the things you have tried to do is call our attention to the loss of grassroots involvement and note the emergence of addiction treatment mega-industry, as well as the lack of passion and the loss of voluntary service that has been an inadvertent effect of the professionalization and commercialization of the field. Why is it so important that we not lose touch with grassroots recovery communities and their ethic of voluntary service?

Stacia Murphy: That loss threatens individuals' ability to get sober. We lose the principles and practices that are essential to getting and maintaining long term recovery!

Bill White: What challenges and opportunities do we face in developing the next generation of leaders for the new recovery advocacy movement and the larger addictions field?

Stacia Murphy: I think they need to be educated about the history of the movement (I include AA and NA in that). We have amassed a body of work that is necessary to know and understand. We have made progress, and often that progress is not put into a context. We need more contact and access to a wider audience, and we need to provide the public and professionals with information that is clearer and easier to understand and use.

Bill White: What do you think are the most important next steps for the new recovery advocacy movement in the U.S.?

Stacia Murphy: Education! Education! Education!

Career to Date Reflections

Bill White: As you look back over your decades of advocacy and service work, what has been most personally challenging for you?

Stacia Murphy: Addressing my own stigma, understanding and accepting the multiple pathways of recovery, and being more accepting of others' views when different from mine.

Bill White: What do you feel best about as you look back over your career?

Stacia Murphy: A lot. Working with so many individuals and groups. Having the opportunity to be a part of the many voices around the country. Witnessing the change and progress we have made.

Bill White: What guidance would you offer others who were interested in committing themselves to a life of recovery advocacy?

Stacia Murphy: Know your self. Know the history. Be open and honest. Believe in the process and progress of the recovery movement.

Bill White: Thank you for taking this time to share your experience and your ideas with our readers. It has been a great honor for me to have had the opportunity to work with you over these many years.

Stacia Murphy: It has been my honor to work in this profession, to witness transformed lives, and to meet and work with so many colleagues. My undergraduate degree was English literature and history so the work you have done and contributed to this field has always had a special interest for me. I believe that if you do not know where you have been you will never know where you are going. Thank you for being our guiding light.

Bill White: Thank you, Stacia.

Acknowledgement: Support for this interview series is provided by the Great Lakes Addiction Technology Transfer Center (ATTC) through a cooperative agreement from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (CSAT). The opinions expressed herein are the view of the authors and do not reflect the official position of the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), SAMHSA, or CSAT.