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Harold Everett Hughes (1922-1996)

William L. White

Harold E. Hughes, following his own recovery from alcoholism, went on to serve as Iowa's governor and United States senator and to become one of the nation's most effective advocates for federal and state support of alcoholism treatment. Hughes was born in 1922 in Ida Grove, Iowa. It was during his high school years that he discovered alcohol's ability to dissolve shyness and instill confidence. From his first contact with alcohol, he had little ability to control his drinking. He briefly attended the University of Iowa, but dropped out after his marriage to Eva Mercer.

After returning to Ida Grove following service in Italy during World War II, Hughes drinking increased, forcing his wife to file papers with the Ida County Sanitary Commission to have Hughes legally committed for hospitalization as an inebriate. Hughes escaped hospitalization, but his drinking problems continued. On a day he was contemplating suicide, Hughes underwent a profound religious conversion that initiated his recovery from alcoholism and altered the course of his life. It was during this transition to sobriety (achieved in 1954) that Hughes, a truck driver by trade, accepted a position as an organizer for the Iowa Better Trucking Bureau. Switching his political affiliation from Republican to Democrat in a state dominated by Republicans, Hughes successfully served with the Iowa Commerce Commission from 1958-1962.

In a series of stunning upsets, Hughes was elected and served as Iowa's first three-term Governor from 1962 to 1968. When his gubernatorial opponent, Evan Hultman, sought to use an old drunk driving arrest against him during the 1964 campaign, Hughes went public with the whole story of his alcoholism and his recovery. The result was a landslide victory for Hughes. As Governor, Hughes pushed through funding to establish local alcoholism treatment resources, making Iowa a model for such services at that time.

Hughes went on to serve in the United States Senate from 1969 to 1975. In 1969, he was appointed to chair the first Senate Subcommittee on Alcoholism and

Narcotics within the Labor and Public Welfare Committee. It was from this platform that Senator Hughes supported funding for alcoholism treatment programs through the Office of Economic Opportunity, and authored and championed passage of the 1970 Comprehensive Alcoholism Treatment and Prevention Act (frequently referred to as the “Hughes Act”).

Hughes served other key positions, including Chairman of the Armed Services Subcommittee on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse and was a member of the National Commission on Marijuana and Drug Abuse. He also served on the board of directors of the National Council on Alcoholism and as president of the World Council on Alcoholism.

In 1975, Hughes announced that he would not run for another term in the Senate, but would instead pursue his religious interests through the Fellowship Foundation in Washington, DC. He remained involved in alcoholism-related causes, most significantly in his role as founder and executive director of The Society of Americans for Recovery (SOAR). SOAR was never able to achieve its vision of mobilizing recovering people into a national political force. It collapsed as an organization in 1995, in part because of Hughes declining health. Harold E. Hughes died 23 October 1996.

References

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