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Writers in Treatment: An Interview with Leonard Buschel

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Introduction

Recovery advocacy organizations and their websites are growing exponentially as part of a growing ecumenical culture of recovery in the United States. One of the more interesting

of such organizations is Writers in Treatment (<http://www.writersintreatment.org/>) --the brainchild of Leonard Buschel. I recently interviewed Leonard about his life and his work through Writers in Treatment. Please enjoy the transcription of this engaging discussion.

History of Writers in Treatment

Bill White: Leonard, let me start by asking you to share the story of how you first got involved in recovery advocacy work.

Leonard Buschel: When I was celebrating my tenth year of sobriety, I decided to go back to college and take courses to get my California certification as a Substance Abuse

Counselor. I guess that act alone meant I was moving from just being a recovered person to someone who was in the movement, so to speak.

Bill White: And what was the inspiration for Writers in Treatment?

Leonard Buschel: I had been a Substance Abuse Counselor for a number of years and while having dinner with a friend, Buddy Arnold, he regaled me with stories about how he had founded the Musicians' Assistance Program years before. He later passed away and about six months following, I was lonely on a long Labor Day Weekend and I had this thought, "What can I do with the same amount of passion that Buddy brought to his organization for all those years?" And then I started to look around and noticed that most of my friends and I shared a background that included writing. I did some research and discovered there were no charities specifically geared to helping writers get into rehab. I designed this brochure and downloaded some photographs appropriate to such an organization. I wrote the mission statement and our vision. I wrote down my wish list Board

of Directors; the functions of the organization, and I had it printed up. In other words, I acted “as if.” I only had ten color Xeroxes printed and went back east and showed them to a few notable people. I asked them, “If this organization existed, would you be supportive?” They read it and said, “Yes, this looks like a viable cause.” I then went to a non-profit tax attorney in Los Angeles and said, “Please read this and tell me if we’re even in the ballpark.” He read it and he says, “This is good just as it stands. I definitely think you have a viable idea here.” That was about five-and-a-half years ago [2008]. So it was with the idea of wanting to help people in the writing industry, not just writers, but anybody who makes their living off the written word, that this all started. It could be a proofreader, an editor or an ad copy guy. Recently, we’ve expanded our reach, not to just help people in the writing industry, but individuals in general. We have a fund for women called the Jewelle Sturm Memorial Scholarship Fund. She volunteered at our first film festival in 2008 and really helped the organization before tragically dying of an accidental drug overdose.

Bill White: Is there something in writing itself that raises the risks of addiction?

Leonard Buschel: Writing can be a very lonely and stressful profession and because of that isolation, writers can get further advanced in their addiction, more so than other professionals who work in bands, groups, teams. It can be a while before people notice you have a problem and need to seek help.

Bill White: Yes, there’s even this romantic image of the heavy drinking and drug-using creative genius whose writing springs from deep waters.

Leonard Buschel: Right and that’s a fallacy.

Reel Recovery Film Festival

Bill White: To promote Writers in Treatment, you started the Reel Recovery Film Festival. Could you describe a bit about its history?

Leonard Buschel: Well, we started in Los Angeles five years ago where we showed the great classics, *Days of Wine and Roses*, *Lost Weekend*, *Barfly*, *Sid and Nancy* and *Less Than Zero*. Our first feature ever of the whole film festival was *Permanent Midnight* written by Jerry Stahl and starring Ben Stiller. The two of them did a half-hour interview with each other about the films on the stage after each showing. It was just fascinating for everybody, so we stuck with classics the first year.

This all started from the fact that, when I had two years sober, I went to see the movie, *Leaving Las Vegas*. I went alone to a matinee somewhere up in Mill Valley, CA. I’m sure most of your audience would be familiar with the outcome. It’s a true story, based on a real writer who goes to Las Vegas to basically drink himself to death. And one of the great lines from the film is, when the woman that he’s befriended asks him, “Why are you trying to kill yourself?” and he responds, “I *had* a good reason but I forget what it was.” He’d been jilted by life, but then the alcohol became his sole muse and his sole higher power and you watch him die a horribly, entertaining death.

For some reason, the movie made me want to drink again. And I was really comfortable in my sobriety at that time and the movie just had this effect on me, which was uncomfortable and a little scary. I went right from the theater to a local Alano Club, just to sit there and wait for the next meeting because, as much as the movie was showing this horrible and brutal suicide through alcohol, there was some romance to it. And some joie de vivre and some absolutely joyful living on the edge. And it made me want to have a drink. So, I went to a meeting and shared about it and then it was over. I thought, “God, I hope newcomers don’t go to see this alone.” So when we produce a film festival, we encourage rehabs and sober living to bring groups of clients to witness their own lives being played in the big screen. We have a clinician, the filmmaker, either someone from the film or someone who’s a psychologist or an addictions counselor who can do a mini-process group with the audience afterwards.

We never just show a film and then send people home. We just don't show films; we show films and talk about them. We refuse to show exploitive material such as reality TV shows like Intervention or Celebrity Rehab. Thankfully, in the last six years, more and more films about the trials, tribulations and rewards of a clean and sober life are being made and submitted to our advisory board. I started the film festival with the realization, that as the cost of pro-quality, filmmaking equipment was dropping as fast as the IQ of a crack-head. Anyone with an idea, some friends and some chutzpah could make a quality picture.

Bill White: It sounds like this interesting mix of art, community therapy, community education and fund-raising.

Leonard Buschel: Yes and now in California, we're authorized to give out continuing education units to counselors and therapists.

Bill White: Now, is one of the functions of the film festival to raise money to support the organization?

Leonard Buschel: It was originally a fundraiser, but there is only so much money you can raise by selling tickets at five dollars apiece. It serves more to raise our organization's profile and to reduce the stigma of addiction, and to provide a place for people to connect outside the rooms. We do get sponsors, mostly from reputable treatment centers. We haven't been able to get funding outside the treatment industry but we're always trying because we know that any organization that ingratiates itself to people in recovery will have customers for life.

Bill White: Does that funding also extend to the larger organization? I'm curious how Writers in Treatment is funded.

Leonard Buschel: From small personal donations and through the Film Festival. We have one other signature event that we do every year at the Skirball Cultural Center in Los Angeles where we give an award to a high-profile individual who's written a

memoir about their addiction and recovery. That started with Christopher Lawford five years ago. Then we gave an award to Academy Award-Winner Lou Gossett, Jr., who has a terrific memoir about his journey. Three years ago, astronaut Buzz Aldrin accepted the award. He has a terrific book about his depression and alcoholism after he went to the moon. In 2013, Robert Downey, Jr. presented the award to John Taylor, the co-founder and bass player of Duran Duran, wrote a book called, *In the Pleasure Groove*. It is very inspiring, and we got over 360 people at the Skirball. Last year, we honored *Upper Cut*, by Los Angeles AA icon and celebrity hairdresser, Carrie White. These events are not like an awards dinner where people sit around at tables and eat rubber chicken. There is a 90-minute networking buffet, and then everyone files into a state-of-the-art theater where people perform and sing and laugh; we have great comedians, Bobcat Goldthwaite, Barry Diamond and Alonzo Bodden.

Bill White: Now, is this what you referred to as the Festival of Laughs?

Leonard Buschel: Well, the first name was Festival of Laughs, which was part of the Experience, Strength and Health Award. That first year we did it at Christmas time but have since done it each year in February.

Bill White: Are there other activities that you think are important for people to understand about Writers in Treatment?

Leonard Buschel: Well, our main function is to help people suffering from alcohol and drug addiction get into treatment. We've had an incredible track record with those we have supported going to treatment, who have since stayed in recovery. It's because people have to take the initiative to pick up the phone and call us and that usually happens when they have done the math and the ledger says, "Keep on using and you're going to have nothing left; get sober and at least you'll have your wits about you." We're not an intervention company, which is not to say that some interventions aren't life-saving

and work really well. By the time people hear of us, they're ready. It's the old cliché of when you walk towards God, God runs toward you. The motivation makes a big difference.

The events that provide the funds to do this are fantastic because they bring people together in a social, cultural setting to see good films and experience honest conversations about the disease and about different pathways of recovery from the disease. We show great documentaries that are really well done. I'm very proud of all of the filmmakers that have submitted films to us. I'm grateful for the people in studios who license us to use their films when they don't come directly to us--films like, *Flight, Shame*, and a new film, *Thanks for Sharing* that starred Gwyneth Paltrow and Mark Ruffalo. It's a great film about recovery, one of the best. The actor, Joey Pantoliano, has a great film on bi-polarism that we've shown in several cities. The gentleman, who ran for governor of Illinois, Tio Hardiman, before he got into politics, was a local advocate for stopping violent crime and gang violence. He made a great movie called *The Death of an Addict* and by *The Death of an Addict*, it means the death of the addict in him. He saw the addict in him needed to die in order for his own life to go on. That's a great film. Tio and his organization, Violence Interrupters, are now our partners in producing our first Chicago REEL Recovery Film Festival. I could go on and on. Paul Williams just had a fabulous movie last year called, *Still Alive* that covers a lot of his musical writing career and his recovery. And, of course, Russell Brand has a terrific 59-minute film that we show called, *Addiction to Recovery*. It's also about his relationship with Amy Winehouse. The other one we liked was *Behind the Orange Curtain*, a terrific, professionally-made documentary about the epidemic of young people dying in Orange County of prescription drug medications. Oddly, the people dying in Orange are not the rebels and the stoners, but the jocks, the athletes because who were injured and immediately put on painkillers by the medical cartel. Suddenly, they're taking Oxycontin or Percodan and they're feeling better than

they ever have. When it wears off, they're wondering, "where'd that sublime taste of euphoria go?" and so they start to pursue more pills and then when they can't get pills, they get heroin. Some films can even save lives. And we're happy to show things like that.

Bill White: Describe the kind of help you provide to get people into treatment.

Leonard Buschel: We financially support at least six people, per year, through residential and IOP treatment, sometimes by paying all associated costs. That's our primary function – to get people, who can't afford it, into treatment. We also help people with the other collateral costs of getting sober. If someone in recovery needs support or assistance, we always try to lend a helpful hand in any way possible.

Bill White: What is the biggest challenge you've faced in this work?

Leonard Buschel: I can talk about challenges on two levels. The first is the challenge faced as a fundraiser getting support from the business community outside the rehabilitation world. That's been difficult. People don't want their organizations to be associated with the issue of addiction so getting sponsors for events can be difficult and even some who will contribute don't want their name on our materials. When I approached the head of O'Doul's, the non-alcoholic beer, "We're doing a recovery film festival. Would you like to sponsor it?" And he said, "We would never sponsor any organization that ever implied that anybody ever had a problem with alcohol." And I said, "Gee, there's a lot of your market here." And he responded, "Yeah, we know that but that's not who we ever claim we're trying to market to." It's sort of guilt by association. We do get some corporate support, often when one of their leaders is in recovery. I can go to Hazelden, who's always been a big supporter, New Directions for Women and places like Pasadena Recovery Center, Balboa Horizons and the Caron Foundation in New York. But they're not the Hilton, Kia, Subways, Macy's, McDonald's or

the Starbucks whose support we would like to have.

The other challenge is finding programs that can help those we send maintain long-term recovery—to give them the tools to make the decisions to change their lives. It's a challenge to find programs that can provide the constant attention, constant groups, constant activities, and good education in a safe, recovery-supportive environment. Some facilities are afraid to let people have emotional experiences. Some places don't want to pay clinical staff to be working all the time, so there's a lot of free time. I've worked in some facilities where there was almost as much free time as there was program time. Here's my favorite analogy about how a treatment center can be seen: I don't know if you like trains, but the train depots have what they call train tables where the train will ride onto a roundhouse. And then the roundhouse will rotate so the locomotive will be pointed in another direction. So, instead of making a giant U-turn or hitting a wall, the train turns forty-five or ninety degrees and then goes out on another track to a new destination. That's what happened to me in treatment. I pulled in on my own track and I rode away on a new track.

Bill White: As you reflect back over these years, what do you personally feel best about from your involvement with Writers in Treatment?

Leonard Buschel: When I get a submission for the Film Festival and I can tell it's not from a professional but from someone who put their heart and soul and created something that I want to show people, I get to call that person and say, "This is Leonard from the Reel Recovery Film Festival. I just wanted to let you know we really like your film and we're going to show it." And people cry. People cry because even though it's this little 45 minute movie, to them, it's been three months or a year of work. That's my favorite moment of all. And these are very special films. The films we select neither condemn nor condescend. We have movies that teach but we don't allow movies that preach. If I

can be the purveyor of some important material for groups of people, that's my favorite take on it all.

Bill White: I would guess it's a really different experience for people to come and be with a community of recovering people and see those films as opposed to going alone to see such a film in a mainstream theatre.

Leonard Buschel: It's safer and it's more fun. People in recovery laugh at things that normies don't laugh at. When a tense and embarrassing moment like that comes up, a regular audience would be dreading it. We laugh because we know what the person's going through. It's a very knowing laugh, a sympathetic laugh, a painful laugh. We also produce an event called, "Chasing the Muse."

Bill White: I don't know about that.

Leonard Buschel: It's officially called, "Chasing the Muse...Stone-Cold Sober" and what we've done over the last five years is to get a panel of writers and performers who are in recovery. William Moyers is usually our moderator, sometimes Susan Cheever. The first year we had Kurt Sutter, who created the show, *Sons of Anarchy*. We had Kathy Segal, Mark Ebner, and we had Michelle Huneven, a novelist who covers addiction issues in her books, not as a clinician, but through characters and plot. We also had the great poet, Dan Fante, the first year and they talk about chasing the muse...stone cold sober. We like to have a lot of working creative types in the audience. It started when I heard the rumor that when Eric Clapton got sober, he couldn't pick up his guitar for six months because it was a trigger. He'd never held the guitar without a drink or a joint and he just couldn't play. He just couldn't compose. And I know that sometimes getting out of a rehab, you're like a deer in the headlights. You say, "uh-oh, now what?" You don't just jump back to the piano and you don't just get your pen out and start writing poems again. It takes time for your body and mind to get to a place where you can create again. So, we ask people, "How do you get through the first six months in the desert before the muse comes back?"

What do you do to not think that maybe a joint can release your creative energy again? How do you get a year sober without picking up a drink, even though your agent's not calling you anymore? How do you do that?"

Bill White: That's wonderful.

Leonard Buschel: They tell stories of what worked for them—from exercising to going to a lot of meetings or trying some other art form until, eventually, it all comes back to them in spades.

The last panel we did in New York was with Susan Cheever; and we had David Carr from the New York Times, Lawrence Block, the award-winning author of detective stories, and the great Irish author, raconteur, actor and politician Malachy McCourt. It was fabulous. Never a dull moment. They really...they almost performed their answers because they're so passionate about recovery and writing and art. It was just a great evening and no one who was there would ever forget it. It was so amazing to hear all these incredible artists' stratagem on creativity, on recovery and anonymity in early sobriety. Malachy McCourt said, when the subject of anonymity came up, "My anonymity is mine to do with as I please." That was his whole take on it. We have a habit of not filming our events because we think people express themselves differently to a private audience. When the cameras are on, super loose don't things happen. It's a little selfish because what goes on could have value in the world--maybe that'll change next year. I just prefer watching great people let it all hang out.

Bill White: Are you presently taking some of these events on the road?

Leonard Buschel: We do have film festivals all over the country now and are expanding as quickly as a beer drinker's belly. We are in Vancouver, San Francisco, Delray Beach, FL, Las Vegas, Houston and we'll be in Chicago for the first time this fall and Denver in May, 2015. We continue to produce weeklong festivals in Los Angeles and New

York. It's a big undertaking. Thank God it's not like I have to fill up a big Greyhound bus with thirty performers but I can put thirty great movies in a briefcase, get on a plane and take them to audiences everywhere.

Supporting Writers in Treatment

Bill White: Leonard, let me ask a final question. What is the best way for people to reach you who either may be interested in some assistance through Writers in Treatment or who might be interested in sponsoring some local film festival in their own community?

Leonard Buschel: We can be reached through www.writersintreatment.org or through www.reelrecoveryfilmfestival.org. Another ongoing service we provide is the free [Weekly Addiction Recovery eBulletin](#). It includes stories, photos and videos from around the world dealing with all aspects of addiction and recovery from governmental policies to rehab industry news to celebrity sobriety to governmental policy news to medical /pharmaceutical news. It goes out to over 12,000 professionals. That's a great way for people to stay in touch with us. And I can always be reached at leonard@writersintreatment.org or 818-762-0461

Bill White: Leonard, this has been wonderful. Thank you so much for taking this time to share your experiences over these recent years.

Leonard Buschel: It's been my pleasure, Bill.

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