

Reflections on Recovery Advocacy: An Interview with Merlyn Karst

There are many people who have played and are playing a critical role in the New Recovery Advocacy Movement in America. One such person is Merlyn Karst. Merlyn's advocacy career represents the multiple layers of this movement through his personal recovery story, his role in helping found a local recovery advocacy organization (Advocates for Recovery—Colorado) and his work at the national level. Merlyn's involvement parallels the evolution of the national movement. He was with us at the seminal meeting in St. Paul, Minnesota in 2001. He helped shape the Faces and Voices of Recovery organization and went on to serve as Chairman of the Board. In the following interview, He highlights some of the important people, organizations and ideas that have been at the core of the New Recovery Advocacy Movement. I think you will be inspired by his words.

Bill White: Merlyn, let's begin by exploring some of the background that led to your work as a recovery advocate. Can you share some of this background with our readers?

Merlyn Karst: Bill, I have been on the recovery path for 20 years, with long periods of sobriety, broken by a few shorter reminders of my ever-present disease. I now have over 9 years of long-term recovery. Through the many years of pursuing the benefits of recovery from alcohol addiction—for myself and others—I have learned the power of stories to bring hope and affect change. Most of the stories that have been shared with me are more interesting and dramatic than mine. A young man who heard me speak approached me after and said, "Well, your story was kinda interesting, but you are not very funny." It was a reasonable observation and probably a caution as we engage in this interview.

I grew up in a small town. My parents drank little and only occasionally. I had a happy childhood and adolescence. There were few students, and school days were filled with a multitude of activities. No time, no money and no real interest in alcohol. I didn't understand others' interest in alcohol either. Later, I found out.

The Korean conflict caused my National Guard Unit to be called to active duty. We spent most of our time in Alaska. At age 18, and again with little freedom, time, and money, alcohol consumption was infrequent. When I drank I enjoyed the effect and thought I was drinking like other people. Out of service, I went to college. I had a great time, graduated, married, and embarked on a long corporate

career with two different companies. I enjoyed alcohol and what I perceived as its benefits.

Through my life, alcohol was my only drug of choice—cheap, legal, and effective. I was what some called a “periodic.” Over the years, those closest to me were concerned over the change in my behavior when I did drink. They did not agree with my perception that it made me more likeable, interesting, intelligent, and entertaining. How about senseless, boring, obnoxious, and pathetic? Oh my.

I was successful in my career, but in my early fifties, I began to drink more frequently, for a variety of reasons. I relieved frustration and pain through alcohol medication. My alcoholism took wing. There is a term, “functional alcoholic.” Maybe I fit that definition. While “functioning,” I drank and drove and eventually was arrested. Fortunately, there were no crashes or injuries.

The on-going consequences led to dramatic changes in my life. It caused family distress, early retirement from employment, an eventual divorce, and through loss of driving privileges, a diminished lifestyle. I entered a recovery program at the request of the justice system. It was called an alternative sentencing program. When I completed my sentence, I stayed with the program for several years as Administrator for Nancy Clark, a pioneer in alternative sentencing programs. During this time I also served on the board of the Orange County, California, NCADD affiliate, chaired activities for a drug misuse prevention program, and was involved in a start-up recovery support resource organization.

Bill: How did this experience inform your later advocacy work?

Merlyn: Of all these experiences, the most useful was in being involved with the alternative sentencing program. I learned about “other drugs” and the devastating effects on those who were addicted and their families. I, along with other staff members, became very involved with the family members of those residing with us. I met many grandparents who were suddenly confronted with caring for the children of moms and dads who couldn’t be at home. Drug addiction is sometimes referred to as a family disease for a reason.

All those who were under our administration—there were hundreds over the years—were there at the order of the courts. Many were addicts, but not all. Our program earned the trust of several judges who trusted us to administer the program and trusted the individuals to comply with their orders. There were rules, restrictions, and regulations. There were constant reminders that this was an alternative sentence with the alternative being incarceration. Educational and

support activities were required, including 12-step programs. This residential recovery program required living on site with others in the same situation. I was a resident manager by choice.

Employment was required and we provided help and guidance in securing jobs. I quickly realized that overcoming stigma and discrimination among employers was an extremely difficult task. Many lost driving privileges but didn't like taking the bus. I recall writing an instructional piece entitled *Taking the Bus is a Trip*. I was also involved in securing state and local licensing, conditional use-permits, judicial system entity approvals, and meeting municipal codes and requirements. NIMBY (not in my backyard) was a large barrier to establishing and maintaining residential recovery centers. I was, and am, a strong believer in our growing number of drug courts whose great benefit is unfortunately limited by available resources for recovery support services.

I celebrated the successes with those who completed the program and hurt for those who didn't. I was angry at the lack of understanding and social and governmental support for programs like ours. Eventually, my own recovery was in jeopardy. I began to escape and isolate. One thing is now clear to me—alcohol was always out to kill me, but first it wanted to get me alone. With the return of sanity, I took advantage of an opportunity to spend more time in treatment and now celebrate my long-term recovery. All of this provided experience, passion, and opportunity to advocate for the enormous economic and social benefits of treatment and recovery support services as an alternative to incarceration.

We need to educate our leaders about the economic and social insanity of continuing to build jails—our new national monuments—to house addicts. We have yet to realize that investments in treatment and recovery services pay off big recovery dividends. That fact has been an important part of my story. I sometimes describe recovery as like playing a western song backwards. You get your wife back, your house back, your pick-up back, your dog back— and, most important—you get trust back. I am still with the same person I married over 50 years ago, have a happy son and daughter—a young grandchild living nearby—a house, a car, a dog, good health, and an active life in recovery advocacy. How about that as an example of recovery dividends paid out?

Bill: When did your advocacy work begin?

Merlyn: I moved from California to Denver and immediately contacted the head of Denver Drug Court. Fortunately, this individual, Adam Brickner, was appointed the new head of Drug Strategies for Denver. Incidentally, Adam is now head of a

large organization in Baltimore and doing a great job of advancing opportunities for people that are pursuing the benefits of recovery. Anyway, we met, and with others became involved in bringing various interests together to form Advocates for Recovery–Colorado. About this time, we heard about the St. Paul Recovery Advocacy Summit being held in October 2001, and decided to attend. It was a truly motivating and educational event. You were the keynote speaker, Bill, and your “A Day is Coming” speech was etched in my brain.

One reflection on the meeting appears in your book, *Let’s Go Make Some History*. You wrote “There was the usual paranoia about what individuals and organizations would emerge as the national leaders of this movement ...” but we got past this issue, as you go on to write of our sheer exhilaration of having that many recovery advocates there and the obvious excitement of seeing ourselves as a part of a growing national movement.

Many of the present leaders of our organization were present as the Faces & Voices of Recovery campaign was born. Senator Paul Wellstone attended and spoke. I had a memorable opportunity to speak briefly with him about the parity bill he had introduced in Congress and asked “how do we get on that train.” His response was, “You have to get your own train, and this is a good beginning.” I have reflected on that comment, particularly with Faces & Voices of Recovery’s active support of the current Paul Wellstone Mental Health and Addiction Equity Act.

So began my involvement with the campaign and its growth and eventually the building of the Faces & Voices of Recovery organization. This was accomplished through many telephone conferences and gatherings of a committed group of advocates. I remained active during this period. There were bumps along the way, and we are grateful for the support and encouragement of The Legal Action Center. Hiring Pat Taylor as Executive Director gave us the experience, wisdom, and diligence we needed to incorporate and eventually to receive our 501 (c) 3 designation.

Those who were active on the campaign committee became our first board members, led by our first board chair, Lisa Mojer-Torres. We were “born again” at our Washington, D.C., *Recovery in Action Summit* in the fall of 2005. You spoke and posed the question “Where Do We Go from Here?” For me, this event gave us form and substance and provided recognition and motivation leading to the success we have had since. The entire Summit’s speakers and forums, day by day, are available on our website and extremely worthwhile.

Bill: Could you describe some of your recent and current recovery advocacy activities?

Merlyn: I am privileged to serve on the advisory council of the Betty Ford Center Children's Program—Colorado which is a very rewarding experience. I referred earlier to our local organization, Advocates For Recovery-Colorado (AFR), an organizational member of Faces & Voices of Recovery. I am a founding board member of AFR and had the primary role of obtaining our 501(c) 3 designation. This fall, we held our 6th annual recovery rally and partnered with Denver's Office of Drug Strategy and White Bison. We had 22 allied sponsors for the event. Our featured speaker was Don Coyhis, mutual friend and your co-author of the book about alcohol problems in Native America. Don was an original board member of Faces & Voices. My role with Faces & Voices helped us bring Johnny Allem and the Johnson Institute's Recovery Ambassadors Workshop; the premier of HBO's ADDICTION series; and Faces & Voices' *Our Stories Have Power* media training to Denver. AFR sponsored the 2007 Recovery Rally and supported the events and activities of other organizations. Colorado received an Access to Recovery Grant and AFR will be involved. With AFR and many others, our Faces & Voices' organizational membership is growing nationwide and those members will have a significant role in our 2008 Recovery Voices Count campaign.

Bill: Could you share more about your position and the work of the Faces and Voices of Recovery Board?

Merlyn: I am privileged and proud to serve as Chairman of the Board of a vital and growing national organization, Faces & Voices of Recovery. Twenty other committed volunteers join me on our working board. We do much of the work through our committees and thirteen of our board members serve as regional representatives. We are old enough to have had some original board members complete their terms and new ones elected. An excellent advisory group also supports us.

We function economically and efficiently through teleconferencing with excellent participation in committee and board meetings. We meet at least once annually for a retreat to make plans and set our continued course. Our Executive Director, Pat Taylor, and our small (in number) staff carry out the plans. Our other officers, Carol McDaid, Johnny Allem, and Betty Currier are tremendous contributors with guidance and oversight. Having said all that, my task is to Chair our meetings, participate in committees, and maintain good communications with the staff and the board. Most importantly, I help the organization stay on course and, with others, carry the message of the hope and reality of recovery—everywhere.

Bill: Could you describe what this volunteer work has meant to you personally?

Merlyn: First, let me say that the work of recovery advocacy is not a substitute for a personal recovery program. As is said, you can't give away what you don't have. My program provides a spiritual and social base and the work certainly gives more breadth and strength to it. I will also say that it gives a great new dimension to retirement. I have made many new friends in Denver and across the country. Today's technology allows us to stay connected. Many are role models for the reality of recovery. I also learned from experience to balance the work with other activities—like providing day care for a granddaughter, doing every day chores, providing for my physical and mental well-being, and finding quiet time to read and contemplate. I seek a quiet mind and a peaceful heart.

Bill: You have been able to devote much time to Faces & Voices due to your retirement. With the coming mass retirement of baby boomers, do you feel we have the potential of a new generation of recovery advocates in retirement who will help shape the future of the movement?

Merlyn: I truly think that the generation of retiring boomers is one of our primary resources for leadership, support, and activism. They just don't know it yet! Our task is to let them know. Wouldn't it be great if we could provide a brochure with their first social security check! Or place an article in AARP magazine. Time is a precious commodity. With limited economic resources, it is what I can invest. Even that investment needs to be balanced and diverse.

The nature of our work attracts advocates with age, experience, available time, and unallocated income. Most retirees have all of those. Many who take early retirement will face isolation and boredom—certainly unhealthy for someone in recovery. We offer them valuable benefits for use of this personal time. There are millions of stakeholders in lessening the enormous and growing economic burden of addiction. These costs may cause everyone's comfortable retirement to be much less comfortable.

Bill: Might others receive similar benefits from volunteering to work with local or our national recovery advocacy organizations?

Merlyn: Absolutely. The nature of the benefits will be both personal and public. It takes initiative, passion, and patience, and I like to refer to the work as an investment that pays big recovery dividends. One can sit and watch reality shows or get up, go out, and carry the message of the hope and reality of recovery. Let me

say that I think we realize that hope only goes so far. Those seeking long term recovery have hope to sustain them; however, recovery requires work, wit and wisdom.

The achievements that result and the benefits to family and community need to be broadcast through the recovery network. We have a prevailing “what’s in it for me” attitude across the country, and we have a credible answer. At the St. Paul Summit, a spiritual leader told the advocates they needed a choir, singing the same words and in harmony. The words and harmony of the recovery message provide music worth listening to. It is also important that we sing loudly and proudly—not just hum along.

Bill: You have been a strong advocate of the importance of people sharing their recovery stories in professional and public arenas. Why do you think such disclosures are so important?

Merlyn: Bill, we long ago recognized the power of story; particularly, what I call the rest of the story. We are a nation of litigation with a tabloid mentality. The media overly covers the illegal acts, violence, and foibles of the celebrated few, and the incarcerations that result from substance use disorders. Such slanted coverage creates stigma, discrimination, and misinformation. I credit Susan Rook for the phrase: *by our silence we let others define us.*

We have to find ways to cut through the clutter of this confusing culture. The story of recovery from addiction being told by the willing—recovering and recovered and their families and friends —of the achievements resulting from a clean and sober life is our best defense and offense. When I write for others, I often refer to your writings, Bill. I am suggesting that readers get your book, *Let’s Go Make Some History* and read about The Boon of Recovery, particularly your discussion of a time when one’s recovery from addiction is reframed as a gift-bestowing blessing rather than a curse. Also, your essay, *Recovery as a Heroic Journey*, can be found on our Faces & Voices website under Recovery Resources.

What I know is that the powerful, spiritual, and joyful stories shared “inside the rooms” can and should be shared “outside the rooms.” It can be done without identifying with any of the growing number of recovery support programs. The rooms where people meet within these programs are like cocoons, and few people outside ever get to view the emerging butterflies. Outside the rooms, we often smother the beauty with a cloak of shame and guilt, just quietly going about life, fearful of the shadow of stigma. Walt Kelly’s, cartoon character Pogo shared this observation with his animal companions, “We has met the enemy and he is us.”

The reality of the recovery message, broadly carried, will dispel that idea. But if Pogo's observation is true, we surely have some work to do.

Bill: One of the more controversial chapters in the history of the movement has been the issue of anonymity and advocacy. Would you share your thoughts about how discussions of this issue have evolved and what we have learned about it?

Merlyn: The matter of anonymity—in AA, it is the spiritual foundation of all the traditions—has been a topic of intense discussion and examination within our organization. Faces & Voices and others have hopefully helped others to learn that there is advocacy with anonymity. A collaborative brochure with that title shows how we can stand up for our rights while honoring the anonymity tradition of our 12-step groups. It is an incredibly important and useful tool in communicating. These brochures are available through our website and you can download a PDF version. Bill, while writing as a “history buff” you said that that Bill Wilson, later in life, spent his time trying to find ways to reach the alcoholic that AA couldn't reach and further to “delve into areas precluded from AA by the traditions.”

Today, we recognize there are many paths to recovery. We certainly are still delving into finding ways to encourage and help those willing to stand up and speak up about the reality of recovery. There is much to speak about and many to be spoken to. Johnny Allem, President of the Johnson Institute, said a great deal about this when he spoke at our 2005 Summit. His presentation, *This is Where We Stand*, is also available on our website. It's recommended reading.

Bill: Another area of controversy has been the issue of medication-assisted recovery. How have your views of this issue and your perceptions of other pathways of recovery changed since your advocacy work began?

Merlyn: There are many paths to recovery. In Johnny Allem's remarks, one thing he said was, “We should help demonstrate that faith and science meet in powerful ways, to help conquer addiction in our life time.” Dr. Nora Volkow, Director of the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) was another speaker at our 2005 Summit. She was also a major contributor to the HBO *Addiction* series. From her I learned that though addiction is a chronic disease, the brain has a tremendous ability to recover. In studies, it has been determined that drugs simply shut down the thinking part of the brain. Drugs affect the “stop and go” circuitry.

New medications are giving the brain a chance to stop and think before possibly relapsing. It occurred to me that some programs recommend (or the court orders) that addicts attend 90 meetings in 90 days. That suggests that some time ago, it was

realized that it takes time for the thinking part of the brain to recover in order to receive, comprehend, and act on the messages in the twelve-step meetings. Medically-assisted recovery may shorten the period of confused comprehension, suppress strong cravings, and diminish the chance of relapse. While thinking about this interview I read an article from the *Los Angeles Times* titled, “Alcoholism Care without Rehab.” It talks about new drugs and about primary care physicians becoming involved with brief interventions, counseling, and “office-based” alcohol treatment. Wow. It is obvious this subject will get a lot of attention in the coming months and years. Bill, you published a paper entitled “Methadone and the Anti-Medication Bias in Addiction Treatment.” It was helpful to me and could be to others. You did an interview with Lisa Mojer-Torres in this profile series that was also very personal, helpful, and educational. Both your essay and her profile interview are available on our Faces & Voices website. See what a useful site this is.

Bill: What do you think are some of the most important issues the recovery advocacy movement will be taking on in the coming years?

Merlyn: Boy, would I like to reverse roles right now. But let me talk about the goals we set at the St Paul Summit: We want to celebrate and honor recovery in all its diversity; to foster advocacy skills in the tradition of American advocacy movements; to produce principles, language, strategy and leadership to carry the movement forward. The issue will be how best to provide the manner and means for carrying out these fundamental goals.

In 2006, our Faces & Voices Board of Directors adopted a 4-year strategic plan and Right to Addiction Recovery Platform (available on our website) to guide the organization in carrying out our mission. We will face issues of who will be our allies and why. Like all organizations, we face issues of sustainability and growth. We are a grass roots movement and will focus on developing community recovery organizations and giving them and the recovery community a national presence and voice. We will be a constituency of consequence. As today’s culture and communication change, I ponder how we can use blogs, You Tube, Facebook, and I–everything, to get our faces and voices to the eyes and ears of those who need to see and hear our message. Frankly, I am anxious to hear your thoughts about these issues.

Bill: How important is leadership development and leadership succession planning to the future of the recovery advocacy movement?

Merlyn: Simply put—without it there will not be much of a movement. Faces & Voices has a nominating committee that identifies and assesses new board member

prospects. We also assess all board members' skills, strengths, and diversity. Our present board members are older and more mature. At our annual retreat we include leadership and communication training. We are fortunate to have many on our board and in our advisory group who lead organizations and also provide ideas on leadership development. Our committee members are primarily board members but we also have others outside the board that help with this work. We seek younger leaders and are beginning to identify and encourage them. Peer to peer leadership will be essential in communicating to young people seeking a path to recovery and enjoying a better life. There have always been junior organizations like the Junior Chamber of commerce, Junior League, junior boards, and a multitude of others. As we grow broader, deeper, and stronger, we can have a Junior League of Recovery. It's the vision thing.

Bill: Merlyn, are there any final thoughts you would like to share with other recovery advocates from around the country?

Merlyn: Well, first let me thank you for the opportunity to provide this profile. Your guidance and assistance through the process has produced a profile that I hope has been interesting and informative to our readers. I also thank you for all you have written as a historian and guide in our growing recovery movement. As I have noted in this interview, your writing has served me and a multitude of recovery advocates very well. I believe that Faces & Voices of Recovery will be the lead organization in our national recovery movement. I hope that we can convince the millions in recovery to escape the shadow of stigma and stand up and speak out. If that is not prudent or practical for personal reasons, I would ask their financial support for our recovery organization and others, so that that the willing and able can carry the powerful message of the reality of recovery. This is my close. Thanks to our board, our staff, and to our individual and organizational members. To those readers who are not yet members of Faces & Voices of Recovery, I invite you to join us and encourage others to do the same. It is easy. Go to our website at facesandvoicesofrecovery.org and follow directions. It is \$30 per year, less than a latte a month. If you can contribute more, please do. The investment pays off big in recovery dividends. Again— thanks, Bill.

Bill: Thank you Merlyn for sharing your thoughts and experiences.