

Too Young Not to Quit!

(permission granted to reprint from the *Texas State Bar Journal*)

I went to my first AA meeting at the age of 22 because I was flunking out of college. The Dean of the college was kind enough to call my parents and warn them that I ran the risk of getting kicked out of the program due to my grades and failure to appear for class. I went to 10 or 15 AA meetings in Austin, but, at that time, I thought it was a cult; there was no reason for me to be part of this. In spite of the fact I had been skipping class for weeks on end, getting my notes from note-taking services, and drinking at bars nightly until 2:00 in the morning, I still didn't see how alcohol had anything to do with my problems. I decided I would quit drinking on my own and see what happened.

I finished college and started law school without taking another drink of alcohol. However, in my mind, the dramatic improvement in my grades was due to my deciding to take life seriously. I was simply deciding to apply myself to school and study so that I could get into law school. While in law school, I didn't drink for the first 2 years. I was in the top third of my class, was Class President, and was fortunate enough to be there on a scholarship. I decided to take a position as a summer associate with 2 large law firms. At first, I didn't drink. But, given the parties and dinners and Happy Hour festivities that went on with this clerkship, I ended up drinking to fit in with the others. That summer, I drank heavier than I had ever drunk in my life. Every night, I was drinking well past drunkenness and making a fool of myself at almost every firm function.

I continued drinking heavily during my last year of law school until the Bar exam, quitting about 3 or 4 weeks before the exam, thinking that it would help me focus by not going out and shooting pool or going to bars with my friends. I passed the exam and got a job with a very small plaintiffs' firm back home and, luckily for me, my boss liked to drink as much as I did. There was a liquor store across the street from our office and we would flip coins to see who would buy the 12-pack that day. At about 4:00 p.m. on almost every work day, he and I would sit outside, drink beer, and attempt to get some work done. Of course, we didn't.

I still didn't think I had a drinking problem, although I was drinking 6 to 9 beers a day and then smoking pot at night. I convinced myself that I was in a high-stress field and deserved to drink in order to wind down after a tough day. Also, I didn't like being a lawyer as it was nothing like I had imagined it would be. I wasn't making the kind of money I had hoped to make, I didn't have the power or prestige that I thought I deserved, and, basically, it just sucked to be a lawyer. Looking back on it now, I have no doubt that I was drinking alcoholically at that time. However, I was still functional enough to be able to go to work, my wife hadn't threatened to leave me yet, and, therefore, why should I stop?

A couple of years out of law school, a friend of mine came to me with a bag full of

prescription drugs that his mother had been taking before she died. He knew I had some medical training and wanted to know what I thought he should do with all those medications. I graciously offered to go through them for him and throw out what needed to be thrown out. In the bag were a number of chemotherapy agents which I threw out and a full bottle of Lortab 7.5 (a/k/a Vicodin a/k/a hydrocodone, an opioid narcotic). I kept those for me.

That night, I convinced myself that I had a severe enough headache to take a Lortab before I went to bed. For the next month, I had the same headache every night, necessitating another Lortab. For whatever reason, be it genetic or psychological, Lortab was the answer to all my problems. After taking it, I felt great. I felt no pain. Cigarettes tasted better, beer tasted better, and I thought I was happier and more relaxed than I had ever been in my life.

For most of my life I have been an intense and moody person, and somewhat hyper in my demeanor. I was always joking around with people, acting as if life was great and that I thought I was the life of all parties. However, inside, I was depressed and unhappy with everything going on around me. I had a beautiful wife who loved me very much, I was just starting a good career, I had my health, and I had family members who loved and supported me. However, I still felt that life simply sucked.

Lortab filled the void I felt in my life. After taking just one a day for the first month or so, I moved up to 2 a day, 3 a day, and, before I knew it, I had gone through the 3 refills remaining on the prescription. When I ran out of refills, I started going to doctors I knew, making up symptoms such as pain or a severe cough so that they would prescribe to me something containing hydrocodone, the active ingredient in Lortab. I spent all day at work thinking about how I could get my hands on more Lortab. Eventually, my habit got to 30 tablets a day. This pattern continued for the next 2 years, with my habit eventually reaching 50 tablets a day, taking 10 at a time every 6 hours or so. If I ever ran out, I would go into horrible withdrawals, with diarrhea, my legs shaking uncontrollably, my nose running, and being unable to sleep or think straight until I either got more drugs or until a week or two had passed. I got fired by my law firm because I was arrested for DWI after being caught weaving on the road during office hours due to taking so many narcotics. I was smoking pot daily and, when I couldn't find or get my hands on any drugs, I would stoop to drinking beer in my car to help control the shakes. I was 29 years old.

My wife and family had no idea what was wrong with me. They thought I was suffering from some horrible depression and that I was just overworked. I would fall asleep at restaurants no matter how much coffee I drank, and I would fall asleep smoking cigarettes on my couch. Eventually, at the insistence of my wife and family, I went to see a psychologist who told me he thought I was depressed. Of course I didn't tell him about the drugs and alcohol because, although I knew I was taking way too many drugs, I just knew I could quit any time I really wanted.

The charade with the psychologist went on for about 6 months when I finally “fessed up” to my family. That afternoon, I was on a plane to a treatment center that deals with professionals with drug and/or alcohol problems.

After many months in treatment, and literally hundreds and hundreds of AA meetings, I can honestly say that I am happy with my life. I am still married to the same beautiful wife, I have a gorgeous daughter that, God willing, will never see me drunk or high, my family still loves me, and I have a wonderful job with a great law firm. I love life, and believe it or not, I love practicing law. I have learned that the problem was not the practice of law, but the way I was practicing law. For so many years I bought into my own lies and felt that I was powerful enough to control or fix any problem that got in my way, including drugs and alcohol. Despite the trips to the ER, the constant fear of getting arrested, and my total dependence on alcohol and drugs, I still thought I had the power. It seems like a miracle that I finally came to admit that I was powerless over drugs and alcohol and that my life had become unmanageable.

I don't regret anything I had to go through to get me where I am today. As a clean and sober individual, I have had to face and assume responsibility for the many negative consequences created by my past and I am sorry for all the wreckage I have left behind. However, today I am truly happy with life, and feel that every day without drugs and alcohol is a blessing. I used to think that living without drugs and alcohol would be the worst thing that could possibly happen to me, but it has been the best. I regularly attend AA meetings to continue to learn a new way to live and am an active volunteer for both the Texas Lawyers' Assistance Program (TLAP), and Lawyers Concerned for Lawyers (LCL), a statewide support group for lawyers in recovery from drug, alcohol or mental health problems.

If you or some other attorney you know has a problem with drugs or alcohol, please remember this: There is hope and there is help. TLAP and LCL are just two of the many places that can help you get started on the road to recovery. Believe me, if I can get clean and sober, so can you. What are you waiting for?