

A Beacon Of Light For Troubled Attorneys
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Bill Leary has been driving force for Lawyers Concerned for Lawyers

By CHRISTIAN NOLAN

Retired probate judge and lawyer William C. "Bill" Leary knows exactly how long it's been since he had his last drink – January 1981.

Leary had tried other times to quit drinking earlier, in the late 1970s, but after varying periods of sobriety he would, as they say, "fall off the wagon." Leary said he fought those same urges for the rest of '81 but no longer feels the compulsion to drink.

Not wanting to take any chances, Leary hasn't gone a week without at least attending one 12-step meeting and often two.

Wanting to pass the same help he got during tough times on to others, Leary became the driving force in turning Lawyers Concerned for Lawyers into a beacon of hope for Connecticut attorneys who need help coping with problems ranging from substance abuse to gambling and mental illness.

"We would not have a lawyers' assistance program without Bill Leary, plain and simple," said Fred Ury of Ury & Moskow in Fairfield, a former Connecticut Bar Association president.

In recognition of Leary's longtime efforts helping others battle addiction and rallying support from the bar and legislature for the assistance program, Leary will receive the Law Tribune's Service to the Profession Award at this week's Honors Night.

"Bill's done a tremendous service to every lawyer and every future lawyer in the state as well as to anyone who may be affected by that lawyer," said Anthony LaBella of Ury & Moskow, who sits on the board of directors for Lawyers Concerned for Lawyers.

'The Night Before'

Leary's story sounds like those of peers who came before him and many that he has helped since. Leary was able to do his job as an attorney, but when he finished work each day, he would go out and drink heavily.

"I was what people describe as a functional alcoholic," said Leary. "I went to work every day and did reasonably well but you cannot work at the level you're capable of doing when you drank too much the night before.

"I didn't drink at work," continued Leary. But "oftentimes I felt the effects of too much drinking the night before. I was functional. I got my job done. Did I do it as well as I would've liked to? The answer in retrospect is clearly no."

At this time in the 1970s, Leary was working as a probate judge in Windsor Locks and in private practice. He said he knew plenty of other lawyers with drinking and other substance abuse problems.

"In my practice, I encountered people who obviously had substance abuse problems and would refer those people to friends of mine who were in [Alcoholics Anonymous]. Some of them actually did get help. I was too foolish to recognize my own problem at that point."

It wasn't until Leary was hospitalized three times with pancreatic attacks and saw the strain his problem was putting on his family that he tried harder to stay sober.

"I called someone I knew who was in AA and invited myself to go with that person to a meeting. That was my initial entry, if you will, into that program."

Every Tuesday since 1976, Leary has attended the same AA group. By the mid-1980s, Leary said he had grown comfortable in his own sobriety and began to help countless other people, many of them lawyers. He might attend an AA meeting with the person, help them "detox" or, if need be, get them in rehab.

Leary said he would even try to help those who appeared before him in probate court who were dealing with substance abuse problems. In many cases, the people he helped were young mothers dealing with drug or alcohol problems and who were at risk of losing permanent custody of their children.

"I never hesitated to help those people and that was a huge, huge thrill," said Leary. "I'd put them in touch with other people to talk to. Sometimes, if it did work, they'd come in and look to regain custody. I'm thankful to have been given the opportunity."

Lobbying Efforts

In 1998, Leary attended an American Bar Association meeting in Montreal that focused on lawyer assistance programs. After seeing what other states were doing, and what Connecticut wasn't, Leary made it his mission to adopt an ABA modeled program in the state.

Previously there had been an informal Lawyers Concerned for Lawyers effort in the state run through the Connecticut Bar Association. It dealt strictly with lawyers with substance abuse problems and included a weekly 12-step meeting in Rocky Hill.

Leary, who had legislative experience, having served from 1967 to 1971, including time on the General Assembly Judiciary Committee, campaigned to get state support and appropriate funding for a more expansive program.

Still, it took some time for Leary's efforts to pay off. It was not until 2005 that Lawyers Concerned for Lawyers was registered as a tax-exempt, non-profit organization. The legislature approved a measure that would allow the program to be funded by the Client Security Fund, which collects yearly fees from members of Connecticut bar.

Leary began as the acting executive director until he hired Beth Griffin in 2006 to take the job full-time. Griffin, a former insurance defense lawyer, too, had dealt with alcoholism and depression.

The group is still headquartered in Rocky Hill and guarantees complete confidentiality for those seeking its services. If someone calls for help, Lawyers Concerned for Lawyers tries to put that person in touch with one of hundreds of volunteers who have endured a similar hardship. For instance, if the lawyer is struggling with gambling addiction, he or she will be put into contact with another lawyer who has dealt successfully with that problem.

According to Griffin, LCL assisted 56 clients in 2007, 77 in 2008 and last year the number jumped to 198. Griffin said the spike was the "confluence of a lot of different factors" including word spreading of their existence as well as a multitude of problems lawyers face.

"It's not just about drugs, alcohol and gambling anymore," said Griffin. The new wave, she said, consists in large part of lawyers fed up with the profession or who have had their practice go out of business recently.

Leary, 71, an avid bluegrass music and rodeo fan, is retired from the practice of law, at least almost. He's been known to come in to his old firm, O'Malley, Deneen, Leary, Messina & Oswecki, in a pinch if help's needed on something, such as a real estate closing.

Leary, a diehard Providence College fan and graduate, who has FRIAR1 on his personalized license plate, will receive an honorary degree there this month. He was also an honorary coach of the women's hockey team.

Besides those activities and spending time with his wife Emily of 39-plus years, he's attending as many 12-step meetings as he can with whomever he can help. In addition to his involvement with Lawyers Concerned for Lawyers, he's president of the Connecticut Community for Addiction Recovery, another non-profit organization.

"Really every day's a miracle for people in recovery so we owe it to each other to keep it going," said Leary. "This is not unique to me... Most people in recovery are trying to help others." By staying sober, he says he "serves as an example." •