

Recovery Rising: An Interview with William L. White

By Jessica Gleason, JD, NAADAC Director of Communications

R*ecovery Rising: A Retrospective of Addiction Treatment and Recovery Advocacy* is the professional memoir of William (Bill) White, who over the span of five decades evolved through the diverse roles to emerge as the addiction field's preeminent historian and one of its most visionary voices and prolific writers. *Recovery Rising* contains more than 350 stories, reflections, and lessons learned within one man's personal and professional journey. The vignettes convey many of the ideas, methods, people, and organizations that shaped the modern history of addiction treatment and recovery. Bill's many past involvements with NAADAC include webinars, magazine articles, and authorship of *The History of Addiction Counseling in the United States*.

Q: How did you first become involved in the addictions field?

A: I entered the field in the late 1960s at a time most people did so out of personal or family recovery experience. These were the days before the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse (NIAAA), National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), and the Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (CSAT); before the founding of most state addiction treatment authorities; and before creation of NAADAC and its predecessors. The field, if you could even then call it that, was then made up of impassioned people in recovery and renegade professionals who shared the vision of forging a national system of community-based addiction treatment — well, actually community-based alcoholism and “drug abuse” programs as the emerging field was then cleaved along alcohol and drug lines.

Q: You may have set a record for the number of roles you have served in the field. What are the many hats you have worn?

A: This was all pretty organic. I started out as a streetworker — an outreach worker in today's vernacular and evolved through the roles of community organizer, counselor, clinical director, planner, trainer, organizational consultant, administrator, and research scientist. Over a span of nearly five decades, the roles of field historian, journalist, and recovery advocate came to eclipse all others.

Q: After authoring numerous other books, what motivated you to write *Recovery Rising*?

A: I was aware that many long-tenured addiction treatment professionals and recovery advocates, including many of my mentors, were, or soon would be, retiring from this work. I wanted to find a way to honor their contributions and to acknowledge the role they had played in my life. I wanted to find a way to inform and inspire a new generation of people to carry on this work by offering insights and lessons I had drawn from this work. I saw the book as both a heartfelt thank you and a passing of the torch to a new generation of leaders. *Recovery Rising* was also my own attempt to weave the threads of decades of activity into a meaningful whole. There was a random quality to how all this unfolded as I lived it, but when I looked back on it, there was a peculiar order to it all, with each unexpected opportunity leading in unforeseen ways to the next. Finally,

addiction professionals are creatures of action and the spoken word, leaving few professional memoirs through which future scholars could reconstruct the history of our field. I wanted to leave *Recovery Rising* as an artifact for future historians of addiction treatment and recovery in the United States.

Q: How did you decide on the story format for the book?

A: Conveying lessons through stories seemed the ideal way to share my life's journey given the role storytelling has long played in the addiction recovery experience. Most of the stories are accompanied by reflective questions that allow readers to explore their own thoughts and past experiences on the most challenging issues faced on the frontlines of addiction treatment and recovery support. Some might characterize *Recovery Rising* as a memoir, but it is ultimately more about the reader than about me.

A: In the Introduction to *Recovery Rising*, why do you compare yourself to the movie character, Forest Gump?

A: Without conscious intent, this character participated in some of the most important historical milestones of the late 20th century. There is a Forrest Gump quality to my professional career and the stories I shared. Due to the many roles I occupied in the addictions field and my attraction to the field's pioneers, I occupied a Gump-like bystander role to critical events in the modern history of addiction treatment and recovery. I have worked in the arenas of addiction treatment, recovery research, and recovery advocacy for nearly half a century and have been blessed with opportunities to work with some of the leading policymakers, research scientists, clinicians, and recovery advocates of my generation. At this late stage of my life, it seemed a worthy effort to try to pass on some of what we discovered within our collective experiences.

Q: How does this book differ from your earlier books *Slaying the Dragon: The History of Addiction Treatment and Recovery in America* and *The History of Addiction Counseling in the United States*?

A: The books you mention were a product of years of historical research and interviews with leaders in the field. In contrast, *Recovery Rising* tells the modern history of addiction treatment and recovery and the new recovery advocacy movement through my own direct experiences. The former were based on archival documents and interview transcripts; the latter was based on years of journaling and a rigorous dredging of my memory. What these books share in common is an effort to heighten the historical consciousness of people working on the front lines of addiction treatment, recovery support, and recovery advocacy. I have loved working in this field and researching its history. I wish I had another lifetime to devote to it.



Jessica Gleason, JD, is Director of Communications for NAADAC, the Association for Addiction Professionals. She manages all communications, marketing, public relations, and informational activities of the Association, the NAADAC website, and all digital media, marketing, and communications. Gleason is the Managing Editor for NAADAC's *Advances in Addiction & Recovery* magazine, and oversees the publication of NAADAC's two digital publications, the bi-weekly *Addiction & Recovery eNews* and weekly *Professional eUpdate*. Gleason holds a Juris Doctorate from Northeastern University School of Law in Boston, MA and a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Political Science from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst in Amherst, MA.

Vignettes from Recovery Rising

Wounded Healer

One of the foundational concepts within the history of recovery support is that of the *wounded healer*—the notion that people who have survived a particular illness or trauma might use that experience as a foundation to help others in similar circumstances. This idea, first introduced by psychoanalyst

Carl Jung and later amplified by Henry Nouwen and others, provides a rationale for the legions of recovering people working in addiction treatment organizations and filling service roles within addiction recovery mutual aid and recovery advocacy organizations. Carried to extreme, it was posited that only an addict could help another addict. Through the course of my career, that proposition was challenged by my

experience of people in recovery who were not effective healers and people who lacked personal or family recovery experience who were exceptional healers. All humans are wounded, but only those who find ways to transcend such wounds seem to possess these healing qualities.

In his history of Alcoholics Anonymous, Ernie Kurtz noted many non-alcoholics who had played important roles in the history of AA — Dr. Silkworth, Sister Ignatia, Sam Shoemaker, Willard Richardson, Frank Amos, Dr. Harry Tiebout, and Father Ed Dowling, to name a few. Ernie described how these individuals did have something in common.

Each, in his or her own way, had experienced tragedy in their lives. They had all known kenosis; they had been emptied out; they had hit bottom....whatever vocabulary you want. They had stared into the abyss. They had lived through a dark night of the soul. Each had encountered and survived tragedy (Not-God: A History of Alcoholics Anonymous, p. 143).

Wounded healers, regardless of recovery status, enter helping relationships with others with conscious awareness of their own healed and healing wounds. Such awareness allows us to serve others from a position of emotional authenticity, learned humility, and moral equality. Over the course of the last half century, I was at my best when I maintained that awareness and at my worst when I lost it. We are indeed all wounded, and what we can bring to the most wounded among us is our presence, our compassion, and our testimony that survival is possible and that a life of meaning and purpose can be found on the other side of such experiences.



What Would Mel Do? (Keeping My Eyes on the Prize)

I have met some remarkable human beings in my more than four decades working in the addictions field, and many of them have helped shaped my own character. One of the most important of these individuals is Mel Schulstad. Mel got sober in the early 1970s and entered the alcohol-

ism field a few years later. He went on to become a co-founder of the National Association of Alcoholism Counselors in 1974, the precursor to NAADAC, the Association for Addiction Professionals. He was a central figure in the professionalization of the role of the addiction counselor in the United States. Mel served as a friend and mentor for many years. Having just passed his 92st birthday as I write this, Mel only re-

cently retired and remains an astute observer of the addiction treatment field. We just finished co-authoring an article, so even now he is not exactly retired.

Mel has long been one of the key people who kept me grounded during the high and low points of my career. It was a complex relationship in many ways. There were days he felt like a father to me, days we were brothers and comrades in arms, and days he served as professional role model and mentor. At other times, he felt like an all-in-one confessor/teacher/sponsor/guide. Perhaps more than anything, he exemplified how to work in this field as a person in recovery and how to stay focused on the recovery mission when a thousand distractions compete for our attention. I can't count the number of times I have asked myself, "What would Mel do?" Do you have a Mel in your life? If so, cherish and nurture that relationship. If not, begin your search for such a person. We all need a guiding star.

Postscript: Mel Schulstad died January 6, 2012, at the age of 93. A tribute to his life and work is posted at www.williamwhitepapers.com. *Recovery Rising* is available at Amazon.com.

