

A Week of Advocacy, Hope, and a Historic Event

By Cynthia Moreno Tuohy, NCAC II, CDC III, SAP, NAADAC Executive Director

Now that the boxes from the 2015 NAADAC Annual Conference & Hill Day are unpacked and the debrief of five days of exciting activities is complete, I can take a breath and reflect on what an incredible time the beginning of October was for addiction professionals here in Washington, D.C. First, wow! What a powerful conference! Every five years, NAADAC combines its Advocacy in Action and Annual Conferences into a special Advocacy Conference and Hill Day in Washington, D.C. to allow for even more of our members and conference attendees to take part in advocating for the addiction profession. This year, our Hill Day was made all the more impactful through NAADAC's alignment and partnership with 10 important groups who joined forces and found consensus to create materials to educate the public and federal legislators on necessary addiction and mental health reforms and legislation. We thank the Association for Behavioral Health and Wellness, the Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance, Faces & Voices of Recovery, Hazelden Betty Ford, the International Bipolar Foundation, Legal Action Center, Mental Health America, the National Alliance on Mental Illness, the National Council for Behavioral Health, and the Psychiatric Rehabilitation Association for their voices and work.

Our Conference rounded out a week that started with people, communities, and organizations taking

over the National Mall first for the *FedUP! Rally for a Federal Response to the Opioid Epidemic* on Saturday, October 3rd, and next for the unprecedented *UNITE to Face Addiction Rally & Concert* on Sunday, October 4th, where tens of thousands of people and 700 partners, including NAADAC, joined together to bring attention to and the change the national discourse about substance use disorders.

For over a decade, it was my hope and vision to have an event like the *UNITE Rally* brought to Washington, D.C. to bring positive attention and support to those persons with addiction and substance use disorders and their family members. As a person in recovery, I wanted to “March on Washington,” just as the Civil Rights movement did 51 years ago to claim justice and freedom from oppression. In this case, the oppression of the stigma of addiction and co-occurring disorders. To see that vision brought to reality on October 4th was historic — a day to remember the opening of a door of public acceptance. Acceptance that people in recovery are people first, with talents, capabilities, hopes, and dreams. Entertainers shared their talents and stories, including Joe Walsh from the Eagles singing his songs of the sixties and speaking his story of recovery, the Fray and its lead singer's personal story, Sheryl Crow stepping out as an ally, and closing with Steven Tyler from Aerosmith shouting out that he was there to



celebrate recovery! Never before have we had a Surgeon General make a promise to publish a “Surgeon General’s Report on Addiction,” and keep this issue in the public’s face! This move to investigate and write a report will bring unprecedented awareness for addictive disorders to a new level of identification and treatment as it did over 30 years ago for the issue of smoking.

My own heart was full of wonder and sorrow as I saw thousands of people walking to the event grounds, with signs and pictures of loved ones lost to addiction. Sorrow for the losses of loved ones suffered by families and friends, and sorrow for my own losses — my mother, father, aunts, uncles, grandparents and cousins. Sorrow turning to thanks that so many people were willing to open their hearts and give up their time and their person comfort to come to an event that could have literally been “blown off” due to warnings of Hurricane Joaquin. I stood in the gathering crowd, wanting to be with “my people” of recovery and opting out of being in the “VIP tent” with other event partners. I wanted to feel it — the electricity of the crowd, the roar of shouting and clapping as cogent comments came from the stage, including Dr.

Oz stating that “The Days of Silence have ended today!” The feel of the wet ground was as real as the feel of hope in those around me. NAADAC staffers Jessica Gleason, HeidiAnne Werner, and Rhonda Britton, joined me holding NAADAC signs proclaiming that “Treatment by Addiction Professionals = Recovery!” and distributing free NAADAC t-shirts, stickers, and baseball caps. People came up to us to thank us and tell stories of the addiction professionals that made a difference in their lives or in their family member’s lives. They wore our NAADAC logo proudly with smiles and expressions of knowing that we and our work mattered in their lives. Gratitude for their acknowledgement of the work of the addiction profession that so many of my colleagues and myself have dedicated our lives to do swept over me and tears of joy for them, for us, and for the persons yet to come into recovery flowed uninterrupted down my face. It was an honor to have Ivette Torres from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration (SAMHSA) take the time to interview me at the event to speak to why the event was important and how others, not at the event,

can bring awareness to their communities that addiction is a treatable brain disease and that hope for recovery exists for both individuals and their families.

Ten hours later, the mood of the crowd moved from excitement and hope to that of love, peace, and a sweet calmness as the night and the event came to an end. People moved together to the last song, touching, and hugging, knowing that they had made a historic stand for addiction awareness and recovery!

I am proud to be a person in recovery and a person who is an addiction professional! Thank you to all addiction professionals for the work you do — you do make a difference!

Blessings,
Cynthia



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