

by Leslie Rakestraw



Trials *and* Tribulations

This is the tale of one attorney's personal journey through alcoholism. While statistics have shown that the legal profession has one of the highest incidences of alcohol and drug abuse in the nation, many attorneys don't know where to turn for help or support. By breaking the chains of anonymity, Leslie Rakestraw wants to show readers that there is hope for recovery with the help of attorneys who have been there. Here is Leslie's story.

My name is Leslie Rakestraw and I am a recovering alcoholic and a practicing attorney. I am not proud of some of the things that I did while I was drinking or the people I hurt, but I am proud of the fact that I got into recovery for alcoholism and I have been sober for 10 consecutive years. Here is my story about what it was like being in the throes of alcoholism, how I got help and how much better my life is now.

I grew up in Albuquerque, New Mexico. My parents and younger brother are not alcoholics and I didn't have any exposure to alcoholism as a child. I drank in high school a few times—I got drunk, passed out and got sick once. I drank socially in college, mostly on the weekends, and would have been labeled a "binge" drinker then. I usually got drunk after a week of going to classes and studying as a way to reward myself, but I certainly didn't drink every day or even every weekend. Once I started to drink, however, it was hard for me to stop and I often "blacked

out" and forgot part of the evening. "Blacking out" was something I thought just went with partying hard.

I don't think I could have made it through law school without drinking. I drank daily then. My habit was to skip all classes that started before 10 a.m. I would attend classes during the day and study in the afternoon and early evening. At 9 p.m. a friend and I would go to Ned's, our regular hangout, and we would drink until "last call for alcohol" at 2 a.m. Then, I would go home and pass out. The next day I started over, doing the same thing every day for three years.

Why did I drink? That's easy. I was afraid. I had been a good student in college. I made all A's and B's, with my lowest grade being one C in an honors class. School had been easy for me and I did well without much effort. But law school scared me to death. Everyone around me was smart, and many of the other students were much brighter than I. The language of law also was foreign to me, and

since there were no lawyers in my family to pave the way I felt lost and confused.

Despite my drinking habit, I graduated from the University of New Mexico Law School and passed the bar exam right away. I began working in a small insurance defense firm. I don't remember drinking particularly heavily during those years, and while occasionally I did work with a hangover, I always showed up for work. I was thrown into trial work right away, so my motto became "work hard and play hard." Winning a case was a cause for celebratory drinking, while losing a case called for drinking and commiserating.

Eventually, I opened up my own office in the Albuquerque area. I had a general practice, but continued to do trial work. I practiced by myself so I could come in late. After work, I often stopped off for a few drinks. It was during this time that I was caught driving drunk and charged with DWI. I did not lose my driver's license, but I did have to go to an alcohol awareness school.

I was in complete denial about my alcoholism. I had gotten a master of arts degree in guidance and counseling, so I knew about the disease, but I felt my drinking fell outside the definition of alcoholism. I was not drinking every day. I rarely drank in the morning, unless I was on vacation. I hardly ever missed work. People who knew me well would say I was a heavy drinker. I was proud of the fact that I was succeeding in a man's world and could drink like one of the guys.

I was still in denial when I moved to Phoenix with the man who would later become my husband. I got a job doing aviation defense after an interview over Chivas Regal. This was the perfect place for me to work. We drank after working long days and we talked about our cases over cocktails and met with clients in the bar. The office "lounge" was the meeting place for various doctors, lawyers and judges around town. My husband and I often went out to dinner, enjoying cocktails before, wine during and

aperitifs after. We entertained frequently in our large Scottsdale home.

However, my drinking did begin to cause problems in my marriage. I sometimes would forget what I had said while drinking and oftentimes I did not always get home when I promised. I also could be quite ugly when I drank. There started to be some other consequences of my drinking besides the blackouts and hangovers. Finally, I was let go from my law firm. I thought I had told them I was taking a trip to San Francisco, but maybe I forgot.

My husband eventually threatened to file for divorce if I didn't get some help. I chose to enter an inpatient treatment program for alcoholism. I told the attorney I was working for at the time that I had "female problems" and he didn't ask the details. After two weeks in the hospital became four weeks, I think he figured out what was going on. I will forever be grateful to this man for letting me spend a month in treatment and still paying my salary. He may have saved my life.

However, just because I quit drinking didn't mean that my life got better right away. My husband ended up divorcing me because he had no one to party with, and my understanding boss eventually fired me. I did begin a relationship with another recovering alcoholic lawyer, but I ended up drinking again. That was 10 years ago and my life has improved significantly since then.

Today, I have a wonderful job as an insurance defense attorney. I have found other ways to celebrate the good times and cope with the bad times. I am helping start a group called Lawyers Concerned for Lawyers. The group's purpose is to help any judge, lawyer or law student who is having problems. It does not matter if the problem is stress, substance abuse, mental illness or the practice of law in general. We meet every Tuesday evening to discuss problems and offer solutions. If you are interested in more information about this group, please call me at (480) 929-7112. If you call me, I will understand because I have been there. 🍷

Are you having a problem
with alcohol, drugs
or depression?
Is it affecting your work,
health, family or
pocketbook?
There is a solution!

New group for lawyers,
judges and law students

LAWYERS CONCERNED FOR LAWYERS

Separate and independent
from the
State Bar

- Confidential
- 12 Step oriented
- No dues or fees

Meeting every Tuesday at 7:30 p.m.
St. Stephen's Episcopal Church and
Renewal Center, 56th Street and
Oak, Phoenix/Scottsdale (*from the
Red Mountain Freeway (202), take
52nd Street north to Oak and turn right
4 blocks*)

**For further information,
call Leslie at (480) 929-7112**