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Profiles of Recovery Advocacy in Action

A Life of Service and Advocacy: An Interview with Johnny Allem (2008)

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Too often, someone of importance passes in the world of addiction treatment and recovery, and we realize that we never took the opportunity personally or as a community to acknowledge our respect and affection for them. One of my personal goals in this "Profiles of Recovery Advocacy in Action" series is to eulogize the living. This affords an opportunity to honor people for whom I have such respect and affection. I have a particular affinity for people whose lives stand as a living testimony of sustained service to movements aimed at elevating the quality of human life. There are few people in the recovery advocacy movement whose lives more vividly exemplify the power of healing and hope than my friend Johnny Allem. Johnny has recently announced his retirement from the Johnson Institute. We wish him Godspeed on this important milestone in his life and offer him our deepest thanks for his sacrifices and his contributions. We also thank him for being one of the groundbreaking faces and voices of recovery before there was a Faces & Voices of Recovery. In this February 26, 2008 interview and a follow-up conversation in early May 2008, Johnny reflects on his life and the movement that has touched so many of our lives.

Bill White: Johnny, before we explore your contributions as a recovery advocate, could you share a bit about your background before getting into this field?

Johnny Allem: My background includes work as a reporter, and I think of myself as a writer even though I didn't get a degree in that until 1999. Circumstances led me into work in advertising and in turn, into politics. So I've spent a good deal of my life in politics, media, and in organizing for various causes. In the mid 1980s, I founded what turned out to be a very successful printing company here in Washington, DC. I sold it in 1991 and then got back into public service in the DC government, first as Director of

Communications for the City and then as Deputy Commissioner for the Mental Health Department.

Bill: I've looked over your resume, and I can't think of anyone in the advocacy movement with a broader background than yours. You've worked as an electrician, a private detective, salesman, sound technician, newspaper reporter, speech writer, printer, political organizer, and government administrator. That's an amazing breadth of life experience. How did that broad background benefit your later work in recovery advocacy?

Johnny: I went through a lot of trades and did them pretty well. But in those early years, I never found what seemed my true calling. I went from one thing to another and had a lot of interesting experiences that later on I was able to draw from. There's nothing like door-to-door sales to polish your powers of persuasion. Today, I'm very grateful for all of those experiences and have tried to learn from them and use those lessons effectively. Looking back on it now, there is an order to all of it. I guess I also enjoyed reinventing myself over those years with the help of good mentors and friends. I just enjoy life. I've had a good run, and God has been good.

I have always been oriented to people and to people's grassroots circumstances and needs. I discovered that I had a good ear for people—whether as voters or my customers. One of my endeavors in life has been to increase people's power in our system and our society. That's a thread that runs through my work in politics, business, and advocacy. If there is a common thread to my life, it is letting people know that they are important and that their voice can make a difference.

Bill: What situations or circumstances led to your early work in recovery advocacy?

Johnny: That story begins with my own recovery. I was managing political campaigns, doing a lot of traveling, and drinking far too much. I was successful in politics for a long time, but I began to forget what city I was in and I became less and less effective at what I was doing. My geographic cure was to stay home and stop traveling. I thought that would help me not drink along with the other usual tricks—only drinking beer, drinking milk before I drank, and all that good stuff. And then I had an occasion to go to a recovery meeting with a close family friend. When I went in there, I discovered I had a problem that was an illness, and I saw people living full lives who had recovered from that illness. That was a turning point for me.

I had achieved at the age of 44 a great deal in politics and business and getting my kids through college. I thought those were important things behind me, and I didn't expect to live much longer. I had this alcohol problem and, in my family, you just died from it. I just hoped that the death wouldn't last too long. And then I was exposed to a lot of people who seemed to have a different view and had interesting stories and had a take on spirituality, which I liked a lot. I went to those meetings until I finally put the cork in the jug on March 23, 1982.

Bill: If I recall correctly, one of your earliest forays into recovery advocacy work was with an organization called Society of Americans for Recovery founded in 1990 by Senator Harold Hughes. Could you describe that effort?

Johnny: Yes, my entry into advocacy was really not my own doing; I had been very active in politics in DC, and I got a call one day in 1985 saying, "The mayor appointed you to the mayor's advisory committee on alcoholism" And I said, "What in the world is that?" I kind of got pushed into it, and I met some wonderful people. My first mentor was Tom Kirk, who now runs addiction and mental health services in Connecticut. At that time, he was the medical director of the AAD Agency here in Washington, DC. He was very kind to me and explained the science of treatment.

Earlier in my political career, I had done some work for Senator Harold Hughes when he was considering a run for the presidency in 1972. By 1990, there were very dark clouds on the scene for our disease—a lot of the gains of the 1970s had eroded through the 1980s, and stigma was again on the rise. Harold Hughes recognized this and recognized that we had forgotten our advocacy role. As he saw support for treatment eroding and more and more addicted people being sent to jail, he formed the Society of Americans for Recovery after he left the US Senate. His vision was a classic model of people at the grassroots getting together and expressing their voices and having an impact on policies that affect all of us. I became associated with SOAR in the early 1990s, but my role was not a significant one in the first couple of years. Then Harold asked me to meet with him in Washington and asked me to take a leadership role in SOAR. It was a valiant effort. He and I traveled the country. I staged the conventions in Baltimore, St. Louis, and in Santa Monica. People had a wonderful time, but we did not develop any adequate financial resources to support SOAR. The people who supported us were very, very grassroots and they gave up their nickels and dimes regularly, but dollars were very hard to come by in those days. And so it just didn't become the kind of advocacy organization that was needed.

But what it did do was create a start that could be built upon later. After years of re-stigmatizing alcohol and other drug problems, SOAR invited a new cadre of people to openly talk about their recovery. Some of these people were quite courageous and many paid a dear price at their job sites and in their communities for stepping up for recovery in those days. I had a good time, wrote some good stuff, and met some wonderful people. Bob Lindsey became a good friend of mine back in those days, and he supported the work I was doing by making phone calls every night to solicit support for the movement. People like Bob were precious to my life, and it's wonderful to be connected to them again years later. In the end, SOAR folded in 1995 simply because we could no longer pay the bills.

Bill: As you look back on the rise and fall of SOAR and its potential, what lessons did you learn that helped with your later work?

Johnny: The first lesson is to always be true to yourself and hold your candle high. I always say in my own life, things never go my way, but they always go to my benefit. I figured out that you just have to do the best you can every day because it does pay off even if it is in ways you don't expect. The other lesson for our community is that we need to keep remembering the patience that Harold had and stay focused on the big picture. We can't be sitting around fooling ourselves that we're making an impact when we haven't done the things that other people do to be effective. We have yet to fully build and mobilize a national constituency around the issue of addiction recovery. I refuse to believe that unlike any other health cause in America, there's not a constituency that can be mobilized for this. Government funding has been important for the treatment enterprise, but we still need the recovery community to step forward and financially support recovery-focused education, advocacy, and research. A lot of things are happening now to suggest that we are beginning to overcome those barriers to having a strong voice, but we have yet to create a financial foundation for this movement that comes from the recovery community itself. That's the job we still have to do.

Bill: I think those are really important messages, Johnny. I know recovery advocates in small grassroots organizations who get drained and demoralized from the challenges of this work, but I think your message that sometimes even failure sows seeds that later re-germinate and bear fruit is a powerful message.

Johnny: As demonstrated as I get older (although I still feel like I'm 25), you just have to do the best job you can every day. It pays off in ways you can't imagine.

Bill: After you left SOAR, you went on to serve as Director of Communications and then Deputy Commissioner of Mental Health for the District of Columbia. Was it in that role that you first became involved with the Johnson Institute?

Johnny: No, it was actually earlier. The Johnson Institute provided the only institutional financial support we had for SOAR during my work with Harold Hughes. The Johnson Institute stayed with us to the end, making sure we had the funds to prevent the phones from getting turned off. I'll never forget the support we got from George Bloom and the board in those days. They believed in what Harold was saying and that's how I first met the leaders of the Johnson Institute, through their support of SOAR.

Bill: I hadn't made that connection. The Johnson Institute is the connective tissue between SOAR and the later new recovery advocacy movement.

Johnny: I really believe that, and what is interesting is that while SOAR was collapsing, the historical focus of the Johnson Institute was also being transformed. The Johnson Institute was known for being the bridge between the recovery community and those people in the recovery community who had something to offer professionally. The Johnson Institute provided them training and certification for intervention and counseling. Because the certification wasn't university-based, such certification was not widely recognized. Harold once estimated that 25,000 counselors in recovery lost their jobs due to the closing of treatment centers in the early 1990s. In that process, the Johnson Institute had to re-evaluate its mission.

The Johnson Institute had a little money in the bank, and George began hosting these really intensive seminars, bringing people together to discuss the barriers to recovery from alcoholism and other addictions. This sparked discussion about the future of treatment and recovery support efforts. Out of this process, the Johnson Institute focused on two initiatives: the political mobilization of the recovery community and the mobilization of the church to carry a positive message of recovery.

Bill: I recall that towards the end of the 90's, the Johnson Institute focused its mission almost exclusively on advocacy, with the establishment of the Alliance Project and the hiring of Jeff Blodgett and the subsequent role of the Johnson Institute in sponsoring the 2001 Recovery Advocacy Summit. That event seemed to be the catalytic spark for the national recovery advocacy movement marked by the founding of Faces & Voices of Recovery.

Johnny: It really was. I have been involved with Faces & Voices of Recovery for many years, and my term as board member and treasurer expires this summer. The Johnson Institute remains proud of this role. I was part of the group that the National Forum, sponsored by the Johnson Institute, convened that led to the Alliance Project. I remember the emerging vision for the need to mobilize the recovery community by committee members including Paul Samuels of the Legal Action Center; Sue Thau of CADCA; Sis Wenger of NACoA; Stacia Murphy of NCADD and many others. None of us had any money so the Johnson Institute put up $300,000 to launch the Alliance Project. That allowed us to hire Jeff Blodgett. William Cope Moyers became the president of the Johnson Institute during this period. William helped raise additional money to support the 2001 St. Paul Summit, where Faces & Voices was launched. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Center for Substance Abuse Treatment also provided support. I attended the Summit, and when I replaced William as head of the Johnson Institute, I became one of the three members of the Administrative committee who joined with 24 Campaign Advisory Committee members to chart the future of Faces & Voices of Recovery.

Bill: When William Cope Moyers resigned as president of the Johnson Institute in 2001, many of us were very excited to hear that you had accepted the offer to succeed him. I'm wondering if you could offer some reflections on some of the major initiatives of the Johnson Institute under your leadership?

Johnny: I'll give you a few examples of such initiatives. We recognized the need to mobilize congregations of local churches and to inspire faith-based recovery ministries. When George Bloom was the President of the Johnson Institute in the early 1990s, he traveled all over the country looking for a faith ministry that the Johnson Institute should invest in and use as a national model. One of the people he talked to was Trish Merrill of Faith Partners in Austin, Texas. Initially we thought this was a seedling program that wasn't far enough along to really merit more attention. After he traveled all over the country, he came back and said, "Well, maybe they are small, but they are still the most viable program I can find." And he began to invest in them, and he encouraged others to invest in them. That's how our faith initiative began, which picked up steam after the Johnson Institute merged with the Rush Recovery Institute in 2004. The Faith Partners Ministry in Austin, Texas has flourished as a Johnson Institute program. It is now in 12 states and 17 faith traditions, and is reaching thousands of people.

George also started The National Forum, which has become an important part of the Johnson Institute's program. It started as a bi-annual gathering of leaders in Washington, DC to discuss the state of the field and key policy issues. The Forum became a soap box through which key issues were raised and a mechanism that brought the field's many organizations closer together.

Another initiative under my leadership has been our efforts to mobilize the recovery community. We created the Recovery Ambassadors Leadership Training Program and then the Faith Partners Team Ministry Program to help achieve this. These programs are creating a national cadre of grassroots leaders who can help us challenge discriminatory laws and practices and advocate for policy changes like parity legislation. These efforts pushed us beyond just the issue of stigma to address particular areas of discrimination. Discrimination is what we're fighting and Americans can be called to support our efforts because discrimination is basically un-American.

I'm very proud of what we have been able to do in these areas.

Bill: Johnny, I'm struck by the role your writing has played in pushing the movement forward. I'm thinking, for example of the book Healing Places, which you co-authored with Trish Merrill.

Johnny: That was really a work of love on our parts. I'm a preacher's kid and, in spite of a judgmental religious background, have developed a strong spiritual life. And so the Faith Partner's Program just really appealed to me. Trish is such a shining light, and her husband Chuck became a great friend of mine before he passed away a year ago. I think we were able to do something very unique in Healing Places. We were able to describe the history of our ministry of service across many faiths and denominations, and to help further an understanding of addiction as an illness across these belief systems. We also explored the healing potential spiritual concepts and values can play with this illness. We felt we had to move beyond the disease and honor the wellness of recovery. The book is helping start the conversation about addiction and recovery within many local congregations. The ministry of these churches begins with their own attitudes and creating places of worship that welcome individuals and families who have been wounded and are healing from addiction. This effort touches everyone within reach, and it's just a wonderful thing to watch and be part of. That book was a book of joy for me, and I'm just so proud of it.

Bill: Another seminal piece you've written proposed seven policies to conquer addiction in our lifetime. Could you describe how that came about and the response it has generated?

Johnny: The Institute of Medicine was mandated by Congress to report on the state of health in America. In its report, it called for significant improvements in the quality of services in health care, but they initially failed to address issues related to addiction or mental illness. When they convened a panel to address these issues, I was privileged to be one of two lead-off witnesses. As I prepared for my testimony, I thought that maybe I could put it in an easy to understand framework from the perspective of recovery rather than from the perspective of illness. After all, I had been complaining for years that all the talk about addiction was focusing on the problem, not the solution. I wanted to view the issue from the platform of recovery. I just started writing, and it came to 7 policies that, if implemented, could make a big difference in our conquering addiction as a society. I talked about how we needed to re-connect the addiction prevention, treatment, and recovery issues to primary health care and re-connect with schools and churches. I've been really appreciative of the reception my 7 policies statement has received.

Bill: And for any of our readers who haven't seen this document yet, it can be found at the Johnson Institute website.

Johnny: That's correct, at www.johnsoninstitute.org.

Bill: Johnny, there are several key national organizations that play important roles in the national recovery advocacy movement: the Johnson Institute, Faces & Voices of Recovery, NCADD, and the Legal Action Center, among others. How have you seen the roles of these organizations and their relationships with each other evolve in recent years?

Johnny: I think we've seen a real maturation of these organizations and their mutual relationships. Today, their leaders are more focused and more collaborative. I hope that the Johnson Institute has played some role in this through the National Forum. I think this is evident throughout the field. Some are spectacular stories. I think the way the American Society of Addiction Medicine (ASAM) has come together and moved not only their science forward but their policy advocacy activities as well is quite remarkable. I'm so excited about the way that Bob Lindsey has approached the rebuilding of NCADD. He began by visiting the grassroots local affiliates and really listening to them. And perhaps the most exciting story is Faces & Voices of Recovery and how it has galvanized everybody's attention. Faces & Voices is reaching grassroots communities in ways that have never been achieved in the field before. I think this is a very exciting period. Windows of opportunity don't last forever, and the public has given us such an opportunity at this moment. They are rejecting the mass incarceration policies of the 90s. The science is coming together, and the recovery community is coming together. This is a time for us to work harder and more collaboratively and that is happening.

Bill: Johnny, let's move from the national level to the grassroots local community level. You've had an opportunity through the Recovery Ambassadors Program to meet and train recovery advocates from virtually all over the country. Tell me about this new generation of recovery advocates.

Johnny: Well, it's so exciting, Bill. We just did our 59th training program, this one in San Diego last Saturday, with 68 people participating. In our typical workshop, we have three groups. We have people who are in recovery who also work in the prevention or treatment field. Then we have other people who are not in recovery but are very passionate about it. They might be parents or other family members or persons who work in the treatment field who are not in recovery. Then we have our main

constituency—people in recovery from all walks of life. We have our most successful experiences when we have equal representation of these three groups. They leave and just do wonderful things.

We are fortunate today to have a generation of people in recovery with many productive years ahead of them, and they bring many skills and knowledge of how the system works and the importance of being at the table. This is quite a capable generation of people in recovery. And the training process is wonderful to watch. In the morning, they are nervous or hesitant about whether they have the tools to do this advocacy work. By 10:30 or 11:00, they're saying, "Well, you know what that guy did, I can do that." By 2:00, they've got some skills under their belt, and they're competing with each other in these role-play exercises. At the end of the day, they don't know why they can't run for mayor. It's very invigorating to me to watch people realize that they have the skills to do this and they have a place to put their passion to work.

Another thing that happens when these new advocates are brought together is that some bridges in the community get built right there. Some of the people who work in the jail systems have never met the people there who work in the churches or for the government. There are a lot of cross relationships built through the training and appreciation for each other's roles. They leave these recovery workshops more capable and more motivated. I'm very proud of this new generation of advocates and the work they are doing.

Bill: Historically, a recovery advocate was thought to be someone in 12 Step recovery. A significant shift has been a broadening of representation of people from different pathways of recovery. Has that been true in the Recovery Ambassadors Program?

Johnny: Absolutely. And this doesn't just happen accidentally. When we do our training, we work with a local sponsor. In working with these local sponsors, we emphasize the need for broad representation in the workshops. They're encouraged to reach into diverse communities of recovery. There was some initial fear associated with this, but there isn't anymore. Our attitudes toward these different styles of recovery are much more respectful and tolerant today. As you may know, I'm a long-time trustee of Stepping Stones, and I think Bill Wilson would be overjoyed today to see what we're doing and to see people engaged from so many different pathways of recovery.

Bill: One of the singular events that you've pioneered through the Johnson Institute is the American Honors Recovery luncheon. What do you think is the significance of this particular program and events like it around the country?

Johnny: You know sometimes you just do things without knowing what their true impact will be. I thought that the American Honors Recovery was a good thing to do. I thought we could shine a spotlight on recovery at the national level and raise funds for the Johnson Institute at the same time. And I thought we could honor people who have used their recovery to advance the recovery of others. I was not prepared for the outpouring this event triggered all over the country. Far more people are nominated than could ever be acknowledged, and people come and are captivated by the experience. It's such a joyous few hours, and it often dramatically changes people's view of people in recovery and what we do with our lives. It puts the recovery reality out there in a new way. Every year, the program gets bigger and more of America sees it. I don't know of another event that pulls so much of our community together at one time. I wish I could tell you that I expected this kind of success, but I surely didn't.

Bill: The public tends to think of recovery in terms of people eliminating problems from their lives. One of the things I like about the American Honors Recovery program is how it conveys that a significant number of people in recovery go beyond eliminating

such problems to live extraordinary lives of public service.

Johnny: I think that's right. There's so much about recovery that is not understood by the public. To be able to host an event that so illustrates the principles of recovery and opens a window into the lives of recovering people is just a real pleasure.

Bill: I want to take you to another area to offer some guidance to our local advocates. You've had the opportunity to deliver official testimony to various Congressional and policy panels. Do you have any advice you would offer for recovery advocates who may be called on to prepare and deliver such testimony even at a local or state level?

Johnny: Yes, I do and it's a high honor to do that. One thing we tell people is to learn the skills of political advocacy. For many years, people would go to a public forum and tell their stories like we tell each other in therapy or in recovery support meetings, and that's not really appropriate. You need to strategically use your personal story to illustrate what you're testifying for. The job of witnessing to policy audiences is really about several key things. It is conveying your status of recovery simply and clearly, advocating a position through a simple message, and linking your recovery experience to that position. You need to stick with a focused proposal and be very prudent about what you share. Advocacy is also about good relationships. Make yourself a continuing resource to those before whom you testify. Let them know that you're part of a larger movement and that you and others are available to them as needed. Finally, express your appreciation to them for the opportunity to be heard and for them listening to your message.

Bill: Those are excellent suggestions. Johnny, you recently announced your retirement. Do we have up and coming advocates who are going to be able to fill your shoes in the coming years? What are your thoughts on the issue of leadership development within the recovery advocacy movement?

Johnny: We have astounding potential for future leadership. An important role of our current leaders is to identify and develop those around them. The message we need to convey is, not "I am the solution," but "We are the solution." This is a movement expressing the will of a community of recovering people, not one relying on a few charismatic leaders. I think it's important that we continually build this movement from within. We have to be committed, competent, and comfortable being an advocate and pass those traits onto others working alongside us. There are no clear cut rules on all of this. I can't tell you how you to do your advocacy; what I can tell you is to prepare yourself, get comfortable with the fact that you have a very powerful story, and open yourself to opportunities. We all have different assets we bring to this movement; the challenge is to find how best to use them.

Bill: As you leave the Johnson Institute, you've identified a new person to head up the Johnson Institute, bringing in a new generation of leadership.

Johnny: We've had a Board process over the past eight months to select a new leader and I am very pleased with the selection of Dr. James White, a veteran advocate and activist in the recovery field from Milwaukee, Wisconsin. James recently completed his third term as a Milwaukee County Supervisor. He is an ordained minister, a community organizer who helped establish several addiction treatment agencies, and was a co-founder of our Faith Partners team ministry program several years ago.

Bill: As the Johnson Institute looks to the future under Rev. White's leadership, you will continue to be involved in its work and I understand that JI will be moving to the George Washington University. Can you tell us more about what's going to happen and what led to this decision to be part of a university?

Johnny: On May 9, we announced our affiliation with George Washington University. This relationship builds on our work together in furnishing advocacy content in the last year and one half and our new venture in intervention training and publishing. This initiative brings Johnson Institute full circle. Dr. Vernon Johnson pioneered intervention technology for individuals and families. Our new Take A.I.M. program, to be released toward the end of 2008, incorporates new research and science that builds on the earlier Johnson model and brings new practice and science to the field.

I am very proud of this association, making the Johnson Institute an integral part of GWU's renowned health policy department. I believe we are a good example of the growth in our field, finding creative alliances, partnerships, and formations to meet today's policy goals and tomorrow's opportunity to mainstream addiction health.

Bill: I know that you will continue to be an advocate. What are your other plans for the future?

Johnny: First and foremost, I will continue on a part-time basis to advance the work of the Johnson Institute and our new home within George Washington University. However, I announced my intention to restructure my life last year because I really wanted time to write. I have been privileged to have a front row seat as the recovery movement has emerged.

Bill: In 1976, NCADD, what was then the National Council on Alcoholism or NCA, sponsored Operation Understanding in which 52 prominent Americans publicly declared their long-term recovery from alcoholism. I think of this as the first "coming out" party. Today, we have recovery celebration events in local communities and states that draw thousands of people in recovery and their family and friends. Do you think we're going to see a day when we have hundreds of thousands of recovering people and their families marching in Washington offering themselves as living proof of the transformative power of recovery?

Johnny: I absolutely do. That day will be a natural extension of the grassroots activities that are now unfolding. We've had a lot of wasted efforts saying, "Let's do something show worthy." Such events need to express what we're doing at the grassroots level. It's inevitable that these local events we now see will build to such a national event. It will be so authentic and so powerful that all of America will be forced to listen. I'm quite excited about that prospect. I don't know when it will come, I'm not in any hurry for it, but I think we're on the right track for it to happen in a very authentic way, meaning that it is being built from the grassroots.

Bill: I like the perspective that having those events attended by thousands in local communities every year is more important than a one-time event that brings a half a million or a million recovering people to Washington, DC.

Johnny: You can see it growing. Every community I have been in is already planning their recovery events for next September (Recovery Month), including the Faces and Voices' Rally for Recovery on September 20th. When you get people thinking and acting with that kind of passion and forethought, anything is possible.

Bill: Johnny, are there any closing thoughts you have to offer recovery advocates who may be reading this interview in the years to come?

Johnny: I guess that rule 62 is still a good one, "Don't take yourself too seriously."

Bill: But take the work very seriously.

Johnny: That's very important to me. Bill, it's such a joy what we do. If we learn the principles and techniques of advocacy and follow and apply them, the benefits to hundreds of thousands of individuals and families are beyond measure. The potential rewards are truly, truly huge.