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MAKING AMERICCA SHATTERPROOF: An Interview with Gary Mendell

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Introduction

Parents who have been deeply wounded by the loss of a child to addiction are stepping from the shadows of their pain to stage an intervention on America. They are using their stories, talents, financial resources, and personal connections to call for a new mobilization of national, state and local resources to fundamentally alter how we as a country respond to alcohol and other drug problems. One of the leading visionaries within this rising movements of parents is Gary Mendell. I had the opportunity to interview Gary in January 2014 about his vision and the work of his organizations, Shatterproof (formerly Brian's Wish). Please join us in this engaging conversation.

From Personal Story to Advocacy Commitment

Bill White: Gary, let me begin by just asking you to share some of the personal experiences that led to the founding of Shatterproof.

Gary Mendell: Sure. My older son, Brian, struggled with addiction to drugs from age seventeen through twenty-five. He was in and out of different treatment programs during those years and our family was very involved supporting Brian in trying to achieve stable recovery and a healthy and happy life. He did very well when he got out of his last treatment program. He was clean for more than a year, however, he tragically ended up taking his life in the thirteenth month out of treatment. After his death, there was an outpouring of letters and phone calls to me from friends he had developed over the years while he was in different treatment programs around the country. In addition to his friends telling me of how distraught they were, they also told me how much Brian had done for them. It was clear that Brian had saved many people's lives by supporting

them in their time of need. That inspired me to start a small charity in his name to help others, as he had.

I decided to hold off going back to work so quickly and spend some time identifying an initiative to form a small charity around. The whole time Brian was alive, I didn't have a good understanding of what was going on around the country. I was very focused on helping Brian go from treatment program to treatment program. After his death, I took a broader view of the disease of addiction to identify how a small charity could contribute. Over three months, I absorbed an enormous amount of information, and every time I found something I thought was really important, I wrote it down. When I sat at my desk on the last day of March, 2012, I had five things written down.

Number one was the word "Big". Addiction is far bigger than I had ever imagined. If you had asked me two years ago how many fathers in the town of Easton had an addicted son, I would have raised my hand and said, "I'm it." Possibly a few others. I learned that twenty-five million Americans in this country are actively addicted today and that addiction is the third largest cause of death in this country behind cancer and heart disease.

The second thing written on that piece of paper was the word "Children". When the word, addiction is mentioned, most people think of a twenty-five year old popping a pill or sticking a needle in his or her arm, but the reality is that of those twenty-five million addicted Americans, twenty million became addicted before the age of eighteen. This is a disease that is most often developed between the ages of twelve and eighteen. This is about our society currently not protecting our children from developing this disease..

Number three were two words, "Tragic" and "Hope." I had learned that the National Institutes of Health have spent hundreds of millions of research and development dollars over the last fifteen years to develop prevention and treatment programs, but that a large part of the

knowledge gained from this investment is sitting in academic journals, not in our communities where it can help people. This includes information that could have saved Brian and hundreds of thousands of others like him. As much as this is so very tragic, it is also hopeful because it confirmed that a foundation of knowledge existed today that could start saving lives tomorrow.

Number four, I became aware that for cancer, we have American Cancer Society, for heart, we have the American Heart Association. For drug and alcohol addiction, there is no national organization with the scale and scope of those other two organizations. And I also learned about the enormous impact those two large national organizations have had on saving the lives of so many people with their respective diseases. So number four was a few words, "no national addiction society". That's when I began to ask why there was no counterpart to these organizations that could represent the problem of addiction.

Number five, I had written "Timing". I had it concluded that in the more than 225-year history of the United States, there couldn't be a better time than now to form such a national organization. Brain scans have now proven definitively that addiction is a disease. We have the foundational research of the National Institutes of Health. And we now have the platform to reimburse prevention and treatment through the integration of the Affordable Care Act and the Parity Act. That day in my office, as I looked at those five facts on my white pad, I also looked to the picture of Brian on the wall to my right. It was the last picture taken of Brian alive. I had taken it on the day he was twelve months clean, and he had stopped on the street to help someone. I am not that religious, but at that moment I felt like a higher power had taken over me. I realized at that moment I had a new calling to my life. That night I discussed those five points with my wife, the next day I began to transition our CFO to take responsibility for running my business, and have dedicated the rest of my life to building this new organization.

Bill White: What were the key steps in forming this new organization?

Gary Mendell: I first formed an organization named Brian's Wish and created two boards: a scientific board and a board of advisors. These boards represented some of the smartest and most experienced people in the country in the areas of prevention, addiction, treatment, long-term recovery, healthcare, marketing, and the political environment related to addiction issues. With their help and two consulting firms, we developed a business plan for Brian's Wish. It was completed mid-April 2013 and called for creation of a national entity with a new name that reflected this vision. Brian's Wish felt like it communicated more of a focus on Brian and our family experience; we needed a name, brand and message that was less about Brian and more about protecting all of our loved ones from shattering their lives through addiction. We also thought about the strength needed in recovery so that lives would not be shattered from this disease. From those discussions emerged the name Shatterproof: Stronger Than Addiction.

Bill White: I can recall only a few examples of family members who've lost someone to addiction being invited to the table in policy discussions about addiction treatment and recovery. Do you feel like these are very critically missing voices?

Gary Mendell: I think all voices in this country are missing from these policy discussions. If there are twenty-five million people in this country actively addicted, that means there's seventy-five to one-hundred million family members directly affected by addiction. The voices of all Americans are missing on this issue. There are fifteen of our loved ones that die every hour from this disease and then the next hour and the next hour of every day, 365 days a year, year after year. It affects one-third to one-quarter of Americans directly. We all should be talking about this.

Bill White: You mentioned the silence that has surrounded this issue and I'm wondering if it's going to take the voices of families who've lost someone to create the urgency that is so needed.

Gary Mendell: Those who have lost a loved one, and those who have a loved one who has been impacted by this disease, will be the more vocal voices as we start. But it really should be the voices of anybody who's a parent or grandparent. I don't want to put the responsibility on one group. It should be everybody.

Shatterproof's Four Strategic Pillars and Goals

Bill White: When you outlined the vision for Shatterproof, you talked about four strategic pillars and the first of those was unite and empower. Could you describe what this will entail?

Gary Mendell: The first pillar is that we must unite together. One voice is a mere whisper. My voice and the voice of many other parents who've lost a child is not enough. This needs the voice of tens of millions of Americans to understand that this could happen to anyone. A chorus of voices can change the world. This disease crosses all income levels, all races, all communities. We need a collective voice to shatterproof our children from developing this disease and we need a collective voice to eliminate the stigma of those who have this disease. We need to be able to change public policies to provide the proper medical care, love and compassion that those with this disease so humanly deserve.

Bill White: The second pillar of Shatterproof is End the Stigma. How did you come to elevate stigma as such an important issue to address?

Gary Mendell: Many of those with this disease feel ashamed simply because they have a disease. No one raises their hand and said, "I want to be addicted to alcohol

and other drugs when I grow up.” This disease develops and then you feel ashamed that you have it. You’re afraid to talk about it. You feel like an outcast in society. You face discrimination and are deprived of the compassion and support and the medical care that other diseases garner.

Bill White: You know, the third and fourth pillars that you outline for Shatterproof were to advocate for change and to research and innovate. I’m wondering what you see as some of the most important research that hasn’t been done yet that would be so important for this agenda.

Gary Mendell: I think the National Institute of Drug Abuse is doing very good research on brain chemistry and potential breakthroughs in medicines, but I think that this disease requires a lot more funding, given its prevalence in our society. We need better ways to treat it medically and better research on how to prevent it. I also think that funding should be put into developing and testing a peer-to-peer prevention program similar to the Truth Campaign that has worked so effectively with cigarette smoking.

Bill White: What are the strategic goals you have established for Shatterproof?

Gary Mendell: Shatterproof will focus on three specific, measurable goals over the next twenty years. We want to 1) reduce by 50% the number of people addicted to alcohol and other drugs (more than 22 million in 2012), 2) reduce by 50% the number of deaths from addiction-related substances (more than 135,000 per year) and reduce by 50% the societal costs (estimated at more than \$416 billion per year).

Partnerships

Bill White: What strategic partnerships do you envision to achieve these goals?

Gary Mendell: We have formed a coalition with nine of the largest organizations in the country related to behavioral health and substance use disorders toward the goal of

identifying or developing programs we can put into our school systems to intervene with our children before they become addicted. We are developing partnerships with six major league baseball teams. We have formed relationships with several other nonprofits in this field to work together by creating awareness of this disease and ways to prevent this disease. We have formed partnerships with numerous organizations within the hotel industry to sponsor a series of repelling events around the country that will create awareness, end the stigma and provide funding.

Governance & Financing

Bill White: Could you describe a little bit about how Shatterproof is structured and governed at present?

Gary Mendell: Governance-wise, we are a 501c(3) governed by our bylaws and Board of Directors. As for staff, we have myself and eight other employees in the organization.

Bill White: Do you see Shatterproof as a government-funded initiative or a primarily private-funded initiative?

Gary Mendell: The source of funding will be many, many individuals around the country who’ll participate in our events, donate online, donate through their workplace giving programs, or provide major gifts. We will also be soliciting foundation support for particular programs.

Bill White: What is the best way for people to support your organization?

Gary Mendell: If someone would like to participate in one of our events, they can learn more about them at <http://www.shatterproof.org/page/content/fundraising-events>. Our events are so very important, as they bring people together to create awareness and funding for the prevention and treatment of this disease, at the same time having a lot of fun, as you can see in the picture below!



If someone would like to learn more about Shatterproof generally, they can do so at www.shatterproof.org.

Early Challenges

Bill White: What are some of the most significant challenges you've experienced so far in organizing and garnering support for Shatterproof?

Gary Mendell: The challenge that I have daily is in wanting to do more and to do it faster. There's so much to do and we do it with the deep awareness that people are dying every hour who are in need of this effort.

Bill White: When you look at the time you've invested in Shatterproof to date, what do you feel best about?

Gary Mendell: The wonderful people that I've met that care about other people and want to help. The response from other families who've been touched by this disease, many whose lives have been shattered, has been overwhelming.

Bill White: One of the things that you bring that I think is very unique is your history of success in the business world. Are there principles and strategies drawn from your business background that will shape the future of Shatterproof?

Gary Mendell: I think my background in business can bring a fresh set of eyes and the discipline to set clear objectives,

strategies and systems of both responsibility and accountability. These are some of the things that have contributed to my success and helped me build effective relationships in the business world these past decades.

Final Reflections

Bill White: Gary, do you have any closing words for other parents and loved ones who share your hopes and visions for Shatterproof?

Gary Mendell: I would urge all parents to get engaged now to help develop this national effort to protect and care for our children. A well-funded, large-scale movement can alter the course of this disease and save countless lives. It has worked for cancer, heart disease and diabetes. And it can work for addiction. Our children deserve that.

Bill White: Gary, thank you for taking this time to share your experience and your hopes for the future and thank you for all you are doing.

Gary Mendell: Thank you Bill for this opportunity to talk with you.

Further information on Shatterproof is available at <http://www.shatterproof.org>/**Gary Mendell's presentation to the 2013 Clinton Foundation is available for viewing at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wGjtajl0IE>**

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