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An Anniversary Tribute to a First Lady

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October 4, 2007 marks the 25th anniversary of the opening of the Betty Ford Center—a fitting time to honor the resilience and fortitude of a family, the courage of a most remarkable woman and the contributions of an important institution in the history of addiction treatment.

In the decades following the repeal of prohibition, American women faced a unique cultural double bind. They were targeted for unrelenting product promotion by the alcohol, tobacco and pharmaceutical industries at the same time social stigma increased for addicted women. Only a few women of prominence (e.g., public health pioneer Marty Mann, actresses Lillian Roth and Mercedes McCambridge) braved such stigma to publicly acknowledge their recoveries from alcoholism, and women struggling with narcotic addiction, such as Jazz singer Billie Holiday, broke into public visibility only when they were arrested or died.

In such a climate, unknown numbers of women lost their dreams and their lives to alcoholism and other addictions. Many sought help only in the latest stages of their illnesses, with many dying early in their recoveries from medical disorders spawned

from prolonged years of secret addiction to alcohol and other drugs. It could justifiably be claimed that these women died, not from addiction, but from stigma. Recovery advocates during the mid-twentieth century dreamed of a day when a woman of unprecedented prominence would go public with her recovery story and by doing so forever shatter America's stereotype of the alcoholic as a depraved Skid Row wino. That dream was about to come true in a way that would forever demarcate before and after in the history of addiction and recovery among American women.

In April 1978, former President and First Lady Jerry and Betty Ford announced to the nation that Mrs. Ford had sought treatment and was recovering from addiction to alcohol and other drugs. That moment stands as the height of destigmatization of alcohol and other drug problems in America. Here stood one of the most prestigious women in the United States and, at a more personal level, a woman deeply respected and revered by the American public for her independence, spunk and candor. We had sensed earlier as a citizenry that this was a woman who cared about us and would tell us the truth. She had demonstrated those traits

by openly sharing her battle with breast cancer and using that experience to educate us as a nation. And here she was again standing with her husband and family talking to us about recovery from alcoholism and drug dependence. In doing so, Betty Ford and her family, as they had done before, found a way to elevate their personal crises to a higher level of meaning and purpose. In 1978, Betty Ford did for alcoholism what a few years later a famous actor, a beloved professional athlete and a brave young boy would do for AIDS. She put a face on alcohol and drug dependency that shattered the public stereotype of the alcoholic and in that moment brought us all a step closer to telling the truth about how these problems had touched our own lives.

The manner in which Mrs. Ford initiated her recovery process was also significant in that it challenged the popular notion that nothing could be done to stop addiction until the person who was addicted had personally hit bottom and reached out for help. News that Betty Ford's daughter, Susan Ford, had initiated a formal family intervention process that resulted in Mrs. Ford's admission to treatment and opened the doorway to her recovery conveyed three crucial lessons to the nation: 1) there is hope for families facing addiction, 2) the family can play a catalytic role in the recovery process, and 3) individual family members and the family as a whole need to recovery from the effects of addiction. Mrs. Ford, President Ford, Susan and the other Ford children offered themselves as living proof of those propositions!

The public reactions to the First Lady's announcement and the sustained evidence of her successful recovery brought women into addiction treatment in unprecedented numbers. The number of individuals and families transformed by the Fords' gift of their own story is incalculable. In the years that followed, family-centered addiction treatment and support reached its apex, and intervention as a therapeutic strategy entered the American consciousness. This alone would be a proud legacy, but the Ford family was not finished.

At the encouragement of Ambassador Leonard Firestone, Betty Ford brought her support and her name to a new non-profit addiction treatment center on the grounds of the Eisenhower Medical Center in Rancho Mirage, California. Lending her name to this center served as a permanent reminder that addiction can touch any family and that recovery is possible for those who seek it.

In the intervening quarter-century, the Ford family has remained actively involved in the Betty Ford Center through participating in Board meetings, assisting with fund raising, lecturing to patients, and cooking hamburgers for staff and patients at their annual picnic. Most important to Betty has been the quality time interacting with patients. The Ford family has remained the force at the core of the Betty Ford Center serving as a constant reminder that addiction treatment and recovery at their best are family-centered processes. Susan Ford Bales' assumption of the Chair of the Board of the Center signals that this involvement and influence will continue long into the future.

In the years since the Betty Ford Center first opened its doors, some 79,000 individuals have been treated at the Center—more than half of whom have been women. Through these years, the Center has developed specialized programs for licensed professionals, innovative programs of focused continuing care and state-of-the-art family and children's programs. In 2006, Betty Ford announced the establishment of the Betty Ford Institute, which will operate independently from the Betty Ford Center and focus its efforts on recovery-focused research dissemination, public and professional education and policy advocacy.

How can we as a field offer adequate thanks for such contributions? Mrs. Ford, know that we love you and that we promise to carry your legacy into the future. To the Ford Family, know that inviting us as a nation to share your pain and your healing has informed and inspired us. Know that previously doomed people are today living full lives because you put a compassionate face and a passionate voice on addiction

and recovery. To Susan Ford Bales who is carrying forward Mrs. Ford's leadership as Chair of the Board of the Betty Ford Center, we thank you for sparking this chain of historical events and for accepting this mantle of continued leadership. We will try to heed your call to create a future of addiction treatment in America that is recovery-focused and family-centered.

To everyone involved with the Betty Ford Center and the Betty Ford Institute, we remind you that your name carries a power possessed by no other addiction-related institution in the world and that this distinction brings obligations and opportunities of enormous proportions. We honor your twenty-five years of service, and

we call upon you to use the power of your name, the resources of the Betty Ford community, the talents of your staff and volunteers, and the spirit of courage and hope out of which you were born to cast a beacon of innovation that will help shape the future of addiction treatment and recovery in America.

About the Author: William L. White is a Senior Research Consultant at Chestnut Health Systems, a member of the Executive Council of the Betty Ford Institute, and the author of *Slaying the Dragon: The History of Addiction Treatment and Recovery in America*.