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Recovery Visions: An Interview with Bob L.

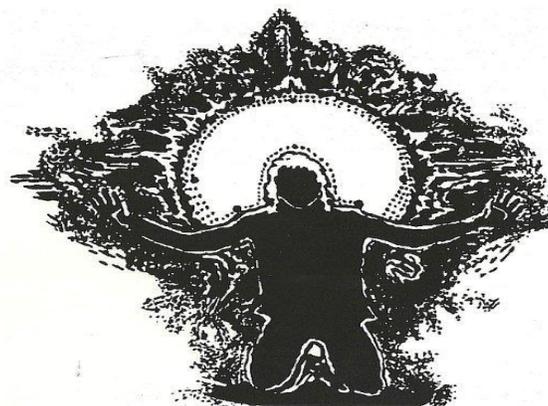
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Introduction

One of the milestones in the history of addiction recovery in the United States is the use of literature, art, music, and sport to express the recovery experience and to carry hope of recovery to others. One of the leaders in this movement is Bob L., author,

producer, and director of the play, *Visions*. The *Visions* play is scheduled to be performed on October 14, 2014 in the Rayburn Office Building of the U.S. House of Representatives. I recently had the opportunity to interview Bob about the history and future of *Visions*. Please join us in this conversation.



VISIONS

A play about addiction....

Bill White: Bob, how did your own personal story lead to development of the play *Visions*?

Bob L.: Well, a lot of *Visions* is based on me and my family and what we experienced through my using years and through my personal recovery. It's a story shared by many people. Every story's different in its details but it's all the same emotion, the same despair, the same anguish, the same anger, the same isolation, the same feeling of worthlessness. And there are many similarities in our recovery experience—the awakenings to what we are, the breakthroughs in denial, the shift in consciousness, the experience of recovery as a great gift and opening ourselves up to something greater than ourselves. A lot of the vignettes in *Visions* are drawn from my background and people I've met along the way.

Bill White: How long were you in recovery when the idea for *Visions* came to you?

Bob L.: I was two-and-a-half years in recovery. The first year, I had a hankering to join a theatre group, and I got cast for a passion play at the Park Theatre in Union City, New Jersey. I'll never forget that. I went home so excited and told my sponsor that I got cast in the play. He said, "You've just got in recovery and that must be your priority. Tell them you can't do it." So I had to wait another year. Then I did a little community theater in Bergenfield, NJ. It was such a gift to me, and they had workshops for people who would bring in their own work. I decided that I might be able to do a story on my addiction and recovery working in all of my family background as well. I got on my knees and asked God for help, and I got an awakening and was able to finish a short script. When I brought it to the community theater, they were aghast. They said it was too harsh, too real. So I went to a couple colleges, and they also were not interested in doing it. I couldn't understand this response. I thought the play was a great

spiritual gift. Eventually, the script got into the hands of a Twelve-Step H and I Convention Committee that invited me to stage the play. I didn't know anything about directing, acting, writing, nothing. So I went into recovery rooms and asked twenty people to join me and began searching for a space to rehearse. That's how it started.

Bill White: So you recruited mostly people in recovery to play the parts?

Bob L.: Yes, most members of the troupe were in personal recovery. There were others with some acting experience who were drawn to the play because of family experiences of addiction and recovery. We all came together for our first performance like beads on a string in September of 1991.

Bill White: In what kind of venues did you first perform *Visions*?

Bob L.: Well, it was first scheduled for a Twelve-Step convention, but we wanted to test it first, so we performed two shows at Integrity House, a long-term rehab program in Secaucus, NJ. During those two shows, there were men weeping. They were telling us about the harm they had done to their children. There were women hugging us who had lost their children. It was unbelievable! Then at the convention, we got the same reaction. Those first performances were only about twenty-five minutes; now the play is over one hour long.

Bill White: So you continue to write additional vignettes for the play?

Bob L.: Yes, as I got additional ideas, new scenes were added, and the characters became more defined. All the scenes in *Visions* portray the bottoms of alcohol and drug addiction and the spiritual awakenings that save people's lives. It's about turning points and the raw experiences that precede such turning points. The play touches on all kinds of issues: family, work, HIV, domestic violence, homelessness, and youth. It's

intense. The actors are continually interacting with audiences. Our audiences are crying, they're yelling, they're talking back to us—it's like going to a Baptist church. It's wonderful! And the majority of my shows are in the trenches: prisons, shelters, and rehabs along with school presentations.

Bill White: How are these productions financed?

Bob L.: That was an issue, but this is what happened. I decided that, since it was a gift and I wasn't going to take full credit (by maintaining my anonymity), I decided not to take any money. So, all the people involved in *Visions*, including myself, are volunteers. I bought, made, and stole equipment. I did what I had to do, Bill (laughs). But I always looked at it like Robin Hood. I accumulated my own equipment; when I had some money, I bought it. If we received any donations, they went to the rehabs that had nothing. The rehabs treat us royally, feed us, even transport us sometimes, but there's been no funding. About five hundred people have been in *Visions* presenting this material to more than forty thousand people in nine states. And we've all remained anonymous. That's the best part of the deal. It's more about giving back than getting a star in the dressing room. I trained all these wonderful people, and it's been like a family joining to be on stage. It's healing for both audiences and cast members. And it's a unique form of service work.

Bill White: Are there opportunities when the play is over for the audience to interact with the cast members?

Bob L.: After every performance, the cast goes out into the audience to talk with the people there and to do a lot of listening. You're not preaching; it's a connection thing. I can't tell you how many people I've seen weeping and hugging us and then we ask them to join us. You may never get on a stage, but you can with *Visions*. If you're old enough and you can commit, you're in. So, I have this very big pool of clean and sober people to draw from.

Bill White: What are some of the ways people hear about *Visions* and invite you to perform it?

Bob L.: A lot of it is by word of mouth, but there was a full-length documentary about *Visions* made by Professor Karl Bardosh of NYU for Television in New York. He said, "This story needs to be told," and did a seventy-five minute docu-feature that has been shown in several film festivals, including the Recovery Film Fest in New York. Last year, a group of NA people brought me out to Texas, and we did several shows including some rehabs while we were there.

Then I did the NA World Convention in Philadelphia.

So, that's *Visions*. I'm not a particularly religious guy, but when people cry out on their knees and they ask God for help, there is an awakening and this is what we portray in the play. That is my experience with this awakening, that it is something that comes in silence, that you are going to totally give up and surrender, not when we have any egos left, not when you are screaming and shouting, "Come on, help me!" The awakening comes in the silence of when we realize our impotence and lack of control and bow our heads in humility. And once the denial is lifted, we realize it is a Gift. Those once addicted have tremendous attributes, a tremendous amount of energy to do really unbelievable things. They have the potential to become the very sensitive and special souls that they really are.

Bill White: When you look back on the birth and evolution of *Visions*, what do you feel best about?

Bob L.: Well, I feel, my God, it's brought so many gifts to others and to myself. It's all the wonderful people I've met. I don't know how to describe it. I would have stopped long ago if the magic didn't still happen when I do the shows because, God knows, I had no money. From doing all those shows, I now have an event company and I'm very busy. For the last five or six years, I've

accumulated more high-tech equipment and been able to do a lot more with *Visions* simply because money's coming in for the first time from my other ventures.

Bill White: Bob, is there anything we haven't touched on you would like to share with recovery advocates around the country?

Bob L.: Just to let people know that the play is available and that they can reach us at <http://recoveryproductions.freeservers.com/>

Bill White: Bob, thank you for taking this time to talk with me and thank you for all you are doing for people seeking and in recovery.

Bob L.: Thank you, Bill. It was very nice talking to you.

Visions Chronology

1992 First performance of *Visions* in New York City, Manhattan Bowery Center.

1993 The *Visions* cast and crew are awarded the State of New Jersey Governor's Volunteer Award in the Arts and Humanities.

1994 *Visions* hosts the largest mobile clearinghouse on alcohol and drug information in the country. All materials are placed out during their open performances and are free for the taking.

1994 Four treatment centers under one roof witness *Visions* at Integrity House, Secaucus, NJ.

1995 First presentation of *Visions* in Pennsylvania at White Deer Run treatment center.

1998 *Visions'* largest audience of 500 plus view the play. Fifteen shelters and rehabs are brought into one site in Paramus, NJ.

2000 The 2nd *Visions* troupe is formed from the clients of a treatment center, Eva's

Village, Paterson, NJ. The Eva's troupe would go on to reach more than 2,000 people in treatment centers and prisons in New York and New Jersey.

2001 Under authorization of the Commissioner of the NJ Department of Corrections, a 3rd *Visions* troupe is formed from the clients at Kintock Correctional facility in Newark, NJ.

2001 The *Visions* cast and crew are awarded a Presidential Points of Light Award for their community service and volunteerism.

2002 *Visions* becomes part of the roster of artists for HAI (Hospital Audiences, Inc.), providing arts access to disabled and disadvantaged New Yorkers.

2003 The 4th *Visions* troupe is formed from allied professionals at the West Virginia University Medical Center. They will perform *Visions* at their addiction conference and receive graduate credits in Behavioral Medicine and Counseling.

2003 Twenty-two *Visions* cast and crew members perform in the Rayburn Office Building of the House of Representatives in Washington D.C. for National Recovery Month.

2003 *Visions* receives accreditation from the Addiction Professional Certification Board of New Jersey.

2003 The 5th *Visions* troupe is formed from Phoenix House Academy in Brooklyn, NY.

2004 *Visions* receives tax exempt status with the help of the Volunteer Lawyers for the Arts in New York City.

2004 The 6th *Visions* troupe is formed from the Bishop's Council on Alcohol and Drugs, Lansing, Michigan.

2004 The 7th *Visions* troupe is formed from Samaritan Village in the Bronx. They will later perform the play at our first correction

center in New York, Riker's Island Correction Center.

2005 The 8th *Visions* troupe is formed from New York City recovering artists.

2005- Training of the first students to enact *Visions* from an alternative high school in NY City.

2006 In April 2006, *Visions* presents its first stage appearance in NY City.

2006 *Visions* celebrates National Recovery Month with an upstate New York treatment tour, September 2006.

2008 In October 2008, *Visions'* first performance in the Midwest in Topeka, Kansas.

2011 *Visions* docu-feature by award-winning filmmaker.

2013 *Visions* performs in Texas.

2013 *Visions* performs at NA World Convention, Philadelphia, PA.

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