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Recovery Advocacy and the Making of *The Anonymous People*: An Interview with Greg Williams

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Introduction

Since the rise of a new addiction recovery advocacy movement in the late 1990s, culturally and politically mobilized people in recovery have found numerous vehicles through which that advocacy is being expressed. A few years ago, I was contacted by Greg Williams, who shared his vision of capturing on film the spirit of the new recovery advocacy movement being manifested in communities across the country. It was one of the great honors of my life to play a small part in making Greg's vision a reality. Today, the film *The Anonymous People* is being screened in theatres and community settings across the U.S. and in other countries. On November 6, 2013, I had the opportunity to interview Greg about his life and this film. Please join us in this engaging conversation.

Early Recovery Advocacy

Bill White: Greg, let me just start by asking you to describe your personal journey from a person in recovery to a recovery advocate.

Greg Williams: Sure. I got into recovery when I was 17 years old. I was heavily addicted in my adolescence and, following a near-death car accident, entered an addiction treatment program in July of 2001. It was there that I was introduced to the idea of long-term recovery. Following that treatment, I spent 90 days in a recovery house where I met a lot of people in long-term recovery and got involved in twelve-step fellowships and other peer recovery support activities. Once I got back home, I got pretty active in my community in Connecticut. I worked with young people in recovery and tried to do a lot of recovery-related service work. That continued for me while I was in college and working regular jobs. It was through that experience that I ran into a lot of system-level barriers trying to help others get into recovery. I had friends who didn't have the opportunities I had to get treatment because of health insurance

discrimination. I had friends who couldn't find recovery housing. I had friends who I wrote letters to in jail who were getting even sicker behind bars, and then there were the friends who died of addiction. I attended a lot of wakes in my first five or six years of recovery.

As all of that is happening, my life is getting a lot, lot better, and I'm seeing thousands of other young people at conferences whose lives are also getting better and we often talked about the disconnect between the thousands of young people supporting each other in recovery and the system barriers we and our families had experienced on our way to recovery. It was then that I began to get angry with how we as a country deal with addiction. During that time, I met a special woman who became my mentor, Donna Aligata. Donna was very active in the formation of Connecticut Community for Addiction Recovery (CCAR) and was working on a grant project through The Department of Children and Families about family advocacy, and we ultimately decided to build a non-profit organization called Connecticut Turning to Youth and Families (CTYF). I did many short videos of young people in recovery for it and to get started, she introduced me to your work, and she introduced me to Faces and Voices of Recovery. She then asked me to speak at the Connecticut Legislative Building. I went there with my father and we told our recovery story to legislators in this very public venue. A *Hartford Current* reporter, the big newspaper up there, comes over to me and asked, "Can I write an article about you?" I said, "Yeah, you just can't use my last name." I was 23, and I was about six years in recovery and he looked at me confused and said, "You just testified in a public setting on the local cable access, but you can't use your name in the article." And I said, "Yeah, I'm not allowed to." And he respected that and wrote a nice article about this young guy who got into recovery at 17. It was one of the nicest recovery articles that has ever been written about me. The first line of the article refers to me as Greg W., and then it goes on to tell my recovery story. Donna called me when the article came out, and said, "If I

didn't understand anything about addiction or recovery or anonymity, what do I read in that first sentence of this article?" And I said, "I guess that I'm ashamed" and then she said, "Is that why you're speaking out?" and I said, "No, of course not." My friends in recovery understood why I didn't use my last name, but that was not the reason in the eyes of the public.

After that, I ended up at one of the Recovery Message Trainings held by Faces and Voices of Recovery, and it was there that I really understood the distinction between 12-Step Anonymity and being public about my recovery status. That unlocked the key and gave me a whole new language for me to become comfortable as a public advocate and helped me understand why putting a face and a voice on recovery is so important.

Bill White: Now, a lot of your early work continued to be through Connecticut Turning to Youth and Families?

Greg Williams: Yes. We were inspired by CCAR and their recovery centers, but in Connecticut, we have a split system in which the adolescent treatment system is separate from the adult system. When I turned 18, some recovery support such as those available to me through CCAR opened up, but they were not available to youth. The limited resources and the lack of youth and family supports made no sense. Addiction is a pediatric health issue and family illness. About 90 percent of people start using alcohol and other drugs before they turn 18, and we just didn't have organized recovery supports for young people and their families. What we tried to do was develop peer recovery support resources, such as recovery coaching, for those younger people and their families. We had a great vision, great volunteers, and Donna is an incredible grant-writer, but we just kept hitting walls and barriers. There just weren't dollars available or the political will to support what we were trying to do at that time. We struggled and we floundered and we still remain today a very grassroots, volunteer group of people

committed to building recovery supports for young people and their families.

The Anonymous People

Bill White: Somewhere within that experience came the inspiration for the film that became *The Anonymous People*. How did that develop?

Greg Williams: That's a great follow-up question because it was my frustration of knocking on doors at the state and the responses I was getting that sparked this vision. We had these powerful stories of young people in recovery on video, but we needed a larger effort to create support for what we were trying to do. And there was a lot of confusion among recovering people about what this whole recovery advocacy thing was really all about. A lot of people didn't get what it is we were trying to do or disagreed with what we were doing. At the same time, I'm meeting people like Tom Coderre, Pat Taylor, Tom Hill, William Moyers, Phil Valentine, Carol McDaid, and yourself—these amazing people who'd been leading the charge on recovery advocacy. I got inspired to get involved and I had some unique skills in the video space and aspirations to become a documentary filmmaker.

I'll never forget what my documentary film teacher once told me: "The most important element to any documentary is a charismatic subject or a group of charismatic subjects." I didn't know anybody with more charisma and who were more articulate than this group of recovery advocacy leaders. And I knew that this story needed to be told. The book, *Let's Go Make Some History*, provided a foundation, but the story of this movement also needed to be told visually and with many voices. I wanted to take this groundbreaking recovery advocacy work and put it into a medium that my friends in their 20s could relate to and access.

Bill White: Greg, what were some of the challenges as you went forward in making the film?

Greg Williams: First was convincing other people to believe in it. As a first-time filmmaker—I started this journey at 26 years of age—my Rolodex was not very big in the entertainment world, and it's those connections that get things done in the entertainment world. I pitched some networks, and I tried to develop various treatments of the subject but mostly floundered for a couple years.

At the same time, Donna told me, "You know, you need to go back to school and get a Masters degree. It'll help you in your career." I was fortunate to find an individualized program at New York University that allowed me to study addiction public policy and documentary film. As part of the culmination of this degree, I produced and edited a short 16-minute promo of what would become *The Anonymous People* as an artistic thesis. But I knew even then that I wanted to make this into a feature documentary. I could not get grants to fund the film, so I ended up taking out a business loan because I believed in it so strongly.

Bill White: In the end, you found a most creative way to fully fund this film. Describe that.

Greg Williams: It was July of 2012, and I knew I needed to shoot some of the recovery marches and the recovery rallies that would be going on across the country in September if I was going to capture the size and diversity of the movement. So there's a website called "KickStarter" that helps independent artists and creative people create a campaign that solicits funding from the general public and people in your network to support a particular project. Essentially, you take big media out of the middle, and you market directly to your potential consumers to fund development of a product. I was blown away. The recovery community and the organized recovery movement really got behind this campaign, and we surpassed our goal of raising \$45,000 to do the filming. We raised over \$85,000 just through that campaign alone and through that process met a philanthropist who donated money to finish the film in a very high-quality way with an award winning production team,

an Emmy Award-winning editor, and an original score. The biggest challenge of the film was certainly the fundraising. Independent film is not easy to do, but I look back now and I'm grateful and blessed that we were able to do it with a very authentic voice and not necessarily influenced or prescribed on how to tell this story from any corporate media influence.

Bill White: You filmed recovery advocacy activities across the country. Are there any experiences that stand out for you in those travels?

Greg Williams: There were two gentlemen, actually brothers, who shot the film. Craig Mikhitarian was the Director of Photography, and Bud Mikhitarian did all of our location sound. We traveled across the country in my parents' Honda Pilot packed to the brim with equipment. Neither of them is in recovery, but they've been in broadcast television and the entertainment world for decades. Every day, we would interview somebody and they would be overwhelmed by the intensity of the interviews and the power of the stories we were capturing. Having this outside perspective and excitement brewing is when I began to sense that we had something very special in this film we were shooting.

The third day, we shot an interview with Michael Askew at the Bridgeport Recovery Community Center where we also got to shoot an All Recovery meeting. If you aren't in recovery or a family member in recovery, you might never witness what a recovery support meeting actually looks like. As the result of the majority of recovery support meetings involving a tradition of anonymity, no filmmakers have really shot this stuff live and unscripted before. So, it was really powerful capturing the testimony of people from all walks of life: Hispanic, African American, White, all coming together at this meeting and being open and willing to share this daily ritual of supporting one another on camera. It was one of those moments when I just knew that we were on to something special.

As each day of filming progressed, we were able to find these unique pockets of the

recovery support and recovery advocacy story. I'm sitting on hundreds of hours of footage, and the film is only 84 minutes long. I am still working on packaging some of this and getting it out to the world through a newly launched video and call-to-action campaign with Faces & Voices of Recovery called ManyFaces1Voice. All of this footage is spiritual gold and a powerful tool for recovery community mobilization. We shot for 50 days with incredible moments each and every time we turned on the camera. Bud Mikhitarian has now even embarked on writing a book about the entire production experience that will become available in 2014.

Early Screenings

Bill White: As of November 2013, how many screenings of the film have been shown or are scheduled?

Greg Williams: When we finished original editing, we did sneak previews as part of our Kickstarter campaign backers awards in April of 2013 for the folks who had supported the film. We were able to do about 25 special one-night screenings for these organizations. We also used those screenings to test the response to the film and to get feedback from general audiences. The overwhelming comment was that people loved the film, but we had comments that the film was a bit long, so the film was shortened before general release. There were issues around some of the language that people use in the film, so we did further editing to address that. We finished the editing in July and we found a distributor, and I thought that was it, but that turned out to be just the beginning of the work. Getting a film out to the world as an independent film is not easy. But we've been blessed by this cool, new method for distribution called, "Theatrical-On-Demand." It's run through an organization called, "Gathr Films" and the way that it works is any person can say, "I would like to see the *The Anonymous People* at my local Cineplex." It uses the infrastructure of the theatrical distribution model and the movie theaters in communities all across the country.

Basically, if you can find 50 or 100 people in your community who'll pre-reserve a movie ticket, they'll take a *studio film* down for the night and they'll show *The Anonymous People*. It's been an amazing thing because we've, to date, had more than 80 screenings all across the U.S. using this model, and we have another 90 scheduled with more and more requests coming in.

I'm learning more about geography than I ever thought I would. We have this map on which we are plotting the towns and cities where the film has been shown. We've also added community screenings where schools, recovery organizations, treatment programs, conferences, and churches can license the film to play in non-theatrical venues. We've had over 160 groups organize screenings that way in the U.S. and in Canada. Today, I got an article from South Africa. We have a group in Australia. We've been screening all over the U.K. It's really incredible, and it doesn't seem like it's slowing down. The film has been out about two-and-a-half months and the momentum is picking up as word travels about the film. We don't have a marketing budget, so we're relying on word of mouth and social media to spread word about the film. We're still looking for a television outlet for the film for next year. We don't have one just yet, but early next year, we'll have a DVD, iTunes, Netflix, and Video on Demand and other mediums for people to access the film.

Our vision for the initial theatrical and community screening release of the film is to get people to come together collectively and talk about recovery and recovery supports in each local community. Faces and Voices of Recovery partnered in a Call to Action website now, called, "Many Faces, 1 Voice" that provides the tools for people to host community screening events where they can not only watch the film, but have a dialogue about the film and start or expand involvement in recovery organizations. It's really special to see what can happen when several hundred people, or 900 people like there were in Providence, come together in a room to watch the film and talk to each other after the film about what they can do locally.

In just two months, we estimate more than 40,000 people have seen the film.

Responses to Anonymous People

Bill White: Were there many surprises for you as you watched people's response to the film around the country?

Greg Williams: The film's funnier than I thought it was going to be. It's a very serious topic, but there are these cool moments that are quite humorous. Hearing a whole room laugh together is when you really feel the power and how connected people are while watching it. There are also moments in the film where people are shedding tears. But the most incredible thing for me is during the Q and A and after the film when people stand up and say, "I've never done this before publically: My name is Lisa and I'm a woman in long-term recovery and what that means to me is...." When you see that happen after folks see the film, you know something important is happening. This new advocacy language developed by Faces and Voices of Recovery is really starting to spread. This language is still new for a lot of people and is quite powerful. Those moments seeing people coming out as people in long-term recovery make the years and years of blood, sweat, tears, pain, and frustration all worth it.

Bill White: Do you have a sense that the film and all the discussions around the film have created a much sharper understanding of the distinction between anonymity at the level of press (not disclosing affiliation with a particular 12-Step fellowship) versus public disclosure of one's recovery status?

Greg Williams: Yes. Alcoholics Anonymous World Services issued a bulletin clarifying this distinction. Not everybody who viewed the film agreed with this distinction. This remains a contentious topic for some people who've seen the film. I think we certainly have helped people understand that they can identify themselves as a person in recovery and participate in recovery advocacy activities while maintaining their anonymity at the level of press and respecting the Twelve Traditions

of the Twelve-Step fellowships. The film has sparked quite a demand for the Advocacy with Anonymity pamphlet. There's been some pushback on the film, in part due to how we marketed the film. I've been told at screenings, "My sponsor told me not to come see this movie..." It saddens me that there is this contempt prior to investigation around the film in a lot of recovery circles. There's still a great deal of confusion about what this film is about, what this film is saying, and what the people in this film are doing—mostly among people who have not yet seen the film. I hope this will dissipate once the film is available on a DVD for people to watch privately.

Next Steps

Bill White: Greg, what do you see as the next steps for this film and for yourself?

Greg Williams: The next step for the film is to find a broadcast outlet in the U.S. as well as internationally. We have an international distributor now who wants the film to play in many countries. It's a full-time job right now trying to facilitate the outreach and distribution of the film. As an independent film, we don't have a staff, and we don't have a studio behind us so there isn't really anybody but me to help get the film out there. This campaign we have created through Many Faces, 1 Voice is also working on creating additional film vignettes from all the footage we shot for *The Anonymous People*. We've already released seventeen video vignettes from that extra footage from the film. This allows people to get to meet some of the characters from the film and to hear more about their personal stories and their personal motivation for becoming a recovery advocate. I continue to look for future opportunities to develop purpose-driven documentary content and to continue to tell the rarely told recovery side of the addiction story.

Young People in Recovery

Bill White: In many ways, your personal story and the film is a manifestation of a larger movement of young people in

recovery who are becoming involved in recovery advocacy.

Greg Williams: That was one of the key motivations for making the film of my own story. I wanted to communicate in a medium that my friends in recovery might be able to access. It is hard for young people to access information about the new recovery advocacy movement, and I wanted to create a film that would help fire up this growing generation of young people in recovery. There isn't a young person today, in recovery or not, who doesn't know somebody at their school or in their community who has passed away from an overdose, from alcohol poisoning, or a substance-related accident. It's hard for people to continue to attend wakes of 17-year-olds, 20-year-olds and 22-year-olds without looking deeper at what is going on. Peers and parents who have experienced such losses are speaking out and joining with young people in recovery to do something locally and nationally. I think this unique mix of people is going to change everything.

Bill White: Do you see the creation of the organization Young People in Recovery and the growth of recovery high schools and collegiate recovery programs as a signal of the strength of this movement?

Greg Williams: Yes, the number one thing that people ask at the end of the film is, "What can I do?" followed by "How could we start a recovery school in our community?" It is such a no-brainer. Twenty-five percent of our college age youth meet medical criteria for a substance use disorder so the idea that we would have a chess club, a basketball team, a football team and we would put huge amounts of money in any academic institution behind that but not build a community of support for young people in recovery is baffling. There are still only handfuls of recovery high schools and collegiate recovery programs in the U.S. We are at the tip of the iceberg of what will be an explosion of recovery institutions in the education world. That will feed a large cadre of young leaders into the recovery advocacy movement. I'm one of the rare young people in recovery in this advocacy movement who

didn't come from a collegiate recovery program. Nearly all of my friends—leading advocates from across the country—came out of collegiate recovery programs. As those institutions grow, we're going to see the recovery advocacy by young people grow by leaps and bounds.

Closing Reflections

Bill White: Greg, let me ask a final question. Do you have any suggestions to offer other young people in recovery who might be considering getting involved in recovery advocacy?

Greg Williams: Getting involved in recovery advocacy is not just a personal decision. I had to sit down with my family and discuss what this would mean for me and for them. Individually, at 22, five years in recovery, I had to say, "If I'm going to put myself out there as a person in recovery, what are the doors in my life that might close as a result of the discrimination that people who've experienced addiction often face?" And I had to really look at that. That certainly was a heavy concern for me, not knowing where my life was going to go and not knowing that this field or advocacy work was going to become part of my everyday life. I have a friend who was trying to get into med school who had been in recovery for six years and he disclosed this on his application to the medical school. For two years, he was denied entry even with comparable academic stats as a result of his history. Every time he went for an interview, this is what they would talk about. He was discriminated against even though he was in long-term recovery. He was discriminated against as a result of disclosing his recovery status and trying to pursue a profession of his choice within the context of that recovery. That's an incredibly important concern for young people still developing their long-term career goals.

The other piece is my awareness that this would impact my family. Sharing my recovery story impacts my mother and father and my sister, who are all very supportive of my recovery. But it certainly was a conversation that we had to have before I

decided to do this work and to tell my story at a public level. I wouldn't be alive today without my family and I had to be sure they were okay with me telling my story because they're a part of that story.

Bill White: Has advocacy work been a different form of service work for you in terms of how you put it in perspective of your personal recovery process?

Greg Williams: Yes, it has. I talk about this unification of my identity. For my first five years of recovery, I didn't really talk about my recovery except with other people in recovery. I would make up stories at my job and in college to other people about why I wasn't going to the bar or why I wasn't drinking, but I wouldn't disclose my recovery status. For me, this work has definitely been another level of service, in terms of reaching out to the community and practicing these principles in all of my affairs, but on a personal level, it has been a powerful unifying force in my life. When I was in active addiction, I had two lives and when I first got into recovery, I still had two separate identities. It wasn't until I was able to unite those identities that I really began to feel whole and that I could say anywhere, "My name's Greg Williams. I'm 5'8". I have brown hair. I'm a person in long-term addiction recovery and I live in Connecticut." Today that recovery piece is just part of who I am. I don't have to sever it into a hidden compartment from the rest of my life.

Bill White: Greg, that's a perfect place for us to end. Thank you for all you have done and are doing for people in recovery.

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