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Recovery Advocacy in Rhode Island: An Interview with Jim Gillen

William L. White

Introduction

The strength of the movement to expand the doorways of entry into addiction recovery and to create the physical, psychological and social space within local communities within which recovery can flourish lies with grassroots recovery community organizations and their unsung advocates and recovery support specialists. Few have been more indefatigable in this special form of service work than Jim Gillen of Rhode Island. I have written a good deal about “recovery carriers”—people who make recovery contagious not only by their words but by how they live their lives. Jim is the consummate recovery carrier. In November 2013, I had the opportunity to interview Jim about his passion for recovery advocacy and recovery support. Please join us in this engaging conversation.

Roots of Recovery Advocacy

Bill White: Jim, let me begin by just asking you to share something of the story of how you came to be involved in recovery advocacy.

Jim Gillen: Well, Bill, I’m not from Rhode Island originally. I’m from New York and I came into Rhode Island very inauspiciously. I woke up in a town called Woonsocket in northern Rhode Island and I didn’t know how I got there and I was terrified. I was in Brooklyn the night before so it took a few years to piece together the story. It was right at the end of my active using days and I reached out and I got help as I’d done many times before, never planning on staying. There was just something one day, call it a sign, that made it clear that I was supposed to stay.

I got into the treatment business as many of us do in the beginning and then it quickly became something of a calling for me. For me, all the lights were green with each next step and I knew this was what I needed to do. Then I got involved with RI Care, the state recovery community organization. I worked with adolescents. I worked in a detox. I worked in a methadone clinic for a number of years. And in each place, I was passionate about advocating for the patient. The agencies I worked with were very supportive. And then RI Care leadership was vacant and I was afraid it was going to die so I agreed to do it for five hours a week, along with my regular full-time job. I stayed with RICares for several years and then the Providence Center, which is Rhode Island’s largest community mental health and substance use disorder treatment provider.

There were some folks I had worked with for a number of years who had an interest in taking a chance and starting a recovery services department and I’ve never looked back. That was five years ago and I’ve been very active in the recovery community. Rhode Island is such a small state, it’s pretty easy to accomplish a lot of things state-wide. Plus, I’m not exactly a shrinking violet. I put myself out there and just connected with people. As much as I missed my

kids and grandkids in New York, I know this is where I'm supposed to be and that this is what I'm supposed to be doing. It is a calling, which is a mixed blessing sometimes.

Bill White: And I am sure those connections you referenced were part of what put Rhode Island on the map in terms of recovery advocacy and support services.

Jim Gillen: Yes. There were a lot of such connections. There was the donor who came to us and asked us if we'd be willing to take on the project of developing a recovery community center. Through that process, I met some wonderful advocates, like Tom Coderre and Steve Gumbley. And then there is Dale Klatzker, CEO at the Providence Center. He took a lot of chances in some tough times, but he just kept saying it's the right thing to do. He's just tremendous in his unwavering support for both the recovery supports and just recovery in general in the state.

The Anchor Recovery Community Center

Bill White: A lot of your focus has been on the Anchor Recovery Community Centers. Could you describe the Centers and their operations?

Jim Gillen: We have three Anchor Recovery Community Centers now. On December 2nd, 2013, the original Anchor Recovery turned three years old. We have just passed 200,000 overall visits. At present, we average anywhere from 6,500 to 6,900 people visiting a month and a lot of people come every day. We see about 1,800 to 2,000 unique visitors monthly. Anchor is about 6,000 square feet of recovery paradise. I'd like to sit and tell you that it's going exactly according to my blueprint but that is not the case. We realized early on that we needed to go where the community needed us to go. We did a lot of research and visited a lot of different recovery community centers. We had a lot of help from Phil Valentine in Connecticut and Mark Ames in Vermont.

The first week or so I was there with a volunteer and my dog, with my face pressed against the window wondering if anybody was going to come in. One day the doors just blew open and people have been coming ever since. It's become such a brand and part of the discharge planning by every treatment provider. Everybody knows and utilizes Anchor. Our funding is quite limited, but we're the only recovery community center. We had a SAMHSA Recovery Oriented Systems of Care (ROSC) grant, which allowed us to get started. We have a private donor and the good graces of the Providence Center. We've been able to keep the doors open and the recovery fires burning. But we need state support of recovery services. It is an investment that just makes so much sense.

Bill White: Jim, you mentioned three locations: could you share where those three locations are at now?

Jim Gillen: Yes. Our original location is Anchor Recovery Community Center in Pawtucket, just about five minutes north of Providence. And the funny thing, Bill, is that Rhode Islanders don't like to travel and one of our fears was that if we weren't in Providence, nobody would come--even if it's only five minutes north. But they did. Then, we were approached by the YMCA. We like to say we took recovery out of the basement and we put it on Main Street

because their address is 249 Main Street in Pawtucket. When the YMCA approached us, it was like going main stream. They have a 117-acre campus, so we have a smaller building there and work with the YMCA on wellness for the families we serve in Warwick. They have something called, "Health Navigators," which is kind of their version of a Recovery Coach. Our recovery coach and the health navigator work with each person on a wellness plan. We believe a healthy lifestyle is paramount to recovery. We do a lot of lectures. We do a lot of outreach from our Warwick location.

This past September, we opened what's called the, "Anchor Recovery Dry DOC" -- DOC for Department of Corrections -- which is in the women's minimum security prison. It's run with help of our Recovery Coaches by and for the women in prison. They do the scheduling, they do the planning, they arrange the speakers, and all of the events that go on at Dry Dock are done with a combination of Recovery Coaches from us and the peers inside. What we're doing is running continuous recovery coach academies. We're getting them CEUs from Rhode Island College with the hope that, upon release, this is a potential avenue they can pursue as a possible line of employment.

Bill White: Jim, I think this is the first recovery center I'm aware of that's inside a correctional institution.

Jim Gillen: I have not heard of any other. We hope to expand on that into men's minimum, women's medium, and then men's medium. Twelve to fifteen women have been paroled or put out on probation since Dry Dock opened in September and all of them have come directly to the Anchor Recovery in Pawtucket right from the prison. They didn't even go home or where they were going to, they came to check in with us first. That's the value of building that relationship before they're released. And what we are doing in Warwick with the YMCA, to my knowledge, that's the only YMCA recovery community center partnership as well.

Recovery Support Services

Bill White: That's wonderful. If our readers walked in to one of the recovery community centers, what would they observe going on over the course of a typical day?

Jim Gillen: Well, Pawtucket is our busiest, but the biggest thing people say when they walk in is that they feel an instant sense of relief and welcoming. We've got electric fireplaces in all of our centers with comfortable couches, big bookshelves, and a sign as soon as you walk in, "We honor and respect all paths to recovery." We greet them as soon as they come in. We open at 9:00 a.m. each day and regularly host All Recovery Meetings. We have a full-time employment counselor, which we were able to do through the ROSC grant. We've been able to keep him on, thank God. We've got a full computer room where people can come in, they can job-search. A lot of people, they can just chill and go on Facebook or connect on their e-mail. We're not aligned with any mutual aid group, but we have a number of outside twelve-step groups that we allow to use the space. Then we have a secondary meeting room where there may be a meeting going on of the Pawtucket Foundation or a Cancer Support group. We have different neighborhood and community groups using our facilities. There may be a recovery coach training that we were doing for our recovery high school.

Then we have another meeting space and also RI Care who sublets space from us. They have all of your advocacy opportunities: your civil engagement stuff. So, there's all this going on. Then, we have another room with just a bank of telephones where we just do all day long telephone recovery coaching. So, you walk in and there are so many things to pick from and recovery coaches always there to help guide you through such choices.

Relationships with the Local Community

Bill White: How has your relationship with local communities of recovery evolved since your beginning?

Jim Gillen: It's evolved well. There were a lot of early complaints that we were violating the traditions, but we kept at it. I kept inviting their regional people in and talking with them and listening to their concerns and we just kept at it. We said, "Come and sit and spend a day with us and see what we do." And so, now, it's funny. AA's Area 61, which is like their statewide group, has used our meeting space. And the NA groups, they're involved in everything that Anchor does. We also have faith-based groups that are running, all independent.

We respect your anonymity. If that's how you want to roll, fine. But this is what we do and we're a very public face of recovery. You're always going to get kind of a zealot that's always going to find something wrong with us but it's really quieted down. We're a strong force in the community and I think people, especially in the hard-core twelve-step community, have really come to see that we are a community center with a recovery twist.

Bill White: You're a recovery community center but you're also a community center. I'm struck by the involvement of all kinds of outside groups in using your space, which integrates the recovery community with this whole larger theme of community service.

Jim Gillen: Well, we do a lot of town hall meetings. We've had the developmental disability population utilize the center sometimes for events. That's the kind of stuff that we want. Family-oriented stuff, holiday activities, evening activities. In Pawtucket, we're open every night except Sunday night.

We're in downtown Pawtucket, and it's not a dangerous area but there are a number of empty storefronts and we still have some skeptics to contend with. So, we, use the old recovery adage of cleaning your side of the street. We do that literally through people in recovery that want to volunteer their time and we also get probationers, parolees and students who need to do some form of community service. So, clean all the way down the street. There's a fountain down by the bank that we started to clean and there's a big municipal parking lot across the street that was filthy until we cleaned it up. The city took notice and gave us free parking spots and then got a grant to plant all this greenery up and down Main Street, which they asked us to maintain. The company that installed the greenery actually came in and did workshops for our volunteers on how to care for the plants. It's so cool. Bill, I'll be out there seven o'clock in the morning, blowing garbage and cigarette butts because it's a main street, with my suit on or not, I'm out there with the blower.

Bill White: That's great. Now, you also once mentioned to me a special relationship you've developed with Walgreens.

Jim Gillen: Yes. Walgreens is wonderful. I'm on the mayor's Substance Abuse Prevention Council and Walgreens has been doing some very community-oriented activities such as offering Narcan at their stores. So, we approached them since they have a big location right up the street from us and they have jumped in with both feet. They were a major sponsor of the Recovery for Rally. They want to be involved in recovery and they're very proud of it.

Rally for Recovery

Bill White: Jim, you were very involved in the Rally for Recovery National Hub Event, which was held in Providence this past year.

Jim Gillen: I've been involved in all eleven rallies here. When we started, there were just fifty people and then in 2010 we were voted, "Best Rally" in the country and then awarded the National event. It was an experience like no other. As you know, I've been sick all summer, Bill. I was pretty run down but I was able to be there all day and we had close to 13,000 people, including Patrick Kennedy who was the Grand Marshal, David Mineta from ONDCP and Pam Hyde from SAMHSA.

We had over a hundred information booths and the City of Providence became a major partner with us, including freshly paving the streets where the event occurred. We had a procession with 50 torches and 400 luminaria candles, memorials, and we marched from our park and placed all the luminaria candles. If you look at *The Anonymous People*, there's a scene in it with the word, "Recovery" spelled out in luminaria candles. That's us.

Our volunteers were the first ones there and the last ones out. The experience of planning that and showing people not just that we throw a great party but that we could focus the event on important issues was in incredible experience. And I think people this year were really able to see what this is all about and that we need to carry this momentum forward. The carryover here in Rhode Island has been tremendous. And Anchor and the Rally have become sexy with the politicians. It's like the place to be seen. So, what we're really trying to do is to build on that. Now, we're getting our "asks" together. And our big ask is, "We need funding, too, to keep this going" and we've got a lot of people on board. Through the Providence Center, we have a direct connection to the Providence Community Health Centers. So, we really can be one-stop shopping for people.

Lessons Learned

Bill White: Jim, you've been involved in this work quite a while. What are some of the lessons you've learned about the nature of advocacy work and how to do it and how to sustain yourself doing it over time?

Jim Gillen: Well, the biggest thing for me is that the person that we're working with needs to be the author of his or her own recovery. They need to be in the drivers' seat. And coming from being a treatment provider and moving more into recovery support and advocacy, I've discovered the value of empowering people giving them a voice--and giving them the words to make sense of it all. I want people to know that they don't have to hide anymore. It's okay to

walk in and say, “I am a person in long-term recovery. Addiction is an illness and I am recovering from this illness. I had to learn that language and now I am teaching it to others. These have been big lessons learned for me.

And there’s the lesson of never giving up even when you are swimming upstream. I said to Tom Coderre a couple of years ago, “Tom, I don’t know if I can keep doing this. I feel like I’m running up the hill butt naked with a bugle and when I look around there’s nobody behind me (laughing).” And he promised me that day, “I’m going up that hill with you every time and I’m running alongside of you.” And then he said, “I’ve never heard about the whole butt naked thing, but everything else works.”

And we’ve built a strong force here. I know that I’m not that important and that I can’t do it alone. I’m not effective alone. So, it’s reaching out to as many groups and organizations and individuals far outside the usual suspects. Recovery is a holistic; it’s not only just the whole person, it’s the whole community. We teach people how important it is to get involved in their community and to be a positive voice for recovery.

Bill White: You referenced this shift in language. I’m wondering, for you personally, if you really began to experience yourself differently as you shifted your language.

Jim Gillen: I absolutely did. My whole personal recovery has evolved and due in large part to my changing beliefs. I didn’t know anything else when I first came into recovery. We were told to keep our mouths shut, that as addicts or alcoholics, we had nothing to say that anyone needed to hear. So we shut up and did our ninety in ninety. I did what I was told, but I questioned a lot of stuff. When I found like-minded people, I really expanded my thinking and it’s changed how I live my own recovery. My recovery, Bill, is lived in a very broad and real sense now. I don’t live in fear. And when I talk, they say, “Well, you, I might use tomorrow.” You know what, I’m not using tomorrow! I’m not going to take it for granted, but I’m done. And here’s the reason why: it would require a price that I’m not willing to pay.

When I’m talking to people about it, “We’re people in recovery, we’re people in long-term recovery.” What that means for me is far more than being abstinent. That’s a really good place to start, but it’s all the other things that come with that. These are the things that we really want to work on because you want to enjoy your recovery. You want to get healthy. My horizons have really broadened and it changed me. And I’ve got to tell you, Bill, it’s helped me immensely in my own personal recovery. My enthusiasm for this way of life has never been greater. People always tell me. “Jesus, Jimmy, you’re the happiest, most enthusiastic SOB that I’ve ever run into and that can’t be real.” I say, “I have issues like everyone else. I mean, even having cancer, just my experiences being in long-term recovery have really helped this whole process. It doesn’t mean it wasn’t terrifying at times but I was really able to utilize a broad support system and a belief system that to help me get better.

The Larger Recovery Movement

Bill White: Jim, how do you see the larger recovery advocacy movement in the US at this point in time?

Jim Gillen: Just from my involvement over the last years, I’m really pleased with the great strides being made. Of course, I’m impatient and I’m always looking for that “wow” factor. I

want that respect for us and I know it doesn't come overnight. And your pieces in the *Anonymous People*, when you talk about the difference between being anonymous and being ashamed, that screams at me, "Yes! Here we are. Speak out, people." You wouldn't have heard that a few years ago. So, we're getting there. We're not getting there as fast I'd like. We get sidetracked a lot. But we're getting there.

Bill White: Did you ever think you would see a day in your life when you would see recovering people marching publicly as far as the eyes could see?

Jim Gillen: Never. Never. Never. I mean, the embarrassment that we all had. It's not that people didn't know that we'd had problems in the past, but I never thought I'd see the day when we could go public. Recovery is a beautiful thing and it doesn't need to be secret. I never thought I'd see this day.

Personal Reflections

Bill White: What has been most personally meaningful for you in this advocacy work that you've been involved in?

Jim Gillen: Personally, it has been the pride my children take in my work. My two sons actually performed with us at the Rally this year, which was a one-in-a-lifetime thing. There are also all of the people I have worked with who are now doing great in their recoveries and speaking out. That's as personal as it gets for me. I'm proud of them and it feels good to have been part of that. It's almost like it's just something that they were looking for their whole life. They're like paging me, "Hey, I voted this month." "Hey, I'm getting involved with RICares." "I'm going to get involved with the Legislative Day this year." "I want to go with you the next time you go to the State House." All of that's personal for me.

Bill White: Jim, let me ask you a final question: would you have any advice for others who are thinking about getting involved in recovery advocacy service work?

Jim Gillen: Bring it on. Bring it on. You'll be glad you did. It's rewarding. It'll be frustrating at times, but you'll see the difference that you can make if you stick with it. Come to Rhode Island and help us if you need a place to do it, but do it.

Bill White: Jim, thank you for taking this time and for all you do for people seeking and in recovery.

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