

LAWYERS Assistance

By J.E. (Buddy) Stockwell

SPEAK UP AND END THE STIGMA

More and more, people are shedding the veil of anonymity and going public about their personal recovery from the diseases of addiction and alcoholism. This shift is overdue because the only way to reduce stigma and focus on better treatment solutions is for people to speak out publicly about their recovery experiences and normalize them.

The 2013 film, *The Anonymous People*, by Greg Williams challenges old perspectives that can discourage people from revealing their personal recovery stories at the level of press, radio and films.

Of course, anonymity is a sacrosanct cornerstone of A.A. and anonymity is afforded each member unconditionally. It is up to A.A. members as to whether they will ever, outside of their closed group, reveal they are alcoholics or in A.A. Just like absolute confidentiality at JLAP, people must have the promise of anonymity in A.A. Without total privacy, it's too hard for many alcoholics and addicts to initially ask for help.

Anonymity is the "spiritual foundation" of A.A. and it is necessary to foster humility, equality and unconditional inclusiveness which are core properties essential to A.A.'s success. Remaining anonymous about A.A. at the level of press, radio and films has been historically more important than the stigma reduction that might be accomplished by public figures sharing they are personally in A.A.

But the compelling question these days is what happens when people and public figures are in solid recovery and want to speak out at the level of press, radio and films? Historically, A.A. traditions have deterred public figures from openly sharing they are active in long-term recovery, but, in fact, it's fine to openly state you are in recovery without referring to A.A.

The Anonymous People makes an argument that fierce boundaries of anonymity may have been appropriate decades ago but may now be counterproductive. It's arguable that silencing those who would speak out is harming our ability to connect, openly support each other, and truly reduce stigma in ways that can really normalize addiction and alcoholism as the treatable health issues they are. If everyone in recovery "came out," the national conversation would be very different.

The Anonymous People storyline on IMDB per the film's creator Greg Williams:

Deeply entrenched social stigma have kept recovery voices silent and faces hidden for decades. The vacuum created by this silence has been filled by sensational mass media depictions of addiction that continue to perpetuate a lurid public fascination with the dysfunctional side of what is a preventable and treatable health condition. Just like women with breast cancer, or people with HIV/AIDS, a grassroots social justice movement is emerging. Courageous addiction recovery advocates have come out of the shadows and are organizing to end discrimination and move toward recovery-based solutions. The moving story of The Anonymous People is told through the faces and voices of the citizens, leaders, volunteers, corporate executives, and public figures who are laying it all on the line to save the lives of others just like them. This passionate new public recovery movement is fueling a changing conversation that aims to transform public opinion and finally shift problematic policy toward lasting solutions.

As an example of what is possible, the film tracks what happened with the HIV/AIDs epidemic. People were dying.

There was little hope for a cure. The disease was cloaked in shadows, shame and stigma. Misinformation, ignorance and fear drove narratives. Facts were hard to come by.

When the death toll mounted, people then became willing to come out of the shadows and go public. There were marches. Celebrities spoke out. We could all see the real gravity of the AIDs epidemic. Resources and research were directed at the problem. There are still deaths from AIDs, but at vastly reduced rates than before. Going public worked because it allowed the world to see a huge health problem with compassion instead of judgment.

The bottom line: If you need help, IT IS OKAY. YOU ARE NOT ALONE. There are an estimated 23 million people in recovery from addiction and alcoholism. People in all walks of life have experienced these health issues and WON — airline pilots, doctors, lawyers, nurses, athletes, authors, actors, musicians and captains of industry. Some of the most talented and gifted people on this planet are in personal recovery and are living full and productive lives.

Don't let stigma and fear get in your way. A confidential call to JLAP connects you with lawyers who have *personal experience* in overcoming these issues. JLAP connects you to powerful resources that save lives. No one else will ever know you called JLAP unless you decide to tell them. Call (985)778-0571, email jlap@louisianajlap.com or visit www.louisianajlap.com.

J.E. (Buddy) Stockwell is the executive director of the Louisiana Judges and Lawyers Assistance Program, Inc. (JLAP) and can be reached at (866)354-9334 or email jlap@louisianajlap.com.

