

BULLETIN

"Your union helped save my life"

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My name is Mike Pond. I'm five years sober this week and your union helped save my life.

When I received my Masters in Social Work in 1995, I thought my days as a psychiatric nurse were behind me. But life has a way of throwing us curve balls. After two decades of successfully helping clients battle addictions, I succumbed to one myself. In a catastrophic free-fall, I lost everything: my practice, my home and my family. What made it worse: as a therapist I was ably positioned to watch myself fall and powerless to prevent it.

By November of 2008, I was homeless, penniless and passed out on White Rock Beach with only a bottle of Glenfiddich swiped from The Boathouse Restaurant to keep me warm. I woke up in the White Rock drunk tank and thought, "this must be rock bottom."

Not by a long shot. Released from the drunk tank with nowhere to go and no one to call, I attended a 700 am AA meeting at a local shelter and from there, boarded a minibus to a down-and-out recovery home. So began my two-year journey to sobriety, with stops in abandoned sheds, back-alley dumpsters, ditches, emergency wards, intensive care and finally, prison.

The Couch of Willingness, the title of my new book, is a real couch in that recovery home, where I was forced to detox and sleep until I surrendered and admitted my powerlessness over alcohol. If anyone truly "recovered" there, it was a miracle. A rat fell from the ceiling on me as I shaved. A drugged-out crack addict woke me in the middle of the night, shoved his erect penis into my face, jabbed the cold blade of a knife into my throat and growled, "suck this old man." A fellow client hanged himself. A house staff member and I cut him down and desperately tried to revive him. But failed. That was the second suicide in the house in less than two months.

I knew I wouldn't get sober here. So mired in misery and despair, I too tried suicide. I did this because I had no "sense of a future self." As a trained practitioner I had unique insight into my plight. I know it's in that absence of a "future self," that many contemplate killing themselves.

My only hope: find work. My license to practice social work had been suspended, but the BC College of Registered Psychiatric Nurses would allow me to work, with conditions. I applied for a job as a psychiatric nurse at Surrey Memorial Hospital and to my astonishment, got the position. With a job, I could get out of the rundown rat-infested recovery home, pay my debts and rebuild my life.

My first week on the job, I relapsed. Filled with self-loathing, I was convinced I was done. But to my disbelief, the Fraser Health Authority contacted me. There was to be a hearing to see whether I could come back to work. I would be represented by my union - the Health Sciences Association. I was humbled, blown away. A union, of which I had not been a member for 22 years, was going to fight for me.

The day of the hearing, I got up early. I had to look my best for the most important meeting of my life. A small circle of fellow addicts met me downstairs. I sat propped on cushions in the kitchen while one cut my hair.

Then men who basically had nothing, quite literally gave me the clothes of their back. I fought tears of gratitude.

At the hospital, I sat waiting for the meeting to begin. I repeatedly rubbed my sweaty palms on my jeans and prayed for a miracle to walk in. And she did. Maureen Ashfield greeted me with a warm smile. I could see the empathy in her eyes. She explained the union's strategy. I hung on every word.

The meeting was successful. The union and the Fraser Health Authority drew up a plan to keep me sober and patients safe. Yet I relapsed one more time. Again, both agreed to a medical monitoring program and allowed me a gradual return to work. It is because the enlightened and progressive mental health attitudes of both the Fraser Health Authority and the union, that I am alive today. By allowing me to return to work, I began to have that "future sense of self." I came to believe I would flourish one day and my sons would be back in my life. I imagined us snowboarding together again. How many other employers have this approach?

Today, my life and my practice are all about paying it forward. I believe respect, kindness and compassion like that shown me by the HSA should form the bedrock of all addiction treatment. Scaffolded upon that, should be a wide array of evidence-based treatment. We have a long way to go to make that a reality.

I have been snowboarding with my three sons again. Thank you, HSA for fighting for me.

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