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A Passion for Youth Recovery An Interview with Stacie Mathewson

William L. White

Introduction

There is a growing movement to mobilize young people in recovery culturally and politically toward the goal of creating the physical, psychological, and social space within which addiction recovery can flourish among young people in the United States. At the center of this movement are young recovery advocates and parents who have lost a son or daughter to addiction and related problems. Emerging from their efforts are expanded recovery advocacy and support resources, including new recovery community organizations (e.g., Young People in Recovery), youth recovery residences, high school and collegiate recovery programs, and a broad spectrum of youth-focused recovery support services. No one is exerting a greater influence on this movement than Stacie Mathewson. Through the Stacie Mathewson Foundation and Transforming Youth Recovery, she is building an infrastructure of recovery support for young people that is historically unprecedented. On November 19, 2013, I had the opportunity to interview Stacie about her vision and the work to date to fulfill that vision. Please join us in this conversation.

Personal Inspiration

Bill White: Stacie, what was the original source of inspiration for the Stacie Mathewson Foundation and Transforming Youth Recovery?

Stacie Mathewson: The original inspiration really came from my son and his struggles with addiction. The problem was first identified five years ago around the time his daughter was born, but looking today, it is clear he suffered from addiction after he began using at the age of twelve or thirteen. His addiction reached a point where it was clear to him and to our family and we began at that point to look for resources for help. There was little information to guide us as to the best treatment resources or to what the long-term recovery process would involve. We started by thinking he would just do a thirty-day rehab and then be on his way to a better life, but then it went from more treatments to longer treatments and those horrific costs. It was extremely overwhelming, but we felt we had to do what was needed to give our son a chance.

It was during that process that I realized the lack of information and support available to families like ours. We simply did not know who to trust for reliable information or competent treatment. I was very inspired to become part of recovery because I knew that he would spend most of his life in recovery and that it wasn't going to be perfect. I knew there were going to be

times when he struggled and that there would be issues to address after the drugs, but there were so few resources and guidance on how to manage this journey.

What most struck me was that there were so few supports for a young person in recovery. My son did not want to spend his life in a church basement with older people smoking too much and talking about drinking too much. This was not something young people could identify with. So, that's where my inspiration came from—just watching my son suffer and wondering why there was not a system of recovery support for young people struggling with addiction. And through that process, I was also forced to look at my father's alcoholism and what that had meant for our family and each of our family members. My inspiration for this work was a very personal one.

Bill White: What was your original vision for these organizations you founded?

Stacie Mathewson: I really wanted to provide a resource for parents, adolescents, and young adults to help understand addiction and the recovery process and to get support through this process. As a young mother with a child struggling with the disease, having such resources could have made a great difference in my life and the life of my son. As a parent, it's very difficult to struggle with a child who's out of control. As a parent, you think that it's your fault that this child is out of control and you never know when you are enabling or providing what is best for your child. When I started the Foundation, I was thinking of needs at the high school level and having a place for parents and young adults to go that they could understand more about the disease and get the help that they needed.

Foundation and TYR Structure and Funding

Bill White: Could you talk a bit about how the Foundation and TYR are structured and how they relate to one another?

Stacie Mathewson: It started out with the idea that the Foundation would provide a grant to start a recovery high school and then it quickly branched into helping fund a campus recovery program at a local university that they were trying to start. I funded that and decided to go ahead with funding several university recovery programs and tabled development of the recovery high school for later. As these grants proceeded, I needed to hire staff and to create a non-profit organization charity to oversee these grant programs. That organization was Transforming Youth Recovery. Once we had that, we could not only expand the money we were granting but also set up a process of accountability when handing out the grants. We went from just giving money to building processes through TYR that assured high quality of campus recovery support services and activities based on each school's unique strengths. Our overriding goals for each program were quality of recovery supports, institutional acceptance, and financial sustainability.

Transforming Youth Recovery now has multiple initiatives. One is recovery support within higher education, and another is aimed at the community colleges. TYR also supports the work of the Association of Recovery Schools. Last year, we sponsored their annual conference and also supported some consultants who helped with restructuring and rebranding the Association. We also supported two national studies, one of which defined the essential ingredients of a recovery high school. We also did a state-by-state study to show the different policies and legislation that apply to recovery high schools. We also funded the accreditation

process that the Association is now recommending for all recovery high schools. We funded the Association's executive director position through 2014 and will be sponsoring their 2014 conference. We have also been recording the clinical and educational tracks of these conferences so they can be posted online for those unable to attend the conferences.

We are still planning what type of support we can offer to the K-8 grade levels. I would like to pull together a coalition of different organizations to make a bigger impact on youth. The last study and effort that we'll make is with a focus on family. I believe that the family will ultimately be our biggest focus with an emphasis on empowering parents with a better knowledge of addiction and skills on how to navigate service systems when your son or daughter is in need of such support. I think getting into family education and advocacy is going to be a coming focus for TYR.

Bill White: Stacie, what are the sources of money that the Foundation and TYR grant to these local efforts?

Stacie Mathewson: My husband has been very successful in business and has been involved in all kinds of philanthropic support of various charities. He has donated most of the money that we have distributed through the Foundation and TYR, but we envision a day when this effort will draw many contributors. My husband and I attend a lot of charity functions, and there are two organizations that really impress me. One is Andre Agassi's charity for developing an inner-city school in Las Vegas. He raises millions of dollars a year for this school. Another friend of ours, Larry Ruvo, whose father died of Alzheimer's, started an organization called the Lou Ruvo's Center for Brain Disease. We've supported that organization as well, and he raises millions a year for that organization. That got me thinking, "Why isn't anybody raising money for addiction?" You see it for AIDS, you see it for breast cancer, you see it for inner-city schools and brain diseases, but who's standing up and fighting for addiction? Who's collecting funds and getting to the heart of the matter and elevating compassion toward people who are suffering from and dying of this disease? Not very many!

So, I felt as though I could start a process of contacting friends and associates to bring awareness to this issue and to solicit large sums of money that could make a difference. So, I really have only been at this for about two-and-a-half years. Ten months ago, my son died, so I've been going through a grieving process in the midst of this work.

To date, we have issued 45 \$10,000 grants to 45 universities to support the development or expansion of 45 campus recovery programs. We have made a commitment for a total of 100 grants. We have three state university systems we're working with—California, Texas, and Colorado. In each system, there's roughly ten universities that we've agreed to fund. We're just in the process of setting up systems in different states where the universities are all working together and supporting each other in having recovery programs on their campuses. We have that going full speed right now, and I'm in the process of hiring staff and organizing the non-profit that was approved in January. I'm getting the strategic plan done, the branding, and starting to think about major fund-raising in 2014.

Challenges to Date

Bill White: Stacie, what have been some of the major challenges you've experienced so far in this work you are doing?

Stacie Mathewson: Time. I am a big family person and a lot of my time these past few years has gone toward my husband, son, and my granddaughter and just being there for them. The challenge has been that there's so much work to do. These campus programs are so needed and they are trying so hard to get something done with such little funding. It's challenging, but it is also inspiring to step out and do this work. It makes such a difference in people's lives and such a difference to these programs. This issue needs more policy attention. It needs greater public awareness and compassion. It needs more organization. It needs more funding. The most difficult part of the process for me is not having the time to put in that I would like. It needs more people that can help.

Bill White: Will the staff you're bringing on free you up to do more of the fundraising and resource development?

Stacie Mathewson: Definitely. We have accomplished a great deal with the resources we have in such a short timeframe. If more funding was available, much more could be done. My vision is a recovery support program in every educational system in the country. I think we have a social responsibility to support the health of youth. This is a time of testing the limits of one's independence, and drinking and experimenting with drugs is often a part of that. Too many people are struggling and dying.

Supporting the Work of the Foundation and TYR

Bill White: Is there a way for those reading this to be of help with your efforts either through financial or other support?

Stacie Mathewson: The best way to reach us is through the Transforming Youth Recovery website (www.transformingyouthrecovery.org). At that site, you can apply for a grant, learn about the grant process, or make donations to support our work.

Personal Reflections

Bill White: Other families in communities across the United States have experienced having a child in recovery or losing a child to addiction. Are there any lessons you've learned in these past years that you might want to pass on to those who have a similar interest in getting involved in recovery advocacy?

Stacie Mathewson: Instead of reinventing the wheel, do your homework on what coalitions are out there that you can join and support to make a bigger impact. I am very impressed with coalitions. I think one of the answers is pulling everyone's efforts together and organizing those efforts for a larger impact. You can still have your own identity as an organization, but we have to get all of these entities to act in concert.

Bill White: What has this work meant to you personally?

Stacie Mathewson: You know, it's just embedded in my life now. This is my family's disease. I will live with it for the rest of my life, and I will always be a warrior for this disease and a warrior for better treatment. Addiction treatment is too expensive and it's too short. I believe the answer is support through a longer period of sober living where it's structured and there's more accountability and hands-on guidance on how to live in recovery. To be isolated in treatment for a few weeks or few months and to then be sent out with the admonition to make AA meetings is not enough. I think it takes up to five years to achieve sustainable recovery, and support and guidance should be available through that period. We need better treatment, more affordable treatment, and longer periods of support following treatment. It needs to be either covered by insurance or it needs to be supported by other funding sources so that people can actually afford to get the treatment. And then we need to understand that it's a long-term process and not a 30-day or 90-day program. It is a five-year program of recovery initiation and then a lifestyle lived for life—for the individual and the family. Thank you for the interview, Bill.

Bill White: Stacie, thank you for taking time to share your vision and your experience. What you are doing is making an enormous difference in the lives of young people in recovery and their families.

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