



I got 99 bottles but a beer ain't one

Sometimes our clients' stories help us find ourselves



Cooper

BY MILES B. COOPER

A cross-country trip

The lawyer woke on the couch at 6:00 a.m. Sunday, his head pounding. The past night was a blur – he knew he drank too much. He also knew his wife was upset – it was his first time on the couch in their 10 years together. He grabbed his bag and headed for the airport. Bad timing for a cross-country flight to Canada with depositions the next day. On Monday, he met with his client. In her early 50's, she suffered a serious injury on her wedding day, a day that was supposed to be the start of a new chapter for her.

His client's story

His client told him about her past marriage. That relationship had been good, until it was not. Her first husband, an executive, had a stressful job. Over time, a couple nightly glasses of wine turned into more. The executive went from functional to non-functional alcoholic, forcing his wife to take over everything. She worked, raised their two young sons, and tried to help her husband find a way out of the bottle.

But the executive reached the point where he could no longer live with the children. He moved into a hotel near the house. The hotel looked onto his kids' route to school. He picked it for that reason. Unable to stop drinking, unable to go home, the executive watched his kids from a distance.

The executive's wife still loved him. He called home every few days. Then, one week, he didn't. She called the hotel. They had not seen him. She went there and they let her into her husband's room. She found him – his opportunity for sobriety forever gone.

A decision

The lawyer, two young kids at home himself, listened to his client's story. After the depositions, he flew home. He thought about it. He didn't feel his drinking was completely out of control – he simply had a few times a year where he couldn't find the off switch. But those times were impossible to predict. He put himself in his wife's shoes. Knowing her husband was out, hoping he wasn't going to have one of *those* nights.

He made the decision to stop and called The Other Bar. The Other Bar, for those unaware, is an Alcoholics Anonymous-style organization for those in the legal field dealing with addiction. The

lawyer went to a meeting the next day. Supportive people, some he knew, went to great lengths to offer help.

We have met the enemy, and he is me

No surprise. I'm the lawyer who made that hungover cross-country flight. Today, as I write this, it is a year to the day since I stopped. I felt it was time to share my story. People say that you have to hit rock bottom before deciding to stop. If that's true, I was fortunate. My decision did not involve jail, a DUI, or State Bar discipline. If you're dancing with the demon now and think rock bottom is deeper, you can keep sinking. Sinking until you're found dead in a hotel room. Or you can make the decision to change. Now.

Breaking patterns

The first few months were tough – they involved breaking patterns. Wine with dinner, bourbon while writing, drinks with colleagues. Change is hard. I used alcohol to slough off the day's events. Bicycling became a good substitute. I found road therapy more useful than support meetings. Many find meetings – and the support – life saving. I've just always been a bit of a loner.

Sober with benefits

For those who've had trouble with the off switch, know that stopping is freeing. I don't worry that tonight might be a night where things go off the rails. There are no hangovers. My relationship with my spouse is better (and I'm not just writing that because she's my editor).

Not all peaches and cream

I miss it. Drinking. The taste. Surfing the buzzing crescendo at industry events (we trial lawyers can *drink*). I feel out of step with the dance at events now. I'm no longer a catalyst, one of the ones moving on to the next venue. But the only ones who really notice are those who like a heavy pour. Given our hard-charging, heavy-drinking profession, there is a tendency to believe life on the edge is part of the trial lawyer mystique. When you stop to look at the greats, however, it is startling to count how many are dry themselves.

Stopping drinking did not make me a saint. I'm still the same dark humored, not-appropriate-for-polite-company guy. I don't feel alcohol is the devil. I definitely do not want folks feeling awkward about drinking around me. I did not write this to preach, and it is unlikely you'll hear about this topic from me



again. But I felt it was appropriate to add to the message. One can be a successful dry lawyer in an alcohol-soaked profession. So, bartender, please pour me another coffee. I have a column to write.

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dition to litigating his own cases, he associates in as trial counsel and consults on trial matters. He has served as lead counsel, co-counsel, second seat, and schlepper over his career, and is a member of the American Board of Trial Advocates. Cooper's interests beyond litigation include trial presentation technologies and bicycling (although not at the same time.)