



Recovery's Historian:

An Interview with

William L. White, MA

*Andrea G. Barthwell, MD, DFASAM,
& Megan Crants, BA*

The antiquated flyer's headline, "Inebriate Asylum, 1876," caught his eye by chance as he wandered the aisles of a local flea market. He paused when he saw the date, surprised. "I've been in the field for four to five years," he thought. "How did I not know that addiction treatment programs existed as early as the 1800s?"

That 1974 flea market discovery led William "Bill" L. White on a thirty-year-long journey of in-depth interviews, historical investigations, and countless significant contributions to the field of addiction. "I just fell in love with the history of the field and all the bizarre, inspirational stories," White explained. "I never would've predicted that I would've been doing this comprehensive work decades later, but that's kind of how it unfolded—I caught the history bug."

Like many people entering the addiction field in the late 1960s, White was drawn in by personal and family recovery experiences. He held his first field position with the Illinois Department of Mental Health, during which time he got a profound look at the deplorable conditions that defined institutions in those days. Seeing the straitjackets, smelling the corridors full of urine, hearing about the forced sterilizations . . . his senses overwhelmed him and turned him towards a passion for changing the world for the better. When asked about navigating the field from that point on, White responded,

I wish I could've said all of this was planned, but much of it was totally by accident. As I began to develop a deep passion for the work, I found vacuums of need or things that weren't being addressed and sometimes just got invited to come in and be part of solving some of those vacuums, whether it was in early areas of clinical treatment combining alcoholism and treatment of other addictions, or early issues related to ethics of addiction counseling, or some of the early organizational problems treatment programs were faced with . . . I just kind of stumbled in and did what I could during the process. There are all these specialty roles I've had over the course of my career, but in retrospect I didn't really choose . . . they sort of chose me.

Some of White's earliest and most significant contributions revolve around the culture of addiction and recovery.

White clinically examined the way in which people made the journey between the two worlds, then continued on to write ethical case studies for the field. His later contributions were primarily in the historical arena, exploring the enormous opportunity he and the other pioneers had to shift addiction treatment from an acute model of biopsychosocial stabilization to models of sustained recovery management. Today he is working to chronicle activities on the frontier of the recovery movement.

One early pioneer, Ed Senay, MD, served as a mentor for White's master's in addiction studies program in the late 1970s. White attributes much of his maturation in the field to Senay and recounted one of his most vivid memories:

I had come out of a therapeutic community, Twelve-Step-oriented treatment background when I began my work in school, and I think it was either the second or third session that I met with Ed. Somehow the subject of methadone came up and I went into one of my antimethadone rants that I was giving at that point in my young, naïve career. Ed very patiently let me wind down this bizarre rant that I was giving, then he looked at me and said, "Young man, your passion is in inverse proportion to your knowledge." He began to pull books off his shelf for me and that was sort of the beginning of my maturation and my immersion into the science of the field.

White is perhaps best known for his book *Slaying the Dragon: The History of Addiction Treatment and Recovery in America*. Published in 1998, the book is true to White's ideals of shared stories and lessons, and details the evolution of the field with inspiring insights about some of the pioneers who made addiction treatment possible. White didn't just stop there, though; he went on to produce over four-hundred journal articles, book chapters, and interviews during his career and will be remembered as a man who truly made a difference through his careful research and writing skills. When asked about his process, White humbly replied that he learned about some of the most important aspects of writing through his mentor Ernie Kurtz. He recalled trips to Ann Arbor, Michigan and sitting in Kurtz's basement, where the two men would bounce questions and ideas off of each other in a classically Socratic manner:

*He taught me a lot about the mechanics of telling stories: telling them in sequence, making sure you have the evidence to support those stories, making sure you looked at all of the evidence, the importance of telling untold stories, how to personalize and put stories in historical context . . . when I asked him to advise on the AA chapters of *Slaying the Dragon* I had no idea that it would morph into this larger mentorship on conducting historical research, and I had no idea that we would go on to do a number of collaborations together.*

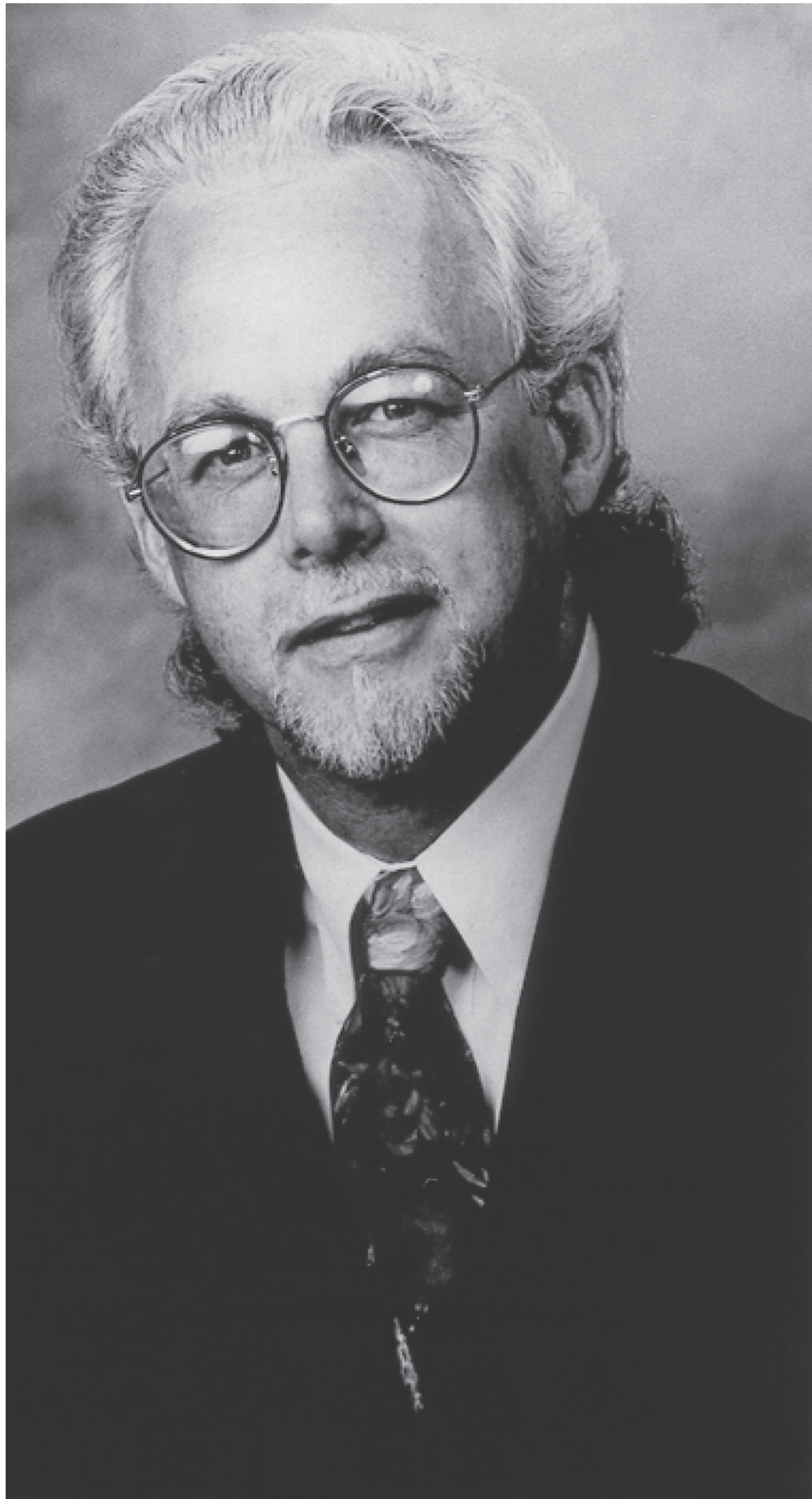
White began writing for *Counselor* magazine in 1999, translating his extensive knowledge of the field into a regular column about the history of treatment and recovery in the United States; "mapping this thing we call recovery."

Some of his articles translated research to practice, others explored treatment options in addiction counseling, and several of them were commentaries on controversial issues like confrontation and expulsion from treatment centers. In later years, White turned the focus to other pioneers in the field in an interview-format spotlight series. "As I got older and a lot of people that had mentored me began to pass on, this series was a way to take some of those individuals and honor them," said White. "Part of my involvement has been to tell some of the organizational histories . . . but I always come back to the fact that so much of the field involves personal stories that these people have told as they've shaped the field over the last half century," he added.

White entered the academic realm of historians from a clinical treatment background and initially found himself intimidated by the scholastic experience of his colleagues. One of White's mentors, David Musto, PhD, was quick to assure him, however, that his clinical perspective was crucial to recording the history of treatment. Musto reminded White that the academics were just as overwhelmed as he was because of his exposure to the "real world" of addiction and recovery. "I remember him as this sort of grand gentleman who was just enormously supportive of someone who didn't have as many of the academic credentials of other people who he was mentoring," White reminisced. "He was wonderfully supportive and convinced me how important this research was that I was doing . . . how nobody really told the full history of treatment and that perhaps I could help fill that vacuum," he said.

In filling that vacuum, White broke down barriers between academics and clinicians in order to form a more united community of addiction historians. "I've often found myself in the middle, looking at polarized issues and looking at ways to bring some of the constituencies from those groups together . . . I think I've been kind of a bridge builder as part of my role within the field," he explained.

Even with all of his success, White remains modest and eager to learn:






I think staying a student has been very important throughout this process. I'm at an age now where everybody tends to think of me in terms of a teacher or mentor role, but it's really strange because I really am humbled daily by what we still need to know and what we don't know. I've really enjoyed being a student of this rapidly expanding recovery advocacy movement, and seeing all the new recovery support institutions beyond addiction treatment that are spreading as a result of that movement.

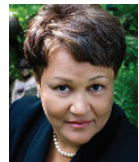
While it is true that the field looks upon White's body of work and understands what he represents and how he represents us, when you are in his

presence you feel his vitality and always appreciate his fresh take on where we are now. He knows we have come a long way from the late nineteenth century services that caught his eye almost a half century ago, but that we have a long way still to go.

As he retires from writing his articles for *Counselor* to dedicate his time and interests in other ways on our behalf, I am proud to step into this space and continue the conversation. I am joined by my associate, Megan Crants, in this work. We would love to hear from you and will use your communication as inspiration for what we cover. I once dreamed about being a journalist and I am thrilled to step into the shoes that my long-term friend Bill has left behind. 

About the Authors

Andrea G. Barthwell, MD, FASAM, is an internationally renowned physician that has been a pioneer in the field of addiction medicine within the American Addiction Society of Medicine (ASAM) and a contributor to the field of alcoholism and addiction treatment. She is a past president of ASAM, was awarded fellow status, and is certified by the American Board of Addiction Medicine (ABAM). Dr. Barthwell currently serves as the medical director for Encounter Medical Group, PC, and is the founder and CEO of the Two Dreams facilities.



Megan Crants, BA, graduated from Johns Hopkins University in 2014 with degrees in cognitive science and writing seminars. She is currently a clinical associate and head writer/editor at Two Dreams in Chicago.



References

White, W. L. (1998). *Slaying the dragon: The history of addiction treatment and recovery in America*. Bloomington, IL: Chestnut Health Systems.