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**Portraits of Recovery:
An Interview with Douglas Lail**

William L. White

Introduction

As the new recovery advocacy movement spreads and sparks calls for a change in drug policy and the redesign of addiction treatment and recovery support services in the U.S., individuals in recovery are finding unique ways to use their personal talents to spread the recovery message. The result is the emergence of an ecumenical culture of recovery in the United States expressed through art, literature, theatre, film, sport, and numerous other venues. In a continuing effort to document the history of the recovery advocacy movement, I have interviewed a number of people who are contributing to this culture of recovery. One such individual is Douglas Lail, who is using his artistic talents to convey the reality and diversity of recovery experience through his [“Hello My Name Is...” project](#). I recently (December 2015) had the opportunity to interview Douglas about the history and future of this project. Please join us in this engaging conversation.

Background

Bill White: Douglas, what was the original inspiration for the “Hello My Name Is...” project.

Douglas Lail: I’ve been hoping to do a portrait series for a really long time. I did portraits when I was in high school and have been drawn to portraits throughout my artistic career. I’ve sketched people off and on and in my early twenties wanted to do a portrait series of black women in hats, but I was never able to proceed with that portrait series. Even in my active addiction, I wanted to do a blog series about the characters that I met as I travelled across the country, but in active addiction such ideas never materialize. When I got into recovery, I had the opportunity to focus on my art career. I’ve been painting professionally for about six years, most since I was laid off from my corporate job. Getting laid off was the best thing that could have happened because it gave me the time to really dig in to recovery and, at the same time, develop my career as an artist. Now, much of the art I do is large format abstract work, but I began to think more about a portrait series—something to which I could be more personally connected. In January 2014, I happened to come across an online class on portraiture, signed up, and found something I really enjoyed doing. During this time, I’m about a year sober and although I was sober and settled, there were still a lot of things I needed to clean up. I think that my art helped me work through all that.

My interest in the portrait series intensified and as I was looking for potential subject matter for the series, I saw the film *The Anonymous People*, and as soon as I saw it, I knew the subject matter for my portrait series. Through my whole recovery process, I’ve been trying to listen and attune myself to what’s coming through and to channel that message through my work. That’s

what happened when I saw *The Anonymous People*. I knew I was going to do a portrait series on people in recovery and their stories. I wanted my art to serve this higher purpose of conveying the reality and diversity of recovery experience.

Bill White: How did the project develop from there?

Douglas Lail: At first, I really didn't know what it would look like. I just knew that it was going to be about people in recovery. I didn't know that people would be willing to embrace the idea and there was the issue of anonymity that had to be sorted out. I worked with my sponsor to sort all of this out and decided initially to set a goal of doing ten portraits of people in recovery.

The "Hello My Name Is ..." Project

Bill White: When did work on the series actually begin?

Douglas Lail: I started roughing out the idea in June and July of 2014. I had to think through what kind of medium I was going to use to do the portraits and it took several months to decide on that and to match my skill level to the kind of medium that might work best.

Bill White: So, the medium really did evolve during that early stage.

Douglas Lail: It really did. I tried a lot of different things with pencil renderings and with charcoal. I really like working in charcoal, but, it just didn't seem right. There was a lot that went into the concept of what the portraits should look like. I wanted it to align with the very idea of recovery, the coming out of the darkness and the light that we see in recovering people. Those were really concepts, because I knew that I had changed. I could see it. I had pictures of me when I was at my worst, and I was just blank. And then I have pictures of me today that visibly show something different about me.

Bill White: It's interesting to me that the focus was not simply on capturing a likeness but sort of capturing the essence of the recovery process for each person.

Douglas Lail: Right. Now that I've been in recovery for a while, I can see it as people progress through the program and as they evolve and fully embrace recovery. They get a different look. Their appearance totally changes; there's a brightness about them. There's something in their eyes that is different. And, for me, that's what this project is trying to visually capture. I've done thirty portraits to date and you can see the recovery in their eyes.

Bill White: Douglas, was there a point in the series where it clicked that you had something very important going with this project? Do you recollect such a point?

Douglas Lail: I do. As I worked through the different mediums, what I landed on was a white on black rather than the traditional black pencil on white paper. I did an initial portrait of my partner Ben as an experiment and just to get a feel of the medium. But after about three drawings, I reached a turning point in the work. It was the portrait I was doing of Bob S. What kicked in was the connection that in my addiction, I really felt I couldn't relate to people unless I drank. A big part of my recovery has been about these one-on-one personal relationships without drugs or alcohol and being comfortable in my own skin. Not only did *The Anonymous People* change my

perception or give me the inspiration for this project, it also helped me accept myself for who I am. It was a way for me to move beyond addiction and to come out of the shadows to really own who I was. So I wanted to visually convey this moving out of shadow and owning recovery within each portrait. I had to understand why I was doing this before I could settle on the medium and the importance of the larger project.

Bill White: How have you financially supported this project since it began?

Douglas Lail: Initially, I funded the work, including the costs of the exhibit shows. I don't get paid, and there's no cost associated with anyone sharing their story. I don't charge them for the portraits. I don't ask them for a donation, they just come in and sit. So, I'm at the stage of trying to get some corporate sponsorship to offset the costs of materials and exhibiting. I used a Kickstarter campaign to support the exhibit that happened in September for National Recovery Month. This year, I'm trying to get corporate sponsors to help me fund five exhibits across the State of North Carolina. What's amazing is that somehow the money for this project always comes unexpectedly from somewhere (laughs). And that's been the real beauty of it. I don't know where the money is going to come from but, somehow, it always manages to show up.

Bill White: Could you describe some of the key collaborations involved with this project?

Douglas Lail: Developing such partnerships is important to the future of my work and to broadening its messages to the broader public. You want people to identify with the project. Whether they know someone in recovery, have a related disorder, or maybe have other issues that they're going through, I want them to experience hope inspired by images and stories of recovery. I'm hoping that this project will strike a chord beyond the recovery community.

Bill White: One of the partnerships that you described to me earlier was with the Asheville Area Arts Council. Could you describe that collaboration?

Douglas Lail: Yes. The Asheville Area Arts Council (AAAC) has served as the fiscal sponsor of my project in that all the financials go through them. That affiliation has added to the credibility of the project. This partnership allows the project to operate as a not-for-profit program under the AAAC 501c status. This allows any contribution to be tax deductible.

Bill White: You have also referenced some work with the Sobriety Court.

Douglas Lail: Yes, the Buncombe County Sobriety Court offers people with multiple DUIs an opportunity for a 12-14 month support and recovery program as an alternative to punishment. Participants at the final stage before they graduate are offered an opportunity to come in and participate in the "Hello My Name Is..." project. It's not a requirement, but some have chosen to get involved. This has brought the involvement of a younger demographic in the project. That has meaning for me because I first made it into recovery through the court system.

Bill White: How did you recruit the people for the first 30 portraits that you have completed?

Douglas Lail: The first ten were among my early peers in recovery. Since then, most of the people either came through referrals of people who had participated or people who had seen portraits at one of the shows. I do a little bit of recruiting on Facebook, just by letting people

know this is a way they can share their story, but most people are coming to me now through the exhibits.

Bill White: How would you describe the experience of those who've participated in this project?

Douglas Lail: I'm always surprised when people ask me about this. It seems that this project allows people in recovery to focus on all the good that has happened to them as a result of recovery.

Bill White: Have any people shared with you what it was like for them to be public in this kind of way and what that meant for their recovery?

Douglas Lail: Yes, and everybody has a different take on the experience. Some people are, yes, I'm in recovery and I'm proud of it and I don't care if anyone knows. Everyone views how they handle anonymity as a personal thing.

Bill White: Were people able to figure out a way to separate the issue of identifying themselves as an AA or NA member from that of disclosing their identity as a person in long-term recovery?

Douglas Lail: Yes. We talk a lot about this going in. This is more than gathering someone's story and doing their portrait. We build a relationship through this process and I talk to them several times before we do the shoot. I talk to them about what they might write about themselves to accompany the portrait. I'm sort of a guide in helping them focus on what they want to say about their recovery. And we talk about anonymity and that they will not be requiring disclosing what they're recovering from or the nature of any treatment or their membership in any recovery fellowship. Whatever comes back on that eight-by-ten sheet that they write is what I use. My drawing is just half of this: the story is really what's important. I'm just trying to capture the recovery that I see on them.

Bill White: What do you think are the main messages conveyed through the portraits you've done and their accompanying stories?

Douglas Lail: The most common messages are that recovery can be a struggle but that their lives are so much better now. They have a better relationship with their family. They have a better job or are going back to school. They're able to fully live their lives now. They feel connected to people now. They feel like they have a purpose. The portraits and stories reveal the recovery journey each person is on. Even though they may seem to be really bright and happy now, you can also see the underlying struggle that they've been through.

Bill White: You referenced exhibits. Could you describe the exhibits and what the audience response has been to the portraits and stories?

Douglas Lail: Yes, the exhibits to date have just been one-day events. They're pop-up exhibits so people come in and just see them. I don't reveal the portraits to the participants until the show, so the portraits I'm doing now won't be available until September, so those who participate and others are seeing these for the first time. And what I really love about the exhibits are that most of the people that are featured there are at the event. So, you see the person on the

wall and read their story and they're standing two or three people down from you and you can interact with them. That's one of the key things about the exhibits that I really love.

Bill White: It gives whole new meaning to putting a face and voice on recovery, doesn't it?

Douglas Lail: Yes, the faces and voices of recovery are very present at the exhibits. The portraits are nine-by-twelve, the story is an eight-by-ten that hangs right beside the portrait. It's set up for intimate one-on-one engagement. The story is handwritten so it slows the viewer down. You have to really focus on every single word and it helps absorb what you're reading. And then you look around and actually see the person whose story you just read. It can be pretty powerful.

Bill White: I would imagine that as people proceed through the exhibit seeing and reading all those recovery portraits and stories that it would inspire hope in those viewing it.

Douglas Lail: Yes, exactly. It also conveys that everyone has their challenges and struggles but that there is hope that things can get better. These are very personal recovery stories, but the theme is far more universal.

Bill White: As we enter 2016, what's your vision for where you see this project going in the months and years to come?

Douglas Lail: Well, I'm just now getting the corporate sponsorship solicitation ready to go out. I'm trying to raise \$20,000 to do five exhibits across North Carolina at recovery rallies and selected conferences, and I want to do a National Recovery Month exhibit, which I hope to do every year. I also hope to capture stories and portraits from each city in which there is an exhibit. This project has really done well over the past year. A lot of people from across the U.S. have contacted me to see how they could get involved and I'm exploring how we might do that. I don't want the project limited to just the people that I know, but at the same time, I really want to keep the personal relationship on some level with those who participate.

Personal Reflections on the HMNI Project

Bill White: What has been the biggest challenge you've faced so far with this project?

Douglas Lail: (Laughs) The biggest challenge is that it has grown so quickly that I have had to figure out how to balance doing work I'm getting paid for and then doing this project as a nonprofit service activity.

Bill White: What's been most rewarding for you to date?

Douglas Lail: It's the personal relationships and hearing the personal stories of those who participate. And of course, some of these people I've seen get sober and witnessed their transformation. It's been very rewarding to both see that and convey that through my work.

Bill White: What has this project meant to your own recovery experience?

Douglas Lail: It has been a way for me to connect with people in a very meaningful way that I did not know was possible, and, in particular, using myself as an instrument to channel these

stories. Trying to capture and convey the light in each of these individuals has been a very powerful experience for me.

Bill White: Would you have any advice for other people in recovery who might consider using their talents as a form of recovery advocacy?

Douglas Lail: I think there needs to be more of us doing just that and also doing projects that link people in recovery to the experience of those in the larger community—projects that reveal our common humanity. I think such projects are a way people can learn about recovery and apply it to their own lives in a way that is nonthreatening. People in recovery can use whatever talents they have as a creative outlet and a way to carry a message of hope to others. Art is just one way we can do this. It's also a way to more fully integrate recovery into our lives in a way that makes recovery more than the time we may spend going to meetings. This project has been a way for me to more fully own and express my own recovery experience through the faces and stories of others.

Bill White: That's a great place for us to stop. Douglas, thank you for taking the time to share with us this inspiring story of the "Hello My Name Is..." project.

Douglas Lail: Thank you, Bill.

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