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Recovery Advocacy and Support in Canada: An Interview with AnnMarie McCullough

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Introduction

A new addiction recovery advocacy movement emerged in the United States in the late 1990s, grew and matured in the opening decade of the 21st century, and in recent years, has spread internationally. Close observers of this movement have witnessed recovery celebration events and new recovery support institutions and services rising in North and South America, Europe, Asia, Africa, and Australia. As this movement adapts itself to diverse cultural circumstances, lessons are emerging from across the globe that could be of great value to recovery advocates in the U.S. On October 24, 2013, I had the opportunity to interview AnnMarie McCullough about the state of recovery advocacy in Canada. Please join us in this engaging conversation.

State of Recovery Advocacy in Canada

Bill White: AnnMarie, let me just begin by asking you to share a little bit about how you came to be personally involved in recovery advocacy in Vancouver, Canada.

AnnMarie McCullough: Bill, I have been in long-term recovery myself for the last five years. Through my work as the Director of Communications and Community Relations at the Orchard Recovery Center here in Vancouver, I became aware of the recovery advocacy movement, SAMHSA, Recovery Month, and Faces and Voices of Recovery. In 2011, our Executive Director, Lorinda Strang, and I contemplated organizing a recovery celebration event in Vancouver, but we felt we didn't have enough time to organize it properly. Then a year later, we saw the trailer of the film *The Anonymous People* on the Kickstarter site, and we just sat there in absolute awe. Our jaws dropped, we got goose bumps, and we knew that we had to have a rally for recovery in Vancouver. We contacted Greg Williams, and we pledged money to help financially back the film. We then set about putting

together Vancouver's first public celebration of recovery. We were sent the video on July 30th and it took us a couple of weeks to make the decision and commit to moving forward. But 8 weeks later, on September 30, 2012, we held the first Recovery Day in Vancouver.

Bill White: Was there a recovery community organization created around this project?

AnnMarie McCullough: I love the term, "recovery community organization," but I would have to be honest and say that I don't really think that there are many of these existing yet in Canada. I think there are organizations that are involved in either prevention, treatment, education or a combination, but there aren't really dedicated RCOs yet. What happened with Recovery Day is that we created a mini-one by forming a planning committee with the Drug Prevention Network of Canada who were very interested in what we were doing with Recovery Day. The Recovery Day planning committee might have been the closest we had come to having an RCO in Canada at the time, but it was not yet an independent organization.

Bill White: Is this pretty typical in Canada at this time—recovery advocacy activities beginning without formal organizations created sort of by or for the recovery community?

AnnMarie McCullough: Yes. I would say that that's true. There are a few organizations such as the Avalon Recovery Society here in Vancouver, which has three recovery community centers, and the South Delta Little House Society, which is also a community center and might even qualify as an RCO, but there are very few. Since the first Recovery Day event in Vancouver, I've been in deep conversation with Greg Williams as well as Pat Taylor from Faces and Voices of Recovery. From these conversations, I decided along with Lorinda Strang to co-found Faces and Voices of Recovery Canada. What we hope to do is to take all of the incredible work that you and our

predecessors have done and Canadianize the information such as the toolkits in order to help foster recovery community organizations and get the recovery messaging training underway. I've been following the history of Faces and Voices very carefully, and we plan to convene a recovery summit like the one you did in 2001. We are also planning surveys of the general public as well as the recovery community to help focus our messaging. It's so perfect that we're having this interview today as I just received the incorporation papers in the mail this morning!

Bill White: That's wonderful news! Congratulations!

AnnMarie McCullough: Thank you. I've been in tears all morning because I just can't believe that it's really happening.

Bill White: Is this interest in recovery advocacy and support happening across Canada or in a few selected pockets?

AnnMarie McCullough: The good news, Bill, is that we have a Member of Parliament here in West Vancouver-Sea to Sky Country, John Weston, who is very supportive of us. Our Federal Health Minister, Rona Ambrose, is also a supporter and a champion of recovery. We've had interest all across the country. We grew from two recovery day events in 2012—one in Vancouver and one in Victoria—to events in 12 cities in 2013, accompanied by dozens of proclamations by City Mayors, letters of support from the CCSA, CSAW, and CACCF, and our provincial health minister. The support from the recovery community, the general public, and from the government has been huge. There's a perfect storm brewing. This is an idea whose time has come.

Bill White: Could you describe the response to the *Anonymous People* movie in terms of turnout and response to the film by those who were there?

AnnMarie McCullough: Well, we had a great turnout here in Vancouver when we

screened it for the first time in Canada on May 24, 2013. It has been shown a few times in Canada since then in Victoria, Calgary, Ottawa, Regina, and coming up in Toronto on February 27th, 2014. I've been helping Greg get the film to other Canadian cities that were hosting Recovery Days. That first screening here in Vancouver was attended by 350 people and the reaction was amazing. There were, of course, a few people in the audience who had questions about how recovery advocacy was going to affect 12-Step programs. We were lucky to have Greg on hand to answer all those questions and then a panel discussion of what this all meant for Canada. The response was very, very positive, as it was in Calgary and Victoria where the screenings sold out. At each screening of the film, we signed people up who were interested in being part of Faces and Voices of Recovery Canada.

Recovery Support in Canada

Bill White: You have a well-developed treatment system in Canada as we've had in the United States for some time, but I'm wondering about the state of recovery support services beyond primary treatment in Canada.

AnnMarie McCullough: I think that we're in our infancy stages. We have just begun thinking in terms of a recovery-oriented system of care (ROSC) and the development of peer recovery support services here in Canada. There are a small number of recovery coaches here, but that is still a very new role. I spoke with Lori Obernauer last week, whose work you are likely familiar with, and we would like to have her work with us at the Orchard to create recovery ambassadors within our alumni base. Peer recovery support services are not yet a mainstream part of our system of care for addictions. We do have the Norlien Foundation here in Canada that's very active in the arena of research into addictions. Greg and I had a meeting with the Foundation to try to help get them on board with the idea of a recovery-oriented system

of care. The representative we met with indicated that she felt this was a very good time to found Faces and Voices of Recovery Canada because the government is very interested right now in this concept of recovery and recovery support services. If you look at the Norlien Foundation and such health authorities as the CCSA (Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse), which is somewhat similar to SAMHSA, they all seem to be moving toward recovery as a new organizing framework for services.

Bill White: In the United States, our recovery support services started in many ways because there was so little continuing care other than mutual aid groups following primary treatment. Is that also the state of affairs in Canada?

AnnMarie McCullough: Bill, I remember leaving the Orchard after 35 days in treatment myself and saying, "Okay, so what now? I'm going to continue going to my twelve-step fellowship, but what else is available to me?" And truly, there was nothing, other than keeping in touch with my treatment facility, which I did. I now work at the Orchard and we stay in touch with our alumni regularly for a year and we offer a robust alumni services program. One of the questions I have raised at the Orchard is, "What are we doing for alumni who've been in recovery for some time?" We are now looking at our programming from this ROSC perspective and launching new initiatives such as our online recovery program in early 2014. I can't speak for all the Canadian treatment centers, but I believe the need to expand continuing care is now being recognized. I have begun meeting with the various alumni coordinators at other treatment facilities and I hope to create an association in Canada where we can meet regularly and share best practices. Interest is beginning to grow among addiction professionals in Canada about how to create a more recovery-oriented system of care.

Future of Recovery Advocacy in Canada

Bill White: What is your personal vision for the future of recovery advocacy in Canada?

AnnMarie McCullough: I would like to see us capitalize on the best practices and lessons learned by Faces and Voices of Recovery in the US and I would like to see RCOs and recovery community centers popping up all over Canada. I would like Faces and Voices of Recovery Canada to be the catalyst for making that happen. And I would like to see more and more people needing and asking for help without shame. I would like for anyone who needs treatment, who needs any type of service, to have access to it and to have those services delivered within this new paradigm of recovery-oriented systems of care.

Bill White: In the United States, we have had a long series of celebrities publically disclosing their recovery status, with some of them outed by the press. Has there been a similar process in Canada that helped set the stage for this emerging recovery movement?

AnnMarie McCullough: When I was looking for someone with a high profile to be at Recovery Day here in Vancouver, I had a really hard time finding Canadian celebrities who were public about their recovery. I knew of a hockey player, Theoren Fleury, who had been out about his recovery for a while and I knew about Frank O’Dea, who started the Second Cup Coffee chain. But that was about it. Until one day, I was scrolling through a news wire that I get about addiction-related stories and I came across a story about Ann Dowsett Johnston, who’d just written a book called, *Drink: The Intimate Relationship Between Women and Alcohol*. She’s a very well-known journalist who’s worked at Maclean’s Magazine. She came out with her recovery in this book and shared this great personal story that also includes an in-depth look at the alcohol industry and how it is affecting the world. So, I contacted her and she’s now joined us at Faces and Voices of Recovery Canada and has agreed

to help us with fundraising. What made me reach out to her was listening to an interview she did on the CBC in which she ended the interview by saying, “I want to be a face and a voice of recovery. If not me, then who?” I knew then we were destined to work together.

Bill White: So few public disclosures about recovery in Canada must have created a climate of stigma much more challenging than we faced in the states.

AnnMarie McCullough: I completely agree. We haven’t had a history of advocacy or the recovery celebrations that are now emerging in Canada.

Bill White: When we first began organizing in the late 1990s, there was a real question of whether we could mobilize even a small vanguard of people to tell their stories publicly. Do you feel the timing is right now in Canada for the emergence of such a vanguard?

AnnMarie McCullough: I think so, as evidenced by the group of us that have dedicated ourselves to starting Faces and Voices of Recovery Canada and the fact that so many people joined us in the Recovery Day events. We don’t need everyone to speak out. As Faces and Voices of Recovery states: “If it’s going to jeopardize your job, your sobriety, or your recovery, or create financial loss for you and your family, you shouldn’t speak publicly about your recovery.” We still have a long road ahead of us before everyone can feel comfortable raising their hand and saying, “I’m a person in long-term recovery.” Once people start to understand the idea of many pathways to recovery and about recovery advocacy while maintaining 12-step anonymity where applicable, this movement will really start to gain momentum. By their surveys, their recovery summit and their recovery messaging training, Faces and Voices of Recovery Canada will be a great help.

Getting Involved

Bill White: AnnMarie, what's the best way for people to contact Faces and Voices of Recovery Canada if they want to get involved or just stay informed of the movement's progress?

AnnMarie McCullough: We have a website that is very basic right now, but it does allow people to join us with their e-mail addresses and names. The website can be reached at <http://www.facesandvoicesofrecovery.ca/> and people can reach me directly at annmarie@facesandvoicesofrecovery.ca. I am available for anybody who wants to speak to me, to ask questions or to join this movement. We'd love to hear from people who are interested in what we are doing.

Bill White: AnnMarie, thank you for taking this time to share stories from these early days of the Canadian recovery advocacy movement. I wish you all the very best.

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