



Selected Papers of William L. White

www.williamwhitepapers.com

Collected papers, interviews, video presentations, photos, and archival documents on the history of addiction treatment and recovery in America.

Citation: White, W. (2005). The voice of history: The evolution of recovery celebrations. *Recovery Rising: Quarterly Journal of The Faces and Voices of Recovery*, Spring, p. 6. Posted at www.williamwhitepapers.com

The Voice of History The Evolution of Recovery Celebrations

William L. White

Emeritus Senior Research Consultant
Chestnut Health Systems
bwhite@chestnut.org

Private and public celebrations of addiction recovery have evolved for more than two centuries. The roots of recovery mutual aid society meetings and recovery celebration events are closely intertwined and date to the Native American “recovery circles” of the mid-1700s. These celebrations continued with the public “experience sharing” meetings of the Washingtonian Temperance Society in the 1840s, the marches of the recovery-oriented fraternal temperance societies and reform clubs of the mid-1800s, the Keeley League marches and newspaper columns of the 1890s, and the Boozer Brigade marches through the streets of America’s Skid Rows in the early 1900s. The closed celebration of recovery birthdays returned with new, mid-twentieth century recovery societies (AA, NA and Alcoholics Victorious), but these powerful stories of recovery rarely penetrated public consciousness until Marty Mann organized the National Committee for Education on Alcoholism in 1944.

NCEA spurred many celebrities to go public about their recovery, but these were isolated events until more than 52 prominent Americans stepped forward as part of NCA’s Operation Understanding (1958) to publicly disclose their sustained recovery from alcoholism. While “going public” became something of a phenomenon among recovering celebrities in the 1970s and 1980s (famed actresses Lillian Roth and Mercedes McCambridge broke the ice of such disclosure much earlier), it wasn’t until the late 1990s that recovery celebration events (e.g., marches, concerts, neighborhood clean-ups) as we know them today began. For more than two centuries, recovery celebration events have served as a ritual of mutual support and recommitment to recovery, a means of reaching out to the still-suffering addict, and an instrument of public education and public policy advocacy.

History often proceeds in small steps. There could have been no civil rights

marchers in Washington in 1963 if there had not first been those who walked in the 1955-1956 Montgomery bus boycott. There would have been no Martin Luther King, Jr. without a Rosa Parks. On the day a million years of recovery stand together in the nation's capital, we will honor the early recovery walks in states like Connecticut. We will honor the Hoop Journeys, the SoberJams and SoberFests. We will honor the power of a video called "The Healing

Power of Recovery" and the humble brilliance of the "Recovery is everywhere" campaign. And we will honor the work of an organization called the Faces and Voices of Recovery. Recovering people have celebrated together for a long time, but compared to what is coming, the celebrating has just begun.