

PERSONAL STORIES

Every September, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) (<http://www.samhsa.gov>) sponsors **National Recovery Month (Recovery Month)**, an observance that increases awareness and understanding of mental and/or substance use disorders while encouraging those in need to seek treatment for these conditions. This year's theme, "**Join the Voices for Recovery: Visible, Vocal, Valuable!**" highlights opportunities for recovery education, support, and celebration.

The following narratives provide personal perspectives on the benefits of prevention, treatment, and recovery. While every story is unique, they all illustrate this year's **Recovery Month** theme and encourage others in the recovery community to: *be visible*—emphasize the prevalence of mental and/or substance use disorders; *be vocal*—share personal stories and be advocates for others seeking help; and *be valuable*—notice warning signs and symptoms and bring awareness to the resources available. These stories are an inspiration to take action and seek treatment for a mental and/or substance use disorder, or help a loved one in need.



Alonzo Grape

*Recovery Coach, Association of Persons Affected by Addiction (APAA)
Dallas, TX*

I grew up a privileged black child with parents who had college-level jobs. My mother placed an emphasis on speaking proper English and being articulate. Socializing was tough—the neighborhood kids picked on me for not knowing how to speak slang. They said I walked and talked like a “white boy,” and made me uncomfortable in my own skin. To make things worse, I attended a predominately white school where the students were quick to call me the “N” word. As a child I felt like I would never fit in anywhere.

My identity crisis carried on through high school. Even though I was a good baseball player, I was still shy and lacked social skills. A teammate of mine told me to have a drink to make me relax, and it worked! So, my social crisis was over. With alcohol, I felt like I fit in with everybody. By the time I went to college I was a full blown alcoholic. I lost my baseball scholarship and got thrown out for fighting. While I graduated from another college, I still abused marijuana, alcohol, and cocaine. I was diagnosed with extreme anxiety shortly after college, a condition for which I now take medication.

After college, I continued to struggle with drugs. I started hanging out with gangsters and tried to fit in. My cocaine use led to heroin, which made me feel invincible. As a result of my drug use, I got into trouble with the law and was in and out of prison. I went to five different treatment centers and chronically relapsed. I wanted to stop using but couldn't; my situation felt hopeless.

At that point in my life, I was introduced to a man who told me that drugs were the wrong answer to my problems. I had a revelation and started seeking help. Starting the recovery process gave me hope. I got a sponsor, started going to recovery meetings, and now I am three years clean. I am a recovery coach, a father, a son, and a friend—this only happened through long-term recovery.



Ivana Grahovac

*Executive Director, Transforming Youth Recovery
San Diego, CA*

At the age of 17, I developed anorexia and bulimia, which went untreated. Shortly after, I developed a full blown addiction to heroin and crack. The only reason I graduated from my undergraduate institution was because my mom sat next to me in class for an entire semester so that I couldn't get up and leave to go get high. I did graduate, but I felt so hopeless about my chances of a successful, happy, full future, that I went to live on the streets of Detroit for two months during the winter.

My parents never gave up on me. They sent someone to find me, and I was taken to jail. I spent two months there, and then I was allowed to get treatment. Having multiple attempts at treatment allowed me to finally find the intrinsic motivation to stay sober.

I now work in the collegiate recovery field, which means all of those painful experiences were not in vain because I can use them to give hope to students who are struggling. Today I am the executive director of Transforming Youth Recovery. I just celebrated 10 years being clean and sober. I am so grateful.



Matthew McManus

Recovery Coach, Association of Persons Affected by Addiction (APAA)

Dallas, TX

After decades of addiction and untreated mental health issues, I had what people in recovery refer to as a “burning bush moment.” I was told to take all I had been through and, “Go help the other children.” I had no idea how to do this, but set out on a journey of discovery to answer this calling.

Step one was going to a mental health provider who diagnosed my mental illness and set a recovery plan. The second step was to enter and graduate from a dual diagnosis recovery center. Then I spent two years pouring the foundation of my personal recovery. Once that foundation was solid, I entered a program that helped with vocational rehabilitation. I became certified as a peer recovery support specialist. It’s been four years since my “burning bush” moment, and I’m now doing exactly as my higher power asked. I work every day with other recovering addicts and dually diagnosed individuals. I thought God intended that I work with youth at the time of my calling, but it turns out he meant the other children of God. My life now is full of riches that I could not have dreamed of, yet, they have nothing to do with money.

It is only through long-term recovery that I am able to be an advocate for people in recovery and a messenger of experience, strength, and hope.



Merlissa C. Alfred

*Sober Home Manager, Any Length LLC
Austin, TX*

I am Merlissa C. Alfred, and I have been in active recovery from alcoholism since February 21, 2013. Reflecting on my journey to this point, it's clear I was always an alcoholic. The first time I drank alcohol, as a freshman in college, it filled something in me that I lacked. It eased my insecurities and flaws, allowing me to feel relaxed and comfortable in my skin; however, I consumed so much alcohol that I became sick and ultimately blacked out. This same series of events—drinking in excess to the point of becoming sick and blacking out—occurred almost every time I drank throughout my undergraduate years. Though I did not drink with any regularity during that period, the times I did drink proved I had absolutely no control when it came to alcohol.

Eventually, I grew tired of alcohol and stopped drinking for many years, but that internal void remained. Ultimately, I returned to drinking alcohol. Initially, I drank socially; however, in a short time I was drinking at home by myself in the evenings. The evenings turned into the mornings, and eventually I was drinking all day, every day. My drinking consumed me, and I could think of nothing else. I drank until I blacked out, and upon awakening, would start drinking again, repeating the cycle.

By 2010, my family realized the situation I was in with my drinking and held an intervention. I believed I had everything under control and could stop any time. Then I saw the pain that I had caused and decided to go to treatment. I learned a lot about addiction and recovery while I was there. One month after being released from treatment, I started drinking again, picking up where I left off. My drinking quickly grew out of control, which resulted in me getting two DWI's within six weeks. At this point, my family and my lawyer made it clear my only option was to go back to inpatient treatment. I went and had an amazing experience, and upon discharge I did almost everything that was suggested for the first few months. I went to outpatient treatment, I saw a counselor, I had a sponsor, and I went to meetings. However, one-by-one, I started removing components from my recovery program to the point where there was nothing recovery-related left. At 10 months sober, I returned to active alcoholism. The insanity returned immediately, and I couldn't stop drinking no matter whom I hurt.

In a moment of clarity, I agreed to talk to my counselor, and I entered inpatient treatment. I was void of any hope or faith, so I held on mightily to the Big Book and the recovery community because they demonstrated that I never had to return to a life with alcohol.

On leaving treatment, I went directly to a sober living residence, where I lived for the following 13 months. Though it was difficult to accept, sober living proved to be instrumental in my recovery. With the guidance of my sponsor, I worked on my recovery honestly and thoroughly; something I had not done before. As a result, I gained access to my Higher Power, and the alcohol obsession, which once controlled every aspect of my life, was removed. I now live a spiritual life in which my relationships with family and friends have been restored and strengthened. I have grown to love myself as a result of staying active in my recovery. Mostly, I have a new-found relationship with God and a service-oriented outlook on life. Today, I have the privilege of carrying the message and giving back what was so freely given to me. For all of this, I am forever grateful.



Robert Ashford

*University of North Texas, Program Director of the Collegiate Recovery Program
Denton, TX*

Today, I consider myself a person in long-term recovery, which for me means that I haven't had a drink, a drug, or a manifestation of a symptom of my mental health illness for a little over two years. The reason I introduce myself that way is so I can be a face and voice of recovery, and because it's very important for me to let others know that not only is recovery possible, but it works no matter who you are.

My recovery journey really began as a child. I came from an upper-middle class family, and I could do anything that I wanted. I had good grades, I was involved in sports, and everything on the outside looked like any other normal kid. But on the inside, I wasn't aware of the internal conflict and the damage and destruction. It continually progressed over my entire adolescence, until I really found recovery.

After I got my third DUI, my family and friends came forward to say, "You need help. There's something that's going on. We want to take a look at this because we really care about you." I never heard these messages so clearly before, so that day I decided to go to treatment.

Thanks to government support, treatment was accessible for me in the state of Texas. Those 42 days in treatment were really an eye-opener. I began to take a look at what was going on inside of me. There were counselors and other people offering peer support who I could talk to about the trauma, underlying issues, and my mental health illness. It allowed me to finally see who I was for the first time. It put me on a path to what I call long-term recovery that didn't just end with 30 days of acute care treatment.

I needed long-term recovery support, which I think most people do, so I went to a recovery residence hall. I enrolled in college. Now I get to take part in a collegiate recovery program with like-minded peers and services to support my recovery in a caring environment.

When I look toward the future and where I am today compared to where I was, I'm proud to be a program director of a collegiate recovery program at the University of North Texas that changes and saves lives. I am proud that I get to sit on the Board of Directors for Young People in Recovery, that empowers emerging adults in recovery to be able to effectively tell their recovery stories. All of this was possible because of recovery. Long-term recovery is continuous—whether it's abstinence-based, counseling, peer supports, or another pathway. Recovery is a life-long journey, and today I'm glad to know that I'm in it.



Sasha McLean
*Archway Academy, Executive Director
Houston, TX*

My journey with addiction started at a pretty young age and has plagued my family for generations. I can look back and see uncles, cousins, grandparents, and great-grandparents who struggled with substance use and mental health issues. When I was in elementary school, I was diagnosed with panic disorder. It's something that I spent a lot of my childhood and young adulthood attempting to overcome without formal treatment.

I remember the first time I took a drink was in middle school, and it was a very intense feeling for me. I spent so much of my life living with untreated panic disorder and struggling to make sense of my world, where I was, and the people in my life. Alcohol helped fill a void—it allowed me to feel more settled in my own body, which is something that panic disorder doesn't allow.

I made a mess of things during my adolescence, and in my early twenties I made the decision to stop the madness and finally receive treatment for my substance use and mental health issues. I'll never forget the last time I decided to drink—it was December 28, 2001—the day that I decided this was just enough. I sought treatment for my panic disorder, and the first thing I was asked to do was take a look at my unhealthy behavior with alcohol. It was the first time in a long time that I felt the hope connected to recovery. I decided to really address the mental health issues that led to my drinking and made the choice to lead an abstinence-based lifestyle. That's when things started shifting for me.

I've been married for 14 years and I have a beautiful seven year-old son. I'm the Executive Director of a Recovery High School in Houston, Texas. It was those first glimmers of hope back in 2001 that led me to the beautiful path that I'm on now.



Jane
West Palm Beach, FL

At the beginning of seventh grade an older girl asked my good friend and me if we wanted to smoke weed. I jumped at this idea and felt an overwhelming sense of excitement. I wanted to know what it was like. After we smoked, I felt like the sun was shining brighter, I was more confident, and everyone around me, including myself, was hilarious. I loved it.

Things went on like this for quite some time. Sometimes worse, sometimes better. By the time I was in eighth grade I was an everyday user. Pot was my drug of choice, mostly because it was so easy to get my hands on. This went on for my entire eighth grade year, which resulted in me failing that grade. I was able to move on to high school because of my test scores. By the middle of freshman year I was so out of control that I began drinking alone on a regular basis.

Numerous times, my father tried to explain to me to be careful with alcohol because his father had died due to alcoholism. I listened, but blew it off as something only old people had to deal with. I was young, all my friends were doing it, so obviously there was nothing wrong. Suddenly, I'm in the emergency room with my mother. I was belligerent, rude, sloppy, and embarrassing. I was yelling at my mother so much that the police had to separate us because I was scaring the other patients. Ultimately, I was sent to outpatient treatment and during this time I had no contact with my friends. I graduated from my treatment and was sober for about a month and half before I relapsed with my old friends.

Starting my sophomore year I had a two-year period of sobriety, while I attended a recovery high school. But a number of things happened that I did not have the tools to cope with: my house was foreclosed, my boyfriend and I broke up, the relationship with my father ended horribly, along with many other things. All of this piled up and ended with me drinking again. This quickly spiraled into me drinking every day and ending up in jail. I drank in the morning, on the job; I was drinking constantly. I can vividly recall the feeling of sheer horror and panic when I felt the alcohol leaving my system. It became a mad rush to see who could go to the liquor store for me. I knew I was obsessed and out of control, but I did not care. Finally, everything came to a head when I ended up in a crack house in north Minneapolis because I was desperate for somewhere to drink. It was terrifying, and I hid in the bathroom with my bottle for most of the day. I agreed to go back to treatment.

Soon I found the sponsor who I have now, and we dove into the steps. I returned to a recovery high school and nine months later and I'm graduating...on time! I never in a million years thought that would happen. I have the same sense of accomplishment I felt after getting my first six months sober. But instead of pride, there is gratitude.



Sophie
Houston, TX

The symptoms of my alcoholism and drug addiction appeared long before I decided to pick up and use. Growing up I had very low self-esteem. I had low self-worth and I didn't know there was a solution out there for the things that were taking place internally. I was emotionally unstable.

Mentally, I knew there were a lot of things that were wrong with me, but I had no idea how to ask for help and talk about them—so I acted out. I destroyed several different aspects of my life. Socially, I didn't really have many friends, so I connected with a lot of people that used. I had a really chaotic family life. I fell off the radar for a really long time, but I showed up making good grades, playing sports, doing things that kept my parents' attention off of me and my acting out.

Before I got into recovery, I had no idea who I was. Getting into recovery, having the opportunity to go to a sober high school, and connecting with people who have the same goals as I do, has allowed me to be the young woman that I am today. Through recovery, I have regained my true potential that I thought drug addiction and alcoholism had taken from me.

This spring I'll be three years sober. In the fall I will be headed to a university. I hope to spread the message that there is a solution, and there is hope for other people who have been through the same things that I have.



Stacey Meyer
Family Member
Ashburn, VA

My story began 13 years ago when I met my husband who was abstinent from alcohol and drugs. Things were great, and I didn't fully understand what recovery meant, or what it meant to be abstinent from alcohol and drugs. So when he started using again, it created a tremendous strain on our relationship. It was very stressful for both of us, and for several years we had a roller coaster of a ride within our marriage and our relationship.

When my husband sat down with me and told me he had an addiction and needed help, I didn't berate or belittle him. I simply asked the question, "What do we need to do?" because we were in it together. He immediately went to a meeting and into a treatment center, and he has been working an amazing program and improving himself on a daily basis. Recently, I've been attending recovery support meetings, and together we are working on ourselves individually and as a couple. We have a long road ahead of us, but I'm optimistic because we have a better relationship today than we had 13 years ago. I'm hopeful that it will only get stronger as we both heal.



Zach Edgerton

*Director of Philanthropy, ScoreMore Shows
Resident Care Staff, Hope Harbor Extended Care
Austin, TX*

My Name is Zach Edgerton, and I am in long-term recovery from alcoholism and drug addiction. What that means to me is that I am able to have an exciting and fulfilling existence, contributing to my life, my family, and my community.

Growing up I never imagined the aforementioned statement would be my introduction. Born to a cardiac surgeon and a pediatric nurse practitioner, I spent my childhood attending the most competitive schools in Texas, constantly driving to be accepted to the best universities. Success was expected, even demanded. No one imagined I would soon be trading in my scholarships and school visits for arrests and jail stays; me least of all. But at the age of 18, just months after graduating from high school, I became a ward of the legal system for the first time. It was an awful experience that ended up being one of the greatest blessings I could have imagined. After a year-long struggle, I entered recovery for the first time in 2008.

I moved to Austin, Texas where I reapplied myself to my education, moving rapidly from the local community college to The University of Texas (UT) at Austin. At UT I became a member of the Center for Students in Recovery, one of the few collegiate recovery programs in the nation. I studied Psychology and Chemistry with the intention of applying to medical school upon completion.

However, the course of my life was drastically altered in 2010 when I became suddenly debilitated by an incredibly painful autoimmune disorder known as recurrent Stevens-Johnson syndrome. Stevens-Johnson syndrome causes the blistering of the skin and mucous membranes (eyes, nose, and mouth) as well as rheumatoid arthritis. As I attempted to cope with the disorder, I was also involved in a rollover accident in an off-road vehicle. The combined pain of my auto-immune disorder and the injuries of the wreck left me in a predicament many people in recovery face: how do we safely manage pain in a population that is dependent on psychoactive substances?

After unsuccessful treatment with all non-narcotic options and faced with constant pain, I eventually decided to take the opiates that had been prescribed for me. Lacking recovery support services, my disease led me back to the depths of addiction, and I found myself alone and chemically dependent once more. It would be another year before I found recovery again.

Recovery has given me a life I could have never imagined. Living with my brother, who is also in recovery, my family has slowly been reunited. Successful people in recovery surround me, and I have deep fulfilling relationships. I get to spend my free time riding motorcycles and playing with my dog in the woods! As I continue my education at UT, I also work for two companies that are dear to me and to my recovery. First, as a part of the recovery industry, I provide support services for other men trying to recover. I have also had the opportunity to become the Director of Philanthropy for a concert promotions company. In a consolidation of my professional and personal worlds we are aiming to create an alcohol-free health and wellness music festival this year for **Recovery Month**, the first of its kind. Come join us in Austin! We are getting well, and we are loving life!