

A Few Minutes With Jack

On October 17, 2008 the National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependency held it's 38th annual Awards Banquet at the Braemar Country Club in Los Angeles, where Jack Bernstein was the inaugural honoree for the Al Jeffries Lifetime Achievement Award. The late Mr. Jeffries was the long time Executive Director of the Council, a leader in the field of addiction treatment, and regarded as a true humanitarian. The unanimous selection of Jack Bernstein by the NCADD Board of Directors reflects their appreciation of Jack Bernstein's leadership in the addiction treatment field, and his role in the enduring success of Narcotics Anonymous



This season, we asked Jack some questions regarding his leadership role with Cri-Help, Incorporated.

From your perspective in a leadership role during most of Cri-Help's history of service, what do you view as Cri-Help's most significant accomplishments?

Jack Bernstein: Still existing 37 years later. As important is the fact that we have grown into the program that we have, providing services to around 1,000 people each year. Building the Pflieger Center and acquiring Socorro afforded us two outstanding service centers. Opening a detox and providing staff and alumni a place to get off of prescription meds after surgeries is notable. Cri-Help has withstood the popular fads of treatment, staying the course of an addiction model and sticking with the 12 step approach to addiction. We've also managed to provide needed services even when we don't get reimbursed. Just to name a few.

Looking back on Cri-Help's role in the community, its mission and programs, are there things that Cri-Help should have done differently?

Jack B: I'm sure there are things that we should have done and could have done differently. The only one that comes to mind is doing a better job of public relations with the neighboring communities, and conducting more outreach to other stakeholders.

Has Cri-Help's mission changed over the years?

Jack B: Not really. We have just demonstrated and realized our commitment to our mission. We do this by continuing to do our best to deliver appropriate levels of care, in the appropriate volume to as many clients as will take advantage of these opportunities.

Considering that several agencies offer similar services in the Los Angeles area, what distinguishes Cri-Help?

Jack B: More than anything else, the staff's commitment to the clients and to realizing our mission.

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Exerpt From Sheryl Letzgus McGinnis' book

Slaying the Addiction Monster:
An All-Inclusive Look at Drug Addiction in America Today
- A Personal story by Heather E.

I was addicted to drugs for about 18 years. I have five years in recovery now. No one, including myself, thought I would ever get off drugs.

In the beginning, it was all about surviving my family life. When I was in my early teens, my mom moved in with a violent, alcoholic Vietnam Vet. Many people I meet in recovery come from similar backgrounds. Some of us blame our parents and some of us don't. I love my mom and know she did the best she could. But I also know that being raised in an extremely violent household affected me. By the time I discovered the tranquilizers in my mom's medicine cabinet, I was already looking for a way to check out. Like many addicts, I used whatever drugs I could get my hands on and always used as much as possible. Consequently, I had quite a tolerance.

I wish I could say that after my last overdose I "saw the light." But by the end, my drug use was so out of control and full of despair, death seemed like the least of my problems. Every day was about getting more drugs. Like a lot of women I had to trade sex for drugs. I did not care that I was covered in bruises, losing my hair and that my body was covered in track marks. Even in the face of death, I kept going.

I feel it's important to mention here that even though I was strung out for those eighteen years, I did a lot of amazing things. I graduated from college with honors and was the only one in my family to go to college. I married the love of my life.

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Upcoming Events

Mark your calendar!
Cri-Help's 38th Annual
BBQ/Auction will be
held on June 7, 2009.

*Hep C Summit
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Jack's Story Continued

Given the difficult economic times across the country, how can those who are devoted to seeing Cri-Help's mission succeed contribute?

Jack B: The most obvious way of supporting Cri-Help's mission, for those that can, is money. Given the condition of the State's budget, and recent cuts – and the additional ones that the Governor is working on – we will need to generate cash donations at a much greater level if we are going to continue to treat individuals that can't afford to pay for treatment.

What does the future hold for Cri-Help?

Jack B: Finding more effective ways to get through to addicts, and increase access to our services, possibly into other communities.

What does the future hold for Jack Bernstein?

Jack B: Given the fact that I recently got a T-shirt that says "how the hell did I get to be this old", I'm really not sure. I've been blessed with good health so far, and poor finances, so I plan to continue on at Cri-Help as long as I'm tolerated. That is at least my plan, at this moment, for the foreseeable future.

Contributions can be made to Cri-Help here.

Addiction Monster Continued

I helped raise a boy born with HIV after his mother, a close friend of mine, died of AIDS. I also co-founded an HIV prevention program for drug users where I served as director for 13 years.

Towards the end, however, I was completely consumed by drugs. But even then, there was still a small part of me that wanted to live. It was this part of me that went to my first Narcotics Anonymous meeting. Here I ran into someone I trusted enough to ask for help – and he got me into Cri-Help.

Believe it or not, making the decision to enter Cri-Help was the most difficult thing I have ever done – infinitely harder than being strung-out. Once the drugs left my system, I felt as if I couldn't breathe – I was consumed with panic and felt like I was going to die every minute of every day. But the longer I stayed in treatment and let the people who worked there love me, the easier it got. They taught me the importance of reaching out for help by getting a sponsor and working the twelve steps of Narcotics Anonymous. They taught me that I could survive feelings if I share them with someone else who understood. I learned what it means to be in the "flow of life": to have a job, pay my rent, walk my dog - all the seemingly mundane things that have become the source of serenity.

I am clearly not the same person I was five years ago. I am full of light. I laugh and I smile. I am not my pain and my past. My childhood and the ensuing years of addiction do not define me. In a way I am grateful for these past experiences, as the lessons I learned in the process are what allows me to be of help to other addicts in recovery.

Hep C Summit

On November 21, 2008, the 6th Annual Hepatitis C Summit was held at the California Endowment in downtown, L.A. This educational conference was attended by two hundred service providers and people living with Hepatitis C, and was co-sponsored Roche Pharmaceuticals, CalHEP (The California Hepatitis Alliance) and by a host of community-based agencies, including Cri-Help, Incorporated. Among the presenters were Christopher Kennedy Lawford, actor, author, nephew of John F. Kennedy, and in-law of Governor Schwarzenegger.

According to Dr. Robert Kim-Farley, MD, MPH, Director, Communicable Disease Control and Prevention, L. A. Department of Public Health., "With approximately 130 million people world-wide chronically infected with Hepatitis C, and 3 to 4 million people newly infected each year, Hepatitis C clearly is an urgent global public health problem. This Summit provides the opportunity for raising the importance of the disease, as well as a chance for partners to strengthen their collaboration in preventing suffering, disability and death due to Hepatitis C."

The Summit is an annual event organized and staffed by The Hepatitis C Task Force for Los Angeles County (HCTF-LAC) is a group of private and public agencies, advocates and concerned individuals working in collaboration to prevent the spread of Hepatitis C and improve the quality of life for people living with Hepatitis C (HCV).

www.hepctaskforcela.org