

Interview #8 - Johnny Allem Reflections on the Historic 2001 Recovery Summit in St. Paul, Minnesota, and the Start of the New Recovery Advocacy Movement



Forward: [Johnny Allem](#) has a long and honorable history in service to the recovery community. In the preparation for this interview, I learned of a connection between my organization, [PRO-A](#) and Johnny I had not known about. PRO-A was formed in 1998 to bring together the statewide recovery community of Pennsylvania. In those early days, as our board was being formed, they invited Johnny to come up to Harrisburg and to share the lessons learned during the years he led the Society of Americans for Recovery (SOAR). I learned that the very day the Board met with him, one of our board members left that meeting and ran into Dona Dmitrovic in the hallway. She was working in the same building for a human service organization, and he realized she was the perfect candidate for Executive Director. She took the job soon after and started her work in the recovery arena. Two weeks ago, when I was trying to set up this

interview, I asked Dona if she could introduce me to Johnny and she did. She got to know him because of her work a few years after assuming leadership of PRO-A. Johnny responded almost immediately and he was gracious with his time in order for me to conduct this interview. To me, it feels like a loop closed, the connections have come full circle over two decades later.

Johnny Allem has been active as a leader in the national advocate for addiction recovery for all of his nearly four decades of recovery. A co-founder of [Faces and Voices of Recovery](#), and former Deputy Commissioner of the DC Mental Health system, he currently leads [Aquila Recovery Clinics](#), an outpatient recovery clinic he founded that features integrated mental health and substance use care. He was the 2016 recipient of the William L. White Lifetime Achievement Award of Faces and Voices of Recovery, a member of the 2004 Institute of Medicine's historic panel on addiction health that produced *Crossing the Quality Chasm – Adaption to Mental Health and Addiction Disorders* and was featured in the [ANONYMOUS PEOPLE](#), Greg William's 2015 film celebrating the vitality and importance of the addiction recovery movement and its power to change minds. He is a former President of the Johnson Institute, featuring the pioneering work of Vernon Johnson, credited with "raising the bottom" for people entering recovery. His career includes five decades of civic, political, business and healthcare interests. As the President of the Johnson Institute, a policy organization, Mr. Allem developed and conducted training for more than 2,000 "Recovery Ambassadors." Allem's addiction recovery story is featured in Gary Stromberg's book: "[Second Chances: Top Executives Share Their Stories of Addiction and Recovery.](#)"

1. Who are you and what brought you to St Paul at that time?

Before getting involved with what became known as the recovery movement, I had done about a hundred things in my life. To name a few, I did sales, I was a news reporter, a sound engineering and eventually politics. From 1962 to 1982, I was a political consultant, representing over 125 campaigns. I also contracted with the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) union, where I developed the PEOPLE political action training program that ended up being provided to more than 90,000 union members. This experience helped shape our work later on when I traveled the country with Dona Dmitrovic and facilitated the Recovery Ambassadors project through the Johnson Institute.

I got into recovery in 1982 and relatively soon after got involved in recovery efforts, first working with the Mayor of DC starting around 1985 when he appointed me to the Mayor's Advisory Commission on Alcoholism, and then with the formation of the SOAR that was started by [Harold Hughes](#). Hughes had been governor of Iowa from 1963 to 1969 then and a US Senator from 1969 to 1975. I had done a lot of work in the political field and I had worked for him when he took a short run for the Presidency back in the 1970s and I knew he was the author of [the Hughes Act](#), the first step the federal government took to recognize addiction as a disease. Back then, he was sober, and I was still drinking. Senator Hughes made quite an impression on me even then. A few years after I got into recovery, he asked me to run SOAR and I agreed

to take the job. SOAR had a brief history; it ran about three or four years, but we set the groundwork for much of what came later. We had the right ideas, but the timing was wrong.

We were trying to SOAR off the ground in the early 90s, right around the time the war on drugs was heating up. It had a real chilling effect on people being willing to identify as being in recovery. The [war on drugs campaign](#) ended up demonizing drugs and people who have substance use conditions. This also made it very difficult to raise money for organizational efforts like ours. We ended up getting supported with the nickels and dimes individuals could give us and we did get some institutional support through a handful of treatment programs, but it was just not enough. SOAR folded despite our best efforts.

But Harold Hughes had the right vision, to engage and mobilize citizens in recovery. He was an amazing person. A real gem. He had this deep booming voice and he captured so much of the recovery experience so well. He was a gifted communicator. He believed to his core in the power of recovery to transform lives. He was a salesman and was able to capture the essence of what we needed to do. We traveled the country and did rallies in several cities including [Baltimore](#), [St Louis](#) and [Santa Monica](#) and our efforts were well received. We knew our direction was the right one. We had the right message but, unfortunately it was the wrong time. As an aside, Senator Hughes health declined fairly rapidly shortly after that time and he died in 1996. He was aware of what we were doing to organize that summit. I think he had the sense that all the work we did with SOAR and his early Senate hearings and other organizational efforts was moving forward. I wished he had lived long enough to see that summit; he played a pivotal role in laying the foundation for what came next.

It was not until the mid-90s when things started to change. At that time, there was a growing recognition within government that there needed to be an emphasis on including constituent groups that were represented and served by government. The [Center for Substance Abuse Treatment \(CSAT\)](#) formed an advisory group at that time and I was the first person in recovery tapped to serve on that advisory panel. For a period of time, I was the only one, but they added more as the commitment for recovery representation increased. Outside of government, recovering people and our allies started to realize that the time was right to set our own table, to bring recovering people together and unify around efforts to get more Americans into recovery. We started to plan the summit. The Johnson Institute played a significant role in it, as did [Hazeldon](#), the Legal Action Center and others. There were some key players like [Bill Moyers](#) and [Jeff Blodgett](#) and we started to plan the summit, which ended up being set for October, 2001 in Saint Paul as you know. That was an era well before zoom. We had our planning meetings face to face. I flew out to Minnesota a number of times as we prepared the summit. We worked hard on a unifying strategy. We emphasized many pathways to recovery and planned the event in ways that would emphasize the transformative power of recovery. We know this is how recovery works, but the public had no idea. Addiction was seen as a moral issue, not a medical issue or one in which recovery was even possible. The war on drugs had increased the stigma and demonization across America. We were seen as hopeless causes even as millions of us around the country were thriving.

2. Is there a particular moment or memory that stands out to you from that summit?

I already knew most of the people in that room, but when I walked into it, I was stunned by the talent that was assembled. I could feel the energy and optimism. Most of my life, I have been a talker, I found myself in a deep listening mode as I took it all in. I could see that we had the right message, the right people to communicate that message and we had them all in the room together for the first time in history. I was an organizer, and I knew what we had the moment I walked into that room. It was a moment I will never forget. We had a story to tell that desperately needed to be told to a world that needed to hear about the power of recovery to transform lives.

For me personally, this was the moment that I bonded with many of the attendees in a much more significant way. We were moving from a collection of individuals into a unified group. I think that other people in the room felt it as well. There were 235 invitees to the summit, and I do not think I was able to spend time with them all, but I sure tried. We formed stronger bonds, which allowed us to do so very much after we left Saint Paul. I recall my conversations with Bill White during that summit and we talked about the energy of the group and the possibilities in front of us. I talked with Carol McDaid and I think she saw some of the same things. I knew them both, Bill through our work to organize the summit and Carol as our SOAR offices were in the same building in DC where her offices were. The summit created a deeper bond of common experience for so many of us.

3. What did you see as the motivating factors that brought you all together for that historic summit twenty years ago?

Hazeldon gets a lot of credit for the support they provided us, as did the Johnson Institute, also Bill Moyers as well as Paul Samuels from the Legal Action Center. All the energy was there, and we were finally in the right moment to bring it all together. It was an opportunity to build some unity and heal our divisions. Historically, our whole field has been so very divided. The early 90s were a clear example of what happens when we have no unified voice. In that era, we lost [about half of our residential SUD treatment system](#) as the insurance industry squeezed out care. A lot of people died. This was in no small part because we had no unified voice. Everyone was divided up, family groups, persons in recovery, the research community, treatment providers. There was so much infighting. It decimated us all. No other area of healthcare has been and to some degree remains as divided as we are. Our primary motivation for the summit was to unify around recovery. We did so because we could all see that that division made us ineffective at getting resources to help people. This was killing our friends and family members. It is an important thing to remember that we are that proverbial house that divided cannot stand.

4. How have we done in accomplishing those early goals?

One of the most important things we accomplished was that we showed we could stand together. That in itself is huge. Getting people to stand up and share the power of recovery to transform lives was a highly effective strategy to shift public perception about addiction and recovery. We showed that it is possible for people to talk about recovery openly. It was now possible to do this while still protecting individuals in early recovery who needed anonymity. It is important to recall now how that there was some hesitancy to stand up and be open about recovery. When I started to do so in the mid-1980s I actually got calls from people telling me I was going to relapse because I was openly acknowledging my recovery. Some people in 12 step recovery confused anonymity at the level of the group with personal anonymity. We showed that we can talk about the transformative power of recovery in ways that honored the need for anonymity at the level of the group. That was huge. Our efforts in that era on this facet of our goals is now visible all around us. Recovery is now elevated to the level of public awareness. It is now easier for people to seek help because of these efforts.

We established ourselves as a legitimate citizen constituency. We are not supplicants looking for a handout, we are respectable people who productively participate in all facets of society. We have earned every right to be seen as a constituency and to be respected and included in matters that impact our community. This focus on positive citizenship was a key facet of our messaging, we were determined to show we are part of the essential fabric of our vibrant society. People get into recovery and do great things. We thrive. We build businesses, we do civic service in our communities. We are not people to be ashamed of, far from it. We represent the very fabric of a resilient and healthy community. The time was right to come out of the shadows and be counted as respectable and civically engaged members of society.

5. What do you see our greatest successes to date are?

I think there are two things I want to emphasize here. The first is the work we did to organize people in recovery. To show them how to message recovery in ways that challenged negative public perceptions about us. We showed America how recovery is about empowerment. We needed to focus on getting our message out in ways that it could capture the essence of who and what we are. No more hiding in church basements. The Johnson Institute saw the possibilities of what was coming together and three weeks after the summit, I was brought on as the President. I used the knowledge and experience I had gained in my earlier life work in politics and in organizational efforts through the Union to put together the Recovery Ambassadors Leadership Training Program. Dona Dmitrovic and I went around the country and worked with over two thousand people. We helped build a citizen force of people in recovery who could begin to talk about recovery in ways that fundamentally changed the narrative. We began to push back against the moralization and demonization of addiction that has shaped the war on drugs mentality that took hold in the 90s. We began to move conversations from a deficit and shame focus to a strengths and hope focus. The evidence that this worked is all around us today.

The second thing we did was begin to pull together all of the varied organizations working in the addiction and recovery space so we could develop common ground. The Johnson Institute would rent out the National Press Club in DC twice annually. We regularly brought in 42 organizations from around the country to focus on our common goals. It was transformative. Every session would start out with a focus on the science – we made sure we were including the most

recent research on addiction and recovery at every single meeting we held. We all sat in a room and worked together to reduce the fragmentation of our field, then everyone went out and networked at lunch. Faces & Voices was there, Legal Action Center played a key role. Our ability to bring organizations together was really important and helped everyone understand that we needed to work together to build. A system of care that met our needs and to work together to pass laws and advocate for policies to end discriminatory insurance and funding practices. This effort we were involved in cannot be understated. It helped us pass [the Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act \(MHPAEA\)](#) of 1996.

MHPAEA was a huge victory, even though we still have a long way to go yet with it. I don't think many people know that it is the only federal law that pushes enforcement down to the state level. This is a huge barrier to implementation, and industry got it in there intentionally to make enforcement hard. All these years later, and we are still working to get this federal law enforced. It is a testament to the kinds of industry lobbying against it that we are still having to fight so hard even as our friends and families cannot get the care they need. Our people are still dying. But we stay at it. Look at the lessons of the past, we know to never give up. We keep at it, knowing that the right time will come, we will get insurance parity in this country despite all the market forces lobbying against it. We will do so because the facts are on our side. The reality is that recovery is the probable outcome when people get the services and supports they need. I know we will prevail, hopefully in my lifetime.

6. What did we miss if anything looking back at those goals?

I would circle back to that discussion on disunity I mentioned in the answer above. What has historically happened in our field is this fragmentation has been used by groups who have vested interests in keeping us divided to further their own political agendas at the expense of our people. We are still fighting for its enforcement of the parity act a generation after it was passed into federal law. We have some ways to go in order to establish the kind of political unity and political platform to combat the forces that divide us. There is no time like the present to work on that. It all comes down to a focus on developing a citizen force and field unity. We must continue to work towards that. But what we did accomplish was to change public perception. We can see now that a large segment of the general public see addiction as a public health issue and not a criminal justice problem. We did that. Unfortunately, they still see it now as an illness we chose to have, like we went to the store and bought addiction. That is the next thing we need to change.

We have come a long way and we have a long way to go, but we are making some progress. Putting a public face on recovery and establishing an active citizen's force was not possible in 1987, or even to the degree we have it now when I look back to 2007, but the multitude of individuals and organizations that are drawing attention to the benefits of recovery in recent years are changing public perception in ways we could only dream about back in 2001. We did that. What comes next?

7. What are you most concerned about in respect to the future?

The only thing that really concerns me is the possibility that we may not put enough emphasis on getting a handle on public policy and on funding mechanisms. We must work towards getting our people a fair shake. We have had our best successes when we have seen bipartisan efforts to support recovery. Addiction is not a partisan issue; it kills Democrats and Republicans just the same. We live in hyper partisan times, so to ensure that recovery remains out of these hyper partisan fights will require a lot of carefully considered strategies.

We certainly have some difficult roads ahead to navigate, but we have every reason to remain optimistic. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr famously said that "we shall overcome because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." The evidence of the truth of these words are visible to anyone that learns anything about the history of recovery in America. We have the right message and the right messengers. We just need to stay at it. We must never give up but sustain our efforts for as long as it may take. There are millions of Americans whose lives depend on us never giving up. The right wave will come along and carry us to shore. Such a day will come sooner rather than later if we can sustain a unified message of hope, recovery and positive citizenship that personifies recovery.

8. What would you say to future generations of recovery advocates about what we did and what to be cautious of / your wishes for them moving forward?

The change began on our watch, but the change will more fully come to fruition in the next generation. When I speak with an audience of young people about how things were in our era, they find it hard to believe. So much has changed. It

is now incomprehensible to them that there was a time, up until just a few years ago that people hid their recovery as if it were an embarrassment. It has moved from a place of shame to a place of worthiness. I tell them yes; you have an illness but you have an illness which the recovery from it makes you a stronger person.

We have also made progress in respect to seeing the connections between mental health and substance use issues. It was a ping pong ball of BS for so long. Which one came first, what caused what and which one we should treat? We still see some agencies embroiled in these internecine battles and downplaying the devastation of addiction and the promise of recovery. I would tell them to keep moving forward and build care that addresses all facets of mental health and substance use needs and not downplay the value of recovery. We must move forward and build a care system founded on good science that supports long term recovery for every American.

They are going to need to work hard and find ways to work together, but if they stay at it and keep their eye on the prize, I am an optimist of what they will accomplish. In [2008, Bill White did an interview with me](#). In that interview he asked me about what kind of recovery advocates will be needed in the future. I said at that time:

“The message we need to convey is, not “I am the solution,” but “We are the solution.” This is a movement expressing the will of a community of recovering people, not one relying on a few charismatic leaders. I think it’s important that we continually build this movement from within. We have to be committed, competent, and comfortable being an advocate and pass those traits onto others working alongside us.

Bill, I am not sure I could say it better today than I did back in 2008. What was true then remains true now. We are the solution, and we will prevail if we can carry the message of recovery and the vital role we play as a citizen force on to the next generation. This is my hope, this is what so many of us have worked hard to make a reality. I am hopeful of our long tradition of recovery service. It has carried us this far, I believe it will carry us forward for many generations, just as those before us worked for and hoped of us. We really are part of something bigger than ourselves. When we keep that perspective in our hearts and go forth and humbly serve others, we always prevail in the end. If that has not happened yet, the story is just not over yet!

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