

Interview #10 William Cope Moyers – Reflections on the Historic 2001 Recovery Summit in Saint Paul, Minnesota, and the start of the New Recovery Advocacy Movement

Forward: We have a long and rich history of recovery in America. It is vital to understand the effort that has gone into providing avenues into recovery. It has taken an incredible effort over many generations to get us as far as we are in respect to eliminating disparate care and discrimination, improving access to care and providing support for our families and friends. It is not nearly enough. Far too many of us are still dying from this common yet highly stigmatized condition. In the spirit of recovery, I have taken on this project to document the perspectives of leaders who attended the 2001 Recovery Summit in Minnesota. A name that kept popping up as playing a pivotal role in making it all come together was [William Cope Moyers](#) of the Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation. I can see why having conducted the interview below.

One of the things I had the opportunity to do was to relay to Mr. Moyers what the work he has done and the efforts his parents made to initiate a much-needed conversation about addiction and the family. For those of you who were not around, it would be hard to convey the deep connection many Americans have to his father, Bill Moyers. It is a name trusted across the nation. [Moyers on Addiction: Close to Home](#) first broadcast in 1998 and it sparked a national conversation that was long overdue in America. Addiction remains an issue steeped in taboo and deep shame. I have no idea what it must have taken for his parents to produce a special on this issue that had such an impact on their own family. They broke the unspoken rule that must be broken – they talked about addiction and relapse and recovery and the science of addiction and how stigma gets in the way of people asking and getting help. They presented it in a way that opened up people's minds. I asked him to thank his parents for their significant contribution they made to this dialogue. I saw its positive influence in my community after it came out. He told me that would mean a lot to his parents, and he would let them know their contributions are so deeply appreciated.



William C. Moyers is the vice president of public affairs and community relations for Hazelden Betty Ford, based in Minnesota. As the organization's public advocate since 1996 Moyers carries the messages about addiction, treatment and recovery to audiences across the nation. He has appeared on Larry King Live, the Oprah Winfrey show, Good Morning America and National Public Radio. Moyers is the author of several books including Broken: My Story of Addiction and Redemption, a New York Times best-selling memoir published in 2006 that is still in print. He lives in Saint Paul. He has written several books on addiction in recovery including Carrying messages of addiction, treatment, and recovery, A New Day A New Life Journal and the DVD Broken Softcover: My Story of Addiction and Redemption and Now What: An Insider's Guide to Addiction and Recovery.

As he notes in his interview, he is still a journalist at heart, and I want to acknowledge that it was a little intimidating interviewing a person who is a master of the craft. It is also true that the bond of recovery came through the phone line as we compared our individual journeys and the insights we have learned along the way, and we talked briefly about our mutual interest in addiction policy. It should be no surprise that Mr. Moyers was as gracious and as humble as everyone else I have interviewed in this project.

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

What matters the most is that I am a man in long-term recovery from addiction to alcohol and other drugs. I have been in recovery since 1994, when I had been living in Atlanta and working as a journalist for CNN. Starting in 1989 with my first treatment, at Hazelden, I had experienced periods of recovery prior to that, when I sought help at that time, It became important to me to move back home to Minnesota which I did when I got out of treatment. I blundered into a job

at Hazelden, as we were then known, in 2014 we merged with Betty Ford and became the [Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation \(HBFF\)](#). They were advertising an open policy position and I ended up getting the job even though I surely wasn't the most qualified of the applicants, and there were hundreds. This part of the story is germane to everything that came after in Saint Paul. When I took the position, my call to action was to change public policy around substance use treatment, expand access to care and to address stigma associated with addiction. What a tall order!

It felt daunting to me, and I did not know anyone doing that kind of work. HBFF is a healthy nonprofit and we are able to do some really great work, but we are still a nonprofit. Our funds were limited and the scope of what needed to be done was overwhelming. I knew we were going to need to draw a lot of people across the country into this call to action. I had no idea how to do it. About a year later, in 1996 I was asked to give my first public speech at my local rotary club in Saint Paul. I was a member. I was not going to let my fellow Rotarians down. Of course, I said yes.

The topic I was given was the impact of alcoholism in the workplace. I spent weeks researching the facts and stats and crafting them all into a speech I figured would resonate with the audience. My presentation came after lunch, and I got up and started to do my presentation to this group of 200 people. As I was delivering my speech, I realized I was losing them. The audience was falling asleep, and it was not because they just ate lunch. They already knew the things I was telling them, and they just were not that interested in hearing me share about the impact of alcoholism in the business sector. I decided I had to do something radical to get their attention again, and I decided on the spot the only thing I could do was shift gears. I decided on the spot as I stood at that podium, I would tell them what I knew about addiction and recovery in the workplace from my own life experience.

I abandoned my prepared speech and I started to speak off the cuff about my journey into recovery and the experience of my parents, Bill and Judith Moyers. I told them about my four treatment episodes over five years and how I got into recovery and rebuilt my life and the impact it had on my family. My parents were not aware of my addiction as it unfolded. They did not know what to do to get me help or anything about the challenges we would all face on the journey of recovery. My father [Bill Moyers](#) was a public figure, a broadcast journalist and my mother [Judith Moyers](#) was an executive producer for the family's television production company in New York and our story, even though I come from a well-known family was a familiar one to many Americans, including the audience on that day. However, it was not a topic people talked about openly. That day, I spoke about the power of recovery and resiliency without focusing on the ugly details that come with addiction. You could hear a pin drop in that room.

As I stood there and told my recovery story, I realized the power of storytelling. I realized that sharing hope helped people to feel empathy about this deeply stigmatized condition. A few things came out of that experience. I had a sense that story telling could help shift public perception about addiction and recovery. The second thing that happened is that I became a beacon of hope for people in my community. People who had attended the lunch started calling me for help. A few days after the presentation a man showed up on my front porch trying to get help for a family member. Things like that began happening all the time. The magnitude of need became deeply apparent to me, and it redoubled my commitment to the mission I was called to do. I was more determined than ever to serve that call to action, to change public policy around substance use treatment, access to care and to address stigma associated with addiction. At this time, I thought I was alone. I thought I had found something in storytelling that nobody else knew, I didn't know anybody else was doing this kind of thing. Later, I came to find out that there were pockets of people around the nation who were doing the very same thing.

It wasn't long after, maybe a year or so, through their independent production company, [Public Affairs Television](#) my parents put together a five and a half hour, five part series on addiction called [Moyers on Addiction: Close to Home](#). It was one of the first docuseries that spoke to what was happening to families all across America, including our own. I had a very limited presence in the series, like two minutes. However, it was such a relatable story that people were intrigued about me and saw the story as one that was playing out in a lot of families across America. People began to associate me with the topic, and I started to connect with people like [Johnny Allem Sis Wenger](#) of NACoA, [Stacia Murphy](#) of NCADD and [Bill White](#). It provided a platform for me to work on this call to action, which was clearly bigger than HBFF and one that resonated deeply with people.

There is an element of this story I don't think people know about. One of the groups we connected with was the [Robert Wood Johnson Foundation \(RWJF\)](#). They had done some of the outreach for Closer to Home and they were very focused on addiction and recovery at that time. I got an invitation to present ideas on what was needed in the treatment and recovery space and an audience with the President and CEO of RWJF, [Steven A. Schroeder](#). Through some of the

connections I had been making I realized we had an opportunity to build a recovery movement. I knew that what needed to happen had to be framed around recovery and not treatment. I took [Jeff Blodgett](#) who had been the campaign manager for [Paul Wellstone](#) to the meeting. He had just finished studies at the Kennedy School and needed a job, so we hired him despite not having much money. We went to Princeton New Jersey together and met with the people from RWJF. We presented the idea of a summit to start to connect all of these groups across the country under what we called [the Alliance Project](#). They thought it was worthy and they gave us a half million dollars. This was a lot of money at the time, particularly in the addiction and recovery space where such philanthropy is still not very common.

As I mentioned, we started to realize there were pockets of people all across the country who were advocating for recovery. I thought I had discovered something others did not know back when I shared my recovery story from that podium at the local rotary club. What I learned was that there were a lot of people around the nation who were doing very similar things. People coming from a place of humility and service and working really hard to change public perceptions about addiction and recovery. Working to save lives. We started to pull them together and we had help from people like Johnny Allem who had run Society Of Americans in Recovery (SOAR) and [Paul Samuels](#) who ran the [Legal Action Center](#). We realized that these people were the drivers. We wanted to bring them all together and convene a summit. That is how it was born. That is what helped bring together the elements of what we now know twenty years later as the [New Recovery Advocacy Movement \(NRAM\)](#).

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

There are actually two memories that stick out to me. The first occurred in the weeks that preceded the summit. It was right after 911 and the horrific terrorist attack on our nation. I was standing in my back yard having a phone conversation with Jeff Blodgett. I recall standing there and watching fighter jets providing air cover over the twin cities of Saint Paul and Minneapolis. I recall thinking that this is as close to war as I had been in my whole lifetime. The conversation with Jeff was on whether or not we would proceed with the summit, and it got rather heated. I was thinking that there is no way we could do it. Jeff was arguing that we absolutely needed to move forward. My sense in retrospect is that a lot of the people we invited from around the country were with Jeff on that issue. He was right. We moved forward despite the uncertainty that everyone was experiencing across the country.

The second memory was on the last day of the summit, a Sunday. It was clear that what we all put together was resonating with people. Something big was happening, we brought the right people together and things were resonating. We could all feel the energy in that moment. I was walking through the ballroom area, which coincidentally was the same space I had given that first speech to the rotary club a few years before. A television was on. It was Sunday, October 7th, 2001. As I walked through the room, I heard President George W Bush. He was on the television announcing to the world that Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) had started with airstrikes in Afghanistan that very morning. I realized we had pulled it off, we had conducted the summit in between the 911 attacks and the start of war. It was in the nick of time, and we managed to get it done.

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

As I had spoken about earlier, we saw the call to action as something that had to focus on recovery, not treatment. One of the things I am really proud of is the behind-the-scenes role that Hazelden had played in the summit. Hazelden had agreed to serve as the fiscal agent for the initial RWJ grant the money provided us by RWJF. One of the untold facets is how we handled that money. Everything was covered for all of the participants travel, food & lodging. While Hazelden put a lot of effort into the project, we only kept \$1 for our role in bringing it all together. It was a symbolic dollar. I think people in recovery will understand that a lot of what we all do is motivated by a deep commitment to service. The work that was done to put the summit together was entirely consistent with the mission of HBFF. It is important to note that we were all motivated by a sense of commitment and service and the dire need to change how America saw addiction and recovery. Looking back, what I hope people realize is that part of what made it all work is that everyone left their personal or organizational agendas at the door. We worked on this call to action as a common area of focus. We worked to bring these advocates together and find common ground. We worked to give recovery a voice in public policy. We worked together to change how America sees addiction and recovery. That dollar was part of how HBFF demonstrated in a concrete way how important we saw this effort. In short, we were all motivated by a deep sense of purpose to the cause of recovery in America.

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

We are STILL HERE! What an accomplishment that is in and of itself. [Faces & Voices of Recovery](#) started to form out of this effort and twenty years later it is still here too! There is a greater understanding of recovery through the power of personal story. We have more effective ways to communicate the power of recovery. It is easier for people to talk about addiction and to seek help than it was before the summit and what emerged out of it. These are huge things. Work on policy issues like the [Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act \(MHPAEA\)](#) got signed into law and probably would not have even been possible without these efforts. But the most important thing we did is show the world that when recovering people come together in common purpose, great things happen!

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

As I noted, we are all still here. This is no small accomplishment. There have been many attempts to create such a movement in the past. SOAR is an example. There was an event here in Minnesota called [FreedomFest 1976: A Celebration of Freedom from Alcohol and Drug Addiction](#) that headlined Dick Van Dyke. 20,000 people attended, many of them open about their recovery. So many people were there. [Don Newcombe](#), [Art Linkletter](#), [Garry Moore](#), [Senator Harold Hughes](#), [Virginia Satir](#) and many others. There is this deep reservoir of recovery across America that has been around for so very long but we have always had difficulty coalescing and coming together. At the time, all the elements seemed to be present, but the timing just was not right. There are internal and external forces that have pulled apart such efforts. Our greatest success is that we are still here. We have sustained this effort over twenty years. That is a huge success. It might be fragile, it is probably something that will need a lot of tending to sustain, but we need to acknowledge what an amazing thing we pulled off collectively.

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

I think we have missed an opportunity to grow the movement through more philanthropy. If you look at major national organizations like the American Cancer Society or the March of Dimes or the Muscular Dystrophy Association, they harness significant private funding and deep community support. They have a lot of visibility, and it has helped drive public awareness, treatment and recovery processes for those conditions. We are not there yet. Faces & Voices has done some amazing work and other groups have also formed, yet we do not have the groundswell of support we need. We do not have philanthropists who want their names associated with our cause. Of course, this is a vestige of stigma, but for all of those other issues, there was a moment in which some deep pocket visionary decided that they would invest their resources in changing things despite all the barriers. We do not quite have that yet. Gary Mendell of [Shatterproof](#) has done a lot on behalf of families. We need others to step up and invest in our recovery community.

What we did do was a whole lot like throwing a handful of seeds into the wind and watching what took root. Some landed on concrete and stuck their roots into the cracks in the ground, others withered on infertile earth. Some landed in fertile soil and flourished and have even grown into forests. That is what we did, and it is so valuable, but a lot more work needs to be done to ensure better access to care, and end to discrimination and seats at all the tables we need to be sitting at. Stigma and discrimination are still such profound barriers. We have a long way to go and the way to accomplish it is broad community support that include benefactors willing to invest in our cause. Together, these elements would help create greater focus on the power of recovery to transform lives, families and communities.

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

I think I am more concerned about our long-term impact than anything else. When I look around, I still see that people still have an incredibly hard time finding help. I get calls two, three or five times a week from people trying to get help for a loved one. We have long wanted to get to a place where access to care was seamless and timely. There is a short window for persons to get help. So much of that time is spent trying to figure out how to get in the door and then stay in care. I think we were right not leaning too much on the treatment system to build these bridges but instead should be strengthening the community. We still have a whole lot of barriers. There is also a great need for basic ethics in our field. So much money flowing in but not necessarily focused on strengthening these foundational elements. Having a strong recovery community was what we envisioned as the foundation for this work. There will be a need to have a fresh set of leaders pick up this ball and carry it forward. Movements like ours have always been fragile and have always faced challenges. It will flourish when new leaders are nurtured and take what the prior generation did and carry the vision forward in ways that meet the needs of the times. I am concerned, but I am also quite hopeful.

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?

There is a quote that comes to mind from President John F Kennedy from a speech in 1963. He said that "change is the law of life. And those who look only to the past or the present are certain to miss the future." It is important to understand the past and we must live in the present, but we also have to dare to dream about the future and work towards that vision. The truth that is evident when we reflect on history is that everything that we have in respect to addiction treatment and recovery support has come from our community. I am confident that for all the things we achieved, someone looked at the aspirations of those leaders in that era told them that what they were trying to do was simply not possible. They did it anyway. They refused to accept that the barriers were insurmountable. They worked as hard and as long as they had to make that vision a reality. That is our history. I hope it is our future as well.

I would tell these new leaders to step up. I would tell them to learn our history, to look around at what exist today and then decide what we should have and work as hard and as long as they need to so that the next generation benefits from the improved reality that they create. This is our story; this is the legacy all of were given by those who came before us. This is the path to the place we need to go. The call to action I was given when I got to Hazleton Betty Ford is not yet complete. We moved the ball forward. I would tell them to not settle for what is, but work towards the reality they want with the resources and tools we have worked hard to give them. I would tell them to do the work out in the community, not on social media. I would ask, if not them, then who? It has always been a long game we are playing. That is the road we walked. I know that they can do even greater things.

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