

**Interview #4 Ben Bass – Reflections on the Historic 2001 Recovery Summit in St. Paul, Minnesota, and the start of the New Recovery Advocacy Movement**



**Forward:** As I was calling around to set up interviews, Ben Bass came up in several conversations. Several people in attendance told me he was at the historic St Paul 2001 Recovery Summit. When I did this interview and spoke with him about the summit and his recollections of the beginnings of the new recovery advocacy movement, he let me know he was not there. He was involved in planning things at his RCO leading up to the event and implementing them following the summit. The Director of his organization who was not in recovery attended instead. In talking with him, it became clear to me why several people thought he was at the Summit. It was because he was in the initial SAMHSA [Recovery Community Support Program](#) grant cohort. While these grants were relatively small, they had a huge impact on recovery efforts in America, Ben was at that time and remains now a leader in these efforts.

Ben is the Executive Director of the Recovery Alliance of El Paso. He began at the Alliance as a volunteer and has served as the director of the Alliance since May 2002. He is the current vice president of the board of the El Paso Coalition for the Homeless; a former member of the board of directors of Faces and Voices of Recovery in Washington, DC; is on the Advisory Board of the South by Southwest Addiction Technology Transfer Center at the University of Texas at Austin. Mr. Bass published in 2009 in Family Community Health Journal an article called Faith Based Programs and Their Influence on Homelessness. In 2011 Mr. Bass was honored at the White House as a Presidential Champion of Change for this work.

This interview helped me to better understand the other major element that helped launch the recovery movement in the United States, the RCSP grants. These SAMHSA grants brought together some amazing people

and organizations that have had a huge positive impact on recovery efforts across the nation. The grants were small, but they paid huge dividends in the development of recovery capital across America.

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

*My name is Ben Bass, and I am a person in long term recovery, and that means I have not used alcohol or drugs in over 34 years. But it means a whole lot more than that, it means I have been able to hold a job, raise a family and to be a productive member of my community. I was not able to attend the Summit in 2001, there was another person running the Recovery Alliance and she attended instead. I became the director a few months later in 2002. I was very involved with the other RCSP grant holders from across the country, including providing TA on Recovery Community Centers in 2004. I was aware of the influence of the summit on us all and was involved in building on top of the foundation that came out of the summit.*

### **2. How did you get involved with the Recovery Alliance of El Paso and the larger recovery movement?**

*I had been in recovery for a number of years, and it became apparent that we had a lot of holes in the care system in El Paso. I wanted to be involved in addressing those and helping get more people into recovery. So I started to volunteer with others. We were in essence a community action group that developed into a Recovery Community Organization (RCO). I didn't even know what an RCO was at the time. As it formed, I became a Board member in 1999. It is a long story, but it became apparent in the months after the summit that the director was not a good fit for our RCO. Our board did a search of over 30 candidates and none of them really had the passion for recovery we were looking for. I uttered those three words "I'll do it." I have served in that capacity ever since.*

*The work we do is so powerful and vital. We are about saving lives. What is more important than that? We have come together to save the lives of our own people – everyone who experiences addiction. That is what gets us out of bed everyday.*

*The other huge factor beyond the St Paul Summit that drove the movement was the RCSP grant and the amazing people that those grants brought together. Recipients like Don Coyhis of White Bison, Tom Hill of Speak Out: LGBT Voices for Recovery and Phil Valentine of CCAR. I think there were nineteen of us, and we started to talk about stigma and how we were going to address that. We began to develop recovery support services. One of the facets that helped get those grants in place was a Washington Post letter to the editor written by June Gertig about recovery and the need to expand opportunities for recovery in the USA. All the facets came together, the right people at the right time. The rest is history.*

*There was tremendous energy around what we were working on and that energy propelled our work, both here in Texas and across the country. We would hold a grant meeting and 300 people would show up. When I look back, the people who were running those RCSP projects were key to the development of the recovery movement. They were the right people at the right time, and they worked extremely hard to build something meaningful that is influencing everything we do today in respect to treatment and recovery.*

### **3. What did you see as the motivating factors that brought you all together twenty years ago?**

*As I mentioned, beyond the summit, it was those SAMHA RCSP grants. As far as actual dollars, they were small, but the grants helped bring us all together. Through those grants we developed peer services. As the recovery community came together, we also started to focus on changing negative public opinion about us.*

*I remember one thing that really galvanized our recovery community here in El Paso and beyond. Christian Dior, the fashion company came out with a fragrance they called "addict." Their naming of that product and media campaign around it was terrible and really magnified all the horrible negative stereotypes about addiction while also trivializing it. It really upset people. [Susan Rook](#), who was a CNN reporter and the Faves & Voices Communications Director and who was in open recovery contacted us in El Paso and visited. Locally we marched*

on the local department store and demanded that they pull it from their shelves. They did. We have a lot of military bases in the area, and our advocacy here locally helped to get it pulled from military base here in Texas and at base exchanges worldwide.

Other [media sources](#) picked up on it. The executives of Christian Dior ended up having to get on a plane from Paris and fly to DC to meet about it. Dior changed their marketing campaign. Our efforts worked! We saw that we had this immense power to do good things when we all came together. We saw the power of recovery and the possibilities that could come from uniting our community and working towards things that got rid of stigma against us and illuminated the benefits of recovery.

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

We have done so very much to strengthen recovery efforts and save lives; but we are still just scratching the surface. There is so much work to be done! There is still a whole lot of stigma and discrimination around addiction and recovery. Getting people to stand up and be open about recovery was huge. We have started to put a face on recovery. Getting a CPA or other professionals to talk openly about recovery let the community know that they are in recovery has had a huge positive influence on how we are seen.

I still think that we would greatly benefit from a huge national media campaign on recovery. What happens is it is so hard to keep the gains we have made. Our focus becomes the provision of services and how to fund the work we do, which is always such a challenge. We are very busy people, and a lot of our focus has been on how to keep the things we have already built.

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

[Patty McCarthy](#) of Faces & Voices of Recovery has done amazing things to help fund our work. [Faces & Voices](#) rose out of that 2001 Summit and has helped get people involved across the nation and to some significant political successes to fund efforts nationally. I also see the [Association of Recovery Community Organizations](#) as a key organization moving forward. Both of these were born out of our early efforts. I would love to see a summit where we brought everyone together and talk about what our goals and objectives are moving forward. We need to make time we can all sit down together and talk and work creatively to work things out and propel our efforts forward. Something beyond the typical conference with preplanned speakers. An actual sit down to really look at what we have done, what has worked, what has not worked and to plan our next steps. We are all so terribly busy it is a challenge to hold such a space and really use our creativity and knowledge in ways to set the stage for what comes next. I think it is really important that we try and do something like this as a way to set an agenda for the next twenty years. We must recruit new leaders to propel the movement forward.

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

We missed focusing on more direct confrontation on discrimination and stigma against us. We need to be clear about addiction. Addictive drug use is very damaging to our health, our families and our communities and the public can see this with its own eyes. We need to be honest about it. Drug use can be devastating, and people can see it all around them. Society has a lot of antipathy about us, and we have to be careful of how we raise issues around stigma reduction and focus on recovery in ways that highlights what happens when we stop using drugs and alcohol and regain our lives.

So far, what we have missed are opportunities to engage the larger society in mass media campaigns that highlight the power of recovery to transform lives. Having media spots run across the country with Robert Downy Jr, Morgan Freeman and Eminem all talking about recovery and how without it they would be dead. We have yet to transform public opinion about us and to highlight how focusing on recovery can change a lot of things. We are assets in our communities, and we need to take the next step and move recovery efforts forward in ways that capture the imagination of America.

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

*I am concerned about the sustainability of peer recovery support services. The funding mechanisms limit what we can do and threaten the future of these services. Here in Texas, there are two billing codes, one for individual peer coaching and one for group peer coaching. We are permitted to bill for fifteen-minute increments and the rates are abysmally low. While the ability to bill is welcomed, it does not pay for the work that is actually done to sustain recovery through the recovery community.*

*We have been working very hard on trying to figure out other funding mechanisms that actually provide the things that are needed and would therefore be sustainable. The way things are now we end up trying to raise dollars to fund the work we are doing. We need to get private insurance to fund things at levels like they do with medical care so that all of the ancillary services and supports are able to be provided. I do see some movement. Some insurance companies are thinking about it. Perhaps this is one of the things we should bring recovery community organizations together on and to share what we have all learned and what we can do to move the world in this direction.*

**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?**

*It is important for the next generation to know that we do recover. We are part of the most vital, life altering movements in American history. It is a movement to save lives. I would want the future generation of leaders to know that when we come together, we can do anything! All we must do is do it! If we look back at the last twenty years, we can see that. We can see it if we look back further in history. Look at what [Harold Hughes](#) brought together in the late 1960's and early 1970's. Look back to the 1940's and the work of [Marty Mann](#) and the formation of the [National Council on Alcoholism](#). History shows us what happens when we come together – we change the world! I would want future leaders to study our history and take what we have done to the next level, if they bring us together, it is certain it will work!*

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