

Interview #6 Dona Dmitrovic – Reflections on the historic 2001 Recovery Summit in St. Paul, Minnesota, and the start of the New Recovery Advocacy Movement

Forward: I first met Dona as she got PRO-A off the ground in those early years of the recovery movement here in Pennsylvania. PRO-A was one of the first statewide Recovery Community Organizations (RCOs) in the nation. I don't even think I had heard of an RCO before I met Dona. She has had a huge influence on the recovery movement, both here in Pennsylvania and across the US. I think she would be the first to acknowledge that the things she has accomplished in her recovery are remarkable. She would also agree that such amazing stories are unremarkable in the recovery community. Recovery is the contagion of hope that saves and transforms lives.



Through her efforts in those early days, we had the first recovery rally in the rotunda of the Pennsylvania state capitol. I was there and it was empowering. We did not have to keep our recovery cloaked in darkness, we could talk about it in the seat of our own state government. It was organized by PRO-A along with other organizations. I recall those early years and efforts to get people to understand that anonymity was important, but it was not something that should limit our ability to stand up and advocate for people to get what we have had an opportunity to have, a life.

She has changed jobs and has held many titles over her career, but she has always placed the needs of our community in the center of her efforts. That has been inspirational to me. Dona has led by example by staying true to those same values. My life has been greatly enriched through her work as a recovery pioneer, as have the lives of so many other people across America. She made the time to do this interview with me late on a Monday night, after a long day, and I am certain she did so as she was putting the values of service first, something that has personified her efforts over the years. She walks the talk.

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

My name is Dona Dmitrovic. I am a family member impacted by addiction, a mother of one and a grandmother of four. I am a woman in long term recovery for over 35 years. Currently I serve as the Director of the Center for Substance Abuse Prevention for SAMHSA to support federal efforts to improve the nation's behavioral health through evidence-based prevention approaches. Prior to SAMHSA, I lead the Foundation for Recovery in Las Vegas, NV. I assisted with the growth of FFR into a statewide recovery community organization offering peer services, education and training and advocacy for those in and seeking recovery. I served in several roles prior to that, including the Director of the National Office of Consumer Affairs for Optum Behavioral Health in Minnesota and COO of the RASE Project with the (Recovery – Advocacy – Service –Empowerment) project. It started as one of the regional groups associated with the PRO-A office. There I assisted the CEO and maintained relationships with policy makers, physicians, providers, and other community-based programs and helped launch the Buprenorphine Coordinator program. This program served opioid dependent individuals with recovery support services in Medication Assisted Treatment (MAT)- one of the first in the country offering this type of support and was recognized with two national awards for innovation.

Thinking back to the 2001 recovery summit in Saint Paul. At the time of the summit, I was the first Executive Director of the Pennsylvania Recovery Organizations – Alliance (PRO-A). PRO-A was founded in 1998. We learned of the 2001 summit during our connection to the Recovery Community Support Program (first grantee cohort) funded through SAMHSA. As part of that grant, we had regular meetings with all of the recipients from across the nation. It was the first time we had such a space for all of us to support each other along with federal representatives. Rick Sampson and June Gertig were two people that I remember as supporting our efforts. I

think it was empowering for all of us. Cathy Nugent was our grant officer and through these meetings we learned about the recovery summit. We were encouraged to go. There were people from all around the country who attended. I recall a number of people who attended, including people from PRO-ACT in Philadelphia and Easy Does It in Berks County. It was the first-time people in the recovery movement from around the country had come together as one. There were people who had funded recovery community organizations as well as people who were just volunteering in their communities to support recovery efforts. That we all had an opportunity to meet and unite was historic. It was unprecedented, it had never happened before that moment.

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

I have a similar memory to [Carol McDaid](#) from her interview with you. It was when US Congressman [Jim Ramstad](#) and US Senator [Paul Wellstone](#) addressed the attendees. Here were two members of Congress standing up and talking about the importance of advocating for recovery. They got up to the podium and openly talked about the legitimacy of recovery and about the need for parity in care for persons with substance use disorders. We had never seen anything like that before. They gave us a sense of dignity and worth, a sense that our voices mattered. It made it okay for us to speak out too. If they could advocate for us, we could advocate for ourselves and our communities. It was a wow moment. It had an impact on me, I think it had an impact on all of us.

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

I think it is important to recognize the role that SAMHSA had in it, they helped connect us through those RCSP grants. It is also important to realize that many of us had advocated for the creation of those grants as well. It was a time when a lot of forces that ultimately culminated in the summit. There was a lot of support coming out of DC that helped make the vision a reality. The [Legal Action Center](#) helped, as did the [Johnson Institute](#). They committed time and energy to the summit. The timing was right. We were all coming together, and we were starting to realize we had to speak in one voice. I don't think I can overstate the importance of bringing us all together in that moment. We knew we needed a national advocacy organization that was run by us and for us. We needed a way to represent ourselves and protect persons from discrimination and to give voice to the needs of our community.

There is history here. While there were organizations like the [National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence](#), which was founded by [Marty Mann](#) in 1944, there is a tendency over time for organizations to move more into a service focus and become less oriented on advocating for the larger needs of persons in recovery and against the discrimination we face. It was doing good work, but we knew we needed an organization that was centrally focused on bring our recovery voices together in ways that centered our efforts and made sure our interests were being represented. We had seen what happened to the Society of Americans for Recovery ([SOAR](#)). We became really motivated to make it a reality and I think there was widespread recognition that developing a constituency of consequence around recovery was vitally important.

Bill White was integral to our efforts; he was like our glue. I am not sure where he came from, but he had wonderful ideas, and we coalesced around them. I think it is important to understand how important he was in what happened. He was not exactly our leader, but he had ideas and he shared them in ways that really highlighted the values of recovery. We listened to him because what he had to say resonated with us. He avoided ego and spoke of all the pitfalls we have faced when recovery movements have historically become centered on a single leader. When he spoke, everyone felt motivated and there was a sense of being part of something larger than each of us on our own. He helped instill those values and the leadership from a place of humility that is vital to our efforts. I think that you and Bill recently wrote about being [recovery custodians](#) and not falling victim to ego and ambition. It is what has killed every prior recovery movement. He helped us stay centered and focused on building something bigger than any of us on our own could individually accomplish.

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

We have come a long way since that summit in 2001. We still have a long way to go. As Bill White recalled in his [2013, State of the New Recovery Advocacy Movement presentation](#), we developed goals and worked hard on them. Bill rightfully called attention to the risks that our efforts get derailed, either as a result of our own actions or external forces. But we have done a lot of positive things. One area that comes to mind is the development of recovery focused research. We are seeing this emerge, but it takes a long time for systems and institutions to reorient and focus on new ways of thinking about, measuring recovery services in ways that demonstrate the value they offer. We are seeing recovery focused research, but we have a long way to go before we move recovery as an orientation fully grounded in evidence. It takes time to develop this body of literature. It was a focus from those early days, we knew we needed it, efforts to measure it are coming together.

I think that another one of the major accomplishments was the focus on many pathways to recovery. We emphasized that we should not dismiss any other person's pathway to recovery. We included family in our focus, which was also revolutionary. Huge gains have been made in this area. We now value all pathways and uphold the importance of individuals, families, and communities to pursue their fullest capacity to live and be the most they can through their own recovery processes.

We also have learned along the way that we need to be careful. There are times we stood people up too soon and put them in the limelight to share their messages publicly. Sometimes we did this before they had done work on all of the underlying trauma and before they had gone through the process of healing they needed to undergo. We did not mean to harm them, but we lost sight of their needs in the pursuit of some gain we saw as important at that moment in time. We must remember not to do this. It can be very damaging. We need to keep this lesson always at the forefront that we must focus on recovery and take care of ourselves first. We must resist the temptation to put others in positions where their recovery is at risk for some goal or objective. When we do this, we undermine our own movement.

I think we have done a good job at educating policymakers by sharing our stories with them. This may be the most important thing we accomplished. It also helped policy makers to share their own stories, something that was not possible for them to do before our efforts to legitimize recovery. They also have personal and family experiences with addiction, and our efforts allowed them to be open about their own life experiences as well. It put us all on equal ground as it has really become apparent that everyone in America has been impacted by addiction. "Those people" are really "our people." We no longer had to hide in the shadows in guilt and shame. The summit brought us together. It helped us see our commonality and to understand how we had so very much more in common than any minor differences we have.

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

It is impossible to overstate the value that came out of bringing us all together to form a unified community. We honored all pathways of recovery in ways that people saw each other's value. We emphasized that whatever pathway any one of us used was not the only way, it was only our way. All of the pathways are to be valued. By listening to each other, we learned about each other in ways that helped us all see and appreciate the legitimacy of all pathways. We developed mutual regard and respect. This was a result of us coming together and spending time with each other and working towards common goals. It is true at least in the recovery advocacy realm that all pathways are embraced, and this came out of that process of being together. Similar dynamics have occurred in respect to the commonality with the mental health community. We have come a long way, we have a long way to go, but we must understand and celebrate what this first summit set in motion, it brought us all together, focused on common purpose.

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

We need to learn from our own history. It is important that our message stays unified. That message may change over time, but history shows us how important it is that we do not become divided up in factions. This is destructive to our common purpose. Recovery is life saving and life defining process for persons, and when we get our lives together, we can do amazing things. Recovery is life affirming. We have shared values. We have a shared identity. Recovery has many pathways and forms, but the inclusion of all of these facets are central to our common welfare. I am not sure we have focused enough on bringing people together in ways that magnifies our common cause as well as we should have. It is in the coming together and listening to each other that our common identity is strengthened. I think we have missed opportunities to do this along the way. It takes time and energy to create space for people to listen to each other, but it is vital that we always do so.

What can happen is we get focused on a particular service or on furthering individual ideologies and we fracture and lose ground over time. It is not too late to change any of those dynamics. When we come together in a unified way and put our individual agendas and our differences aside, we all do better. History is clear on this. People like Bill White have kept reminding us of these dynamics, we have not always listened. We do better when we pay attention to these repeated patterns that are so evident from our own history.

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

We have to heed own history. If you want to understand the things we want to accomplish moving forward, we have to understand our own history. We have to consider what has happened to recovery movements that have come before us and look at what has happened to institutions focused on our issues over the long term.

How do we learn from our own history to ensure we get to where we want to go? How do we stay focused on a common mission that does not get redirected by individual agendas or mission creep? How do we ensure inclusion so that our foundational institutions continually reflect the needs of our own community? There is a pendulum of history we need to pay attention to. It becomes a matter of dispensing with individual agendas and understanding that if you are doing this work, people are watching you. People look up to us, and we must always model recovery values in everything we do. That can be hard, but when we do so we achieve great things. And at the end of the day, we are all working towards this common goal ... making recovery possible for individuals and families and ensuring that death is not the outcome for those with substance use disorders.

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?

I would tell young recovery leaders to stay in touch with their passion, it is the thing that sustains us. I know this is what has kept me going. I suspect that this is true for others as well. The truth is that if you are a recovery advocate, you are going to get knocked down a whole lot more times than you will be lifted up. I would tell future leaders that they should stay in touch with why they do this work. I think for many of us, we want to make sure that others who come after us have the opportunities we have had in our own lives. We are working towards something greater than each of us as individuals, increasing access to help, supporting an individual's pathway to recovery and developing the resources to sustain recovery for all of our communities, in all of their respective diversity. We can only do so when we take care of ourselves and nurture our own recovery and stay true to recovery values and keep moving forward. If the next generation builds the foundation on recovery values like service, integrity, empathy and inclusion, they will accomplish great things and I see that happening right now. They will make history.

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