

2001 St Paul Recovery Summit Blog Series - Article Two

David Wheters, PhD - Reflections on the historic 2001 Recovery Summit in St. Paul, Minnesota, and the start of the New Recovery Advocacy Movement

Forward: In taking on this project to document individual accounts of the historic 2001 recovery summit in St Paul I began to ask around about who attended the summit and how to get a hold of them. An early name I ran across was Dr. David Wheters (he did not earn his PhD until 2010 . . . long after the summit). A friend of a friend knew of David and helped connect me to him. I walked away from this interview with a better sense of his contributions, the leadership at the time within SAMHSA who helped foster the movement and early leaders as well as the importance of strengthening recovery efforts across all of our diverse communities. I am grateful to David for taking the time to devote to being interviewed for this project.

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

My name is David Wheters and I am a person in long term recovery for the last 36 years. I got into recovery at age 26 while living in the Atlanta Georgia area. I was a founder of [Recovery Consultants of Atlanta, Inc \(RCA\)](#) based out of Decatur GA. It was one of the first Recovery Community Organizations in America and originated out of the second round of [Recovery Community Services Program \(RCSP\)](#) grants offered through SAMSHA. Recovery Consultants of Atlanta, Inc. (RCA) is a non-profit, 501(c)(3) Recovery Community Organization founded in 1999 by a group of concerned, committed and spiritually centered members of the Metro-Atlanta's 12-Step and faith-based addiction recovery communities. During the first decade of its existence, RCA developed innovative recovery support services for individuals and families in, at risk, or seeking recovery from substance use disorders.



I got involved in developing the recovery community in 1999 and around 2001, I was running RCA when we applied for and were awarded one of these grants. It was vital to our developing the recovery community in the Atlanta area. I was then and remain now an active member of a 12-step fellowship. At the time, I had a grant officer at SAMHSA, [Cathy Nugent](#) who told me about the recovery summit and suggested I attend it. I am so incredibly grateful that she suggested attending to me. It changed my life. I am so proud I was a part of this important moment in recovery history and all that has come out of it.

My personal story involves getting into recovery in the mid-80s. Educationally, I had a GED. Over the next few years, as part of my recovery I focused on my education and got an Associate's degree, a Bachelorette, Masters and a doctoral degree in Social Work. At the time of our grant, I was one of the few grant holders with a Master's degree. The thing is that many of the people involved without degrees made vital contributions to the effort. There was growing recognition at that moment in time that lived experience in recovery had value. The expertise of lived experience was being recognized by the Federal Government. It is because of the grant and our work to establish an RCO that I found myself at this historic event in St. Paul.

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

A few things stand out to me from that the St. Paul Summit. It was a beautiful winter weekend in Minnesota, I went there prepared for cold weather with winter clothes, when I got there, the weather was perfect and it was

such a beautiful place. I met some of the happiest people I have ever met in my life. I met a woman who was attending the event who was openly in [Medication Assisted Recovery](#). She was the first person I ever met who openly embraced this pathway. This was very new to me as a person who was following a 12-step recovery process and it stands out to me as important because it was because of her that I started to see and become open to multiple pathways of recovery. I cannot recall her name, and I think she has since passed, but meeting her and seeing her pathway helped open me up to these pathways of recovery.

One of the other things that stand out to me was the slogan “Nothing About Us Without Us.” The slogan motivated us, and I recall us chanting it over the course of the summit and embracing what it meant. It meant to us that no longer should the government create programming intended to support treatment and recovery efforts without including us in the design of these programs. It was a groundbreaking concept, I thought we had coined the term. “Nothing About Us Without Us!” became the rallying cry of the new recovery advocacy movement and predicated on the belief that no policy or service should be developed without the full participation of the authentic recovery community. Actions that occur without us will move away from needs of our own people. Later [Dr H Westley Clark](#) told me that it has had a longer history, but the slogan validated for many of us what we were feeling about the need for inclusion in matters related to our community.

So many things stand out. [William Cope Moyers](#) was such an eloquent speaker, he was one of the leaders of the event, Bill White spoke a lot. This was the first times I met [Joe Powell](#) executive director of the Association of Persons Affected by Addiction (APAA) in Dallas, Texas. I recall [Don Coyhis](#) speaking often at the event about developing the native American recovery community and [White Bison](#). I was so proud of us all. It was a small group of people that assembled at the event. There were only three black faces in the room. I recall that I laid back and did not say some of the things I was thinking and feeling. I wished I had said more, I was more shy in that period of my life. In part because I was new. It was also something that is relatively common for my African American brothers and sisters when we are involved in events within the dominant white culture.

It is also true that because of attending I started to connect more to those who attended from the African American recovery community and focus on the needs to strengthen recovery efforts within our community. I was disappointed that more African American recovery community members were not there. However, the seeds of strengthening faces and voices of recovery (FAVOR) came from that very summit. As a result of attending, we got connected and we had many calls and it helped focus my efforts with RCA and get support from them. These calls happened after the summit and through the RCSP grant calls. We had many conversations through that grant with about five of us who were focused on serving the African American community. It helped focus us all and was incredibly valuable. This was something that Cathy Nugent encouraged and much of our connection originated out of that historic 2001 Recovery Summit in St Paul.

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

Cathy Nugent was an amazing person, and she was fundamental to getting me into the room. She did a lot to encourage and support me and helped see that I was a good project director and to support my efforts to develop RCA. Without her, I would not have gotten to St Paul. She was one of the best and she did a lot for me. I think she may be retired now; you should try and find her and interview her. She loved what we were doing and was fundamental to supporting our efforts. There was recognition of the value of lived experience at the national level and within the respective states. Some of that has been lost in the ensuing years.

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

We accomplished so very much! We founded a movement; I am so proud I was a part of it. We were integral to getting an additional [100 million dollars to the states](#) (for the life of me, I can't recall the name of this bill. Joe Powell would know . . . Access to Recovery [ATR]. That's it). to support addiction treatment efforts across the

United States under George W Bush, who ended up doing a lot to support our efforts. It was our advocacy that increased resources to states to assist people into recovery. Another major thing we accomplished was the foundation of [Faces & Voices of Recovery](#). We birthed a national recovery community organization. We knew we needed a national organization that could advocate for us and to strengthen our ability to meet the needs of persons seeking recovery across the United States. I think we conceived Faces & Voices at that event.

We also developed peer support services, which we thought of at the summit and then went out and began to build communities across the United States. An interesting and related story is in the time that followed the summit, there were concerns within the federal government that the RCSP grants were too advocacy oriented. We heard that they could end. We got together and suggested that the focus of the grants shift towards recovery support service and community recovery capitol development. We did not even know what we were building, but we were intent on strengthening recovery community efforts and were determined to save those grants. The grants were our lifeblood. Dr H Westley Clark supported our efforts. Many of us credit him with saving the RCSP grant program and everything that came out of it. I recall [Tom Hill](#) crediting Dr Clark for what he did to save the RCSP grants. There were people like [Phil Valentine Executive Director of Connecticut Community for Addiction Recovery \(CCAR\)](#) who led the way breaking ground innovating and developing peer services. We emulated what he was doing and began to individualize these services for our own communities. We all did so very much together. They were exciting times.

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

We built things that matter, and we have helped save and restore thousands of lives and revitalize communities across America. We helped get recovery to the table and expand understanding about the restorative power of recovery. We changed the language, we do not refer to ourselves as drug addicts, we now embrace the dignity of recovery. We refer to ourselves as persons in recovery. The very act of standing up and building what we did established the foundations of what people now take for granted and assume that we always had these things. We should celebrate what we did and redouble our efforts to expand recovery across all our communities.

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

I think we missed an opportunity to bring more black faces to the table at the very beginning. Think about how attention to addiction related deaths only gained national attention when it started to impact white suburban and white rural communities. Crack has been decimating the African American community for well over a generation. We must move policy in ways that resources and opportunity are offered in urban settings like North Philadelphia, and Newark and communities like them across America that have been left out. We need to expand the development of recovery capitol in African American communities. I see this as a way of engaging people and reducing incarceration by focusing on strengthening our communities. This is what we missed. Engaging active drug users and providing opportunities for new ways of living in recovery. This is something I am focused on now and I am working with likeminded recovery community leaders across the United States to develop now.

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

We need to keep doing what we are doing. That summit and what came out of it opened my eyes and mind to recovery that included medication assisted recovery pathways. We need to keep focus here. We need to educate elected officials about expanding recovery opportunities to all communities. We accomplished a great deal but we have a lot of work ahead of us. This last 20 years was the first chapter, we have an opportunity to change America and strengthen recovery community in all its diversity. This is the future we should work towards.

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?

History matters, our contributions needs to be remembered. In my community I was one of ten black faces in my recovery fellowship in the early days, now there are thousands. Young people must not take these gains for granted; it took a lot of hard work. Understanding history is vital to understanding not just where one comes from, but also where we need to go. I hope that the next generation takes it even farther. Recovery has the power to restore American community. We must ensure that Nothing About Us Without Us remains our focus and ensure we are meaningfully engaged in all facets of developing, facilitating, and evaluating services that support recovery across our entire SUD care system at every level and in every community.

References to the summit –

- State of the New Recovery Advocacy Movement - Bill White (2013) Link [HERE](#)
- A Day Is Coming: Visions of A New Recovery Advocacy Link [HERE](#)
- Toward a New Recovery Advocacy Movement 2000 Redux Link [HERE](#)