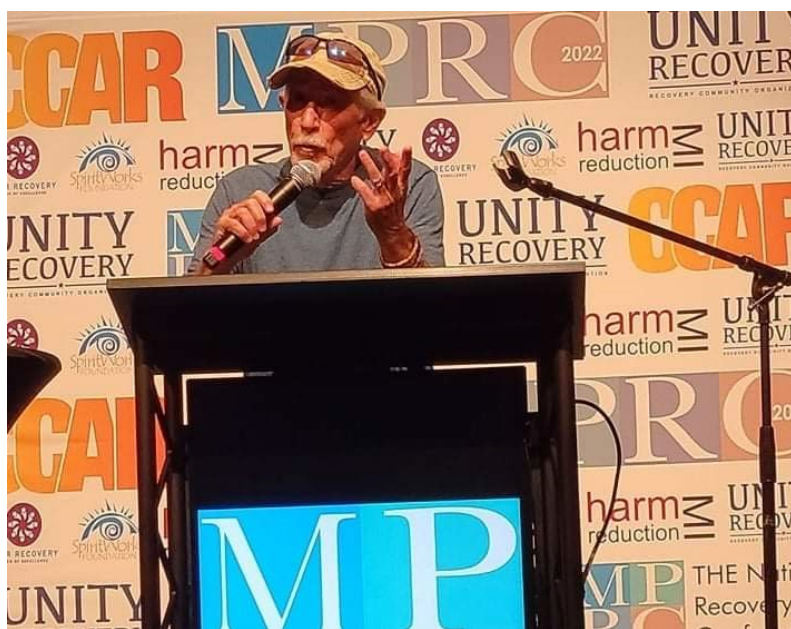


## Interview with John Winslow - Founder of International Recovery Day

**Forward** – I have known [John Winslow](#) for the better part of twenty years. I kept running into him in DC and in my travels around the country. He is a person in long term recovery for over 46 years, and he has been in the field of helping people recovery for the vast majority of those years. His work as a recovery advocate has taken him to the White House (twice). He served at ground zero at the World Trade Center after the September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 attack to support police and firemen during the recovery efforts. He has taught collegiate course on addiction, presented at the FBI Academy, served as President of the Maryland Addiction Director's Council, and had the opportunity to open one of the first Recovery Community Centers in Maryland – the [Dri-Dock Recovery & Wellness Center](#).



Over the years, John and I have had many an opportunity to break bread together at conferences and meetings around the country. He is a friend and a person I have found who is filled with recovery wisdom and a lot of insight into our history and the recovery movement. Recently, John announced his semi-retirement, and that [Faces & Voices of Recovery](#) was going to assume responsibility what is perhaps his greatest gift to the recovery movement, [International Recovery Day](#). Knowing some of his history and contributions to the recovery movement, I asked him to do this interview. I am grateful he agreed to it!

### 1. Tell us about yourself and your work to support recovery over your lifetime

*First and foremost, I am a person in long term recovery, I got into recovery on January 21, 1976. I was in my 20s. But one of the things that was part of my story years earlier than that was that my older sister was killed by a drunk driver when I was 17. She had been 19 at the time of her death. The intoxicated driver who crossed the center line was killed, my sister and others in the car he hit also died. It was devastating. I vowed never to drink and drive again. It is a testament to how strong a pull addiction can have. That vow only lasted only a few months. I drove intoxicated many times in those years, despite the loss of my own sister. I experienced a lot of consequences, and in my mid-twenties I started to realize that my addiction was probably going to ruin a relationship I cared a lot about. In 1975, I voluntarily admitted myself into the psychiatric unit a Perry Point V.A. hospital where I spent two months under my veterans' benefits, having served during the Vietnam era. I recall that they suggested I may be an alcoholic and sent me to a 12-step meeting. At that time, I wanted nothing to do with any of it.*

*About a year later, I was experiencing increased difficulties due to my substance use, and it began to threaten my job- which happened to be working with munitions at [Aberdeen Proving Grounds](#). Substance use and explosives are not a good mix! I had been coerced into receiving treatment through my employer (the federal government) at an outpatient program. Eventually they told me I needed more than they could provide. This time, they sent me to Caron Foundation, which at the time was called [Chit Chat Farms](#). I was filled with despair, I felt defeated and alone, but following a head-on collision while heavily intoxicated I experienced a "moment of truth" and became open to help in that moment. I had just turned 26 years old.*

*The Caron Foundation provided excellent treatment. The program made sure I had a sponsor and a*

connection to my local recovery community before I walked out of the door. They had warm handoffs in 1976! That was one of the things that saved my life. Some of my counselors in this era had very little formal education but had an amazing grasp of addiction and recovery, and were highly skilled at communicating about what I was experiencing and what I needed to do to get well. I am grateful for what they did for me.

In early recovery, I started to think about what I wanted to do with the rest of my life, and the idea of getting involved in helping others find recovery was something that really appealed to me. I took a job as a night counselor at [Springfield State Hospital](#) and enrolled in classes to become an addictions counselor, which at the time were known as "paraprofessionals." I realized that there were very few people in my age group working in the addictions treatment field and I thought it would be valuable to serve as a power of example in showing others - particularly young people - that recovery was not just possible but could be a reality for folks of any age (young or old) struggling with addiction.

The Springfield Program for Addiction Recovery (SPAR) was run by [Dr Sandy Unger](#) who was an interesting person and a colleague of [Dr Timothy Leary](#). He was part of the [Spring Grove Experiment](#) to study the impact of LSD for use with persons with psychiatric disorders and to facilitate spiritual awakenings in patients experiencing Alcoholism. It was funded by the National Institute of Health. He was quite a character. He later married the office manager, and I performed the wedding song on my guitar at their wedding ceremony at his request.

During this period of my recovery, I met a number of people who had been around and in recovery since the 1940's and early 1950's, even people who knew and worked with [Marty Mann](#). I saw [Father Martin Chalk Talk on Alcoholism](#) who immediately became my first Recovery Hero! I then started to run into him in my community and we became friends. He lived in a nearby town and I was honored when on one occasion in my first year of recovery he asked me to step in for him and help out with someone struggling with alcoholism when he needed to go out of town for a speaking engagement.

## **2. Where you aware of Operation Understanding at the time it happened? What do you recall about efforts to normalize recovery in that era?**

I don't particularly recall it well. I was in early recovery at the time and just trying to figure out my own way. It was not until long after that I grew to appreciate the recovery movement and our rich history. At one point, a number of years later I moved up to Pennsylvania and worked at the [Livenqrin Foundation](#), which at the time was run by [Mercedes McCambridge](#). Many people may now recall her from the clips of her brave testimony in front of Congress on recovery that [Greg Williams](#) and [Jeff Reilly](#) included in [the Anonymous People](#) as part of [Operation Understanding](#). She let you know she was a star. According to Orson Wells, Mercedes was the greatest living radio actress, she has won an Academy Award for the movie [All the Kings Men](#) and was nominated for one for her work on [Giant](#) with James Dean.

Thanks to the Anonymous People, we are now much more aware of this period of our history. What people may not know is that she paid a price for her advocacy. Standing up and being open about being a woman in recovery led to her being blacklisted in Hollywood. She could not get work because she was open about her alcoholism. There were a lot of people in the recovery community who were opposed to living openly in recovery. There was a lot of controversy at the time about [Dick Van Dyke](#) being open about Alcoholism and the impact of public relapses on the perception of recovery. These early advocates paid a price for being open about addiction and recovery. We owe them a great deal for what they did for us.

## **3. I have put some effort into interviewing people about the recovery summit in 2001. I don't think you were there, but were you aware of it? When did you first start to see the influences of the new recovery advocacy movement in your community?**

In the 1980's-90's I established a private outpatient addiction practice in Pennsylvania. During this era, we were seeing a lot of erosion of recovery efforts on a national scale. Lengths of stay in treatment centers

were decreasing because of pressure from the insurance industry. There was such a focus on professionalism and documentation that the field became overburdened and set up barriers for our community to do the work of helping people get into recovery. We lost something in this era, the pendulum had swung away from recovery and the field became over-professionalized. Some treatment settings prohibited giving a client a hug or disallowed self-disclosure (talking about your own recovery). [Brief therapy](#) was all the rage, the notion that you could provide a handful of outpatient treatment sessions with a person, educated them about severe substance use disorder and recovery and they would be healed. The insurance industry loved it. The dots that connected treatment and recovery were severed. It was horrifying and something needed to be done to reconnect recovery with the treatment experience.

Some years later, my wife and I moved back to Maryland where I became the director of the Dorchester County Addictions Program. While there I became interested in developing community-based recovery support. I started to think about those old 12 step clubhouses, and I thought something similar could benefit my own community. With the support of State funding, I founded the [Drydock Recovery & Wellness Center](#) in Cambridge Maryland. I was heavily influenced by the work of Bill White and the concepts of recovery-oriented systems of care (ROSC) and recovery management. Soon thereafter, "The Anonymous People" movie was released, and it was a game changer! The movement became energized and focused on embracing many pathways to recovery. I am grateful to have seen and have been part of this positive emphasis on recovery and recovery community.

#### **4. How have views of addiction and recovery changed over the last four decades from your perspective?**

Have people's views changed? My short answer is yes and no. The work of Bill White, Greg Williams and so many others through the new recovery advocacy movement has definitely increased our capacity to talk about addiction and recovery openly. This has really increased public awareness of addiction and recovery. On the other hand, I'm sorry to say that I see a lot of disparaging, vile, hateful, ignorant, shaming, and judgmentally stigmatizing commentary concerning addiction and people suffering from and impacted by addiction on social media and other public platforms. It is heartbreaking to see how common are the misconceptions about who we are and what we experience. We have a long way to go to get to the point where society normalizes addiction and stops seeing it as a moral failing but instead something that is common, is treatable and from which recovery is the probable outcome given the proper care and community support in which people need to heal.

#### **5. You started International Recovery Day. Tell us about it and what it has accomplished.**

I got the idea to start International Recovery Day (IRD) in the Fall of 2018. I was reading a bio on [Marty Mann](#) and all of her amazing advocacy pioneering work. I was simultaneously reading Bill White's newly released [Recovery Rising](#). In the back of my mind, I was also reflecting on [Don Coyhis](#) who was talking about the spider web of connection. I wanted to be part of reconnecting the dots and expanding recovery. I saw that we had through some of the new technology the ability to connect people in ways that was not possible before then. I started thinking about September being National Recovery Month which begins the day after we observe [International Overdose Awareness](#). Many recovery-related events occur throughout the country (and now around the world) during this month. Holding International Recovery Day on the last day of the month (September 30<sup>th</sup>) would provide a month's ending crescendo as an opportunity to be the day to honor and celebrate recovery worldwide and offer a beacon of hope to all impacted by addiction.

I started to imagine a scenario where everyone in the world who'd been impacted by addiction could launch their own virtual recovery rocket and anyone could watch them online streaming across the globe. I thought it would be an amazing way to express unity and focus the world on recovery in a non-politized way. Over time, I sheepishly realized that the imagery of all these rockets may actually look like the virtual start of WWII! Given that awareness, we shifted the concept from Recovery Rockets to that of Recovery Fireworks - thus averting another worldwide disaster - whew! Today, anyone can register for free to launch their own

virtual Recovery Firework on September 30<sup>th</sup> and watch it join with countless others around the globe rise up into the sky in celebration of recovery. <https://internationalrecoveryday.org/>

Purple is the color we embrace to symbolize the Recovery Movement. I was involved in a community near mine who was using the color purple to show support for recovery, they used that color because of that scene in the Anonymous People when [Chris Herren of the Herren Project](#) was talking to the kids wearing the purple shirts to support drug free living at a High School assembly. This was part of his work on [Project Purple](#). My wife suggested that we focus on having people light things up in purple. That is what we did!

Even though International Recovery Day is only a few years old, it has already taken off! The web site is available in many different languages to increase accessibility. "Recovery Lights Around the World" on September 30<sup>th</sup> invites everyone to get out and light up your back porch, your City Hall, and/or your State Capitol building. So far, we've had countless buildings, bridges, and structures light-up in purple on the 30<sup>th</sup> to include such iconic places as [Niagara Falls](#), the Rock and Roll Hall of fame and Aloha Towers in Hawaii. Last year, over one fourth of all countries on the face of the earth participated in International Recovery Day. We are just getting started, our goal is to get every single nation of the world to participate. What a show of unity, diversity, and a testament to many pathways of recovery. I think we really [can turn the world purple one day at a time!](#)

**6. When we were at the CCAR Many Pathways to Recovery conference, you announced that Faces & Voices was going to carry International Recovery Day forward / What are your hopes for this change and what it signifies moving forward?**

For the past few years, I've been thinking about how best to insure the future of International Recovery Day. I am getting older and it is important to me. I started talking to Bill White and a few other people about the idea of making sure it had a home long term that could increase its visibility and really expand it in the way to connect the world and show the power of recovery to heal. Through the process of reflection, meditation, and consultation it appeared that [Faces & Voices of Recovery](#) was the ideal place for it to go, given that they have the technical, staffing, financial, and networking resources to move I.R.D. forward in a major fashion. I soon discovered that Faces & Voices' C.E.O., [Patty McCarthy](#) was thinking along the same lines. She invited me into conversation to discuss the possibilities, and the rest is history.

So, at the [CCAR Multiple Pathways of Recovery Conference](#) we made a formal announcement that Faces & Voices of Recovery was going to add it to its projects. Yes Bill, as you have joked with me about retiring, I am retiring in that I will be involved in IRD as an advisor, sort of semi-retired. I am very excited to see what it will evolve into and suspect that it may really help create a sense of world unity and connection in the global recovery community.

**7. You have been a major contributor to the recovery movement over your lifetime. What would you want young people to know about what you have learned along the way? What are your hopes for the next generation?**

I have been thinking about this question since you first asked me to do this interview. I thought about my early years of doing the work and who I wanted to be like. As I have shared, I was blessed to have had some great mentors and role models. I felt a little overwhelmed and was trying to emulate all of these amazing people and also find my own voice. Early on in my career I had a colleague I looked up to by the name of Joe Massie. He was such a gifted counselor. They actually [named an adolescent unit after him](#) in Western Maryland. Joe was so well respected. He was very limited in his formal education, but he was a genius and a gifted communicator. I asked him about how I could honor all of the work of all of these people in my own efforts moving forward. He gave me the sage advice [to just be myself](#). I have followed this advice even as I worked to understand, honor and preserve the work of my recovery heroes!

One of the things I reflect on when I think of where we are now is that the whole movement has gotten a lot



*more complex. There arises a chorus of voices- from prevention, harm reduction, treatment, and recovery. It is my sense that not all of these groups fully understand what addiction is and the consequences of having a severe substance use issue. I think it is very important moving forward that anyone committed to doing this sacred work develop a deep understanding that moderation does not work for everyone and that there are those of us for whom recovery is a matter of life and death.*

*The things I would hope that the next generation reflect on are rather simple. Concepts that have served me and a lot of people in recovery quite well:*

- *Be yourself*
- *Take care of yourself*
- *Be humble*
- *Do no harm*
- *Do the next right thing*
- *Always take the high road and do the ethically proper thing.*
- *Put principles before personalities*
- *Be open minded*

*I did not invent these concepts. They were around a long time before I learned them. When I reflect on my recovery heroes and think about what they accomplished and how they did it, I see these same concepts as the things that they centered on in their own lives and in their own work. That is my wish for the next generation. I know that if they do these things, dream big and keep focused on them, they will accomplish so very much!*

Link to post [HERE](#)