

## Interview 12 - Recovery Review Blog Series – Betty Currier Reflections on the Historic 2001 Recovery Summit in Saint Paul, Minnesota, and the start of the New Recovery Advocacy Movement

**Forward:** I am quite sure I had never met or spoken with Betty before this interview. She is 83 years young and her zest for life and learning came through the telephone line loud and clear. She was modest when sharing her significant life accomplishments. I felt like some additional context on what Betty contributed to support the new recovery advocacy movement would be helpful. I decided to talk to [Tom Coderre](#) who had worked closely with Betty when he was National Field Director for Faces & Voices of Recovery.

Coincidentally, a few days after I did her interview, I also had the opportunity to introduce [Greg Williams](#) at an event focused on family recovery in my community. I was able to talk about Betty and her work to support the recovery community from the podium. I talked about the history of services in our area and how they linked to other efforts nationally. I shared some of Betty's family recovery story she had shared publicly over the years and how she got help because of a family connection. I noted how rare that would have been back in the mid-1970s in rural New York State. After Greg took the stage, he spoke warmly about her and how she changed how he spoke about recovery with the [Faces & Voices of Recovery](#) messaging training. He then educated the audience about [Marty Mann](#) and how her work as the founder and Executive Director of the [National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence](#) over many decades which helped create the very services in central New York state that Betty and her daughter got help at in 1976. We have such a rich history. Each generation builds things that then lift up the next generation, who uses that foundation to do even more and pass those things on to the next generation.

A few days later, when I was able to catch up with Tom Coderre, he gave me an overview of his own recovery process that many readers may be familiar with as his story was included in the movie [the Anonymous People](#). Tom told me about how the messaging training helped him develop ways to talk about recovery beyond the recovery community in ways that reflected our resiliency and not simply focus on the devastation of addiction. He also spoke warmly about Betty, and that she had done so much for him in respect to recovery messaging through the training. He called her one of his favorite people in the recovery movement. One of the first things she did upon retiring and moving to North Carolina was to get involved with the recovery community and help train yet another recovery community using her considerable talents. He spoke about how she has consistently showed up over the years and continues to train and help carry the message forward. We call this service in the recovery community, and she has the value of service to others at the core of her being.

During his tenure with Faces & Voices, Tom traveled around the country facilitating the "Our Stories Have Power: Recovery Community Messaging Training" for two years with Betty and other facilitators. One of the stories he shared with me was near the end of his work as national field director for [Faces & Voices of Recovery](#). It was in December of 2008, right before he went back to work as Chief of Staff to the Rhode Island Senate President in the very Capitol building in the political world that addiction took away from him a few years earlier. They were [recording the training to DVD](#) to make it available to a wider audience. It was being filmed in the Baltimore area. Greg Williams was also there as the project was being filmed. Tom told me that some of the conversations that occurred during that time led to the production of the Anonymous People.



He talked about filming the DVD with Betty. From Tom's perspective, her experience of long-term recovery and deep involvement in 12 step recovery was integral in communicating recovery messaging to members of those 12 step fellowships. He was the new guy with five or six years of recovery, and she had the wisdom of years and the communication skills to take the material and make it resonate with attendees. Listening to Betty during the interview below, I could feel the generations of advocacy efforts that it took for services to be there for her and her family. I could see the positive influence and the lives she changed by combining her background as an educator with positive messaging on recovery and the recovery value of service. I never met Betty Currier before this interview, but I am certain that her work on recovery messaging influenced people around me and in turn positively impacted me and thousands of other people in those early years of the new recovery advocacy movement. Tom Coderre was right when he told me that Betty Currier is a jewel of a person. I hope that comes through in the interview!

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

*First and foremost, I am a woman in long term recovery, and that means to me I have not had to have a drink since January 6<sup>th</sup>, 1976. Recovery has changed the way I think, feel, and act as I have sustained my recovery over the last 45 years. I am currently retired and living in North Carolina, but for most of my life I was in New York State. I grew up a few miles from the Canadian border in that upper flat section of the state. It is quite remote. I became a secondary school teacher and moved to central New York State where I was in a marriage of 18 years.*

*At the time I got in recovery, we were living in Otsego County. It was a winter evening, and we were upstairs when we heard our oldest daughter who was 16 come into the house from an evening out. We did not hear her come upstairs. We went down to investigate, and she was passed out on the couch. We woke her up and walked her around. She did not seem ok, and she kept passing out. I called an EMT friend of mine who came over and she ended up in the hospital. She had overdosed on phenobarbital and brandy. Had we not come downstairs, she would have died.*

*The hospital had one of the early addiction programs, there was very little around in that era, but our hospital had one. The next day, the counselor George wanted to talk with me. I'll never forget his first words: "Your daughter says you drink too much. Do you?" I gave him a long list of "I nevers" and he said to me, you told me what you don't do, but tell me about what you do do. I was speechless. He sat there calmly for a moment and then went on to describe alcoholism. I burst into tears and told him that he was describing me. I went to some meetings and found support. That is how my journey to Saint Paul really started.*

*Over time, I started to pull together the community. As you mentioned, these were very early years after federal funding became available after the Hughes Act and there was not much around. As I mentioned to you, I was a teacher and I thought it was important to use my skills in recovery. I started to bring people together in our community and do things to educate the community about recovery. This eventually formed into [Friends of Recovery of Delaware and Otsego Counties Inc.](#) (FOR-DO) which we founded in 2001 as we recognized the gaps in services, the stigma and discrimination that affects individuals in recovery. I suspect that part of how I ended up in Saint Paul was my work on Friends of Recovery. As we formed, we started to connect with other groups and people working on similar issues around the nation. I think it was [Pat Taylor](#) who encouraged me to go to Saint Paul for that historic summit.*

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

*It has been a lot of years, but what I recall most distinctly is how dynamic a group it was that came together for that recovery summit in 2001. People had come to similar conclusions, that we needed to change how we think and talk about addiction and move it into a recovery framework. We wanted to form a national recovery organization and over the three days we met it was a constant topic of discussion. We needed a national*

presence, and out of this came the seeds of [Faces & Voices of Recovery](#). We spent a lot of time together sharing our experiences, our strengths and our hopes for the future. I think more than anything else, simply coming together and realizing we had a lot to share with each other and that we were stronger together than we were as individuals was the power that came out of that event.

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

*I think many of us in the recovery world were seeing what was happening in respect to addiction and recovery and we were realizing that things needed to change. We saw other diseases being addressed far differently than addiction. We saw services and supports and research being invested into other chronic conditions, but we did not see these same things happening in respect to addiction. We could see things like heart disease and cancer where there was an emphasis on getting help and on recovery. Yet in respect to addiction, nobody was talking about it, care was hard to access and when it was available it was in very short durations with no community supports beyond acute care in place. We knew if we did not talk about this, nobody else was going to. We knew that if we did share about recovery and wellness, America was not going to hear about it. We had a lot of positive influences, most importantly the contributions of [Bill White](#). He was instrumental to what we did.*

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

*We accomplished a whole lot. One thing we were able to do was form [Faces & Voices of Recovery](#), one of the things we set out to build. We did this because the summit pulled together the movers and the shakers across the country. I think that bringing everyone together in the way that we did created a power greater than ourselves as individuals. People inspired each other and that made a very real difference in what happened in the years after that summit. I can most clearly talk about how it influenced me and what I did when I got back to my community. We had started Friends of Recovery Delaware and Otsego counties, we came together in 2001, it became formalized in 2004. We initiated conversations around the state, and I began doing messaging trainings. Over time, we organized Friends of Recovery New York as a statewide recovery community organization. What started as small community conversations blossomed into a statewide effort. There was an immense desire in our communities to start talking about recovery and start changing the way we address it. We began to shift things to a recovery focus.*

*This led to so much more. We developed messaging trainings, we started peer services using peer coaching and we developed recovery centers. It opened up a world of support for our communities. It has led to the visibility of recovery in our communities and an emphasis on hope and resiliency. I was proud to be part of what happened. Like many of us, one of the most important lessons that recovery taught me is that we need to give away what we want to keep. An emphasis on service to others is a foundational element of recovery for many people. I was able to use my skills as an educator to teach people about the power of recovery.*

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

*Those of us who were there knew we needed to change the way we talked about recovery, so the work on recovery language was very important. We set out to teach people how to talk about recovery. Up until this time, recovering people were doing what they had become accustomed to in 12 step fellowship meetings. They would say that they were recovering addicts or alcoholics and then share stories about the destruction that comes with addiction. It is important to understand that this kind of story sharing is really important in private settings where we share such stories to remind ourselves and each other about where we came from and what we risk if we do not practice self-care. But that kind of messaging does not help the general public connect with hope, healing, and the reality that recovery is for millions of people across America.*

*We knew we needed better messaging! I got involved in the “Our Stories Have Power: Recovery Community Messaging Training” and traveled across New York State and the country providing training. I was able to combine my love for education with my passion for recovery and help people talk more constructively about recovery. I had the opportunity to work with people like Tom Coderre. I recall one training we did in Washington DC in 2008. People came in from all across the country to attend that training. Greg Williams was there and clips from that training ended up in the movie the Anonymous People. I think the work we did to highlight the hope and the resiliency of recovery was a significant contribution. A lot of work has been done on recovery sensitive messaging since then, but it started with the seeds that came out of that recovery summit twenty years ago.*

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

*I really don't think so. I would not want to frame it like that at all. What we started was more of an evolutionary process, where things build on top of earlier insights and gains. It is a growing process and we needed to go through the process to get to where we are today. The things we identify we need to do today are visible to us and more in reach than they were because of all the work that came before, including the work that came out of the recovery summit.*

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

*I am not sure that I would think of it as concern. I suspect my view is influenced by my own experience in recovery from alcoholism over 45 years ago. I was one of those persons who were “just” using alcohol, which certainly is deadly when left unaddressed. In the last few decades, addiction to multiple substances had become more commonplace. These changing dynamics have greatly influenced how we support people seeking help. I think it is important that we stay fresh and consider what the changing needs are in our communities. We need to make sure we stay focused on our current generations needs and including new faces in our work.*

**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?**

*As I mentioned earlier, service is key. The notion that we have to help others to help ourselves. Service needs to remain a fundamental element of work to expand recovery moving forward. It will look different than it did in the past because it is a different generation with different needs, but what will remain the same is the foundational role of service to others. I would tell young leaders to keep an open mind. I would tell them to keep learning across their entire lifespan and I would tell them that we have the capacity to grow as long as we live, and if we approach every day as an opportunity to learn and grow, we stay vital for ourselves, our families and our communities.*

Article link - [HERE](#)