



# The Priceless Gift of Lawyers Helping Lawyers

by Gordon Hickey

Many a Virginia lawyer's career has been saved by Lawyers Helping Lawyers, but K. Dennis Sisk is among the very few who have been twice rescued. Sisk's journey through drug and alcohol addiction took him so far into darkness that he was eventually disbarred. Lawyers Helping Lawyers brought him back to the practice of law, as it has helped countless others.

Sisk had always been a social drinker. He was married with children, and was the head of litigation in the New York office and later the Atlanta office of a large law firm. He was a successful, talented lawyer, looking at a long career.

But one night in Atlanta he was drinking at a party, "...and some white powder showed up.... My life changed," he said during a recent interview at his office in Richmond. He began what would be a long slide.

Sisk dates his alcoholism and drug addiction to 1995. He knew he was spinning out of control, but he couldn't stop. George Hettrick, a respected lawyer and member of Lawyers Helping Lawyers' board, was with Sisk's law firm in Richmond and recognized his problems. Sisk said the firm was willing to let him stay on, if he connected with LHL.

Founded in 1985, LHL provides free, confidential, nondisciplinary assistance to mem-

bers of the legal profession who are impaired by substance abuse or mental issues. Lawyers Helping Lawyers has initiated the Lighthouse Plan, a pilot project aimed at de-centralizing the program and increasing attempts to reach more troubled lawyers across the state. (See page 19.)

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Sisk signed a contract with LHL, which provides evaluations, assessments, treatment referrals, peer support, and monitoring. If the lawyer complies with the contract and doesn't violate the rules of professional conduct, LHL keeps lawyers out of the Virginia State Bar's disciplinary process.

Unfortunately, Sisk said he started violating the contract in 1997 or 1998 and was finally forced to resign from his law firm. He got a divorce, declared bankruptcy, "and still wasn't quite done."

Sisk, like many addicts, had intermittent periods of sobriety. Those periods of sobriety convinced him that he really didn't have a problem, that he had things under control and could stop drinking and drugging at will.

In 2005, Sisk hit bottom.

## A Common Refrain

It is a common refrain. While the stories addicts tell of their fall and recovery differ in the details, those stories often include a moment when something happens, when there is a realization that their life has reached its nadir.

For Stan, who asked to remain anonymous, that moment came on an international flight back to the United States, while he was attending law school. He had been out of the country on vacation and drank too much on a layover on the way home. He blacked out on the plane, but he had caused such a ruckus that he had to be restrained.

“It was hugely traumatizing,” Stan said. He had violated federal law by disrupting that flight, ended up in federal court, and was sent to counseling.

Stan moved to Richmond after law school and hired a lawyer to represent him on his character and fitness to join the bar. That lawyer sent him to LHL, where he met with James E. Leffler, then the executive director, who now is the clinical director focused on caring for referrals. “He told me what to do,” Stan said. “He said, ‘You’re going to be OK.’”

While the events that lead lawyers to LHL differ, clients’ praise for Leffler is universal. Sisk, for example, said, “Jim is excellent, he’s very responsive. He has been the core of the organization for many years.” He’s been a counselor, intake provider, office manager, and assessor. “He’s just been fabulous. And he’s brutally honest, with good humor.”

Asha S. Pandya is also in Leffler’s camp. She met with Leffler the day after she was arrested and charged with being drunk in public. “The fact that he knew that I needed to see him the next day was everything,” she said. “Who knows what would have happened if he had delayed. Even if it was just doing the testing, and his kindness. He knows what he needs to do and he does it immediately.”

### **False Security**

Pandya’s crisis came on February 4, 2012, when she was stopped by the police for driving under the influence. She was an assistant commonwealth attorney in Norfolk at the time, where she had worked for twelve years. She said in a recent interview that she should have been charged with DUI, which would have been her second — she had been convicted four years earlier.

Pandya, a long-time social drinker, was a black-out drunk by then.

“By the next week day at noon, I didn’t have a job anymore... At that point, I was absolutely devastated.”

A friend stepped in and talked to Judge Charles E. Poston about her situation. Poston was a long-time supporter of LHL, and he

told her to contact the organization. The next day, Leffler referred her to a therapist and asked her to attend an LHL meeting. From there, she started attending AA meetings. Thanks to the intervention of Poston and Leffler at LHL, Pandya has been sober since the day of her arrest.

Like many addicts, Pandya didn’t recognize her problem until she had to. “I thought I was different,” she said. “I’m a lawyer. I’m not just any other drunk.” Lawyers “convince ourselves that we’re better, we don’t need all of this.” Success, she said, lulls you into a sense of security.

### **Medication**

Oliver’s problems started in law school. He had been very ill for about two years, and no one could say what was wrong. There were doctors, hospitals, tests, and a lot of pain. The problem was finally diagnosed as a severe autoimmune disease, but by then he had endured years of pain and suffering.

Oliver, who asked to remain anonymous, said he was home for Christmas vacation from school when he suffered another nasty attack and went to the hospital. He was in the ER when a nurse “looked at me and asked, ‘Are you in pain?’” He was. “She put a shot in the IV. It was like night and day. I could finally not be in pain.”

The shot was a potent opioid.

Oliver went home from that visit with a diagnosis and a bottle of pills. Then things got worse. He developed further complications, which eventually were diagnosed as a second, aggravating autoimmune condition.

There were more drugs for more pain.

“By the time I returned to law school I was already hooked.” Oliver points out that he was never into recreational drug use. He grew up middle class, “under a rock,” as he put it. “I know nothing about the illicit side of obtaining drugs. And I thank God,” because if he did know how to get heroin, he believes he would have, and most likely would have died as a result.

By 2007, “My drug use was daily, and it was constant. The pills were as much of my daily routine as coffee. It was all very normal. It had the veneer of being sanctioned by doctors.”

Like many lawyer-addicts, he didn’t see himself as addicted. But he needed more and more of the pain killers to get by.

By 2012, “I had maxed out all of the doctors.” In his mind, he wasn’t an addict and was simply treating the pain, so, “I asked myself, how can I get more of these drugs?” He found a way to obtain more of the painkillers. “I was floored by how simple it was.”

“It seemed like the right thing to do because that’s how messed up I was in my head,” he said. “Denial is a feature of the disease.”

### **A Moment of Grace**

It all crashed down in late 2012, and a family member suggested he call Lawyers Helping Lawyers.

That’s when Leffler stepped in and asked whether he wanted to go to treatment. Oliver checked into an inpatient facility for drug treatment.

At that point, Oliver was sure his legal career was over. “I convinced myself I would be the best grocery store manager ever.”

But Leffler sat down in front of him at the center a couple of weeks later and told him, “You need to start planning to return to work.”

“It was a moment of grace,” Oliver said.

Oliver went back to work three months later. “I will forever be grateful for that, and for the second chance my employer offered to me.” He signed a contract with LHL, which he stayed on for an extra year “because I don’t want this to happen again.” He attends AA meetings.

He calls what LHL did for him “a priceless gift. I needed them and I didn’t even know about them. I credit LHL with saving my life.”

### **Saving Lives**

Others who have benefitted from LHL feel the same way.

What would have happened to Pandya without LHL?

“I can’t imagine because I wouldn’t have gotten into recovery,” she said. There had always been periods when she didn’t drink. But without recovery, she said she probably would have practiced law, relapsed, and ruined her professional career.

“I know people on contracts, and LHL saved their licenses, saved their lives,” she said. Today, she is a criminal defense lawyer in Norfolk.

Stan said, “I’m convinced I would have lost my law license without Lawyers Helping Lawyers.”

Stan signed a contract with LHL and was assigned a monitor. “For me, it was really transformative,” he said. When young lawyers enter the profession, “there is a huge transition. You don’t know what you’re doing.”

“The level of service a lawyer is obligated to provide is higher than in other jobs. . . If you’re a young lawyer, a lot of your illusions are going to be shattered.”

Without LHL, “If I had been able to practice law and was still drinking, I couldn’t have functioned. I’m really lucky.”

Sisk’s road to recovery was long. By 2005, “Nothing else mattered but drugging and drinking. . . I was just on a tear.” Sisk was homeless and an occasional inmate at The Healing Place, a shelter he had once supported as a successful lawyer. He was also arrested for multiple offenses, including writing bad checks, and his law license had been revoked.

“There is a level of insanity that can take over when a lawyer needs to convince himself it’s all right to keep drinking,” he said. A lawyer can turn the same skills he uses to persuade courts and negotiate with adversaries against himself when alcoholism or addiction hi-jacks his mental faculties.

In 2006, he went to drug court and then to meet with Leffler. He signed a contract that included monitoring, meeting requirements, and drug screening. His sobriety date is June 17, 2007.

By then, he was working for \$10 an hour at a legal copy firm.

By 2008, he was a paralegal, had an apartment, and was paying off his tax debt and making payments to catch up on his child support arrears.

George Hettrick recommended Sisk to Barbara Williams, who was then president of LHL. Sisk was hired as a conflicts analyst at McGuireWoods in 2011, and in 2012 applied to have his law license reinstated.

He has since resumed the practice of law as a senior conflicts attorney at McGuireWoods.

“I certainly would not have been readmitted to the Virginia State Bar without active assistance from Lawyers Helping Lawyers. . . Without a contract and testing, there would be reason to doubt my sobriety. The support has been incredible.”

This year, Sisk became the president of Lawyers Helping Lawyers.