

A Member's Powerful Story of Addiction, Surrender, Recovery and Hope

By Sean Corcoran

Editor's Note

Sean Corcoran is a young lawyer with a solo practice in Lake Charles. On June 27, 2018, Sean made an emotional and shocking Facebook post that “went viral” — in that it was shared more than 34,000 times and received more than 5,000 comments — because of its powerful message.

Before June 27, 2018, Sean's close friends, family, various doctors and the Bar Association knew of his younger years of drug addiction, and his recovery. But he kept the gruesome, raw and full truth to a council of very few — himself, trusted friends, and those doctors and counselors. The past was the past. With a young family, a thriving practice, and people who respected and depended on him, he knew that those distant days were in the rearview mirror — and, surely, no successful person would voluntarily bring those to bear before the world.

Today, Sean attributes the bottling up of his story to his own fear and the shame that our society places on addiction. Since his bottom days, he has made it:

he slipped free of the pain from his other life. He graduated from college, was president of the Student Bar Association at Louisiana State University Paul M. Hebert Law Center and has a successful family practice in Lake Charles.

The constant reminder of Sean's addiction was only the Judges and Lawyers Assistance Program-required counseling he still attends due to his conditional admission to the practice of law. Even that reinforced the shame. Still, in times of solitude and prayer, he knew that he should be proud and forthright. He knew God was telling him that his story of triumph over addiction could have meaning and give comfort to others.

On June 23, 2018, Sean received a call that a family member, a cousin, had died of a heroin overdose. The next day, he sat at his computer and started typing. His wife was at the beach with his two small children. On June 27, 2018, Sean posted this testimony (reprinted in this issue of the *Journal* with Sean's permission) on Facebook, including with that post the photo of his family that is featured in

his law firm advertisements on local billboards in Lake Charles. He cried. He boarded a plane for his cousin's funeral. He texted his wife and family that they should read his Facebook page. This would be the first time any of them would know just how close to the edge he had gone before pulling himself back and building a better life.

Despite writing it, Sean says he has never sat down and read the post from beginning to end. It instantly went viral. When he got off the plane in Atlanta, it had been shared thousands of times. It continued to spread across the world and eventually received more than 5,000 comments, 33,000 likes and 34,000 shares. In the months that followed, Sean has been featured in media, as a guest speaker, and an inspirational story for those struggling with addiction in their lives and families.

The Louisiana State Bar Association wishes to thank Sean for allowing the reprinting of his testimony and agreeing to a question-and-answer session about his experiences.

— Scott L. Sternberg

Sean Corcoran's story as posted on his personal Facebook page on June 27, 2018, at 8:40 a.m.

This is the picture of an addict.

I lay on the floor, alone in the dark, dying. My breathing was shallow and purposeful and took all of my energy and focus. With each breath I silently repeated the same prayer I had said dozens, if not hundreds, of times before — “God, please pull me out of this one last time.” It was not said out of a desire to live or to change, but out of a desire to protect myself and my family from the embarrassment of me being found dead this way. Somewhere on the floor near me was a broken light bulb with burnt methamphetamine residue, a lighter, and a straw used as a makeshift pipe.

Yes, this is real. This is my memory from sometime after dark on December 13, 2005. My childhood had been amazing. My parents had raised three children in the same way, with the same guidance, the same attention, and the same opportunities, and, at 27 years old, each of the other two were years into successful careers. I'm not sure what was so special about me that, at 27 years old, I was homeless, unemployed, desperately alone, and dying in the corner of a hotel room of an addiction to meth.

A lot happened leading up to that point, and a lot has happened since. For years I have felt God putting on my heart to share my experience, in case anyone needed to hear. But fear controlled me and kept me silent. Fear of embarrassment, stigma, isolation . . .

fear of how everything I have built since that time would be affected.

The recent attention to the suicides of Kate Spade and Anthony Bourdain brought these feelings back to the front of my mind. At first I was confused and upset upon hearing person after person in the media say the same thing, “I can't imagine what it is like to feel that way.” Though the words were said with a show of compassion, every time those words were said, each person watching who was at that point of hopelessness felt more alone and less like there was anyone who would understand them or what they were going through, perpetuating a cycle of despair. Suicide is the tenth leading cause of death in the United States. Nearly Forty-Five Thousand people commit suicide each year in America . . . 123 each day. And everyone who talks about it has no idea what it is like to feel that hopeless. That, my friends, is the power of stigma.

Eventually people started coming forward to talk about their own experiences with depression, anxiety, panic attacks, hopelessness, loneliness. I felt grateful that the ice was broken but was still reluctant to thrust myself into the conversation. The pull from God was getting stronger. Finally this past Saturday, it reached a head. It was clear that He was telling me that the time was here. On Sunday morning as I kneel in the church pew, I challenged Him one more time — “If this is really what you

want from me, show me. Let me clearly hear your call”

Sunday afternoon, while celebrating birthdays with family, we got the call. Someone close to us had overdosed. A housemate in the sober-living house he was staying in found him. He was taken to a hospital, but it was too late. Later today, I'll be boarding a plane en route to attend a funeral for someone whose number I had, but whom I never called . . . for someone whose addiction was known to me, but to whom I never reached out to say, “You're not alone. I've been where you are, and I know what you're going through. I know how hard it is and that it seems like there is nothing in front of you but impossible situations, and I know and am proof that it is possible to come out on the other side.”

In the nearly thirteen years that I have been in recovery, I have seen addicts rise high, and I've seen addicts fall hard. I've seen the disease take so much from amazing people, and I've seen it take so many lives. I know that I am not responsible for anyone else's recovery, whether successful or failing. I know that I am not responsible for this person's death. But I also know that unless people who are winning the fight against addiction in their own lives come forward and talk about it, the stigma and the cycle of solitude will continue in perpetuity. Which brings me here . . .

My childhood was as good as it

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gets. I was raised by devoted parents who are coming up on their 45th anniversary. I attended the best schools, learned musical instruments, played team and individual sports, was a boy scout, and while I wasn't spoiled with material things, my parents never said no if I asked to do something that would result in self-improvement. They attended every event that I or my siblings had, most of the time as a coach or otherwise active participant. I was never neglected and there is no single event, act, or period which can be pinpointed as the causation resulting in the future addict.

For me it wasn't the first drink, the first time I smoked weed, or the pain pills I got when my wisdom teeth were pulled. Alcohol, marijuana, and opiates either made me sick or dumb, or both. A less-than-stellar athlete, my brain was all I had, so I couldn't get enjoyment out of anything that slowed my mind. For me the hook was Adderall. With amphetamines, I was awake, alert, and hyper focused on whatever I wanted to do. I liked it so much that I used the Adderall I'd gotten from friends to research ADD to the point of having all the right answers for psychological testing to prove that I needed my own prescription.

Before long I was taking ten 30mg Adderall pills every day. I hardly ever slept, and was consequently always looking for something to do when nobody else was awake . . . except other people who didn't sleep. Nothing good ever happens after 2 a.m. I still remember the first time I tried cocaine. I remember everything about that night. I remember where I was, who I was with, what movie we watched,

what we talked about. It was nineteen years ago and I remember it much better than I remember yesterday. That was the greatest high of my life . . . and though I tried for years, I never was able to get to that point again.

Once I had done cocaine, and was seeking it out on a regular basis, there was really no reason to hold back. Ecstasy was next, and before long I was taking 5 or 6 Ecstasy pills every Thursday, every Friday, and every Saturday night. I'm sure the only thing holding me back Monday through Wednesday was that everyone else had to work and wouldn't do that on a work night. I had to work, too, though it didn't bother me as much, but I'd be damned if I was going to do drugs by myself . . . that's what addicts did.

It was easier to mask the high to the public if during the week I stuck to Adderall and cocaine. When meth came around, it was even better because the high lasted so long and was undetectable unless someone noticed my eighty-pound weight loss, huge dark circles under my eyes, or my newfound ability to clean and organize irrelevant things for hours at a time. I would take things apart just to fix them, even though they weren't broken. I never got to my car, but I witnessed friends with no automobile knowledge (and no instructional YouTube videos) dismantle their engines in an attempt to fix a problem that didn't exist.

I spent nights high lying on the couch wide awake peeking behind the curtains because I believed someone was out there who knew what I was doing and was getting ready to bust me. I became a slave to the drugs, working 18-20 hours

a day just to pay for my addiction. I spent six years systematically tearing apart every relationship I had with friends and with family. I made each person miserable and blamed them for all of it, until they got fed up and protected themselves by removing me from their lives. I lost jobs and I lost homes. I neglected everything else in my life. No, neglect isn't strong enough. I laid waste to everything in my life outside of my addiction.

The last four or five years of my active addiction, I didn't get high in the way that we generally define the word. There was physiological or biochemical reactions, but there was no euphoria or positive feelings, either physically or mentally. I was not continuing because I enjoyed the rush. I was continuing because I could not stop even though it was killing me. I was very aware that it was killing me. Paralysis, dangerously low blood pressure, inability to breathe . . . the worst possible physical feelings I have experienced coupled with a complete void in my mind and my soul. That was my life. Every. Day.

With Hurricane Rita came FEMA and free hotel rooms for people who knew how to get them. That's how I ended up in the corner of a crappy hotel room, by the bathroom, under the room's single remaining light . . . the only one I hadn't turned into a meth pipe . . . dying of an overdose. I wasn't scared to die. I truly believed I had no reason left to live. I was worthless. I was hopeless. I was stuck in a cycle of living just long enough to bring myself a little closer to death than the last time. My prayers for salvation were solely based in the fear of disappointing my family one more time . . . of giving them

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a lifetime of a last memory of my complete failure.

I had been at this point before. I had brought myself to the emergency room on several occasions and lied each time about my motivation for being there. I knew this time was different. I couldn't move. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't open my eyes. The curtains were closed, and the "Do Not Disturb" sign hung on the outside of the door where it had stayed for the previous two weeks. No one was looking for me. Nobody was going to find me. And I was out.

I don't know how long I was out. I don't know what happened or how I survived. I don't know what kind of work God did on my heart and soul during that time that motivated me to my next steps. I know that my motivation was still the same . . . to save my family from one last grand gesture of disappointment.

I left the hotel room and rummaged through my little truck which held every possession I had left. I found a pamphlet for a treatment center that someone had given me years before and I somehow hadn't lost. It was free, which was all I could afford. I called and they said they had a bed available.

I was able to convince someone to fill my truck with gas. Nobody was dumb enough to let me "borrow" cash anymore. I drove 200 miles in a beat down S-10 that hadn't had the privilege of an oil change in years. I broke down in the parking lot and had to push it into a spot. There was no hesitation. I walked right in. I knew that nothing could possibly be worse than the life I was currently living. They were expecting me.

My father had already called. He called to find out when my fam-

ily could come and what they could do to support the process I was beginning. I had spent years violently dismantling every positive connection that I had with my family and they stood there ready to welcome me back.

I spent 45 days in an inpatient treatment facility. I've spent twelve and a half years going to meetings, working with counselors, and actively fighting to ensure that I never return to that place of anguish and despair. I have been clean since December 13, 2005, but that's not where it ends. It takes a tremendous amount of work and slips and falls and get-back-ups, even without the chemicals in my system. I didn't just destroy everything around me, I destroyed who I was, and building that person back is no easy task.

Twelve and a half years later, and I have graduated from college and law school. I own two successful businesses, and am married to an amazing woman who is too good for me, is a beautiful mother, and a successful business owner in her own right. I have the two most perfect children who have ever existed. I will raise them using the example that was given to me, and I will do everything in my power to protect them from the demons that conquered me for so long.

Most importantly, I will talk to them about the past, in an effort to avoid its repetition. There is so much failure and sadness and hopelessness surrounding conversations of addiction. There is so much misunderstanding among those who have been blessed to never experience it in their own lives. As a recovering addict, it is so easy to want so badly to put that entire period of my life behind

me and ignore that it ever existed, and in doing so I am neglecting my responsibility to show others that there is hope. I have been blessed in my career to be able to counsel parents of addicts. Not one has ever come in with an attitude of anything other than "I want so badly for them to come out of it so that they can be a good parent to their children, but for now I need to protect the child."

It's too late for me to reach out to the person whose funeral I'll be attending tomorrow. But we as a country are not on the verge of solving this crisis, so it is not too late for me to reach someone else who may be struggling. If you are the family member or friend of someone dying from addiction and they have destroyed your relationship, text them and tell them you love them. I'm not suggesting forgive and forget. You have to protect yourself until they are ready to be who they were meant to be. Their recovery is not your responsibility. Their response to your message of love is not our responsibility. But it may get to them in a way that they can't express at this time and it may help them to save their own life.

And if you are a person struggling with addiction, please know that all is not lost. Hope and redemption are just on the other side of a whole lot of work and participation in changing your status quo. The people out there who loved you still love you. They are praying that God will help you because they feel their own hopelessness that they cannot do it themselves. They are waiting for the you that used to be to return to them. You are not alone. I am here and there are millions of stories like mine waiting to be heard. You are loved.

See Interview on page 334.

Q&A Interview with Sean Corcoran

Interviewed by Scott L. Sternberg

Sternberg: Sean, I've known you a long time. This post was as raw and emotional as I've ever seen you. How hard was this post to write?

Corcoran: It was really hard. It took three days to write. I wrote it out several times. I had to stop at times because I was having to wipe tears from my eyes just to see the screen. It wasn't something I thought I would want to relive.

Sternberg: Did your wife and family know about your addiction?

Corcoran: They all knew something, but this is the first time that I have ever sat down and said this is how bad it was. My mom never knew the extent of my addiction until the Facebook post.

Sternberg: You were scared.

Corcoran: Yes. I was scared. I was scared of the same thing that held me back for years — being judged, shame, people judging me, or worse, my family. People looking at me differently. In public. Behind closed doors.

Sternberg: So you wrote the post, and then what?

Corcoran: I cried for three hours. It was this huge mixture of fear, catharsis, of finally being free of that. From a personal standpoint, the most impactful thing that has come for me is complete freedom. I literally have nothing to hide. I now have less reservation about what people think of me, in general. Because I know that they already know my worst secrets. Life is easier.

Sternberg: I know you said your wife, Michelle, and your kids were at the beach. Did you tell her what you were

doing before you posted?

Corcoran: I texted her to let her know I had done it. She eventually read it, and we didn't talk about it for a few days. I think it just took her a long time to process it. She had the immediate concern I had: how are people going to act toward us now?

Sternberg: How long did it take for you to realize that your Facebook post meant something more for your friends and family?

Corcoran: When I arrived in Atlanta, it had been shared 2,000 times and it was going at something like 5 shares a second. I was just trying to figure out how fast it was happening and why. I post pictures of my kids all the time. They are beautiful, but it doesn't get shared that fast.

Sternberg: Did you stop and think to yourself, what if people don't walk through my door anymore?

Corcoran: I was not scared of losing my practice. There was a thought of: Would I be the drug addict lawyer? I wasn't scared of that. I've learned a lot through the process. I reminded myself that in 2005 I was homeless with nothing to my name, having failed out of college three times. If I lost this practice, I am 100 percent confident that I could start all over again and be so blessed.

Sternberg: Lake Charles isn't a small town but it's not a big one either. The legal community is tight-knit. What kind of reaction did you get?

Corcoran: The reaction has been overwhelmingly positive. Court staff, lawyers, people even stop me in gro-

cery stores. They pull me aside to tell me about their own addiction stories, family members. And they are whispering it so that the person on the other side of me doesn't hear them, but then that person on the other side whispers an identical story.

Sternberg: Is it an instant trust with someone who has an addiction story?

Corcoran: By baring it all, I built it. People trust that I am not going to judge them because I have been there. People know they are not alone. That's what I wanted when I hit "post."

Sternberg: The tragic loss of your cousin set you on the course to write, but who did you write the post for?

Corcoran: I wrote it hoping that one other person who was in my cousin's position right before he overdosed would read it. Or a friend would read it and say to someone else, we need to talk. I just imagined my cousin, in a room, dying of heroin, alone. I've been there. People don't have to be there.

Sternberg: You do a lot of family law. Is your struggle with addiction something you've brought into your counsel to clients?

Corcoran: I have had grandparents come in and say my daughter, my son is an addict and they are ruining their lives. I take those opportunities to tell them my story. I had never gotten into the gory details before, but I have told them that I was addicted to drugs and have been to treatment. There are times when my addiction story has given me the opportunity to ease clients' minds that they might not lose this person in their lives.

Sternberg: You said that you have never read the post from front to back, even though you wrote it. I believe you. That must have been very hard. Why won't you read it?

Corcoran: I'm scared of the emotion. It's an uncomfortable feeling to relive that. There's still shame. I think that's the power of the stigma. All of this, that's the power of the stigma that society has put on addiction. Even with the positive reaction, the radio, the news, talking about it over and over and the grocery store encounters, I still feel shame. It's very hard to relive it.

Sternberg: What can you do to be free of that shame?

Corcoran: The shame is what I was trying to change. If I had called my cousin and said, hey, I know what you are going through because I have gone through it. He would not have felt alone and maybe he would still be with us. It was a story of shame I wrote out of guilt. I wouldn't allow myself to hide that anymore. My hope was that if one person read it and it helped them to feel better, then I would feel that it was worth it no matter what else happened.

Sternberg: You told me that your wife sits in the front row of all of your speaking engagements. What do you tell people about your story during your speeches?

Corcoran: I think that every person in recovery can change lives by talking to people. I know that there is nothing super unique about my story. I know that because, being in recovery, I know doctors, lawyers, janitors, pharmacists, yoga instructors, financial advisors, and teachers who have been to the bottom and fought their way back and to their career heights.

Sternberg: How can you change people's lives?

Corcoran: The only thing that makes me unique is that I talked about it. If I can continue talking about it and empower someone else to not be afraid of talking about it, it can snowball, just build and build until there's not a stigma anymore. Then the kid who got his parents opiates

and now finds himself craving it all the time isn't going to be scared to ask for help.

Sternberg: You told me you had prayed about telling people about your addiction.

Corcoran: God is 100 percent the only reason that I had the courage to do it. I believe that this is what God was telling me to do. I went to church that Sunday morning and prayed about it. After church, I asked God to tell me very clearly. Then my Dad called to tell me about my cousin dying later that day. I knew it was God giving me my sign. I didn't have a choice at that point.

Sternberg: You just adopted a new baby. What will you tell your children about your story?

Corcoran: When the time is right, I'm going to be transparent. I believe that my children have the same genetic predisposition to addiction. My adopted child was born to a mother who was also addicted to amphetamines. Education is the best chance we have to help them avoid the place where I am.

Sternberg: What's the strangest thing that's happened to you since the post?

Corcoran: Other than adopting a baby? I was shocked at the correspondence I received from New Zealand, Australia, Ireland. The post really had some serious reach. It was God doing that work.

Sternberg: What should readers of the *Journal* take away from your experience?

Corcoran: We, as lawyers, have people come to us with their problems. They know that once they sit down with us we are under an obligation not to say anything. We are the person that people come to with their problems. We are the people they are going to come to and open up to. We have the ability to point them in the right direction and let them know they are not alone.

Sternberg: You want lawyers to talk more freely about addiction?

Corcoran: I want people to know they are not alone. Help their clients

know *they* are not alone. It's not just addiction. It's suicide. When we shame it, people don't talk about it either. When we don't talk about it, people think it's just them with problems. It's not.

Sternberg: What can society do to be better about treating addicts and accepting those who are rehabilitated?

Corcoran: What we have done is we have made it into a moral thing versus a disease. We need to stop looking at this like good vs. bad. Addiction is a chronic brain disease. I was an addict before I did drugs. I had a predisposition to addiction.

Sternberg: You have been on the news, the radio, in print. I know you've maintained your practice as well. Is this what you thought you'd be doing with your time when you finished law school?

Corcoran: Of course not. But in my mind, I know that I shouldn't be alive. I know that I shouldn't have been to law school after failing out of college three times. I know that I should not be successful. I have always believed that God has a plan for me. Maybe God's plan had nothing to do with my business. Maybe it had to do with providing a different platform to have this conversation about addiction. It resonates more. If I hadn't gone to law school, or graduated college, people wouldn't listen. Maybe this is what all of that was all about.

Sean Corcoran is a divorce and child custody attorney and a licensed family law mediator in Lake Charles. He is owner of Corcoran Law Firm, L.L.C. He has three children and is married to Dr. Michelle Swift Corcoran.



Scott L. Sternberg is a partner in the firm of Sternberg, Naccari & White, L.L.C., in New Orleans. He is currently serving as chair-elect of the Louisiana State Bar Association's Young Lawyers Division and is a member of the Louisiana Bar Journal's Editorial Board. (scott@snw.law; Ste. 402, 643 Magazine St., New Orleans, LA 70130)

