

Alcoholism

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Victim Quote:

"I've known Mike and his family for fifteen years. Our daughters are good friends. We have common friends in this courtroom right now, and it really pains me. I'm sure his family feels the same devastation my family has felt. But . . . when I look at Mike I don't see him as a victim of gambling addiction. I see him as a cold, calculating criminal."

I was sitting in front of my favorite \$100 slot machine. Outside the casino, it was a dreary winter's day. Weeks had passed since there had been a glimmer of sunlight. The feeling of depression was palpable.

Inside the casino, the VIP slot area was bright and alive with the promise of hope and a chance for redemption. The room glowed with colorful lights, and the clanging of bells rang out with the possibility of future jackpots for all who played. Players sat at different machines with their good luck charms in full display—from a rabbit's foot to a picture of a grandchild. The extremely pious taped religious relics to their favorite one-armed bandits. A simple pull of the lever created an opportunity to win back all money lost. As long as the player had tokens, the player had hope.

Only one carrousel offered \$100 slot machines and there were five machines on that carrousel. I had hit jackpots on three of them and was playing a fourth while waiting to be paid my \$120,000.

Hitting each jackpot only kindled my craving for more. While waiting for the payout, I put in two tokens at a time, pulling the

lever as fast as I could. A casino host who knew me well approached from behind. He knew that I had been losing heavily for months and wanted to encourage me to win even more on this day. He leaned over and whispered in my ear, "Remember, Burke, it's never enough." He had uttered the single greatest truth faced by all addicts.

For the second time in my life, an addiction threatened to take away everything that was dear to me. The first was twenty-five years ago. How could this all be happening again?

I come from a long line of distinguished attorneys. My grandfather, George Burke Sr., was a partner in the Burke Law Firm, the oldest active law firm in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Following the Second World War, he received an appointment as judge at the Nuremberg Trials, where he heard numerous cases involving German war criminals. After the trials concluded, he returned to the United States with significant political clout.

My father was the second oldest of five children, the one destined to carry on the family legal tradition. After completing his undergraduate studies at the University of Michigan, he attended law school at the University of Detroit, after which he joined his father's firm. Dad soon discovered that he did not enjoy general practice, so my grandfather used some of his political clout to assist Dad in finding a new job. He contacted the governor of Michigan, G. Mennen "Soapy" Williams, and asked if there were any positions in state government that would be suitable for my father. As a result of that meeting, my father received a lifetime appointment, serving as the head of the Michigan Liquor Control Commission. The new job meant that our family would have to relocate, so we moved from Ann Arbor, finally ending up in the small community of Howell. It was there that my nine brothers and sisters and I were raised.

Thanks in part to our Irish Catholic background and my father's position with the state, drinking in our home was part of our

lifestyle. In fact, it was not just condoned but actively promoted as part of our family heritage. However, we were regularly warned that it was unacceptable to be involved in any drinking behavior that might cause embarrassment for our father. Fortunately, this was not a problem for me because I had been born with an exceptionally high tolerance, which meant I could drink large quantities of alcohol and not appear intoxicated. Yet, from the very first time I drank, my drinking was different from that of others; I did not especially care for the taste, but I loved the effect it had on me.

At Hillsdale College, my time was equally divided between playing football and drinking. No drinking was allowed during the football season, and anyone caught violating the rule would lose his scholarship, so I never drank during the season. The rest of the year, however, was a different story. I drank a lot, but due to my high tolerance, most of my buddies never knew exactly how much I was drinking. They did know, however, that I was a good friend to have around—the one who would make sure they got home safely after a night of partying. Alcohol worked extremely well for me in my college years.

On August 2, 1968, I married Jane, my high school sweetheart, who was a senior at the University of Michigan. Her father was an attorney in Howell who had been practicing for over fifty years. In 1973, he saw some articles on a new law school opening in Lansing and requested all the necessary material needed to file an application for admission. He was so excited about the possibility of me attending law school that he offered to pay all my expenses. It was the opportunity of a lifetime, and we were ecstatic. It made good sense to both of us that I would become a lawyer and carry on the family tradition.

Those who lack the desire or ability to survive that first year of law school are quickly weeded out. The amount of work is overwhelming, and I realized that all of my time would have to be devoted to studies if I was going to succeed. My fear was that if I continued to drink in my normal manner, I probably would not

make it through the first year, so I decided to quit. As it turned out, abstaining from alcohol was not as difficult as I had feared. I was so busy that I hardly missed it. Eventually, I successfully completed the year and was pretty much assured of obtaining a law degree. In my second year of law school, I resumed drinking, but my patterns changed as well as the amount I consumed. I found myself stopping at the bar *every night*.

Despite my growing dependence on alcohol, I graduated from law school. The day of my swearing-in ceremony was one of the best of my life, with family and friends in attendance. Some of my colleagues and family members spoke. I was overwhelmed by a sense of history and family heritage as I took the Lawyers' Oath, one I would eventually betray.

I loved being a general practitioner, and the practice of law was exhilarating. Each day meant new things to learn and new challenges to overcome. I loved the contact with clients and other attorneys, and nothing was more exciting than being involved in settlement negotiations or resolutions of disputes on behalf of my clients. A small general practice is never boring because you have no idea what type of case is coming through the door next.

As my practice began to grow, I was aware that alcohol was taking a more dominant role in my life. I still was unable to admit I had a drinking problem, but for the second time, I made a decision to give it up. This time, in an effort to make my decision irrevocable, I told my friends and family I was going to stop drinking. However, I could not keep this promise because I had become physically addicted. My only option was to lie.

From that point on, I felt forced to be a "closet drinker" and found I was able to survive the day on one pint of vodka. As long as I had access to my pint, I could meet with clients, go to court, and navigate from one end of the day to the other. Alcohol became my daily medication, taken in secret, with my alcoholic symptoms still not visible to family, friends, or associates.

This solution seemed to work for quite a while, but then, one frigid January morning, I had to go to court to finalize a divorce.

The parties had agreed in advance to all the terms, and all I had to do was place their agreement on the record. In legal jargon, lawyers call this “putting on the proofs.” After arriving at the courthouse, I decided not to have a drink before going inside. I felt confident I could handle this situation without the assistance of alcohol—but I was wrong. Upon entering the courtroom, my client took the stand to be sworn. All I had to do was ask her a few questions and present the judge with a written judgment. However, I couldn’t do it. My hands were shaking, I was sweating profusely, and I couldn’t get the words out. The judge saw I was having problems, so he put the proofs on for me and granted my client a judgment of divorce. After the hearing was over, I went back into the judge’s chambers. As I tried to apologize for what had happened in court, the judge told me not to worry about it. He had seen young attorneys suffer stage fright many times, and it was nothing to be concerned about; he was confident that it would never happen again.

When I returned to my car, I leaned over, reached under the passenger seat, and grabbed my pint of Gordon’s vodka. The pint was ice-cold from the frigid weather. I can still recall the wonderful feeling as I raised it to my lips and took a swallow. It burned as it ran down my throat, but it was a wonderful burn. As I sat in the car, I made a promise to myself that I would never allow this to happen again. I swore I would never again go to court without having a drink first. Alcohol was now interfering with my ability to perform as an attorney.

I knew that if I purchased alcohol at the same store every day some people might start to believe I had a drinking problem. To make sure this did not happen, I found nine or ten different party stores where I could make my purchase. On my way to court one morning, I stopped to get a bottle. As I entered the store, there were three women standing in line waiting to purchase groceries, so I started to walk past them to take my place at the end of the line. The clerk recognized me and immediately stopped what he had been doing and pulled a pint of vodka off the wall. He then put it in

a brown paper bag and handed it between two of the women to me. I took the bottle in my left hand and just happened to have the \$2.80 in my right hand, the exact cost for the pint of vodka. I was totally humiliated. As I got in my car and drove away, I told myself I would never again purchase anything at that store. Still, by the end of that week, I was back buying another pint.

Shortly after that episode, I experienced the alcoholic's worst nightmare—my tolerance suddenly decreased. I now was getting drunk on the same pint of vodka that used to help get me through the day. Problems started arising at home as well as at work due to my blackouts and other physical symptoms. A dull, aching depression entered my life, and the only release from that pain came when I was drinking.

I decided I needed to make a geographic change and start my life over. One morning after my wife left the house to go to work, I drove to my office and prepared a quitclaim deed transferring ownership of our home to her. I returned to the house and left her a note saying I was leaving. I took \$2,500 out of our joint savings account and decided to move to Las Vegas, Nevada. I wanted to be in a place where I could have a good time again.

The last memories I have of that morning were packing my suitcase and leaving the house. Everything that happened in the following twenty-four-hour period was erased from my memory because of an alcohol-induced blackout. The next thing I recall was waking up the following day in McCarran Airport in Las Vegas. I was sitting between two police officers, trying to explain how I had been robbed of all my money. I told them that when I arrived, my intention was to walk from the airport to the casinos, but on the way I was robbed at gunpoint by two men. One of the officers said that he did not believe me; in all the years he had worked in Vegas he had never heard of anyone walking *from* the airport *to* the casinos. Visitors always take a bus, taxi, or limousine to travel the five miles. However, he stated that he was aware that some unlucky visitors had to walk from the casinos back to the airport.

I told them I didn't want to argue anymore; I only wanted to call my wife and ask her to wire me a ticket to fly home.

The flight back to Detroit was one of the longest trips of my life. I had no cash, so I couldn't buy any alcohol, I hadn't bathed in two days, and I was starting to go through withdrawal. When I arrived in Detroit, I was met by two attorney friends who came to drive me home. Neither one of them talked to me on the one-hour drive from the airport. I stared at the backs of their heads, wondering what awaited me when we arrived at the house.

Once I arrived home, my wife calmly explained to me that if I wanted to continue in the marriage, I would have to enter an inpatient rehabilitation program and deal with my problem. By this time we had been happily married for nine years, the only real problems occurring in the past few months as a result of my drinking. I told her I did not want the marriage to end and agreed to seek help.

In April 1977, following my aborted trip, I entered Brighton Hospital, where I was forced to meet my demons. It was the best-known facility in Michigan for dealing with alcohol abuse. It offered a thirty-day inpatient program, with medical support, group therapy, and lectures. There, I was able to survive the physical effects of withdrawal, and thanks to the counseling, I was able to accept the fact that I am an alcoholic. One of my favorite lectures was presented by Dr. Russell Smith, a world-renowned speaker on alcoholism. He talked to us about the dangers of cross-addiction and how we must guard against trading an addiction to alcohol for some other addiction after we left treatment. He warned us: "If you can smoke it, inject it, snort it, swallow it, or roll it [dice in gambling], you are the people who can become addicted to it." This lecture, like most of the talks I heard at Brighton Hospital, made perfect sense at the time.

My life turned around due in large part to Brighton Hospital. Within a year after I finished the program, our first child was born, and we were a family. Five years later, our second child was born, and she made us the perfect family. Our daughters were raised in

a house of love. Everything about raising them was fun, and every day with them was better than the day before.

In the following years, I became involved in many community-based activities. I felt a responsibility to give back to the community that had been so good to me. I was on the boards of the county United Way and the ARC (formerly known as the Association for Retarded Citizens) as well as the Livingston County Counseling Board. I was a founder of Howell Public Schools Citizens Advisory Committee, and the cochair of three Howell Public School millage campaigns.

Shortly after completing the Brighton Hospital program, I made the decision to leave the firm I had been with and become a sole practitioner. My practice became one of the best in the county. My client base was comprised mostly of alcoholics or the families of alcoholics. I learned important lessons from these people: Alcoholics always must have traumatic events going on in their lives. The traumas create “smoke,” and people close to the alcoholic watch that and fail to look at the person. These clients came to me seeking representation, and I would immediately send them to obtain help for their problems.

I sent so many people to Brighton Hospital over the years that they put me on their board of directors. My clients would enter the inpatient program, learn how to deal with their addiction, resolve their legal problems, and in many instances reclaim their lives. Thanks to the program at Brighton Hospital, my own life was almost perfect—except for one thing. Because I had not paid close enough attention to the advice of Dr. Smith against trading one addiction for another, I ended up celebrating my twenty-fourth, twenty-fifth, and twenty-sixth years of sobriety in Jackson Prison. I am a compulsive gambler.