

What the Alcoholic Owes to Marty Mann

Out of Her Suffering Has Been Born a Network of Hope and Help for Thousands.

by Floyd Miller

In January 1963, Reader's Digest published a story by Floyd Miller titled "What the Alcoholic Owes to Marty Mann. Out of her suffering has been born a network of hope and help for thousands. The article is available at Silkwood.net, a website that provides historical writings, documents, letters, events, people, places and references through-out the history of Alcoholics Anonymous.

An ashen-faced man in search of help made his way into a quiet office on New York's upper Fifth Avenue. He was an alcoholic, and he poured out his despairing story to a handsome woman in her 50's who sat behind a large desk. After a few moments he paused, spread his hands helplessly and said, "its difficult to make you understand how I feel."

"Oh, but I know exactly how you feel, " she said. "I, too, am an alcoholic. I wouldn't be here if I hadn't gone through the valley of the shadow."

The woman was Mrs. Marty Mann, executive director of the National Council on Alcoholism, a voluntary health organization she founded 18 years ago. A remorseless crusader against ignorance and prejudice concerning alcoholism, she has been largely responsible for the fact that the nation's attitude toward the "drunkard" is changing, that alcoholism is now recognized as a disease and that thousands of our five million alcoholics are today being successfully treated. (Only one drinker out of 15 or 16 develops alcoholism. Like an iceberg, the symptoms are below the surface at first; but the disease progresses relentlessly until the victim, once he takes a drink, stops only when he is too drunk to continue. It usually takes 10 to 15 years of drinking for a potential alcoholic to acquire the disease full-blown. If un-checked, it can end only in insanity or death.)

On the lecture platform Marty Mann is electric. Her handsomeness is deepened by marks of suffering, and she summons up a power of purpose that transfixes her audience. Her husky voice speaks of reasoned facts, but with a spirituality that drives them hard into the hearts as well as the minds of those who hear.

Once in Jacksonville a man awoke in a hotel room after a week of drinking, turned on the radio and

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heard Marty Mann speaking from New Orleans. "No alcoholic wants to be the way he is," she was saying. "Alcoholics are not bums. They are sick, and they can recover from this disease just as from others."

The words penetrated the man's numbed brain, and for the first time he began to hope. He picked up the phone, called the radio station and asked to speak to the woman who had just broadcast. Marty not only talked with him; she put him in touch with someone in Jacksonville who could give him immediate help.

Marty Mann can supply almost immediate help from coast to coast through NCA's network of affiliates operating Alcoholism Information Centers in 74 cities. Without charge and without humiliation, the alcoholic or his family can telephone or come to these centers for consultation and referral. Depending on the individual's condition and need, he is sent to a doctor, a hospital, a clinic or to Alcoholics Anonymous.

Science now believes that two basic conditions must be present to make a person prey to alcoholism: an emotional vulnerability, and a body chemistry which makes him sensitive to the alcohol he consumes in an effort to ease his emotional stresses. Marty Mann's own case demonstrates these concepts with classic simplicity.

Born to a wealthy Chicago family, she went to the best private schools. As a debutante she entered a world that was all champagne and caviar. In her set it was gay and smart to go to New Orleans for the Mardi Gras. On the spur of the moment she married a young man she met there; she was 22. A year later tuberculosis, with which she had had a bout as a child, flared up, and she went to a Western ranch for both recovery and divorce.

Though she did not realize it until much later, her real descent into the hell of alcoholism began when she was 24, the year her father lost his fortune. Suddenly thrust against the buzz saw of life, she went to New York to look for a job. She moved into a small Greenwich Village flat with two other young women, and if there were days when they were without food, they were seldom without bootleg whiskey. For this was the Roaring Twenties.

Marty got a job reviewing books, and then became an editor of a glossy magazine. Her talent was apparent and her career well launched, but so was her social life. A writer who squired her to

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speakeasies and flamboyant parties of the era recalls with awe, " I can't remember dating a more beautiful and intelligent girl. And she could drink any man under the table. A hollow leg, that girl!"

A high alcohol tolerance - the ability to drink a lot without showing signs of drunkenness - is one of the early symptoms of alcoholism. Others soon followed for Marty. She became dependent on alcohol in order to enjoy a party; then dependent on it to cope with difficult events.

The death of her grandmother brought a small inheritance, and Marty quit her job and travelled to London. She was as sought after there as in New York, for she was bright, witty, the gayest of companions.

Now the first drink of the day was advanced to noontime and became increasingly important. Also, she began to drink surreptitiously at parties, belting down two while others were taking one. And she began to have memory blackouts. Then, in 1931, her tolerance for alcohol reversed. She began getting drunk on lesser and lesser amounts.

"What has happened to you?" her friends demanded. "Why can't you drink the way you used to?"

No one asked these questions more urgently than Marty. What frightened her most was the fact that, despite the most desperate exercise of will, she could not cut down her drinking.

One summer afternoon in 1934, at a weekend houseparty in the country, she had the blind staggers and had to be led upstairs to sleep it off. Her bedroom opened on a small balcony. Below was a paved courtyard. Marty was only vaguely aware of the events that followed. She never knew whether she fell or jumped. Even the moment of impact on the cruel stones was mercifully fogged by alcohol. She fractured her leg at the hip and broke both hinges of her jaw.

After having her leg in traction for six months, she recovered from the accident - but not from her drinking. Her inheritance gone, she got jobs and lost them. Now she huddled in a secluded corner of Hyde Park, sipping from a bottle. There one day a friend found her and begged her to do something about herself. "Maybe you should go back to New York, " she suggested.

This struck a response in Marty's dulled mind. Typical of the later stages of alcoholism is the desperate conviction that a geographical change will somehow work a cure. Marty borrowed

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money and sailed for New York. But the transfer only changed the location of her drinking.

In rare moments of clarity she was completely disgusted with herself, and concluded that she must be insane. She went to a series of psychiatrists, none of whom would accept her as a patient after she described her drinking. The only suggestion the doctors could make was that she commit herself to a mental institution. This compounded her fears, and she returned to alcohol for forgetfulness.

Some hard, brave corner of her mind refused to give up the search for help, however, and finally Dr. Harry Tiebout agreed to take her, free of charge, as a resident patient in Blythwood Sanitarium in Connecticut. Here, for a year, she had regular psychiatric sessions, but the doctors remained baffled.

One morning Dr. Tiebout brought a manuscript to her. "This was written by people like you," he said. "They seem to have found a way out of trouble. Perhaps it can help you. Let me know what you think of it."

She began to read slowly, skeptically. As she read on, her skepticism gradually began to lift, to be replaced by a mounting excitement. These people were drunks; they had suffered just as she had suffered, and they had survived!

She discovered that her ailment had a name - it was called "alcoholism." It seemed a blessed thing just to have a name pinned to her. As she read on the fog of fear and ignorance began to part, and she learned that alcoholism was a disease! They described it as "an allergy of the body coupled with an obsession of the mind." She learned that the "allergy" was irreversible and that the affected person could never put alcohol into his sensitized system. The "obsession" was that the alcoholic was driven to take a drink despite his knowledge that disaster waited.

What was the answer?

It came with stunning simplicity: she must discard attempts at moderate drinking; she must give up all drinking. But wasn't this beyond her power? The manuscript spoke of God's help. Through the recent hellish years, though, she had lost God. Now, suddenly, she knew for a certainty: He could help her.

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As she pondered this, something happened that she cannot fully explain. She seemed to lose the upper-most level of consciousness, and when she regained it she found herself on her knees beside her bed, her pillow wet with tears. And through her body surged a feeling of serenity and soaring confidence such as she had never known.

She ran to Dr. Tiebout to tell him what had happened. "have I lost my mind? Am I insane?" she demanded.

Thoughtfully, he said, "Something very real has happened. Let us watch and learn together."

They did watch and learn. The road back to health was difficult, but Marty was never again to feel alone, to know despair. Old friends noted the difference in her appearance; there was a new radiance about her. She explained, "You let God in, and He comes out of you."

Within a year she had an excellent job, but she knew now that her life would have real meaning only if she served other sufferers. Alcoholics Anonymous was helping many, but it could assist only those who sought it out. Most alcoholics were hidden, closed in by their ignorance and fear and shame. Marty dreamed of a vast program of education that would remove the stigma from alcoholism and allow alcoholics and their families to seek help openly, without shame; a program that would marshal sufficient public interest and support to provide adequate diagnostic and treatment facilities.

One February night at 3 a.m., Marty got out of bed, went to her typewriter and outlined a plan of action, which was to become the National Council on Alcoholism. It was presented to a group of scientists who had founded the Yale Center of Alcohol Studies. They underwrote it financially. On October 2, 1944, the NCA opened a modest suite of offices in the New York Academy of Medicine at 2 East 103rd Street.

Marty now found support for her dream from many sources. Within five years the NCA was able to function without the subsidy from the Yale group, and took its place as a full-fledged voluntary health organization. The bulk of its money came, as it does today, from individuals gifts. The council now employs 45 persons in national headquarters, and its affiliates across the country employ 150 full- time counselors in the Alcoholism Information Centers.

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Inquiries flood into the NCA, and since each represents a personal need, it receives a personal answer, many from Marty herself. Besides, Marty travels more than 50,000 miles each year, speaking at meetings of all kinds, appearing on TV and radio. Largely because of NCA's educational work, more than 80 large corporations have established procedures to handle their problem drinkers as sick persons; the AFL-CIO has installed programs in unionized industries and shops; some 3000 general hospitals now accept acute cases.

Most important, out of Marty Mann's suffering has been born a network of hope and help immediately available to any lost or frightened individual. In the areas served by the NCA's Information Centers, no man or woman need face his illness alone - he has only to lift the telephone.

(Source: Reader's Digest, January 1963)