

30 Years Sober: A Tale of a Law Firm Leader

In an act of vulnerability, Husch Blackwell chairman Greg Smith described his struggles with alcoholism at a partner retreat, an act meant to bring those grappling with addiction and mental illness out of the shadows.

By Dylan Jackson
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Less than five minutes after Husch Blackwell Chairman Greg Smith began addressing lawyers at the firm's 2019 partner retreat, it became apparent that this would not be your typical speech filled with corporate platitudes.

"I stand before you as an alcoholic with 31 years of sobriety," Smith announced almost casually from behind a lectern at the retreat in Dallas.

"I've never talked publicly about it," Smith continued amid applause.

He started from the beginning, describing how he drank heavily in college and continued into private practice, finding success and recognition at Husch Blackwell. By then, drinking had become ingrained into his sense of self, he said. He shared drinks frequently with clients and colleagues and developed the well-worn reputation as a "hard-charging, hard-drinking" attorney.

His personal life told another story. By the time of his sixth year at Husch Blackwell, his marriage had fallen apart. His custody battle did not go well, given that he was, "quite frankly, a lousy father" to his 3- and 5-year-old kids, he told his colleagues. Even then, the lines between his addiction, success and failures blurred.

"Drinking was so much a part of the fabric of my everyday life, socially and professionally," Smith said. "How in the world was I going to succeed if I was not drinking as I had before?"

He reasoned that seeking help would make him seem weak, a label he sought to avoid at all costs. He figured he could channel into his personal life the willpower that



Husch Blackwell Chairman Greg Smith

courtesy photo

brought him professional success. He set all sorts of rules to stem his drinking—rules he quickly broke.

So, after seven years of practicing law at Husch Blackwell, and three years trying to quit drinking, he did what many attorneys would consider unthinkable: At the age of 33, he put his career on hold for a year. He still went to work, but it was no longer his priority. He made time for his children. He sought counselors and began attending meetings.

"The shocking thing about this was how much my professional life improved without me trying," he said. "Basically, when you acknowledge your humanity and flaws, when you subjugate your ego and you try to live a balanced life, it's amazing how much better an adviser, a trusted confidant you are to the people you represent."

Success in his professional life followed. Nearly three decades after he stopped drinking, Smith assumed the top

job at the Am Law 200 firm where he began his career, a position he has held for the last two and a half years.

Moved by the rising din surrounding mental health in the law, Smith says he told his story at the partner retreat not to brag about his success but to show that vulnerability is acceptable and quash, at least in his own firm, one of the biggest obstacles many see in mental health wellness: stigma and the culture of silence around mental illness.

Smith is not the only recovering addict working in Big Law, but he is one of few who have made their recovery public. Even rarer is the fact that Smith is publicly acknowledging his addiction while chairing an Am Law 200 firm.

After his speech, Smith was mobbed by attendees who came to him with stories of their own, of their family, of their friends. Smith has made several referrals to the firm's employee assistance program. Husch Blackwell, like many firms today, has numerous wellness programs. Last year, it signed onto the American Bar Association's well-being pledge.

A 2016 study conducted by the ABA and the Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation found that attorneys suffer from mental health disorders at a higher frequency than the general population: 21% of employed attorneys qualify as problem drinkers; 28% show signs of depression; and 19% exhibit signs of anxiety.

"We have to quit whispering about this problem," he said. "I can't tell you how many people talked to me about their own issues. Once you pull the curtain back, it's a whole different environment. I think it's important for people in leadership positions to talk about this."

But stigma has become a stubborn obstacle, as firm leaders struggle to get their attorneys to seek help and use the programs they increasingly offer. Experts say it begins in law school as students fear what a mental illness disclosure would mean for the character and fitness portion of the Bar, as well as what it signals to future employers.

Like Smith, Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld chairwoman Kim Koopersmith has found it effective to bring in her own personal experiences to break down these walls.

At a mental health panel at Legalweek New York 2020 this month, Koopersmith said she frequently speaks to her attorneys about wellness, finding that sharing personal stories about herself and family helps show others that everyone is vulnerable.

"It's fundamental to talk about yourself," Koopersmith said. "It's important for people to know that it's happening in everybody's life and that it's OK."

Faegre Drinker Biddle & Reath insurance chairman Stephen Serfass, a recovering alcoholic, has acted as an informal counselor to his colleagues as well. He finds that his past allows him to find common ground with those in his firm who are struggling, even outside of the realm of mental health and addiction.

"I had an associate on my team who was struggling in his marriage. He had online affairs. I don't have that in my past, but being a drunk means I've done some rotten things. Having that experience gives me humility, and when I'm able to share my work and the baggage from my past, it helps because it breaks down walls and people become more comfortable," Serfass said.

Serfass believes that Smith's speech, or any action taken by a person in power that demonstrates personal vulnerability, is far more effective than any single program or initiative, especially in light of the fact that he does not think the pressures and stresses of Big Law—the long hours and constant barrage of emails—will ever subside.

"I don't think there's anything that a law firm can do to change the culture of the law firm—the grind," he said. "No, I don't think that's going to happen. But if everybody in my law firm is aware that Serfass and a random, say, eight or so people in these offices have struggled with alcohol or drugs and have found ways to thrive in this profession sober, they're more likely to talk and not suffer in silence."

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