## **State of Mind**

How the Sheeran-Crowley Memorial Trust created to help attorneys suffering from addictions and mental problems—is saving lives.

BY MICHAEL LEE

## "Life sucks, and then you die."

As I entered my 30s, stuck in the morass of an alcoholic pit, this bumper sticker philosophy became my personal motto. Fortunately for me—and for my wife and children, my employer, my friends, and the other lawyers in the cases I was handling—in September 1993, I landed in the rooms of a certain 12-step fellowship. A few months later, I was introduced to Lawyers Concerned for Lawyers (LCL). I became active in both, and, as a result, I now have gone two decades without the need to take a drink of alcohol to get through the day.

## "Life no longer sucks. And, I'm still alive."

In 1999, an LCL friend talked to me about something called the Sheeran Trust. She explained that she was one of the three trustees, but that professional commitments were requiring her to step aside from the role. She inquired whether I would consider allowing her to nominate me as her successor. Fortunately, I said yes. The remaining trustees selected me to serve as one of their number. Fourteen years later, I still find a great deal of personal fulfillment in my service.

The Patrick D. Sheeran and Michael J. Crowley Memorial Trust was created in October 1995 by members of Lawyers Concerned for Lawyers around the state. The trust is named in memory of the first director of the Texas Lawyers' Assistance Program (TLAP) and an Austin attorney who was known for his tireless outreach and help to attorneys suffering from alcoholism and addiction. The trust exists for the purpose of assisting attorneys impaired by alcoholism, addiction, substance abuse or dependence, depression, or other mental disorders, by paying for the treatment of their disorder or otherwise achieving recovery. Sadly, a large number of those engaged in our profession suffer from alcoholism, addiction, substance abuse or dependence, depression, and a variety of other mental disorders. For most of them, life sucks on a daily basis. Too many of them die way too early. Others die a slow death in various institutions. The "Disciplinary Actions" section of this publication is filled monthly with their names. Many of them need professional mental health care or treatment.

But the reality is that those who most need professional mental health care or treatment often are those without the means to pay for it. This is where the trust can step in to help. When a lawyer (licensed or not) is referred to TLAP, the professional staff attempts to determine what services might be appropriate to assist the lawyer to achieve recovery. Often, this results in a referral to a local 12-step fellowship or a local LCL group, for which there is no cost. But sometimes the road to recovery requires a certain period of inpatient or outpatient therapy. Sometimes recovery requires additional medical care. Sometimes recovery requires medication. When the recovery path requires these external services, and if the lawyer does not have access to resources (such as savings or insurance) to pay for the services, TLAP staff will often turn to the trustees to determine if the trust can provide the financial assistance to cover all or part of the cost.

The trustees do not determine whether there is a medical need for the services—we are attorneys, not medical professionals. We review the requests as they come to us through TLAP to determine whether the requests fall within the purposes of the trust. If so, we order a bequest from the trust, within the confines of the trust's guidelines.

In a recent two-year period, the trust made 41 grants for services, including a mix of inpatient and outpatient treatment, medications, counseling, and psychotherapy. The bequests were for any number of conditions—drug addiction, alcoholism, depression, and other mental disorders. The dollar amount for those 41 bequests was \$80,500; and, at the end of the two-year period, just over \$65,000 of those bequests had actually been paid out to health care providers.

As trustees, we do not track individual recipients of trust bequests. In fact, within our internal correspondence and in our correspondence with TLAP staff, we refer to applicants only by first name and last initial. However, it does happen that we often know the recipients of trust bequests through our activity in LCL, and TLAP staff typically follows attorneys who are started on the road to recovery by their referral to TLAP. So, I thought some examples of what the trust can help accomplish might be in order.

(Note: The attorneys referenced below will remain anonymous, but they have given express permission to have some of the facts of their cases mentioned in this article.)

**Attorney No. 1:** My first example is an attorney who was a successful Central Texas practitioner. This attorney slogged through an 18-month effort to stay sober, with some periods of success that were followed by periods of relapse. These efforts seemingly ended in a suicide attempt, which fortunately was unsuccessful. TLAP staff and volunteers had been working with the attorney during the effort to achieve sobriety, and TLAP intervention got the attorney to the hospital for emergency care following the suicide attempt. Physicians at the hospital recommended inpatient treatment for the attorney's alcoholism and underlying depression. By this time, the attorney's practice had been destroyed, and there was no insurance, no income, and no support system.

The TLAP staff worked with the admissions office of a local treatment facility, which ultimately agreed to admit the attorney for a month of inpatient treatment in return for a payment of \$5,000, the maximum bequest authorized by our trust guidelines. The trustees approved the payment, and the attorney went from the initial hospital straight to the treatment facility. The attorney was subsequently discharged from the treatment facility upon successful completion of the month stay.

Some months later, a newcomer came to our Dallas LCL meeting. The attorney talked about gratitude for life, support, friends, and the ability to still practice law, which the attorney attributed to the support and intervention from TLAP and the ability to go to inpatient treatment, thanks to the Sheeran Trust.

This attorney recently obtained a family law job with a well-known attorney.

**Attorney No. 2:** The second example was a prominent Dallas attorney who had been clean and sober for many years but eventually dropped out of LCL and the recovery process. While going through a messy marital situation, he turned to hard street drugs to cope with the emotions of the moment. After that, he started losing things—first his practice, then his home, then his car. He was living on the street. A lifelong friend in London happened to reach him on his cellphone—he hadn't pawned it yet—and she contacted TLAP. A referral for outpatient treatment was made, and the trustees approved a request for payment for such treatment. However, the attorney changed his mind and didn't attend. He went further downhill—and lost everything. He even pawned his watch for drugs. He ended up in jail multiple times on drug-related charges. From there, the London friend, TLAP, and a recovery facility worked out a deal for longterm treatment. The facility took a significantly reduced amount, the trustees approved payment of the trust's inpatient limit, and the London friend paid the rest.

Today, the attorney is alive, employed, filled with life, and working heavily with other lawyers in trouble. He even moved out of town for a year to care for a sibling suffering from terminal cancer. And he is employed as an attorney—something unimaginable a mere three years ago.

**Attorney No. 3:** My final example is a young attorney who arrived in Dallas LCL one recent April. The attorney was severely depressed and overtly suicidal. LCL members began aggressively working with the attorney, getting a commitment from the attorney to stay alive

until the June Texas LCL convention. At the convention, LCL members and TLAP staff convinced the attorney to go into treatment and to stay alive until treatment; TLAP staff worked with an out-of-state facility to accept the attorney for very long-term care, and for a fraction of their regular fees, and the trustees approved payment of those charges. LCL members drove the attorney the several hundred miles to the treatment facility.

The attorney successfully completed the acute treatment phase and was transferred to a halfway house, where the attorney remains as of this writing. Word coming back to Texas is that the light again shines in the attorney's eyes. The attorney is working again and is seeking legal employment. Most important, the attorney remains alive, something that seemed like a long shot that April afternoon.

My examples are Dallas-centric because Dallas is my home and where I attend LCL, but examples like this can be found throughout Texas. These attorneys have found that life no longer sucks, and they no longer have to die prematurely because of their affliction.

In 2010, the board of directors of the State Bar of Texas authorized a large contribution to the Sheeran Trust to help enable the trust to continue life-saving work. The trustees, along with the many attorney recipients of grants from the trust, offer profound thanks. However, the trust needs your contributions to carry on our efforts long into the future. Please consider making a contribution to the Patrick D. Sheeran and Michael J. Crowley Memorial Trust (see page 895 for details). Know that your contributions will work to save practices, families, and lives.

And, by the way, I have a new personal motto: "It's a great day to be alive." TBJ



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