



## MY OPINION

BY BOB BLACK

PRESIDENT, STATE BAR OF TEXAS

# Broken Dreams, Mended Lives

Three brave lawyers share a glimpse of their journeys through suffering, depression, hope, and redemption in the following vignettes. Their stories remind me that life is a gift and it is also a miracle. It takes courage to get sober; it takes bravery to stay sober. It also takes programs like Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous — and the remarkable Texas Lawyers Assistance Program ([texasbar.com/tlap](http://texasbar.com/tlap); (800) 343-8527). TLAP helps struggling lawyers, but it also assists their loved ones — and the public — by helping get mental health and substance abuse issues addressed. TLAP specializes in turning broken dreams into mended lives.

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*One:* I am a judge and a recovering alcoholic. My father was a trial lawyer and an alcoholic. I wanted to be just like him, except that I vowed I would never drink like he did. I didn't drink like my dad did — I drank more. When I couldn't drink myself to death fast enough, I tried suicide by taking pills — twice. Five days after being released from the second hospitalization, I went to a local bar association meeting. The speaker was a judge and a TLAP volunteer who told his story about recovery from alcoholism. It took me about a month to work up the courage to call him, but I did. He took me to my first 12-step meeting and to the local Lawyers Concerned for Lawyers (LCL) support group. Had it not been for his willingness to speak out as a TLAP volunteer, I doubt I would have had the courage to reach out for help. I now try to do the same for others. Recently, the judge who helped me has been facing health challenges and a group of lawyers took a meeting to his house. It

was at that very meeting that I celebrated 12 years of sobriety and was able to tell him what his help meant to me. Also at that meeting was a young lawyer who I accompanied to her first meeting after she reached out to TLAP a year ago. It is so awesome to be in a place where life has come full circle, starting with a simple act of kindness by one lawyer to another.

*Two:* I have been a Texas attorney for 38 years. I have fought many battles in the courtroom, helped thousands of clients, and, I hope, made a difference for the better in many lives. Before and throughout my legal career, I have struggled with depression and anxiety. I kept my disease secret in hopes I would not be exposed as a fraud. As things got worse, the depression robbed me of good judgment and pushed me into isolation and immobilization. In 2004, I received a helping hand out of that dark hole of fear. My recovery began when a concerned law partner confronted me and a patient wife demanded I seek help through TLAP. I learned I was not alone. TLAP provided me with resources critical to my recovery. Most important, TLAP referred me to local attorneys who still provide support through the local LCL chapter. Without TLAP as a resource, I would still be lost. I now face my demons every day, live in a happier world, and contribute more effectively to my profession — and I volunteer with TLAP to help open doors for others.

*Three:* TLAP played a vital, instrumental role in saving my life. When my marriage fell apart, I did, too, sinking into a seemingly bottomless pit of despair and substance abuse. I participated in the nearly total destruction of my life, my

relationships, and my career. In this work, I was persistent and effective. Fortunately, TLAP staff and local LCL members were equally persistent and even more effective. When my options were reduced to jail, institutions, or death, the dedicated men and women of TLAP and LCL offered another path: sobriety and a gateway to a life worth living once again. With a grant from the TLAP-administered Sheeran-Crowley Memorial Trust and the contributions of friends and family, I entered a three-month treatment program and, as of the publication of this testimonial, I will have been sober for more than one year. TLAP was at the center of making this possible and was instrumental in what I hope, when my life is through, will have been a worthwhile cause. ❖

**Note:** The Executive Committee passed the following resolution on Jan. 5, 2012:

Move to ask the Supreme Court of Texas to suspend the work of the Uniform Forms Task Force and ask the Bar to study the issue of indigent self-represented litigants in the State's courts, including collecting data demonstrating the number of these litigants, gathering information about how these cases are being handled by Courts throughout the state, and reviewing possible solutions to the issue.

The letter on the opposite page was sent to the Court based on that action. Further discussion was expected at the meeting of the board of directors that was held after the publication deadline.

# STATE BAR OF TEXAS

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PRESIDENT



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January 5, 2012

Chief Justice Wallace Jefferson  
Supreme Court of Texas  
P.O. Box 12248  
Austin, TX 78711-2488

Dear Chief Justice Jefferson:

The Executive Committee of the State Bar of Texas met today and after much respectful discussion and consideration voted to request that the Supreme Court of Texas “suspend the work of its Uniform Forms Task Force and direct the State Bar of Texas to review the issue of indigent self-represented litigants in the State’s courts, including collecting data demonstrating the numbers of these litigants, gathering information about how these cases are handled by Courts throughout the state, and reviewing possible solutions.”

The State Bar of Texas is fully committed to access to justice for all Texans and applauds the efforts of all those who have worked on this issue over the past few months to do what is best. Unfortunately, at this point there is no consensus and, equally distressing, we are unaware of any available data on indigent self-represented litigants. A lack of data coupled with anecdotal reports has created a stalemate in the rhetoric being used to support what may be legitimate perspectives from all interested parties.

We believe we are at a critical juncture on this issue. Along with numerous individuals and groups – all with the best interest of access to justice and administration of justice as a motivating force —the State Bar of Texas Executive Committee believes that immediate action is required so that critical information can be gathered and considered in the development of any possible recommendations. It is imperative that all those who have expressed an opinion on this issue know the facts, be heard, and be part of any recommendation considered by the Court.

Thank you for your consideration. We are anxious to hear from the Court on this issue and look forward to working with all interested parties to best serve our Courts, the public, and the profession.

Sincerely yours,



Bob Black