

## **My Dad is An Alcoholic – Author & Illustrator Q&A**

### **Marc Treitler**

#### ***You come from a family in which addiction is prevalent. At what point did you realize this?***

When one of my relatives was visiting my parents in San Diego. At that time, at the age of 13, I had never experimented with drugs or alcohol. That relative took me into the canyon where I would often ride my bike with friends. He began smoking marijuana, which I did not like. The next day he stole paint from my parents' garage and began huffing it. This was my first face-to-face encounter with substance abuse.

#### ***In what ways, emotionally and psychologically, do you feel that living in a family of functioning addicts plays into becoming an addict?***

I know from my experience as an alcoholic with children, the addict fails to develop normal coping skills. My coping skills were limited to drinking, anger, and rage. Working through a problem, or trying to understand the other person, is not a trait of an addict. Instead, the alcoholic focuses on resentments, anger, and pride. He is therefore emotionally withdrawn and incapable of emotionally connecting with his family.

Children certainly suffer from this on many levels. Living in a house full of anger can scar a child. Children also tend to mirror the behavior they see, so it is very difficult for children to develop their own coping skills and emotional maturity when the addict is the model of adult behavior. And without those skills, children often take the same path as their parents.

#### ***As a functioning alcoholic, how easy or difficult was it to deny your addiction? Why?***

There was always someone worse off than me and my disease would tell me: *See, you are not an addict. You have a job, kids, a great job, a nice house and nice cars.* Someone else was always worse off than me, therefore I wasn't truly an alcoholic. I would see a homeless drunk and say I am not homeless I am doing well. I would see a heroin addict and say, well I only drink legal alcohol. I would see relatives on meth without jobs and would tell myself they are doing something illegal and can't even hold a job. As an alcoholic, I was able to keep a job, rise within the business world, and keep up a "successful" appearance. Finally, as most of my drinking was hidden, I was rarely if ever confronted about it.

#### ***When we think of alcoholics or addicts, we tend to think of people whose lives are unproductive, people who live on the edges of society. Yet you were very successful while still drinking. How did you manage this? And how common is it?***

In my experience and research, it is quite common for an addict to be a very smart and successful person. The same DNA that allows my mind to be very productive also probably played a part in seeking out relief in alcohol. Look at some of the famous alcoholics and addicts in the world. Is anyone smarter or more driven than people like Glenn Beck or Robert Downey Jr.? Of course the ability to rely on your God-given smarts or business acumen is never enough as the disease progresses to the point where full-time work is not functional. If I did not stop drinking when I did, I would have certainly begun morning drinking, and eventually drinking alone in a hotel room and dying. Your God-given talent can only keep you afloat until the disease overpowers it. Amy Winehouse is a sad, sad example of this.

#### ***Change is usually brought about by a catalyst. At what point did you recognize you had a problem? At what point did you actually decide to do something about it? And what was the catalyst?***

I knew I had a serious problem for the last 10 years of my drinking. I literally could not go a single night without alcohol, without fearing a night of tossing and turning. But recognizing that there is a problem is only a minor part of the road to recovery. You have to realize that your life is unraveling, or becoming unmanageable as AA says. You also need to have something in jeopardy that you love more than alcohol – something that might leave, something you might lose. The idea of that loss must scare the addict more than the fear (physical, mental and emotional) of losing the substance. For many people this is losing a job, wife, freedom, or children. For most addicts, there is never such a realization.

My daughter's knowledge of my drinking was my catalyst.

For me, thankfully, I always loved my family more than myself. And as a father I would always put my kids first. So when I realized that Lianna was aware of my drinking (at a concert) I felt like a

sledgehammer had hit me in the chest and something clicked. A few days later I consciously, or subconsciously, drank myself into a state where I would have to ask for help.

***Once you made the decision, how difficult or easy was it to gain sobriety?***

Well, pride is a funny thing, especially for me. I have always been successful and rarely, if ever, asked for help. Getting to the point where I was desperate enough to ask for help was incredibly difficult. It's hard to put into words just how difficult. I had to admit total defeat and realize (at the time) that I was too weak to fix my problem. Asking for help, then calling my wife and telling her I was on my way to rehab, was secretly an alcoholic, and would not be home for 30 days, was surreal.

***How much did family support enhance your ability to become sober?***

Everyone in my family supported this decision and has always believed in me. My wife, especially, has been supportive of my AA meetings, counseling sessions, and all actions needed to maintain sobriety. I remember when I returned home from rehab, the kids had posted drawings all over the house about beer and booze being bad. It was priceless.

***What steps do you take to ensure that you stay sober?***

Tens of millions of people have died from this disease and millions of recovery methods have been tried and failed. The only program that has had a track record of success is Alcoholics Anonymous. As part of this program, I attend AA meetings, work with sponsors, and spread the message of recovery (which I am hopeful this book will be a part of).

***This book opens your 'allergy' to friends, colleagues, to the public at large. What concerns do you have about people learning you are an alcoholic? And what makes it worthwhile regardless?***

I knew going into rehab that I had one shot at sobriety. I am not the type of person that likes to fail at anything, and somehow I sensed that a relapse would kill me. Therefore, on my way to rehab I began texting everyone I knew that I was going to rehab, as if to make it harder to turn back as I would disappoint more and more people. I asked my wife to share the message, and she did, via an email to everyone we knew. Sharing the disease with people is a motivational tool to me. I know many struggle with this concept and I would simply say, be proud you are sober and not locked up in jail.

***Your book is for middle-grade kids. Why did you write for this age group?***

This answer is simple. One of the most important messages in our book is that we need to prevent the disease from ever starting. Most addicts begin using drugs and alcohol in high school and thus we need to reach the children before high school, when they are still pure. I still believe to this day that this is a major flaw in our recovery community – the focus is on treatment rather than prevention at an age where it matters.

***You wrote the book with your daughter, and your wife and son did the illustrations? How did this become a family project? What did you get out of the writing? Particularly of doing so with your family?***

I knew from my first day in rehab that I had to do something about children with addiction in their genes not knowing about the insidious allergy waiting to pounce on them. I swore I would make sure my children would have the knowledge they needed to avoid it, and I wanted other children to have it, too. I pondered the question of how to best accomplish this for years. I would watch the kids study their schoolwork and see what was most effective in creating long-lasting learning. Having the kids read my story would be powerful for sure. But one day I saw Lianna writing an essay and thought to myself, wouldn't the message sink in more if she was actually involved in writing it, and drawing the characters. This would take the message in their brain to an entirely different level. To this day, seeing my children participate in this process gives me an overwhelming feeling of peace, knowing that this mission with my children is complete, that they are prepared to avoid this disease. And maybe we can help others, too.

***What do you hope kids – and their parents – take away from the book?***

That addiction is not something to be ashamed of. It should be discussed openly in families as much, just as we discuss other allergies. I also hope there are children, including mine, that are able to avoid the disease instead of fighting to control it, because of the knowledge in this book.