

Shannon's Interview with Andrea Macone

July 25, 2018

You're Worth Recovery



SL: Please describe your childhood

AM: I was very fortunate to be given everything I needed and most of what I wanted, growing up in Medford with my two brothers and both parents, who were involved in our lives at school and in sports. I excelled academically and was probably a little more awkward and quiet than other kids, but I wasn't lacking any basic needs that would have contributed to my addiction. I have a family history of substance use disorders and my grandfather was active in Charlestown AA, but I never met him and didn't know what recovery was until I needed to find it for myself. I do remember feeling emotions deeply from a young age, and sensing that something was wrong but not being able to identify what it was. I cried in my room alone a lot, without understanding why, and self-harmed from an early age. I placed a lot of value on what others thought of me because I lacked the confidence to find self-worth within.

SL: How and when did addiction begin manifesting and at what age?

AM: I began experimenting with substances in my early teens but didn't see it as a sign of potential addiction at the time. I considered it social use and having gone through the D.A.R.E. program and grown up during the Just Say No era watching "This is your brain on drugs" commercials I associated addiction with homelessness, dereliction, and a life that was unimaginable to someone so sheltered and privileged. When I was in high school at Matignon the experimentation progressed from alcohol and marijuana to pills, and it seemed like overnight OxyContin was everywhere. Because my friends and I had always been able to use other drugs occasionally without major consequences I didn't see them as any different. I believed that if I could use on the weekends and stay at the top of my class and was captain of three sports, I was just doing what kids do and there wasn't a problem. I managed to live this way and moved onto college at Boston University. Looking back, I now realize that I looked forward to partying on the weekends as an escape from the pressure and that the things that were once so important to me lost significance quickly. I never felt like I could live up to people's expectations of me, or maybe the ones I placed on myself, and when I was using the anxiety and fear quieted for brief periods of time.

SL: How did your addiction progress from there:

AM: I started losing friends and people I loved to this disease and felt like I was living two lives. I saw classmates at BU planning and building futures but spent so many nights at wakes for young people I'd known. I didn't know where I belonged because I felt stuck between both worlds and didn't know anyone at school with a drug problem or anyone from home who seemed to want a way out. I wanted to be able

to enjoy life but also felt hopeless, like I was destined to be another tragic story. After one particularly painful loss I turned to the only coping skill I'd ever known, using substances to suppress the pain I felt, and using quickly became my top priority and an everyday occurrence. I somehow managed to graduate from BU but within a year I blew every opportunity that came my way. I lost jobs, broke my family's hearts, lied and stole more than I did anything else, and gave up hope that I could be anything more than an addict chasing the next high.

SL: Can you describe your path towards recovery?

AM: My path toward recovery has been long and winding, and I know it will be a lifelong journey. I was first brought to a 12-step meeting in Charlestown in 2006 and eventually ended up needing multiple detoxes, residential treatment and other means of support. My overachieving brain wants to check the boxes and be done, and that has led to relapse for me after multiple years in recovery. I'm reminded often by those close to me to slow down and allow myself to experience life instead of trying to make up for lost time, so that has been my approach since returning to recovery in 2014. This time around I'm finally taking suggestions by those who have paved the way for me. I've found that service keeps me deeply embedded in the recovery community, so I never have to do this alone. While working and a graduate student at UMass Boston I helped co-found the university's collegiate recovery community, and that was momentous for me because it forced me to step out of the shadows and be fully myself where I spent most of my time. Since then I have moved onto employment at a nonprofit called The Phoenix, which offers free fitness programs for individuals recovering from substance use disorders and those choosing to live a sober lifestyle. Being open publicly about my recovery has been game-changing. Not only am I facing shame and stigma head-on and showing that recovery is possible, I also use any success that

comes my way as an opportunity to help others the way I have been supported. Social justice and recovery are the same for me; in recovery I've learned what my values are and advocating for those most in need lands at the top of that list. I'm also a parent and it's important for me to raise my son showing him that that nobody is perfect, and everyone deserves to be treated as human, even if they make mistakes.

SL: What has helped you maintain your Recovery?

AM: I believe strongly that recovery is personal. What has worked for me may not work for someone else, and things that I didn't find helpful may save someone else's life. That said, I have found great support and personal growth in 12-step recovery. It's provided a framework for me to grow as an individual in meaningful ways, surrounded by others who understand the life I've lived and support me in my attempts to better myself. I've found therapy and medication necessary and helpful at times, as well as a spiritual community and my collegiate recovery community. Since joining the staff of The Phoenix, I've extended my network to include others who challenge me to take on new adventures like CrossFit, rock climbing and surfing with sober people. I have been extremely fortunate to have the constant support of my closest friends, family, boyfriend and mentors along the way, and I'm grateful that I've been able to maintain and build these relationships. I resisted the idea of a higher power for years and have worked hard to find one that's right for me and to trust in it. I used to cringe when I heard recovery clichés but sometimes I still take it a day, or even a minute, at a time. Through doing some work I've learned that substances were only a way for me to avoid my feelings and that if I can sit through them I can get through anything without picking up. Facing things that scare me - whether it's sharing my story at a meeting, climbing a giant rock in Utah, speaking to legislators about recovery, or accepting that not everyone is going to like me - gives me a

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sense of accomplishment and proves that I am more than my disease.

SL: What advice would you give someone just beginning their steps towards recovery?

AM: I would suggest finding people who smile and laugh (but not at the expense of others) and spending time with them. There are people in recovery with an aura of serenity and authenticity and those people, if you take a risk and ask, are not only willing to help but want to. Try all the things – if we tried all the drugs why not try all the things in recovery? Check out a meeting. Don't like it? Give it another chance and if you still don't there are thousands more to try. There's more than one fellowship if you haven't found your tribe yet. Meetings aren't for you? Come to Phoenix! (Shameless plug:thephoenix.org) Not your thing? There are organizations for people in recovery who are into art, music, theater. Call a doctor or counselor and ask for an appointment. Visit a community recovery center or see if your city has a recovery support worker, usually in the health department. Consider an alternative peer group. If you're part of a religious community, there's probably at least one person who has offered to be a point of contact for anyone seeking help with addiction. Reach out to Boston's Office of Recovery Services for an endless list of organizations willing to help you on your journey. More than anything, step outside your comfort zone because that's where the growth happens. If nothing else, believe that you're worth recovery. If you don't believe it yet, know that we believe you are.

