

Paying It Forward

Lives of Hope, Success, and Freedom From Addiction Distinguish De Paul Freedom Award Winners

Ben Westlund

Co-winner of the 2002 Freedom Award,
with fellow state legislator Lenn Hannon

"Two things I'm thankful for that I'm not burdened with," says Westlund. "I don't have to know where my cancer came from—secondhand smoke, agricultural chemicals. A lot of people need to know... I don't care.

"The other is that while I was drinking I never got in one of those wrecks. I never hurt anybody. It was just there, but for the grace of God, go I," Westlund says emphatically. "One left turn, one right turn, one half-second delayed response and I could have been there. Those two things I am eternally grateful for."

The cancer Westlund refers to hit him many years after his recovery from alcoholism, while he was working in the legislature. "I didn't fit the profile for lung cancer because I didn't smoke, never smoked."

"They did cancer surgery on May 16, 2003 and I went back to the session, did chemo, did the radiation.

"September 3, 2003 was one of the great days of my life," says Westlund. "It was the last day of the session, my last day of chemo, results from my first CT scan showing things looked pretty good, and it was my 54th birthday.

Now for some people a battle with alcoholism, followed by another with cancer might seem like a heavy dose of bad luck. But more was on the way. Weakened by radiation, Westlund's windpipe became infected, and likely due to prescribed steroids, last November Westlund's colon ruptured, requiring emergency abdominal surgery. Now, weakened abdominal muscles from that surgery have caused a hernia. But Westlund laughs it all off, happy to be in improving health and moving forward. "It's a glide slope down," jokes Westlund. "When I get down to a hang nail next year, no problem."

That just-for-today optimism, and forward-thinking attitude are a recurring theme with all five Freedom Award winners.

Pay It Forward

In the 1999 Warner Bros. movie, "Pay It Forward," Kevin Spacey plays a teacher whose devastating life story confirms that some tragedies cannot be redeemed.

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All five Freedom Award winners have found ways to "pay it forward" in their lives. Rather than dwell in past or present dilemmas, these well-known Oregon leaders look for ways to pay forward to others in need. But first each has had to beat his or her own demons.

Going Public

In recovery for 24 years, Westlund was 31 when he got sober. "What a blessing," says Westlund. "The most genius words I've ever heard are Bill W.'s (Bill Wilson, one of the founders of AA), 'You can't keep what you've got unless you give it away.' For an alcoholic that's exactly what it is. I get so much satisfaction helping various people along the way. I don't go out of my way to find them—they just kind of find me."

For Westlund, recovery was a combination of chance, fate, fortuity. "Libby (his wife) and my mom were saying, 'Why Ben, why? Why do you drink?' It was the intensity of the emotions that I felt... music, poetry, whatever. I wasn't a violent drunk, I

wasn't a partier, although I did my share of that. I liked being by myself pretty much, and thinking. It was the intensity of those thoughts.

"Somehow one morning, pretty hung over, I found a card that my mom left for a treatment center in Washington, and I called. They didn't have a place.

"I woke up the second morning still hung over. Now I'm calling those bastards again. I was able to talk my way in. I chartered a plane—I didn't trust myself to drive there. The pilot drops me off in a pouring rainstorm at a little airport—the only thing there is a phone booth. I call a cab and when the cabbie gets there he's drunker than I am. I thought, this is divine justice. I'm going to die at the hands of a drunken cabbie on the way to alcohol rehab.

"But, God bless him, he made it. I made it.

"We know what to do. Treatment works. Recovery happens."

For Westlund, living in the small town of Mitchell, anonymity was always an open question. "Even though we all think no one knew how much we drank," says Westlund, "everyone knew. So it was kinda big news in Mitchell when I was going up to a treatment center. When you're coming home, you think, gosh I hope nobody knows.

"Hell, everyone knows and everyone is patting you on the back, saying thank God, good for him...it's about time.

"As I was approaching getting into public life, anonymity was a dilemma for me. What do I do? Will someone throw mud at me for this? The question was answered for me in summer of '96. The phone rings—it's an Oregonian reporter. First question. 'Have you ever been arrested?' It was fight or flight. 'Well sure, hasn't everybody?'" I answered.

"From the time I said those words it was very easy for me. 'What did you get arrested for?' 'Well, drunk driving, kinda.' 'Kinda?' 'Well I was pulled off to the side of the road changing a tire.'

"But that's not why he was calling. 'Ben, do you know who arrested you?' "I said, 'No.'

"Does the name John Minnis mean anything to you? State legislator John Minnis. Do you realize that if you win your race, you'll be serving in the legislature with the guy that arrested you for drunk driving?'

"We both laughed."

The headline that ran a few days later read something like, "Officer and man he arrested may serve time in the big house together." And, of course, they did.

"When Minnis arrested me that was my personal bottom," says Westlund. "A Portland beat cop just doing his job really helped someone turn his life around and become a productive member of the community. It all comes together—law enforcement, personal resolve, and access to resources.

"But it wasn't until I got involved in public policy 16–17 years later," admits Westlund, "that I started to have the conscious connection between the number of facilities, the magnitude of the need, versus what was available. Back then, hell, it could have been the only one on the West Coast for all I knew.

"Other approaches may work for others. But if you've tried to quit three or four times and it hasn't worked, read the writing on the wall—maybe you need a more professional approach."

