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When Wisconsin women lead the nation in chronic drinking, why don't we hear more about it? A look at the silence surrounding substance abuse, and the three local women working for change

By Meagan Parrish
Photographed by Anna Stephenson

“It was
probably
the most
terrifying
moment
of my life,”

Linda* says, describing the day that she—a successful professional and mother of two—walked haltingly through the doors of a rehab clinic to seek treatment for an addiction to alcohol.

She was far from home, literally, and even farther from the safe suburban existence where alcoholism was more associated with the homeless men hanging around the Capitol Square.

“You wonder, ‘How did I let myself get to this point?’” she admits.

By her early 40s, Linda had stitched together all the pieces of a full life: marriage, kids, career and a picture-perfect home. But when it began to unravel, a problem with alcohol quietly grew under the radar. Casual drinks with friends and nightly glasses of wine turned into a crutch.

“I was probably already drinking too much because I was pretty miserable in my marriage, but when I filed for divorce, it just got bad,” she recalls.

Soon, one or two drinks weren’t enough; she couldn’t stop herself from reaching for more. Eventually she would regularly

drink until she blacked out. On the day Linda realized the problem had spiraled out of control, she started sipping wine at noon. The estimated number of glasses she downed that day? Between 15 and 20.

Her story is hardly unique. Though it’s tricky to pinpoint the precise number of women struggling with alcoholism—a progressive disease generally marked by the inability to stop oneself from consuming alcohol—indicators of overall use show that plenty of local women are putting themselves at risk.

Across age groups and in various studies, Wisconsin has been crowned the No. 1 state for heavy drinkers for over a decade. In the most recent National Women’s Law Center’s health report card, Wisconsin women topped the list out of all 50 states and the District of Columbia for the number of women who admit to binge drinking

(having five or more drinks in one sitting) at least once a month.

The medical community knows the consequences: Studies show that women who are chronic abusers have a higher chance of liver disease, heart damage and brain damage than men. So when nationwide studies call our state the worst, and when science shows the stark consequences—why does the issue continue to get the silent treatment?

As three area advocates explain, it’s the stigma that surrounds substance abuse in a culture that loves the sound of clinking glasses.

Today they’re coming together to offer a singular message: We need to look at the issue of substance abuse in a new way that erases blame, increases understanding and leans on partnerships to advance the cause.

“**The name Alcoholics Anonymous** pretty much says it all,” quips Sarah Carpenter. A no-nonsense public relations pro who devotes her free time to elevating the issue of alcohol abuse, Carpenter isn’t shy about putting it frankly.

Though passionate about the plethora of health issues facing the community through her work with groups such as the Breast Cancer Recovery Foundation and Madison Area Rehabilitation Centers, it was a long history of exposure to alcoholism that nudged her toward local organizations battling substance abuse.

It’s been the experience of serving on the boards of the Recovery Foundation, which helps raise awareness and funds for those who can’t afford treatment, and the Aaron J. Meyer Foundation, which funds a local recovery home for young men, that has opened Carpenter’s eyes to how the stigmas surrounding alcoholism prevent many women from seeking treatment.

“Unfortunately, we don’t have compassion for [alcoholism] like we do for breast cancer and other diseases,” Carpenter says.

As she pointed out, even one of the most well-known support groups for the issue, Alcoholics Anonymous, is founded on the premise of remaining anonymous.

“People, women especially, are really afraid [to admit they have a problem and seek help] because their employers or friends might find out. People gossip about them...they just don’t want everyone to know,” she adds.

Shelly Dutch, a mainstay in the Madison community of counselors and advocates, agrees.

“It’s the shame [that] keeps [women] in a perpetual state of abuse,” says Dutch, founder of the Recovery Foundation and owner of Connections Counseling, a substance abuse and mental health outpatient clinic specializing in mentor-based services for addicts.

The added layers of pressure many women face to be the best in their careers and at home are magnified when dealing with a problem like substance abuse. There’s a fear of seeking help, of admitting you have a problem, as Dutch details. But then there’s the fear that even after, your life will never be the same.

“You’re viewed differently than men,” Linda says flatly of the stereotypes she’s confronted. “Men just have a ‘drinking problem.’ But if you’re a woman and you had a problem, all of the sudden you’re a bad mother in everyone’s eyes.”

The difficulty that surrounds both initially reaching out for help, and life after

treatment is one that Dutch understands intimately.

A Madison native, she spent her early 20s hooked on cocaine and other drugs, hopping across the country in an attempt to flee the addiction and spare her parents the humiliation of having hometown acquaintances learn about the problem.

After entering an inpatient treatment facility, Dutch had the epiphany that might have saved her life.

“I realized I was a sick person trying to get well, not a bad person trying to get good,” Dutch explains.

It’s coming to this realization, she says, that’s at the heart of really understanding the battle against substance abuse.

“**When you have that first drink** and the euphoria hits...you’re like a gerbil in a wheel. You start and you can’t get off,” Linda says, describing how, every time she drank, her brain would send the same, fixated signal to have more.

Her account follows a pattern for disease evolution that’s just as predictable as with many other illnesses, complete with risk factors (depression and anxiety), symptoms (cravings, loss of control and physical dependence), diagnosis (confirmation that the problem is beyond a lack of willpower) and treatment (usually with counseling and group therapy).

The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism within the National Institutes of Health defines alcoholism as a chronic, progressive disease that can be fatal. The risk factors for developing alcoholism can be genetic and influenced by lifestyle.

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Yet, getting recognition as a legitimate illness—just as legitimate and devastating as, say, cancer—is a struggle for substance abusers. The fact that there is an element of control over how it begins doesn’t help its case in the public eye. The line of thinking by many? You can’t control that a cell turns into cancer, but you can control having a beer in your hand. But as Linda’s story illustrates, nightly cocktails to help relieve stress can, for some, easily spiral out of control.

Recently the medical community has worked within the legislature to help bring the point home.

Passed in 2008, (though not fully implemented until 2010) the federal Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act requires health insurers to pay for substance abuse treatment with coverage equivalent to other physical and mental illnesses.

Still, as Linda notes, the greater community has a long way to go with accepting the disease and many alcoholics feel they risk public scorn, judgment or even job loss if others find out.

"I don't tell people in my professional life because they tend to think you're mentally ill or just a weak person," Linda says.

To strike at the root of the problem, Carpenter and Dutch are working together to improve a public understanding of the disease in a local culture where heavy drinking is the norm.

"People who get through [this disease] *and survive it* are some of the strongest, most determined people I have ever met."

"Hardly anything is being done [about this]," Dutch says. Strong efforts by local groups and individuals, including former County Executive Kathleen Falk, have become stagnant. Dutch hopes new partnerships will elevate the plight of alcoholics and put them on par with those who have battled any illness.

For her, it's about coming back to the life-saving lesson she learned so long ago.

"It is critical to increase awareness about addiction and that it's a sickness," Dutch says. "It's about being proud of the fact that you have a disease, that it can be in remission and you can live a healthy and productive life."

To help trumpet this sentiment—while boosting services—Carpenter and Dutch have connected with a woman who has a slightly different perspective on it all.

If the stigma of substance abuse keeps many silent, Cathy Meyer is all about giving them a place to let their struggle be out in the open.

A soft-spoken legal assistant, Meyer helped launch the Aaron J. Meyer Foun-

ation and Aaron's House, a local halfway house for young men in recovery. And now she hopes that with the help of Carpenter, she can usher the arrival of another house in Madison—this time for young women.

But while these days she helps addicts find a safe place to land it wasn't until an unexpected tragedy that it became a cause so close to her heart.

"The day I found out [my son] Aaron was using ... that was the beginning of it all," Meyer says, recalling the path her teenage son took from getting high to becoming increasingly dependent on downers such as the muscle relaxer Oxycontin within just six months.

After making the painful decision of sending him to a boarding school in Oregon, Aaron returned to Wisconsin fresh from recovery and ready to start anew. But in a tragic twist of events, he was killed (while sober) in a car accident months later, just as he was getting set to finish high school.

Through their grief, Meyer and her family found a fitting tribute to honor Aaron's life and the hard work he had put into rebounding from addiction.

"After the accident we decided to ... do something in Aaron's memory, and we came up with the idea of Aaron's House," she explains. "One of the things Aaron had wanted to do was ... live with his friends [who were also in recovery] so they would have a [sober] place to live."

The challenge for any addict or abuser after treatment is coping with the chronic nature of the disease; it's a battle they will have to fight their entire lives. Recovery means adopting a new lifestyle—which often includes new environments and new social circles.

Aaron's dream for himself became a reality in 2007. Today, the home (aptly titled Aaron's House) is nestled into a cozy neighborhood on the near east side of Madison, where it provides a vital escape for young men ages 18 to 26 who are striving to stay clean, go to school and work in a college town known for its excessive boozing.

One of many "halfway" houses with similar programs dotted across the country, the goal of opening a similar home for women has helped Carpenter and Meyer's passions collide. The pair have joined forces to begin laying the groundwork for a woman's recovery home—searching for the perfect site for the house, which they hope to open within three years.

Meanwhile, Carpenter and Dutch have also revved up the efforts of the Recovery Foundation to raise more funds for those needing treatment.

Supports recovery

Shope

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cooperation



Sarah Carpenter, Shelly Dutch and Cathy Meyer, joining forces to fight the stigma surrounding substance abuse.

At the center of it all, Carpenter explains the partnerships—though not shared officially with funds or resources, but through referrals and strategic promotions—aim to bolster an awareness of alcohol abuse throughout the community.

While in decades past, it may have been unheard of for nonprofits to partner and risk missing out on resources for themselves, these are different times. As Dutch notes, linking arms is not only a savvy economic strategy, it serves a larger purpose.

“We want [to raise awareness about treatment options] so that women get the help they need,” Dutch says.

Quite simply, their message is more likely to resonate when they’re all echoing it at once.

But as Carpenter notes, they’re up against a daunting challenge. Though the booze-accepting culture isn’t likely to budge, she hopes they can pave the way to change how we treat those in the grips of alcoholism or addiction.

It’s a mission, Carpenter adds, that not only brings sorely needed recognition to a big issue, it helps show how substance abusers can fight back against the disease and win.

“People who get through [this disease]

and survive it are some of the strongest, most determined people I have ever met,” she says.

In the face of a stigma they’ve experienced first hand, Carpenter, Dutch and Meyer are breaking the silence—and hoping others will soon hear the message, loud and clear.

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For more information about these organizations and other local support services, visit bravamagazine.com.

*Name changed at her request.
Additional reporting by Kailey Bender.