

Taking Initiative with Government

Leo C. Miller of Chicago is an addictions professional and, at the time of his presentation, Chair of the NCCA Board of Directors.

Back in August of last year, I was down at Haymarket, and I was visiting my friend Ray Soucek. On a table in his office there's this big book, about that thick, and he said, "Look at that." I said, "What is it, the phone book?" that's how thick it was. He said, "That's the state budget for the state of Illinois." I thought, "Wow." I asked him, "How much money is going to alcoholism?" He said, "\$232 million." All of a sudden the wheels are clicking for me. I realized that \$232 million out of a total state budget of \$52 billion was less than one half of one percent. I didn't think that was a lot of money. \$232 million is a lot of money, but compared to that budget, it isn't.

You have to take life as it comes. While I wasn't happy with that budget and the money spent, and the cuts that are always chipping away at it, that's the way life is. Two weeks later, I'm visiting a friend of mine who is a judge and a state senator comes in. We're acquaintances, not friends, because I'm always bugging him about alcohol and drug issues and social issues. When he walked in, he probably wanted to leave, but he said, "You'll be happy to know that we (the Democrats, his party) recently just did our survey of issues that that voters feel they're affected by, because we have a general election coming up in November. You'll be happy to know that alcohol and drugs are in the top 10."

I said, "Oh that's good to know." He said, "I can tell you one of my colleagues from across the aisle, the Republicans, they did a survey, and it's in the top five." I didn't say any more. He said, "Gee, Leo I thought you'd be doing cartwheels over there."

I said, "Jimmy, it seems to me that you'll use that, and the Republicans will use that, and you might get elected because of it, or partially because of it, but you won't increase the spending one dime after the election." He said, "How do you know that?" I said, "Because historically you don't. I mean this is not the first time that it's ever been used as an issue. Do you think you'll increase it?" He goes, "No."

Lip service but not funding

When I was drinking I would have been in a fight over this, an argument over this, probably arrested over it, too. But I don't do those things in sobriety. People who know me know that this is an ongoing sore subject, that alcoholism and drug addiction is such a big problem in our society and we pay lip service instead of coming up with funding to deal with it.

I work for an airline and after 9/11 I was just swamped for at least three months. It was just unbelievably hard work, dealing with people who were very frightened to fly, and I'm talking about employees.

I was remembering when I first moved over to the counseling side of Catholic Charities, my boss who was Ray Soucek is who is now at Haymarket said, "Why don't you come up with a program to go out to Catholic schools, high schools and grade schools." We talked about what it would be, and it was a six-session type of thing. It would be mostly films, Father Martin-type films, and what have you. He had a friend, Dick Athey, who is originally a Dominican priest, and he had contacted Fenwick High School, and he was a good friend to Father Mac's, so they sent me out to Fenwick High School.

I go out there and I sit down with the vice principal and two priests, and we get talking. I don't remember how we got talking about it, but at the time I was probably about four years sober. It was a chemistry teacher, he said, "You know, alcoholism is a sin." I looked at him and I said, "No, it's not a sin." He said, "Well, it really is. The Church teaching on it is that once you know that you have the problem and you do nothing about it, now you're in a state of sin." I left there muttering to myself, and they allowed me to come in and talk to the kids. I talked to some people, and they said, "Well that's true. Once you truly know you have the problem and you do nothing about it, then you're probably in a state of sin." I was thinking about that late last year, and because I am not a theologian, I am going to grant that that is true. But if it is true that it is a sin for an individual alcoholic, who understands that they are an alcoholic and they're not doing anything about the problem, then what about leaders, whether lay leaders, Church leaders? When they know there is a problem and they do nothing about it, are they in a state of sin?

I have been saying for years that insurance, and anybody who has worked in the field knows that insurance today for most people is inadequate. For some people it can be very good.

I don't care how good the treatment center is, they have to pay their bills, they have to pay their help, and what have you. They have to raise money if they are going to do quality work. Most treatment centers have fund raisers, but because of Father Martin's notoriety and good works, raising money, while still not the easiest thing, is easier for the Ashleys and the Hazeldens and the Betty Fords and what have you. I'm not begrudging that. What gets me angry is that we have problems raising money for one of the top health problems in this country. Elite treatment centers have no problems raising funds, but other people do. After I saw the Illinois budget, I checked with New York. I talked with Jim Devine. New York spends a lot of money on treatment — 1.7 percent of their budget. California, at 1.8 percent, is tops in the nation. It is not enough money.

Recently the bishops were in Dallas dealing with a very serious subject. We all know it had to be dealt with. If it's taken out of context, this is going to sound politically incorrect, but please hear me out. Three hundred bishops got together dealing with a subject that needed to be dealt with a long time ago. I don't know how many people have been sexually abused by priests, maybe we will never know, thousands. There are millions of people who are affected by alcoholism, either by their own use, drug addiction by their own use, the people they are married to, their kids, their parents, their co-workers. I don't see any groups of leaders getting together and saying, "We need to deal with this."

I'm not castigating the bishops here. Across our society leaders don't want to stand up and take note of these issues. My opinion, I'm not saying that it should be the NCCA's opinion, I'm just saying that it's my opinion that the bishop's convened last week was because the victims have been screaming for justice. They have been doing it in the rights of ways, verbally, but also through lawsuits. I'm not saying that in our situation that lawsuits are necessary, but I have always been told that the squeaky wheel gets the oil.

I belong to different professional groups, and we're all fractious. There's nobody standing up and saying what needs to be said. If a public opinion leader were to say, "Gee, we have a problem with alcohol. Who do we talk to?" They don't call the NCCA. They don't even call the NCA. They call some celebrity to come in and talk about addiction. A celebrity went to treatment. He could afford it. He could afford 100 treatments. But there's always disparity, even for people with insurance.

Loud, respectful, consistent

I don't know where the answers to this are, but if someone were to say to me, "What should we do?" The advice I give is that you have to be loud and you have to be respectful you have to be consistent with the message. If a group of leaders doesn't want to listen to you, you have to go to another group of leaders. The NCCA has always been an arm of the bishop's conference. There are bishops who will listen to us. Others will say, "I don't have that problem." But two out of three parish priests say that this is problem in their parish and they don't feel adequate to deal with it. Then it's a Church problem. If it's a sin for an alcoholic to know he or she's an alcoholic and not do something about it, it seems to me that it goes up the ladder. I really want to take it out of the arena of sin. I'm just saying that there's got to be some accountability.

You people are safe. You people know what alcoholism is all about. You know what addiction is all about. You know how it affects you, your family, your constituents. You know that I am preaching to the choir. The people who need to be talked to are people in power — the people that have the money.

It would be nice if we took our resources and hired a publicist. I used to work for a hospital and we had a very famous neurosurgeon there and he had a publicist. I said, "Why do you have a publicist?" He said, "So that my good work can get done. So that people come to me." I'll tell you what, for a long time people who had brain cancer or brain tumors always came to Columbus Hospital, because they did the laser surgery. Many of them left cured.

We are the lamp underneath the bushel. We need to remove the bushel, the basket. I don't know exactly how to do that. I don't know how it's going to play out in the future. But I made a pledge to myself that when I'm talking to these state senators and state reps ... I am told that when a state senator gets 15 letters on a subject they pay attention. Well, they don't, but their aides look at it. Why are we getting 15 letters on this subject? It doesn't mean they'll vote for something or against something, but they're wondering what's going on here. He said when they get 150, they're calling around and saying, "What's going on out there?" It does not take thousands of letters to get state senators and state reps to pay attention. We need to be more vocal. Thank you very much.