**Verne Wagner**

**Narrator**

**Amy Sullivan**

**Interviewer**

**May 18, 2017**

**Duluth, Minnesota**

Verne Wagner -VW

Amy Sullivan -AS

**AS:** This is Amy Sullivan it is May 18. I got it right gals. May 18, 2017 I’m in Duluth, Minnesota with Verne Wagner. Verne do you give me permission to record this interview?

**VW:** Yes, you have my permission to record this interview.

**AS:** Let’s start with your story. Where you grew up, when you became a parent, some of your childhood, a little background on who you are.

**VW:** I grew up in the town of Proctor, just a little bit outside of Duluth. It’s a railroad town. My father was a railroader; my grandfather was a railroader. I grew up there. Railroad men are known for drinking. My dad and my grandfather were no exception. My grandfather was a terrible alcoholic that got into recovery. He left my dad and his mom at a very young age. They separated and he was gone for eight years until he finally got into AA and got very involved in AA. My grandfather was also an international union president which took him to Washington. While he was in Washington, I have some pictures of him and John Kennedy together, fell off the wagon and started drinking again. He ended up retiring. My grandfather, one of the local railroads asked him to be a drug and alcohol counselor for them. He started a program that is used now throughout the United States. Rather than firing people if you agreed to go into treatment they would put you in treatment and keep you working. When I was a little boy growing up I used to see these men that looked like the roughest meanest looking men sitting in my grandfather’s living room. I’d say, “Grandma who are these men?” “Oh, they’re just men that need to talk to Grandpa.” Those were sponsors. He sponsored those men. When Grandpa died, all these people at his funeral came up and said, “Your grandfather saved my life, that’s how I know him.” That was my introduction to the AA.

**AS:** But you didn’t know about AA until much later?

**VW:** No, Grandpa gave me his big book and I knew a little bit about it. My father also was a terrible alcoholic. My mother came down with breast cancer in about 1965. On July 4, 1967 she passed away. I was twelve years old at the time and my older brothers and sisters were four, five, and six years older than I am. My father remarried six months later and moved us into a stepfamily. My brothers and sisters all revolted and pretty much left.

**AS:** You were twelve?

**VW:** I was twelve.

**AS:** So they were all teenagers.

**VW:** Yes. I was left in a stepfamily. My dad was gone drinking. My stepmother was very upset that he was gone and was very, very verbally and emotionally abusive to me. I was a teenager. I was twelve. You can imagine as a teenager what that’s like with a stepmother especially. I was born very strict Catholic. Not only did I go to Catholic grade school but I sang in the choir at eight o’clock mass, at ten o’clock mass I served mass, and at eleven thirty mass I usually read the epistle to the church. I had a priest that taught me public speaking skills. This priest abused me, sexually when I was twelve. He basically raped me. I quit the church shortly after. What’d I’d do when I was supposed to go to church…

**AS:** You were still supposed to go so you didn’t tell anyone.

**VW:** I went to the Proctor golf course and I’d hide up there. I worked there as a summer job so I could hide up there. I’d come home after church was done and I never told anyone about this. Finally, my father said to me, “You’re not going to church.” I said, “How do you know?” “I know. Why not?” “I don’t know, Dad. Church does not appeal to me anymore. I’ve learned everything I can learn. I don’t like church. I don’t want to go.” “You don’t have to go.” That was my way out of church. I started discovering girls. Girls started discovering me. I was a chunky little fellow. I lost all this weight and the girls started knocking on my door which was very strange for me. As a young boy it was extremely exciting. As a Catholic I was never sexual with girls. My father always said, “Verne you don’t have sex with a girl unless you’re either married to her or you plan to marry her. You never, never have sex with a girl.” That’s how I was raised. I had girlfriends who used to say, “How come you aren’t like the other boys? How come you never try anything?” I don’t know but I just knew that was not what I was supposed to do. I had a secret life. Going through puberty I learned about masturbation. It was extremely shaming to me. It was a secret. I used to think, if my mother is watching me how shaming this was.

**AS:** Your deceased mother.

**VW:** Yes.

**AS:** That’s so intense.

**VW:** I started doing that compulsively. I hurt myself. Then I started exposing myself to young girls when I masturbated, girls my age, in Proctor. I’m thirteen, fourteen years old. At fifteen I get caught. Somebody turns me in. My dad sends me to a psychiatrist. One of my older brothers is gay and my dad could not stand the thought of a son that was gay. This was a World War II, John Wayne, butch haircut, six foot two man’s man. To have a son that was gay was the worst thing in the world for him. Now he’s afraid that his youngest son is gay too. He sent me to a psychiatrist. It was so shaming. Only nuts crazy people saw, back then.

**AS:** When’s this?

**VW:** ‘69. Only crazy people saw psychiatrists. I was a crazy person.

**AS:** What year were you born?

**VW:** ‘55. I saw this psychiatrist, he kept me from committing suicide. At fourteen I actually attempted suicide. US Highway 2 runs through Proctor. There used to be grain trucks from North Dakota that would come down to the grain elevators and it was a steady stream of big grain trucks. At fourteen I closed my eyes and walked out in front of one. That man, poor guy, slammed on his breaks and went around me. When I realized he didn’t hit me he jumps out of his truck and I took off running. That was my suicide attempt. At fifteen I started drinking. I started using marijuana and LSD. I was a very out of control kid. The psychiatrist I went to see, I saw him for about a year and then he got arrested for molesting his patients.

**AS:** Where did you see him?

**VW:** In Duluth. I’d see this where he had women laying on different cots in different rooms. He’d give them a tranquilizer and then he’d molest them when they were out. One time he came in and he had his pants down and he had thigh high stockings on and a garter belt. What the hell is that?

**AS:** What did you think of the world at this point?

**VW:** He’s a professional and I’m the one who’s crazy. I was scared of anybody as an adult. I played sports in Proctor. I was scared to death of the coaches. I was scared of people in…

**AS:** Positions of authority.

**VW:** Positions of authority. With my father’s drinking I got very involved in lots of things trying to become a leader in something to get his attention. Children of alcoholic type stuff. I struggled to do that. I always thought once I had sex with a woman my compulsive behavior would finish. I met my wife when she was fifteen and I was sixteen. It was a dance that the Catholic Church in the western part of Duluth would put on for teenagers in the summer. I met her, she had white blue jeans on.

**AS:** Those were the days.

**VW:** I memorized her phone numbers. We dated off and on. She was an extremely strict Catholic. She has two nuns in the family. I’m thinking she’s from the west part of Duluth. If you’re from Proctor you’re thinking west-end girl these women are rowdy. I have to marry one who’s thinking about becoming a nun. We dated off and on. We finally got engaged. After four years at nineteen years of age we lost our virginity together. It was very intense. I felt like I was doing something wrong. “You took her virginity, you asshole. You selfish bastard.” She was like, “No, it’s okay. I wanted to do this.” We ended up marrying. We’re going on forty years now of being married. I always thought that would stop my behaviors and it didn’t. I got in some trouble with the police.

**AS:** After you were married?

**VW:** After I was married. I met a psychologist in town. I said, “My grandfather was very big into AA. This feels like a very compulsive addiction, what I’m doing. I’ve tried stopping this my whole life. I can’t stop it.” I made promises to myself, I made promises to God, I made promises to my wife and I can’t stop this behavior. I said, “I’d like to start this twelve step group based on the steps of AA.” He said, “That’s an interesting thought.” I put it together. He was part of this community group of therapists. He said, “Would you put a presentation on to these folks?” I did. This one therapist said, “You’re talking about sexual addiction.” I said, “What? I’ve never heard that term.” “There’s a doctor in the Twin Cities named Patrick Carnes. He’s written a book called *Out of the Shadows*. It’s now called *Out of the Shadows.* You should read that book.” I went and got it. Oh my God. It was like this guy wrote this book about me. I contacted him and tracked him down to the Twin Cities. He said, “I just started a program in Golden Valley. Would you like to come down?” “Yeah.” I was patient number ninety-seven of his. Pat Carnes is now a world famous therapist. My second son is named after him. I went through his program. I learned about addiction. I learned about core values that addicts have about themselves, low self-esteem. If people knew what I was really like they wouldn’t like me. For me sex was my most important aid. I can’t depend on other people to meet my needs. You have very little self-worth, self-esteem, you don’t trust people so therefore you have a very secret life. I learned that. While I was there I started going to Sex Addicts Anonymous meetings in the cities. But when I came up here we didn’t have anything. I started a group in Duluth, still going strong. I don’t go to it anymore but I went to it a year ago. I walked into the meeting and folks were like, “Hi how are you?” “Good.” “Do you know what meeting you’re at?” “Isn’t this Sex Addicts Anonymous?” “Yes. How do you know about us?” “I started this meeting in my living room in 1985.” It’s still going strong.

After about two years in therapy I started the Minnesota Council on Sexual Addiction which was an educational organization. What that did for me though was it got me very involved in the twelve steps. I understood the twelve steps. Starting that group in Duluth I can’t tell you how many hundreds of people who I had coffee with that told me their story that needed help. The county jail would call me up, “Verne we have someone up here who needs to talk to you.” I’d go down to the sex offenders program in Moose Lake and they asked me not to come back because they said, “These folks are going to be here the rest of their lives. We’re not going to let them go. You’re telling them that their behaviors are insane. The second step of the program is belief in a higher power will restore us to sanity. By doing that they’re going to claim that they’re insane and they’re going to try to get out of here. We’ll never let these people out of here. We don’t want you to come back here.” “I don’t think this is the right thing to do.” They wouldn’t let me come back. We started SAA meetings here. I got a call and went up to Canada and did it up in Canada. Long story short, that’s what got me involved in the twelve steps. I worked the twelve steps, I know the life of an addict, I know how powerful an addiction is. The insanity of that addiction. I’ve been married going on forty years, we have two children. My wife is a medical social worker. She’s soon to retire. She started a group called COSA. COSA was the AlAnon version for co-dependence of sex addicts. Both of us have this background. When our oldest boy called us up and said, “Mom, Dad I’ve got a problem. I’ve gotten myself addicted to meth.” We were like, “Oh my God. We’ve been down this road.”

**AS:** Did your sons know about your addiction?

**VW:** I told both my boys my story.

**AS:** When did you do that?

**VW:** Probably when they were seventeen, eighteen years old. I started to be on the news media more and more. I got involved with my work with the church. I filed a lawsuit against the church in 1992. What I did is I went to the bishop of Duluth who I knew very well. I had dinner with him several times at my mother-in-law’s house. I called him up and said, “Look, I had a priest in Proctor, Father John Nicholson. He molested me. He raped me. He did that to a bunch of the kids I went to school with. I’m not interested in suing you. All of this is starting to come out in the media about what’s going on. Let’s do something proactive. Let’s reach out to my classmates and say we heard this happened. What can we do as a church to help you heal?” “Come into see me.” He wouldn’t see me. He’s an attorney basically, the second in command to the bishop.

**AS:** So the bishop invited you to talk to him but then the bishop didn’t take the meeting.

**VW:** So then this guy meets me. He tells me who he is. “The bishop won’t be joining us.” I told him this guy molested me. I said, “I’d like to do something positive with this. I would like to do an outreach to my schoolmates. I think we could heal together. I think this could be something very positive that we do together.” He said, “I think that’s a great idea. Let me get back to you.” He never did. A couple months later I called him back. “We’re still thinking about it.” He never did.

I’m watching Sally Jessy Rafael. She’s got Father Tom Doyle and another priest on the show. Tom Doyle was a lawyer and he was with the embassy, the Vatican Embassy in Washington D.C. He and the priest were charged by the American Association of Bishops to look into this. This was all starting to happen. “Is it really that bad or is it just a few bad priests?” He came back and said, “No, this is huge. We need to do to reach out to these people. We need to do something about it.” They buried his report and said, “If you two want to have a future as priests you’ll forget this ever happened and bury it.” Here these guys on Sally Jessy and they said, “The only way we’re going to get the church to do something right about this is to sue them. Go after their pocketbook.” So I did. I contacted Jeff Anderson from the Twin Cities. They took me on. I settled the case. The laws got changed in one of the courts. Jeff Anderson calls me up and says, “Verne your lawsuit is dead. Until this gets appealed to a higher court, your lawsuit’s dead.”

**AS:** Because of the reporting?

**VW:** No it was just the way the law had gotten interpreted. There’s a lot of Catholic judges. He said, “Verne the church will give me enough money to get my money out of this. I can get you a couple thousand bucks.” I said, “Jeff I told you when I first started this, this has nothing to do with money. This is about keeping the church accountable. You get your money out of this. I will settle this thing so you can get your money but I will not sign a clause that will keep me quiet. I want to publicly speak about this.” That’s what we did. That allowed me then to continue my work as a volunteer. I think Nicholson had thirty some people that he ended up molesting.

**AS:** That’s the priest?

**VW:** That’s the priest. Since I started that I think the diocese has about thirty or forty priests that have been identified.

**AS:** What’s the name of the organization?

**VW:** SNAP, the Survivor Network of those Abused by Priests.

**AS:** That’s a powerful story. That interests me being raised Catholic. We were at the point where you said you told your boys when they were seventeen and eighteen. This is in the 90s?

**VW:** Matthew was born in ‘86. Patrick was born in 1990.

**AS:** This isn’t until the 2000s. But you brought this up in ‘92? This was a long process.

**VW:** Yes. It was settled in about ‘95.

**AS:** You started speaking out more because it blew up nationally. Your boys were teenagers and they were going to hear you.

**VW:** They were going to hear me on the news. I told my father, “Dad you’re going to hear in the news.” He felt terrible. He absolutely felt terrible. The reason I’m throwing this at you was this was the framework that I’ve had to be there to help my son. Sometimes you kind of look about why things happen in your life, talking about higher power stuff. My son Matthew is a professional dancer, he does dance and theater. He was out in New York. He had a partner out there, they would go in New York City, it’s all about who you see and being seen. Somebody said, “You ought to try meth.” “Okay.” He tried it and it was like “Oh my God, this is incredible.” As a dancer, “I’m losing weight because I’m on this stuff. I don’t have to eat as much.” It ended up consuming him. He lost his job, he lost his relationship. He lost pretty much everything.

**AS:** At what point did he call you?

**VW:** He’d been using for about six months when he called me. He called me in the fall.

**AS:** What year is this?

**VW:** He’s been clean for five years. That was seven years ago, 2010. No, it was 2011. It was 2012 during our flood that I came down. I had to go down to the cities and pick him up, he’d been using. Probably 2010 when he first...I got him involved in a treatment center in New York. This was a revolving door place. “Come on in. Thirty days. Goodbye.” It did nothing. He started using again. His partner was very upset. They were hurting for money. His partner finally said, “I’m done.” Matt started sleeping with all kinds of people so he put his partner at risk too. Matt’s gay and it’s all part of that gay lifestyle of New York. His partner said, “I’m done.” He called me up, “Verne, Matt owes me money for rent. Can you help me out?” “Yes.” I ended up paying his debts.

He’d been gone for two weeks on the streets of New York. Nobody knew where he was, none of his friends. I called the St. Louis County attorney who I know. I said, “Mark do you have any contacts in New York City? I’ve got a son that’s using out there. He’s using meth. Could I get somebody to look for him?” “If they find him they’re going to arrest him and he’ll get a felony. I don’t know if you want that. Although they might put him in drug court.” Finally, he made contact with one of his friends. He said, “Matt I’ve got food and stuff in my apartment come on in when you can.” He put a motion detector hooked up to a computer with a camera. When Matt entered his apartment he had him on motion detection. Matt is so gaunt and so out of it. This guy finally runs home and gets him and has him. I talk to him on the phone. I say, “Matt do you want help or not?” “I don’t know Dad.” “Here’s the deal son. If you want to stay using, then I’m going to put your mom on the phone and I want you to say goodbye to her. Then you’re going to say goodbye to me. If you want to be an addict, then you choose that and you be an addict. If you don’t think you have a problem that’s your choice. You’re going to lose your family. You can’t have both. You have a choice here. You can either have your family and I’ll be there to support you or you can have your meth. That’s your choice. What do you want to do?” My wife is going, “What are you doing? Are you crazy? Are you fucking crazy? What if he says?” “He has a choice to make: do you have a problem or don’t you? If you’re going to choose your drugs over your family, it’s pretty tough to say you don’t have a problem.” He said, “Dad I don’t want to lose you guys.” I said, “Good. That’s the right answer. I want you to come home. I can get you into treatment in Minnesota. We have the best treatment centers in the country.” I flew him and his friend home. I was afraid he might take off. I flew them both in. This was retirement money that I had.

**AS:** Verne you never told me what it is that you do.

**VW:** I railroaded for twenty-nine years. I blew two disks out in my back. I was retired at age forty-seven. I was a union guy. I represented railroads in Minnesota down at the state legislature. I had success down there and they shipped me to Washington D.C. I was a lobbyist in Washington for a number of years.

**AS:** A lot like your grandfather.

**VW:** My kids were little and I said, “I can’t be a father who comes home on weekends.” I went from assistant national director to a Cub Scout leader here in Duluth. Talk about a little ego change. That’s my background. We got him home. I called the Pride Institute in the Twin Cities. The former director, Joe Meeko, was on my board for the Minnesota Council on Sexual Addiction. I said, “Is Joe Meeko there?” “Joe’s gone. We know Joe.” “I’m an old friend of his. I have this gay son who is coming home who is hooked on meth. Can I get him in?” “Yes you can.” I picked him up from the cities and he was home for a while. He stole our car and went to the cities and used. The cops pinged his phone and said, “Verne he’s in the Twin Cities. Why don’t you put a health and welfare check on him? If we do find him we can say, ‘Call your parents they’re worried about you.’ If you file a stolen car report, then he’s going to get in trouble and you don’t want that do you?” “I don’t want that. I just want the boy home.”

We got up here the night it started raining, what a hellacious night. We got back to Duluth at eleven thirty at night when it started pouring. I was a Red Cross volunteer at the time. When I get home there’s a call at one in the morning saying, “The city’s flooding out, can you opening up a shelter?” “Yes.” We have a big church up on the hill and I called that minister and we opened up a shelter for Duluth. It’s only because I remember how crazy this whole shit was. We did a rule twenty-five. The day of the storm we were scheduled to do a rule twenty-five. The social worker from St. Louis County said, “I’ll try to get to my office.” Mary said, “Great, I will be there.” Mary took a whole bunch of detours and got there and met with the social worker. She did a rule twenty-five. Then a couple days later I got him down to Pride Institute. He was there for ninety days. He got out, they put him in a sober house. They should have put him in a halfway house. Bought all his clothing, food, linens, all this shit. He was there for two days and he’s gone. We’ve both been down this road. Finally, we talk and he’s living at some guy’s house that’s providing a free place to stay.

**AS:** He’s going to work the program on his own?

**VW:** “You’re on your own. Good luck.” After three weeks he calls me up and says, “Can I come home?” I said, “I don’t know. Here’s when you can come home. You go to ninety meetings in ninety days and you get an NA sponsor.”

**AS:** And then you can come home?

**VW:** Then you can come home. “You have to agree to those terms.” He went to the Center for Drug and Alcohol and they had an outpatient day meeting. He went there and he started going to NA at night. He got a sponsor, a woman from Superior, Robin. Robin is incredible. She’s been clean from heroin for about twenty-five years now.

**AS:** Is it Robin E?

**VW:** Yes, Robin E.

**AS:** Robin’s being interviewed right now by my students.

**VW:** I was going to suggest to you that you interview Robin.

**AS:** I found her on NA.

**VW:** Robin’s incredible. Robin became Matt’s sponsor. Matt did ninety days. He said, “I’m going to do another ninety.”

**AS:** Is he living here at this point?

**VW:** He’s at home. For two years he was going to NA every day. Then he got on the area board. Then he became the assistant regional. He’s very involved in NA. He sponsors a number of people. I got a call from Douglas County, their jail. I criticized them, their county attorney and their jailers. “You’re talking about locking people up longer. You don’t have a treatment program in Northwestern Wisconsin. You just got done saying if you lock people up longer it’s a better idea. I’m not from here, I’m from Duluth, I’m not here to tell you your business. You don’t provide any type of programming while they’re in jail. If you believe it’s better to keep them in jail, then why the hell aren’t you offering NA in your jail? Why not?” “I don’t know why not.” “I’ll tell you why not. You have a policy that you have to be clean for at least two years and you also cannot have a felony on your record to be in a jail. How many heroin addicts and meth addicts do you know that don’t have some sort of record?” I got a call the next day from the county jailer. “We’ve changed our policy. Can you come over and start an NA group?” “No I’m not an addict.” I said to my son, “Son this might be great service work for you.” Nothing was more sobering for me than to hear that big steel door shut behind me and know I was not locked in. I said, “I would really recommend you consider that.” He did. He runs an NA group up at that county jail.

**AS:** So Matt still lives here.

**VW:** Yes. Matt lived with us for two years. Two years of my life I was taking care of my dad who was quite elderly. I was his caretaker up here and I was taking care of Matt at the same time. My life was extremely full. After two years I said, “Son it’s time for you to go.” “You think I’m ready?” “You are. You’re working your program. You have a higher power you’ve connected with. It’s time for you to go.” He started, because he’s a professional dance, one of the dance schools called him up. He did that. Then he got a call from a theatrical director, “We have a small company in Duluth to not only do choreography for us but we have a couple of lead roles we’d like you to do.” He’s like, “God, Dad I can’t believe this.” “And you thought coming back to Duluth your whole theatrical life was over.” We talked about higher power action. How this was so much higher power that he needed to recognize. “Son when this happens you need to bank this. When you’re feeling very scared if you can recognize that your higher power has been there for you it’s a very comforting thought. You can recognize you might not have the answers about what’s going to happen in life but you can trust that a higher power does.” He got a call from University of Minnesota Duluth campus saying, “We’d like you to teach a class for us.” This last year they called and said, “One of our teachers is going to be gone. We’d like you to be full time on our staff.” He just finished with that. Matt’s been clean for a little over five years. Now he’s headed down to Milwaukee to get his master’s degree. The college folks have said, “Matt we’d love to have you come back.” He says, “I love teaching college level.” But he needs to have his MFA. So that’s what he’s doing.

**AS:** When did you start the NarAnon group?

**VW:** Three years ago this June.

**AS:** That’s it. During those first two years you said were hard, you started the NarAnon group after Matt moved out?

**VW:** Pretty much. He’d been here for a little while when we started the NarAnon group.

**AS:** Tell me why you started the NarAnon group.

**VW:** I wanted to start NarAnon because what we went through and what every parent goes through is the darkest shit. You just can’t get over how dark this is. It felt like I had something to give to people. It’s the old thing about turning lemons into lemonade. Trying to do something positive. Three years ago I contacted the mayor of Duluth, Don Ness, and I said, “Mayor we’ve got this opiate problem going on. We can’t rely on the police to do this. This is bigger than the police. We need to start some sort of community organization. Some sort of community task force. I would like to offer you my services to do that.” I started the NarAnon by contacting the police chief and saying, “We’re going to do this NarAnon group. Would you put that on your Facebook page that we’re going to do that at Miller-Dwan Meeting Room at this date?” I did that with the Superior police chief too. We had ten people at our very first meeting. The police, I’m getting calls all the time with them. The mayor said, “I think we need to do more than what we’re doing.” He put me in touch with the police chief and he said, “There’s a group called the Opiate Advisory Response Strategy group, OARS group. You should be on that. I will make it happen that you can be on that group.” I joined them. I do not have a formal education. I’m a high school graduate. In Proctor High School I was the valedictorian of my class with a 2.7 grade point average. Just kidding. I always joke in Proctor it’s all about trains. I got on that. It’s a lot of doctors, very professional people.

We were meeting just to meet. It was becoming a clearinghouse of information but nobody was doing anything. I got ahold of Maggie Kazel and a couple other people. We have all this talent, all this expertise in this room and we’re not doing anything with it. We need to do more. I started speaking more. I started letting these people know that we have too many kids who are dying of overdoses. We’re doing a lot of talking but now it’s time to take this talk and go into action. We did. We started holding public meetings. I got everybody to break off into small groups. We have committees on harm reduction, on support, treatment programs. Biggest thing we found in treatment is lack of access to treatment. Five to seven-week window to try to get into treatment. I got on all those committees. I started pushing like hell to say this is not enough. People listened. We just put in a one point four million dollar grant to the Department of Human Services. We’re supposed to hear something by the end of May.

I’ve been meeting with the mayor. The mayor put the opioid epidemic as her first priority for the state of the city address this year. She’s going to hold a summit. I went down to the legislature and met with some people. We’re all going to get together in one room with county commissioners, legislatures, the mayor, the police, treatment centers. I’ve been pushing for these rapid response groups where if somebody overdoses we go in there with a rule twenty-five, we have a place for them to go, we have people from the recovery community to meet with them and say this is my story. We get them into a program where they stay overnight for a week or two weeks, get them on Suboxone or medically assisted treatment as soon as we can. It’s a continuous thing. The police chief just told me, “We’ve decided to adopt the Gloucester community model.” That’s in Massachusetts. “If people come to our precinct and say ‘We no longer want to do this. Here’s our stuff, here’s our drugs.’ We will not arrest them. We will bring them right into treatment and walk them through the steps so they are not alone.” Now they have Narcan being distributed everywhere. I’m with the rescue squad.

**AS:** What do you with that?

**VW:** If there’s a car accident, if there’s a drowning, people are lost in the woods, if there’s an overdose, all that kind of stuff. A lot of the overdoses I get are people who are lost or committed suicide.

**AS:** Do you have Narcan in there?

**VW:** We do not but we are getting it. I have Narcan in the house. I keep it here. I let all my neighbors know I have Narcan in the house. That’s how I’ve gotten involved in this. This is more involved than I wanted to get.

**AS:** You’re still on the committee.

**VW:** The committee gave me this award not long ago. It’s from the Public Health Department. It’s an achievement award. The county gave me this about two weeks ago. “This is for the work that you’ve done.” I’m a volunteer. That’s the nice part about being a volunteer. I can speak my mind and say what I want to say.

**AS:** You’re not at risk. You’re not beholden to anyone. You’re like the voice of the community.

**VW:** That’s what they’re calling me.

**AS:** That’s really powerful, especially in this current crisis that we’re in. They stay siloed, this task force idea is great. You can sit around and talk but if you don’t do anything there’s no point in meeting.

**VW:** The folks on the range called me up and they want to do the same thing, “Will you come up and meet with us?” I don’t have any magic bullets on this thing. I’m just trying to get people…

**AS:** You’re saying you don’t have the answers.

**VW:** I don’t.

**AS:** You’re coming to it from a place of humility.

**VW:** If I had an answer I’d throw it out there. All I’m saying is I believe in the twelve step programs. I think medically assisted treatment has to have a finite end to it. We need to work addicts to a point where they go, “I’ve tapered off of it. Let’s stay involved in the twelve step community and let’s live a twelve step life.”

Everybody kinds of cringes when I say this but I want to start a two year or a three-year treatment program where people can come to it and live there for two or three years and get stabilized. It was two years for my son to really get back to his old mental self. He doesn’t remember half of the stuff that went on when we talk about it. As parents you just don’t get it. All you can think of is, “How in the world don’t you realize how bad this is for you?” We talk about at our twelve step meetings about expectations and fears. Don’t have expectations, recognize that the addict can’t do that. If you have expectations you’re setting the addict up to fail, yourself up to fail. All you’re doing honestly is putting more shame on the addict. Then you’re mad, “Why are you doing this to me? If you love me, you wouldn’t do this to me.” I think that’s part of the important message that in NarAnon we get to talk about. I try to share that when I do public speaking. As a NarAnon person I say, “I’m a part of NarAnon but I’m not speaking tonight representing NarAnon.” Same with this OARS group I’m a part of. I say, “I’m a member of NarAnon but I do not represent NarAnon at this meeting. Please know that. I’m a volunteer.”

**AS:** The anonymity thing worked in the time period that it was developed. There was a need for privacy and anonymity. For some people there is a need for privacy but the anonymous part hasn’t really helped us understand addiction as a society. It’s only kept shame alive. I think we are about to move into a new time. My experience as a mother of a teenager who was going off the rails that other parents didn’t want to talk to me. I felt ashamed. I wanted to talk but parents of other troublemaker kids didn’t want to talk. They didn’t want to admit they weren’t in control or their kids were struggling too. It was the most alienating thing. I remember thinking “Why when they’re little babies we’ll talk about the color of their poop and when they’re teenagers we can’t talk about the social problems they’re having.” How can I as another parent help you? I’ve been through this. I’m talking about long before addiction came into my life. Just normal teenage acting out. We don’t support each other in things we feel shame around.

**VW:** I look at how that reflects on the child. When the child knows the family is shamed of them what does that do for the child’s self-esteem and self-worth? “I’m the black sheep of the family. I’m the bad one. They don’t even want to talk about me.” I explained that to my son. We talked about shame, we talked about the core beliefs of the addict. “Drugs are my most important aid. If people knew what I was like they wouldn’t like me. I can’t depend on other people to meet my needs.” Those are some of the core beliefs that addicts have to go through. The major one is “I am basically a bad person. No matter how many times I have tried to stop my addiction I have not stopped. I have to be a bad person. I have prayed about it. I have gone to treatment about it. I have made promises to my mother, my father, my wife, my kids. I’ve responsibilities to my children, to my family. I have thrown them all away to take care of my addiction. What an asshole of a person I am.” That’s a terrible thing to live a life of that. That’s why it’s important that we have this public education and stop that stigma. Do you mind if I read this letter of this kid? It kind of ties into this.

**AS:** You can tell a little bit about it.

**VW:** A NarAnon mom just lost her son. He took his own life because he was addicted to heroin and he couldn’t stop it. He was ashamed of his behavior. He felt like a failure. This is an apology letter that he left his mother.

“Mom,

Words can’t come into place for the way I’ve been feeling for a while now and I know you’re going to want to blame part of this on yourself because you gave me more money. This is the most peaceful way I could have done it.”

He put a hose from his exhaust pipe into his truck. That’s how he died.

“It would have happened no matter what but this was the cleanest least sufferable. You and Dad did an amazing job with what life threw at you and not a lot of people would have been able to handle it. I love you Mom and thank you for being the best you could possibly be. Ok suicide by heroin didn’t work. I know you’re wondering why I did this and I will tell you. Monday I went in to do one of my weekly eye scanners and ninety-nine percent of the time it says I’m clean and I most certainly am not clean. Obviously I started using again. I’m pretty sure probation was going to work for me anymore. I also needed to learn how to get clean off heroin on my own. Probation isn’t going to hold my hand for the rest of my life. I found a way to stay off heroin though. I’ve been smoking weed. To probation weed isn’t legal so there’s no possible way to overlook that. If you need to substitute drugs it needs to be Suboxone or methadone or destruxin which are no different than heroin. They all get you high. They all make you totally dependent on them and they all make you sick when you don’t use them every single day. That’s why most addicts are in court systems in the first place. We get sick and we do anything to use again. Weed isn’t like that. I can stop using weed for however long I want and I’m sure as shit I don’t get the least bit sick. I don’t even nod off in public. If for some reason I do need to increase my dosage the same thing happens if increased, nothing. I’ve tried just about everything besides this. I know you’re thinking prison would change me but not in the way anyone would want. Most importantly how I wouldn’t want. I’ve met enough of Duluth’s finest in county and I’d rather not meet anymore. Please don’t leave my body in the ground either. I don’t mind if you have an open casket funeral but please cremate me. I’ve always had the belief that if your body stays in the ground then so do you but if you’re cremated then you get free.”

**AS:** That is tragic. Thanks for sharing that.

**VW:** This epidemic is extremely powerful. Those of us that it affects, it affects all of us. It doesn’t matter if you’re a parent, it affects all of us.

**AS:** You can’t be in a room with more than fifteen people with someone who knows someone.

**VW:** I think of all the children that are in foster care because their parents are in addiction. I think of all the problems those kids are going to have. This is not something we can sit on and allow people to die. That’s it. That’s pretty much why I’m here. This is what got me involved with all this.

**AS:** Thank you. It’s a really powerful story.

**VW:** You’re welcome. I didn’t say it but with my sexual addiction I had been clean and gotten into SAA and did all the stuff I did and was able to put all that behind me. Thank God for that.

**AS:** You know it can happen for addiction.

**VW:** I know people who have eating disorders, who have so many other kinds of addictions. I have been handing a gift, going through all this crap that I’ve gone through. I have a lot of insights. There you go.

**AS:** Thank you.

[End of Interview]