

# Change is Possible

By Tish Vincent

## Hosting

Former State Bar of Michigan Lawyers and Judges Assistance Program Administrator Martha Burkett is in Germany these days, providing treatment to U.S. soldiers returning from Afghanistan, but her spirit was in Grand Rapids for four beautiful autumn days in mid-October. The air was crisp and the trees were ablaze with red, orange, and gold leaves set against skies the color of a light-blue crayon—the perfect setting for a community of professionals to gather for the American Bar Association Commission on Lawyer Assistance Programs (CoLAP) annual conference at the Amway Grand Plaza.

Inviting CoLAP to Grand Rapids was a dream of Burkett's that came true; the October 9–12 event attracted 180 attendees and 30 exhibitors from 18 states, the District of Columbia, and Canada. Our scenic state opened its doors to welcome the people who run the lawyer assistance programs in the U.S. and Canada to further their mission of outreach and education to lawyers, judges, and law students struggling with addictions, mental health issues, cognitive decline, and social problems.

## Lawyer Assistance Programs

The SBM Lawyers and Judges Assistance Program (LJAP) is a lawyer assistance program (LAP), and every state in the country has one. The LAP structure and organization varies depending on the nature of the state's bar and the program's history. Michigan has had some form of lawyer assistance program since the 1970s, when recovering attorneys formed a committee that met regularly and reached out to other attorneys struggling with alcoholism. Lives were saved, and the idea was supported and pre-

served. This trailblazing work evolved into today's comprehensive program that offers support and accountability to the state's law students, lawyers, and judges.

The original goal of reaching out to attorneys struggling with alcoholism and other addictions remains. Dedicated attorneys volunteer their time to monitor the recovery of their peers. LJAP serves as a clearinghouse for this effort, keeping a file of potential peer monitors and putting recovering attorneys in touch with volunteers. LJAP also offers telephone consultations, presentations, comprehensive evaluations, and monitoring contracts.

## Educational Sessions

The theme of this year's CoLAP conference was "Meeting Our Challenges for 25 Years." Conference attendees were welcomed by SBM President Bruce Courtade; 55th District Court Judge Donald Allen, current chair of the SBM Lawyers and Judges Assistance Committee; and Dennis Archer, past president of the ABA and SBM.

Educational sessions dealt with recovery mind training; assessment, diagnosis, and treatment of sex addiction; identifying cognitive impairments; addiction treatment in the new millennium; common and best practices and other ideas from the student frontlines; motivational interviewing; un-

derstanding psychological trauma and the brain; and adaptive intervention. The sessions were interspersed with time to interact with other treatment providers and enjoy Grand Rapids and the surrounding area.

As a provider and LJAP director attending the CoLAP conference, I can attest to the synergy created when professionals gather and focus their attention on the wellness of the nation's attorneys. Attendees engage in lively discussions, share ideas, compare programs, kindle friendships, and strengthen connections.

My path brought me from the practice of therapy and counseling to the practice of law to my current position with LJAP. So my observation of the law is from the perspective of an addictions therapist with years of experience evaluating processes and problems. I cannot help but compare and contrast the cultures of counseling and law. From my earliest days in law school, I could feel pressure from what I've since heard described as "time famine." Perhaps you have heard people say, "The law is a jealous mistress." How do attorneys, judges, and law students maintain their values and self-care as they compete in the practice of law?

We see many dreary statistics in professional journals about the rates of depression, substance abuse, suicide, and various social ills of legal practitioners. Where do we see the stories of wellness, balance,

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happiness, and human connection? Since becoming program administrator for LJAP, I've struggled to fill this column with positive messages of health, hope, solutions, and fun.

We are the problem solvers, the fixers, the champions, and the trusted counselors to our clients. We can find solutions to the problems staring at us. The solutions rest quietly in each of us, tucked away deep in our hearts, in the smiles of our children,

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the warmth of the sun, the sense of support and comfort that comes to us during lunch with a friend, and the helping hand that reaches out to steady us while we regain our equilibrium. The spark of wellness in each of us ignites at the CoLAP conference, and those in attendance feel the warmth throughout the following year.

During the course of those four days in Grand Rapids, I heard many uplifting stories of joy, hope, and possibility. When times get tough, we do not need to have all the answers, go it alone, or appear stronger than we are. We can reach out to one another through LJAP or other points of contact. ■



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