



Never Enough

By Michael J. Burke

Fast Facts:

- Two out of three compulsive gamblers commit an illegal act to obtain money for gambling.
- Gamblers have the highest rate of suicide of all addictions.
- If you think somebody has a gambling problem, he does.

It was the middle of September 2000.

I was in the VIP slot room at Casino Windsor, playing a \$100 slot machine at \$200 a pull.

The machine was on a carousel, which held four other \$100 machines.

I had hit jackpots on three of the five machines and was waiting to be paid off over \$100,000.

With bells ringing and lights flashing, I was already playing the fourth machine, playing two tokens at a time, playing as fast as I could.

A casino host who knew me well approached from behind.

He leaned over my shoulder and whispered in my ear,

*“Remember, Burke, it’s **never enough.**”*

He had uttered the single greatest truth shared by all addicts...

The first time I used the proceeds from my IOLTA account because of my gambling I knew that my professional career as an attorney—and life as I knew it—would come to an end. The only issue was when. How had things ever gotten to this point?

I come from a family of attorneys. My grandfather, George J. Burke, Sr., an attorney in Ann Arbor, was appointed as a judge at the Nuremberg War Trials, hearing cases against Nazi war criminals. The Burke Law Firm is still the oldest existing law firm in Washtenaw County. My father, George J. Burke, Jr., practiced with the firm and then became business manager of the Michigan Liquor Control Commission, moving his family from Ann Arbor to Howell.

I was raised in Howell with my nine brothers and sisters. We were expected to attend college, and each child was to use his or her special talents to pay for that education. I ended up playing football at Hillsdale College, after which I returned to Howell and married my high school sweetheart.

In 1972, her father, an attorney and judge who practiced law for 50 years in Howell, heard about a new law school opening in Lansing and offered to support me financially if I wanted to attend. It was the chance of a lifetime. Three years later, I stood with the first class graduated from Thomas M. Cooley Law School.

After graduation, I joined a small law firm in Howell and began my career. One of the members, a friend from high school, became my mentor and teacher. I loved the practice of law and everything associated with it. Unfortunately, there was one problem—drinking. I didn’t get in trouble every time I drank, but every time I did get in trouble, I had been drinking. There finally came a time when I announced to family and friends that I was going to quit, but unfortunately, I was not able to stop. As a result, I entered Brighton Hospital in April 1977.

This facility was then a 30-day inpatient treatment center for alcoholism. Through a series of powerful lectures and group therapy, I came to understand what I would have to do to survive as a recovering alcoholic. One of the lectures was presented by Dr. Russell Smith, a world-renowned speaker on alcoholism. He warned the patients about the dangers of trading one addiction

for another. He suggested to the patients that if they could smoke it, swallow it, inject it, or roll it (dice), they could become addicted to it.

Brighton Hospital turned my life around. Within a few years, our children were born. My wife and I were the best of parents, taking part in all school activities with our beautiful daughters. My life also became filled with community service—serving on several boards, assisting millages, negotiating teacher/administration disputes.

After a few years, I left the firm I had been with and went on my own. My law practice soared. My clients were primarily people with problems caused by alcohol. My first advice to them was to get admitted to an inpatient program for alcoholism. The most rewarding aspect of getting my clients into treatment was that they could return to reclaim their lives. As a result, I not only increased my clientele, but I also developed many life-long friends.

As good as this all was, my life was about to come crashing down around me. Because I did not pay close enough attention to Dr. Smith’s lecture on trading one addiction for another, I ended up celebrating my 24th, 25th, and 26th years of sobriety in Jackson Prison. I had become a compulsive gambler.

Gambling was just one of those things that I enjoyed as a younger person. There were friendly poker games with my buddies, bets on a round of golf or an occasional football



game. In the late 1970s, my wife and I started to vacation in Las Vegas. This was the beginning of yearly trips to one gambling destination or another. Early on, I was rated by a Las Vegas casino as a “high roller,” so my gambling junkets were “comped” by the casino. Like most gamblers, I would lie about my losses, saying that I won or, at worst, broke even. I lost large sums of money every time I went to Nevada, but I was able to earn it back in the course of the next year.

That was all to change in 1994 with the opening of Casino Windsor. Studies have shown that problems associated with compulsive gambling double within a 60-mile radius of a casino. (*The biggest pitfall for a compulsive gambler is proximity.*) Casino Windsor is 58 miles (less than one hour) from Howell. I was able to sneak over there a couple of times a week without anyone knowing, going during the day, when everyone assumed I was in my office, in court, or in transit. As the years passed, I got deeper and deeper into debt. Things were so bad financially that I borrowed \$75,000 from a client. Instead of using that money to get out of financial trouble, I lost most of it at the casino “chasing” money I had already lost.

Eventually I arrived at the point at which the only place I could get money to relieve the financial pressure caused by the gambling was my IOLTA account. (*Two out of three compulsive gamblers commit an illegal act to obtain money for gambling.*) I convinced myself that I was only “borrowing” those monies until such time as I could replace them. Of course, the only place I could get that kind of money was in a casino; I was now robbing from Peter to pay Paul.

It seemed that when things were at their worst, I would be able to settle another case—an influx of cash to get debtors off my back and go gamble some more. I had arrived at that stage in my gambling where the only thing that mattered was being “in action,” or the gambling itself. Winning or losing didn’t matter. If I happened to win a large amount of money, it merely translated into more time that I could stay in the casino. Gambling had now become my *medication*.

In September of 2000, I was sitting at my desk one night with a .38 pressed against my temple. It was the most wonderful feeling I’d ever had because I knew that suicide would free me from the guilt of being publicly exposed and having to explain to my family what I had done to them. As I turned my chair around, I caught a glimpse of a family photo on the credenza. I was so delusional that I honestly thought they could deal with the suicide, but who would explain the missing funds? It was just too much to do to them at one time, so I put the gun down. (*Gamblers have the highest rate of suicide of all addictions.*)

It all ended on March 30, 2001. That morning, I went to the State Bar and reported what I had done. I then met with a prosecutor from the Michigan Attorney General’s office and gave a full statement. That afternoon, I had to tell my wife and children about the deceit that had existed for years. There is no appropriate term to describe the pain and betrayal that they experienced. The following week I was arraigned on a count of embezzlement of a client’s funds over \$20,000. On that same afternoon, I experienced severe chest pains and was hospitalized. Later in the week,

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I underwent triple bypass surgery. Six weeks after surgery, I was sentenced to three to ten years in Jackson Prison and ordered to make restitution to my clients in the amount of \$1.6 million.

Prison offered me the opportunity to take time to decide what I could do to reduce the pain I had caused my family, friends, victims, and myself. I resolved that I would use that time to heal physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

I have been home from prison for four years, have reestablished a relationship with my family, and work daily on regaining their trust. I have also written a book, entitled *Never Enough*, which is being published by the American Bar Association and scheduled for release this month. Any proceeds will go to my victims. I lecture at Brighton Hospital on the subject of compulsive gambling and cross-addiction. I do as much public speaking on the subject as possible with the hope of making some amends. Anyone seeking information on compulsive gambling or in need of a speaker on the topic of addictions could visit www.neverenoughthebook.com.

Because of the proliferation of casinos, Internet gambling, and the growth of the lottery, lawyers are going to find themselves more involved in matters related to gambling. Every area of law (from domestic to criminal to business) is being impacted by gambling. Attorneys must be able to recognize the signs of compulsive gambling and be aware of the resources available. They must also be prepared to protect the family of the compulsive gambler from certain financial and emotional ruin.

As well, some of you have friends in the profession who you think may have a gambling problem. There is one absolute truth about gambling: *If you think someone has a gambling problem, he does.* Help these people get to the Lawyers and Judges Assistance Program before they suffer the devastating consequences of compulsive gambling. ■



Michael Burke was a sole practitioner for 25 years in Howell, Michigan. He is married and the father of two grown daughters. He was actively involved in many community activities, including Livingston County Bar Association (past president), Brighton Hospital Board of Directors, Livingston County Counseling Services Board of Directors, and Livingston County United Way Board

of Directors. Michael is available to speak to groups on addictions, with special interest in cross-addiction and compulsive gambling. He can be reached at www.neverenoughthebook.com.