

2021 Interview with Renee Schofield, Advisory Board on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse Chair

(responses were both written by Renee and transcribed from conversation)



Where do you live in Alaska and what do you love best about your community?

Ketchikan where I've been since the early 80s. This island community is the only place I have ever lived that opens its arms and loves you from the beginning. While our differences are many, at the end of the day, if you are in need, Ketchikan finds a way. If you need help, people embrace you from that moment forward and you're a friend. They'll see you in the grocery store, the car dealership and say hello. If you have a hardship, this community loves on you more than anywhere I've been. They'll just do what it takes. For me it's unique, that's the reason I'm still here – it's certainly not the weather! We are a very transient community – coast guard, fishing, tourism. As a community they've learned to love on you hard and fast and they don't ever let go. You may move to another state and they will remain lifelong friends.

How did you get interested/involved in the topic of mental health/substance misuse?

I am the mother of an addict. While my daughter has been in recovery for 17 years, those moments of terror still live in my heart. She started off doing typical teen things - a couple cigarettes, some beer, and before we knew it she was a full-blown meth addict. I as the mom was in denial. Once I was able to get past myself and recognize this was not about me, I was able to start to grapple with the reality. I remember the paralyzing feeling of not knowing if she was going to be alive from one day to the next. During the time I had the support of the police department, troopers, community, and some colleagues at the medical clinic where my office was located. One day, my daughter came walking into my work – she is 5'7 and weighed 82 lbs. She said, "Today's the date I'm going to quit." I called her pediatrician who is one of Ketchikan's respected doctors. He told me to contact KAR House, the residential program. I called them and said I need a bed and their response was that they didn't have room due to already have two males. I persisted and explained we have to do something or she is going to go back out. I called the pediatrician again and asked what to do. He told me "Well first you have to give her a beer." Back then the only way to be accepted into program was to be actively under the influence. And then he told me to go to the ER to receive clearance. A few months earlier I knew she'd need a TB test if she ever wanted treatment so I had actually already gotten that for her. Through those two men, they made this

work. She was cleared at 10PM and about midnight space and female staff were available for her. That's what started this whole thing for me. I am pretty well connected so I could navigate it and make it work. But when you think about the people who don't have those connections, who are maybe by themselves because their family has given up or maybe they've expended all the resources they have and don't know what to do next, that's what I'm here for. We have to make sure that no matter when, who or where, there is an opportunity for recovery to begin whatever that looks like – it's going to be different for every one of us. When I watch what happens in these communities, and when we hear these stories on the board of, well I didn't know where to go next and consequently now my child is incarcerated for twenty years, or my child is dead, or my husband is incapacitated for life because of a choice he made – always at some point there is that opportunity for recovery.

Even in recovery, the arrested development of my daughter's life is evident. Some days her anxiety overcomes her day. Some days she shines like the moon. What I know is, by sharing, participating and being the beacon those who cannot yet speak their truth, I can pay forward my gratefulness for her sobriety. There is no way I can ever repay those who supported me and my family during those dark days. The small acts of working toward helping others is a very tiny price for me to pay.

What mental health and/or substance misuse problem in your community would you like to fix most?

Homelessness. We have homeless by choice and homeless by chance. Very different circumstances and solutions. The homeless by chance people are living in a car, sending their kids to school every day, trying to not let people know they are struggling and just trying to make it and trying to find resources. Such stigma is attached to substance abuse and mental health issues that people really get nervous about raising their hands for help. I think we're getting better but I think that right now, especially with the past year's circumstances, the risk of people being marginally placed and displaced completely is a huge factor in our entire state. If you're outside, hypothermia is a major threat. Once we have people in stable housing, we provide the opportunity for people to breathe and make some different choices. As long as they are out there fighting for mere survival, they are going to do what's easy. If I am just trying to stay warm but you've got a pint of whiskey and I'll feel better for an hour or two...

Affordable housing is a long-standing conversation in our state. We need to work toward a responsible solution. I think if we could get creative about braiding funding and creative housing, even cubbies with locks – it's a place that's dry and their things can be secure. I do believe that folks have to do their part. They must have skin in the game. They should at least have to participate in some sort of service – even a webinar. They've forgotten how to dream. Helping them have hope again, to think that they could get a job. There is great potential in some of those folks they are just having a run of crap luck. I wish we could have leadership say "We are going to fix this problem THIS year." It's always later. How many people are we going to bury before we stop doing that?

What is a “bright spot” in your community that is successfully making a difference?

Two things. 1) The Ketchikan Wellness Coalition is working on community greenhouses. There are currently three being built. This is a solid move for food security for the island. We also have 2-3 small businesses that are focused on food security, growing, foraging or importing quality items. This is important and valuable. 2) We are currently working with SE Conference to establish our vision for going forward after the pandemic. There are lots of dollars coming available from the feds and we want to ensure that we use them wisely and with the greatest leverage possible. Smart ideas are critical and we are working hard on that.

What inspires you to keep trying to make a difference?

I believe that I was given this life to be a helper – to be one of those people who listens and reads between the lines of other things that might be going on. My unique perspective as a business owner, mom of an addict, community leader, health coach, allows me to use lots of different tools for success in my work. I am a crime and trauma scene decon person, so my business sees folks at their worst. And then I see people at their very best – those who just got their pilot license and are getting a drug screen for their new job. But one thing I feel very strongly about, is that we are not here to judge. We are here to make sure the person who walks through our door leaves feeling like they were treated fairly and the service they got was professional and responsible and they got what they needed. It only takes one tragedy or one huge win to remind me that we have plenty of work to do. For me it's about giving back. I truly believe that God brought me to this earth to be a beacon for others. You gotta shine your light for others to find their path, whatever that is for them. Just light the way.

Anything else you want to add about being an AMHB/ABADA Board member?

I've been on this board since the Murkowski administration. We all live in these silos where we live. Being on these boards has let me see the bigger picture. I've seen us do a lot of amazing things and through that work provide resources that may not have otherwise happened if we weren't advocating. We are truly blessed to have so many resources available to our residents. So many other states do not have the ability to shift gears and get those resources on the street like we do. I really do enjoy sitting down with my legislators especially and have them come away with an understanding of what we're doing.

The people on these boards are volunteers. They give their time to help shape our future. That matters and I am so grateful to be part of the team. It's valuable time and I've made lifelong friends out of this group. I think it's a good place if you have the time, I think you'll learn more than you'll ever expect and sometimes more than you ever wanted to know. There is a lot to learn.