

# Addiction doesn't have to be the final word



August 21, 2026

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Special to the Catholic Review

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After 35 years of counseling people with addiction, I discovered that the stories most likely to frighten us aren't necessarily the stories most likely to change us.

Recovery accounts can give the addicted something fear cannot: a reason to believe their story is not finished.

The last time my client Angela West sat in my office, she was polite, respectful, and determined to stay sober. I had no idea how much danger surrounded her. Months later, she was murdered.

A narcotics detective assigned to the case visited me at my office. He told me that Angela had witnessed the killing of a police informant at a cocaine party. She fled in terror, but the dealers followed her and killed her.

I kept wondering how someone so promising had been pulled into such a violent world.

We tend to think of addiction in terms of catastrophe. But what happens when catastrophe is interrupted? Whenever I think about Angela, I think about another client whose life took a different turn.

As is the case with Angela West, he is listed by a pseudonym, David Abraham, to comply with the legal requirements of the Federal Confidentiality Law. David came to me after years of cocaine, heroin and methamphetamine abuse. Facing immediate jail time, he agreed to treatment.

He deleted every drug dealer's phone number. He avoided the neighborhoods where he'd bought drugs. He attended recovery meetings faithfully (Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous). Most importantly, he began rebuilding his relationship with his family.

After a year of sobriety, he was confident enough to share his recovery story publicly on local television. I stood at his side for moral support. His mother contacted me to tell me how grateful she was for my help.

About 15 months after his television appearance, I ran into him. He was still sober, worked in a professional job, and thanked his parole officer every time he spoke at Narcotics Anonymous meetings.

My work taught me that recovery often begins only when accountability and hope exist together. Sometimes treatment was enough. Sometimes the prospect of jail provides the wake-up call that makes a person willing to enter treatment. In either case, the crucial step was a willingness to change.

America continues to pay an enormous price for addiction. Although overdose deaths have declined recently, the Centers for Disease Control estimates that 69,973 people died from overdose in 2025, a provisional number subject to change.

Yet every one of those numbers represents someone's child, parent, sibling or friend.

Angela's story captures the stunning and unpredictable violence of addiction. Such tales dominate the media because they are tragic, frightening, and newsworthy.

But when these are the only stories we hear, they can leave people struggling with addiction (and the families who love them) believing there is no way back.

Angela's story should be remembered. But it should not be the only story we tell.

Many people who embrace recovery experience profound emotional and spiritual healing, as well, through religious faith, fellowship meetings (AA or NA), counseling or other recovery techniques. Relationships are repaired. Self-respect is restored.

There is a Catholic dimension to Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). Bill Wilson, co-founder of AA had a lifelong friend and spiritual advisor, Father Eddie Dowling. Father Dowling recognized AA's principles of honesty, examination of conscience and surrender to a Higher Power as compatible with Ignatian principles of spirituality. He helped spread AA in its early days and invited thousands in need to join.

Many people in recovery understandably protect their privacy. That makes their stories less visible. But it doesn't mean those stories aren't worth telling. Authentic recovery accounts can protect individuals' identities while giving hope to people who are still struggling.

For 35 years I watched men and women rebuild marriages, return to their children, recover careers and reclaim lives that once seemed lost.

These are quieter stories, often kept secret. Yet they end years of suffering.

America will continue counting overdose deaths. We should.

But we must count recovery stories, too. They tell people that another ending is possible. They remind us that addiction isn't only a story of lost lives.

It is also a story of lives reclaimed.