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Cofounder of Hands Across the Bridge

I didn't start out as an alcoholic or a drug addict. The first time I ever drank alcohol, someone brought a fifth of booze to my eighteenth birthday and challenged me to a "chug-a-lugging" contest. I won! I remember that feeling; it was a warm hug that went from the roots of my hair to the soles of my feet. It was the most marvelous feeling I had experienced. It lasted for about 45 seconds. Then, as the alcohol poisoned my system, I began throwing up. That was on a Saturday. On Tuesday, the doctor came to the house and gave me a shot to help me stop throwing up. I can still see the yellow bile in the bottom of the bucket. But, the thing I remember the most was that nice warm hug. The doctor said I was lucky that I didn't die and that I had alcohol poisoning. None of that mattered to me. I wanted to feel that again and drank again the following Friday.

I was married, divorced, and diagnosed an alcoholic by the time I was twenty three years old. I found that if I were to add another substance to alcohol, I could drink "faster" and more without getting too drunk. For most of my addiction, I learned new formulas. I could mix and match my pleasures.

I did get married again and began to live a normal life. We settled down, bought a business, had a child and lived a good life for several years. But once again, my addiction took me down. This time, I brought my husband down with me. We lost everything, our home, careers, and most of all, we lost our child. Yet, we didn't stop there. We began to break the law and lost our freedom.

My husband went to jail for three months. While he was in jail, he made the decision to never go back. He didn't care what he had to change. He was willing to do whatever it takes to make a new life for himself.

I went to jail. And after three months of incarceration, I left my shampoo behind, because I knew that I could never live without drugs and would be back. You see, the hole I had in my soul was so big, and I felt so lonely. It didn't matter

what I used, it never got full. I didn't know that I had a "soul sickness." I didn't know that I had a spiritual malady.



My husband left me, and I really began my spiral downturn. I couldn't seem to do enough dope or drink enough alcohol to change the way I felt. I was filled with shame and humiliation. I just didn't feel good enough about me to even bother to change. I thought I was no good, and I couldn't seem to die fast enough.

As my life spiraled out of control, my world got smaller and smaller. My health was getting bad. I didn't know what was wrong, but I began to get huge holes everywhere I stuck a needle. I didn't know the dope I was doing was so loaded with strychnine, and my blood would not coagulate. The needle exchange did an intervention on me and took me to the hospital. The doctor said to me, "If you don't stop shooting drugs, we will have to amputate your arms!" I looked at him and said, "If you cut off my arms, how will I shoot my dope?" I will never forget the look on that man's face. It was incredulous. I filled with fear. If they cut off my arms, how will I shoot my dope? The question looped over and over in my head. I practiced for a week—trying to make my toes smart enough to hold a syringe, so when they cut off my arms, I would still be okay. Shooting dope was my only concern.

After a week of trying, I got a vision burned into my brain. A little old lady sitting on a bed without any arms and picking up a syringe with her toes from a very dirty floor. That woman was me. At that moment, I shouted out to the Universe, "Yo, Dude, if you are up there, you have to help me. I can't do this anymore by myself!" Nothing happened, proving there was "no Dude." I went to sleep for twelve hours and woke up with a whole new outlook on life. I got to go to jail one more time for a violation and began my journey back to become a human among humans.

When I came into recovery, it seemed like I had been given a new lease of life. The second chances that were afforded to me had made me almost dizzy. I knew that if I wanted to continue to grow, I had to give back to my community. It seemed like that would be the key. I knew if I wouldn't continue to grow, I might just go.

I dug into the recovering community. I wanted to shout from the roof tops that I was in recovery. I had met so many people along my path to destruction. I thought if I could just share with others that I was free of addiction—people would realize that if I could get clean, anyone could. I was introduced to a project, they were organizing in the recovering community. I was taught how to tell my story without breaking the anonymity of my twelve-step program that had saved my life. I began to find friends from the "bad ol' daze" who were making a difference in the lives of others. They were advocating for more drug

and alcohol treatment, affordable drug free housing, saving lives with community education on issues like Hep C and prescription medication, and reminding people to be careful when they left jail or detox.

I think it was near the end of July in 2003 when Louise and I heard about National Recovery Month. We didn't know what it was, and after a little investigation, we found that folks all around the country celebrated freedom from addiction during the month of September. We thought we would stand on a bridge in downtown Portland at sunrise and give thanks to our Higher Power that we were no longer under that bridge, dying in our disease.

We would invite a few of our friends. The list of friends got longer and longer and soon we moved to the bridge that connects Oregon and Washington, called the media, and invited a few elected officials. The department of transportation said, "You want a bridge permit? You want to put alcoholics and drug addicts on the bridge? We will issue a permit for 6:00 AM on Sunday, September 1st."

About 200 of us gathered together on either side of the river with a little ceremony and met in the center of the bridge to hold hands and say the Serenity Prayer. During the evaluation that followed our small event, we knew that we would do it again and again. The Power of joining hands to give thanks to the Universe was something that needed to continue, and we needed to celebrate after we came off of the bridge. We wanted to just be together, laugh, and honor recovery.

We soon joined with Oxfest—celebrating with our friends, families, and community with music, food, and fun for the whole family.

Each year as we begin to plan for Hands Across the Bridge, I get so nostalgic. I can hardly get through a day without becoming so filled with gratitude. We have been chosen to carry the message of recovery to our community.

We have grown since that first Hands Across the Bridge at 6:00am with 200 people. We have grown in number and recognition. We continue to invite elected officials to stand in solidarity with the recovering community to let folks know, Recovery is REAL and Communities Heal!