

EPRA Helps Recovering People Salvage Careers: A Win-Win Work World for Former ‘Losers’

BY AMES K. SWEET

Scott F. is a recovering alcoholic, a musician for most of his life. Born and raised in the Caribbean islands, Scott never made it past the sixth grade before peeling off on a wild detour of booze, drugs and singing in cheap bars. A critically acclaimed debut album only fueled the out-of-control ride and, unable to recreate his early success, a number of years later Scott found himself in New York City, broke and bottoming out, blackballed from the music biz.

“I didn’t have a clue what I was going to do when I grew up,” says Scott, “assuming, of course, that I was going to grow up. The music thing wasn’t happening for me at the time and I knew from getting sober that I needed to take some action.”

FROM ATTITUDE TO APTITUDE

That’s when Scott heard about the Employment Program for Recovered Alcoholics (EPRA), a vocational rehabilitation service for individuals in recovery from alcoholism and substance abuse. While they sincerely want to reenter the work world, before attending EPRA these individuals are often immobilized with fear about their abilities to perform in a working environment. Like Scott, they frequently have fragmented work histories; many have low self-esteem and have internalized social stereotyping, all of which hinders their employment opportunities.

EPRA provides an array of vocational rehabilitation services, with the primary goal of assisting recovering people in successfully reentering the workforce in a sober manner. Through comprehensive counseling, evaluation and training of its clients, EPRA has been able to develop a fundamental win-win proposition: alcoholism costs employers billions of dollars in lost or reduced productivity on an annual basis; for employers, EPRA is a resource which provides sober, reliable, motivated and well-trained employees who know how to overcome obstacles, solve problems, and who are committed to a positive work experience. Win, win.

For Scott, it all began with a battery of vocational tests to determine where his strengths lay and what kind of career might fit with his many aptitudes.

“I’m a survivor,” says Scott. “I’m street-wise and don’t tolerate a lot of bullshit — not characteristics usually sought after by employers.” But therein lies the beauty of EPRA.

A BRIDGE BACK TO WORK

Founded in 1977, EPRA is a bridge back to work for individuals in recovery. Having survived their own particular brushes with

disaster at the hands of alcoholism and addiction, EPRA’s clients are strongly motivated, conscientious, and eager to make meaningful contributions to society. With the unconventional education they have received in recovery — where lessons like keeping it simple and putting first things first, how to make a searching and fearless moral inventory, admitting personal weaknesses and making restitution to others have been learned and relearned — these prospective workers have already gained considerable stability and personal insight, valuable characteristics found in exceptional employees of all descriptions.

In the win-win world of EPRA, employers get the benefit of committed, thoughtful and self-aware employees, while the recovered alcoholics and addicts of the program are enabled to return to meaningful work, get off public assistance, pay taxes, and develop long-term career goals.

Until the founding of EPRA there was no recognized program for helping recovered alcoholics re-discover their employment potential. Initial funding for the program came from the National Council on Alcoholism and grants from the Union Carbide Corporation and Brinkley Smithers of the Smithers Foundation. As a founder of EPRA, Brinkley Smithers’ generous spirit and support is continued by the Christopher D. Smithers Foundation and Adele C. Smithers-Fornaci, along with additional support from other foundations, corporations, and government agencies.

DISCOVERING HIDDEN TALENTS

EPRA’s services include: evaluation and assessment, job readiness training, job placement and real-time work experiences which enable clients to make the transition to the discipline of a normal working lifestyle. Evening and weekend programs provide follow-up to help clients and graduates deal with workplace issues as they arise.

With the help he got from EPRA, Scott discovered some hidden talents and, after working for a while in an office environment, decided to return to school to develop the necessary credentials for becoming an alcoholism counselor.

“For somebody who never made it past the sixth grade, that was a big decision.” One Scott admits he couldn’t have made without EPRA’s help.

“I’m really a musician at heart,” he says, “but now there’s a whole new future opening up in front of me.”

Win. . . and win.

(For more information about EPRA, visit www.eprany.org, call (212) 947-1471, or e-mail info@eprany.org.)

