



Jerry Moe, national director of children's programs at the Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation, speaks at the Awareness Hour on April 9, 2016.

Before the Ted Talk, There Was the Awareness Hour

By Jeremiah Gardner

For almost a half century, community members in California's Coachella Valley have heard the stories of people who overcame addiction—people whose personal and family recoveries often began in the anonymity of Twelve Step meeting rooms but who saw the value of shedding public light on a disease hidden for generations behind shame and stigma.

The Alcohol Awareness Hour was launched on Nov. 13, 1976, at the Eisenhower Medical Center in Rancho Mirage, Calif., and adopted six years later by its new neighbor, the Betty Ford Center, which still carries on the speaker series' rich tradition of public education, inspiration and advocacy.

Hundreds have stood on the Awareness Hour stage—including authors, physicians, clergy, educators, business leaders, authors, sports figures, show business personalities and musicians—paving the way for a modern era that is now replete with recovery podcasts, videos and public speakers. An era where, thanks to Ted Talks, the solitary storyteller on stage has become a cultural force.

Major League Baseball players Sweet Lou Johnson, Bo Belinsky and all-stars Maury Wills, Don Newcombe and Ryan Duren all spoke at the Awareness Hour. As did Chicago Bear Bob Newton; U.S. Sen. Harold Hughes; U.S. Reps. Wilbur Mills and Mary Bono; comedians Roseanne Barr and Tom Arnold; actors Ed Begley, Jr. and Jan Clayton; singers/actors Gary Crosby and Gordon MacRae; songwriter Paul Williams; and the multitalented Walter O'Keefe, among many others.

Of course, former First Lady Betty Ford also spoke, along with her daughter Susan Ford Bales and the physician who treated Mrs. Ford's substance use disorder—Dr. Joseph Pirsch. So, too, did the beloved author and historian William White, as well as Father Joseph Martin, whose "Chalk Talk on Alcohol" is one of the most celebrated talks ever on addiction. And back in 1981, a year before the Betty Ford Center would open and 33 years before it would merge with the Hazelden Foundation, iconic Hazelden President Dan Anderson visited Eisenhower to deliver presentations on two papers he published, including one that ended with these wise words, reinforcing the case for the Awareness Hour: "Perhaps the greatest problem is still community education. In a very real sense, alcoholism does not exist until the community says it does, and comprehensive treatment programs will not be fully available until public support is fully mobilized."

As advocates and organizations like the [Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation](#) continue to creatively lift up recovery voices in public settings—through events, blogs, social media, Zoom rooms and more—it is worth reflecting on the history and significance of what may be the nation’s longest running and most influential public recovery speaker series.

“It’s amazing—and it’s very touching to me, and I’m very grateful—that it’s continued to go on,” said Joseph R. Cruse, MD, in 2016. Dr. Cruse, who [passed away](#) in 2021, was president of the Eisenhower Medical Center staff in 1976 and co-founded the Awareness Hour with retired radio legend Del Sharbutt and his wife, singer Meri Bell.



William C. Moyers speaks at the Awareness Hour on Feb. 20, 2016. The bestselling author and national recovery advocate is vice president of public affairs and community relations at the Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation.

A ‘HAPPENING’ EVENT AND ‘BURGEONING MOVEMENT’

The Awareness Hour—or *Alcohol Awareness Hour*, as it was originally known—quickly became a big deal. It frequently exceeded capacity during its first two years in the 150-seat Dennis Auditorium in Eisenhower’s Kiewit Building, before being moved permanently to a larger space in Eisenhower’s Annenberg Center for Health Sciences, where the Awareness Hour is still held today on select occasions.

“Our auditorium was packed full, and on a number of occasions, we had to move to larger quarters to accommodate crowds of 400-500,” said John Sinn, then President of Eisenhower’s Board of Trustees, in a 1981 issue of the national magazine *Alcoholism*. “Then Joe made us aware of the fact that many of these people were newcomers each week, and it became clear to the board that this just wasn’t a disease, but a disease of epidemic proportions here in the Valley.”

People in recovery attended, along with people seeking recovery, concerned friends and family members, and the interested public.

“We are trying to remove the stigma from the word ‘alcoholic,’” wrote Meri Bell Sharbutt, who was Mrs. Ford’s recovery mentor, in the First Lady’s 1987 biography, *A Glad Awakening*. “We reach people who would be frightened or embarrassed to go to an AA meeting.”

Added Mrs. Ford: “It doesn’t matter whether you start interacting with a group at a treatment center or in AA or during an Alcohol Awareness Hour; it doesn’t matter whether you come through the front door or the side door or the back door; it doesn’t matter whether you meet in a church basement or in a community center—there is help out there for anyone who wants it.”

Doctors and other healthcare professionals attended too, and not just those working at Eisenhower. Jerry McDonald was working two hours away at San Pedro (Calif.) Hospital when the Awareness Hour started. He and four colleagues there—Allen Berger, Ed Storti, Judi Hollis and Father Leo Booth—would regularly car pool to the Awareness Hour.



(L to R) Dr. Joseph Cruse, Del Sharbutt and two local health officials—Polly Wentworth and Ellen Fitzpatrick, RN—a few days before the first Alcohol Awareness Hour. © The Desert Sun (Nov. 9, 1976) Used with Permission.

“It was *the* place to go for the latest information on addiction, treatment and recovery,” Mr. McDonald said. “People would come from all over—not just to listen but to also ask questions.”

“It was a real happening on Saturday morning,” added Dr. Cruse. “We had literature laid out. We had books that were being sold. We had all the volunteers there. We had about four or five volunteers every Saturday. They acted as ushers and greeters, and it was a high-spirited kind of thing.”

Of course, free caffeine and sugar helped. When Dr. Cruse proposed the Awareness Hour to the Eisenhower board, he suggested holding it Saturdays after the doctors' regular “mortality and morbidity” meeting because he knew the meeting always had leftover coffee and doughnuts.

After carpooling to the community lecture series for years, Mr. McDonald eventually started working for the Betty Ford Center in 1992 and became the Awareness Hour emcee in 2003. It's a role he still serves in today, carrying on many traditions such as thanking Eisenhower Auxiliary volunteers at the start of every Awareness Hour—for, among other things, providing the java and pastries.

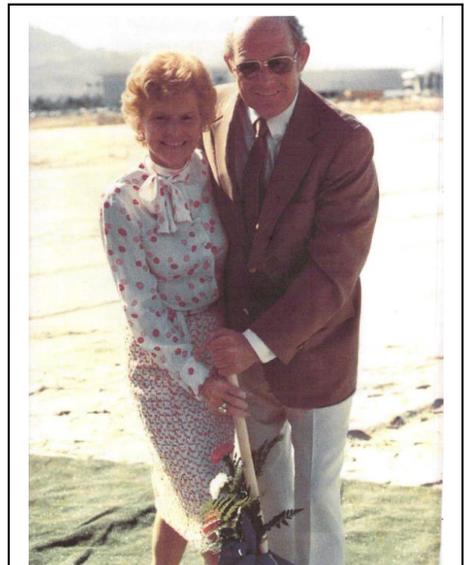
Interestingly, Mr. McDonald's four San Pedro colleagues—who sat with him in the Awareness Hour audience for more than a decade, each became prominent figures in the addiction care field, and all eventually spoke multiple times at the Awareness Hour.

In the 1981 *Alcoholism* article, Mr. Sharbutt reflected on how quickly attitudes changed for the better in the Coachella Valley, noting the outpatient treatment program that Dr. Cruse was able to start at Eisenhower in 1978, new detox and emergency room protocols there, the local media's willingness to promote the events, and the invitations local people in recovery began getting to speak in other settings like churches and service clubs.

It all helped lay the groundwork for the Betty Ford Center, which was approved in concept in 1979 and opened its doors on Oct. 4, 1982.

“That was the next stair step—the Awareness Hour, then the outpatient alcohol program and then the Betty Ford Center,” said Dr. Cruse, who became the Betty Ford Center's founding medical director. “The Alcohol Awareness Hour had been like a plough, getting the sod ready, preparing the dirt in the valley for an alcohol treatment center.”

Mr. Sharbutt said he was rather surprised and amazed by the impact of the Awareness Hour. While some doctors learned about alcohol problems and solutions by attending the Awareness Hour, he said, others started getting educated by their patients who had attended. “We had no idea that the public would start to talk to their doctors,” Mr. Sharbutt told *Alcoholism*.



Former First Lady Betty Ford and Awareness Hour co-founder Dr. Joseph Cruse at the Oct. 9, 1981, groundbreaking for the Betty Ford Center.



Dr. Cruse said he and Mr. Sharbutt made buttons that helped break the ice with other employees at Eisenhower Medical Center and elsewhere. One said, "Some of my best friends are alcoholics," and the other said "Alcoholics are (really) nice people."

"After a while, with all we were doing to engage the public, people just got comfortable with an alcoholic," Dr. Cruse said.

Alcoholism magazine called the Awareness Hour an "exciting, burgeoning" movement. And before long, awareness hours were popping up throughout California and around the country. Mr. McDonald, for example, started three awareness hours himself at other California locations. According to the *Alcoholism* article, about 150 awareness hour presentations were attended by nearly 25,000 attendees in California and Arizona from 1976 to 1981.

Vernon Johnson—the family "intervention" pioneer from Minnesota who wrote the classic book *I'll Quit Tomorrow* and spoke at Eisenhower's Awareness Hour in 1978—took home the idea too. The Johnson Institute, which he co-founded with Minneapolis business and civic leaders Irene and Wheelock Whitney in 1966, started its own awareness hour in 1983 and kicked off the first season with prominent speakers like Minnesota Viking great Carl Eller and Chicago nightly news anchor Ron Magers. Later, Hazelden would acquire the assets of the Johnson Institute, which for more than four decades, was a leader in intervention, treatment, publishing and advocacy.

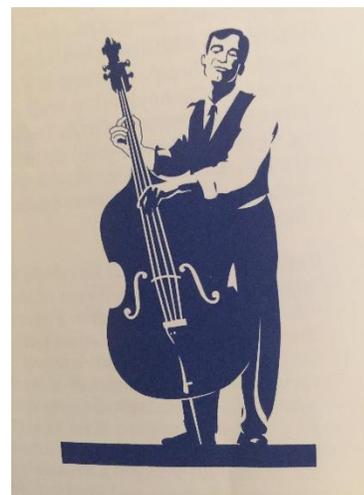
Dr. Cruse and Mr. Sharbutt also took their show on the road at the behest of James Kemper, a person in long-term recovery remembered by many for pioneering an employee assistance program; adding alcoholism treatment coverage to his Kemper Insurance Companies' group insurance plans in the 1960s when no one else was doing it; and in the 1980s bucking the trend of jacking up life and medical insurance rates for people in recovery.

"He sent Del and me around the country," Cruse said. "We went to his headquarters in Chicago and wrote this little booklet on how to start an alcohol awareness hour. ... We would put on awareness hours here, there and everywhere." And Kemper would mail 7,200 of those booklets to every hospital in the United States.

JAZZ WITHOUT BOOZE

One thing none of the other awareness hours could mimic was the wildly popular Jazz Without Booze, an annual event launched by Mr. Sharbutt as a companion to—and fundraiser for—the Awareness Hour series in Rancho Mirage.

Many people remember Mr. Sharbutt as the person who created and originally voiced the famous "Mmm Good" slogan for the Campbell Soup Company. But, upon his retirement to the California desert in 1976, he also brought with him many contacts from the entertainment industry, especially from the world of big band jazz. As a well-known CBS radio announcer in New York City, he had the opportunity in his 45-year broadcasting career to work with people like Glenn Miller, Tommy Dorsey, Guy Lombardo, Frank Sinatra, Bob Hope, Duke Ellington, Jack Benny and W.C. Fields. He also was a saxophone and clarinet player himself, and a longtime lover of jazz. His wife Meri Bell had been a professional singer as well, with Gus Arnheim's Orchestra.

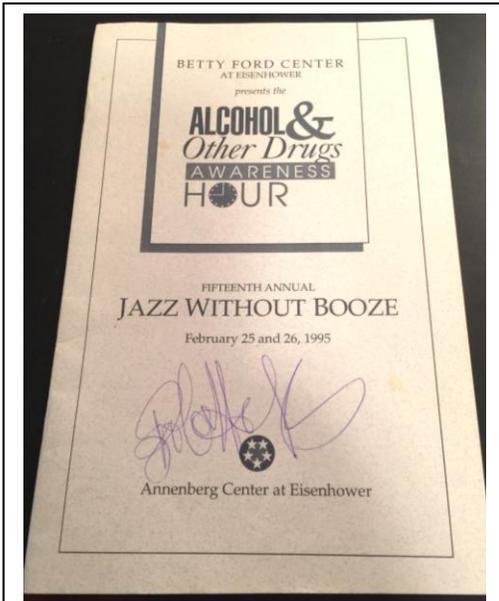


In 1978, the Sharbutts put together a special "once-a-year" program featuring great jazz musicians, many of whom had decided to stop drinking over the years. In 1981, it became associated with the Alcohol Awareness Hour and known as Jazz Without Booze. It would continue for 17 years, with Mr. Sharbutt as the master of ceremonies and many others contributing to the effort, including Dr. Luther Cloud, former president of the National Council on Alcoholism and fellow jazz aficionado.

“We wanted to let everybody know that you didn't have to drink to have fun,” Mr. Sharbutt wrote in a 1993 event program. The band had 19 members that year, all with impressive musical resumes.

For several years, the event would take place on a single Saturday evening, after an Awareness Hour lecture earlier in the day. Sellouts usually happened within a day, though, and many complained, so the event was extended to Saturday and Sunday starting in 1987.

“It turned out to be one of the most popular things that ever happened in the area,” Dr. Cruse said. “It was, I mean, like a big production. It was wonderful.”



Entertainment legend Bob Hope, a Jazz Without Booze fan, autographed this event program for longtime Betty Ford Center executive John Boop in 1995. Hope and his wife Dolores donated the land on which Eisenhower Medical Center and the Betty Ford Center sit.

Betty Ford was a regular at the Awareness Hour, and she and her husband, President Gerald Ford, both made it to the Jazz Without Booze performances. Dan Anderson, who spent some winters in California after his retirement from Hazelden in 1986, also was a frequent attendee of the Awareness Hour and Jazz Without Booze. Hollywood stars were commonly seen, too. For example, Dr. Cruse recalls seeing Clint Eastwood at Jazz Without Booze in 1995—“just because he loved the music.” Bob and Dolores Hope were also regular attendees. Many, like Mrs. Ford and Dr. Anderson, would make a day of attending both the Awareness Hour and the jazz concert that evening.

“In the early '90s, I remember seeing Frank Sinatra at the Awareness Hour event where Tom Arnold and Roseanne Barr spoke. Gregory Peck was another who attended an event,” said longtime Betty Ford Center executive John Boop. “Everyone in the crowd mixed in. No one was treated as a celebrity—just guests attending an event about recovery.”

Asked about other favorite memories, Dr. Cruse mentioned two. The first was when Sharbutt played a video of the Lennon Sisters singing on the Ed Sullivan Show.

“The whole audience was watching this video, but they didn't realize that the soundtrack wasn't the soundtrack at all. It was the Lennon Sisters behind the curtain, and then they walked out singing,” Dr. Cruse said. “It was pretty theatrical. There were a lot of things like that.”

He also recalled when tenor saxophone great Stan Getz, one of jazz's best known figures, performed and was followed by a part-time Betty Ford Center counselor named Max Geldray, who just happened to be a jazz harmonica giant in Europe before moving to California. Geldray actually was well-known overseas for his work as a comic and musical sidekick to Peter Sellers and others on *The Goon Show*, a BBC radio hit in the 1950s. Apparently, Getz wasn't familiar with him.

“Max was just marvelous,” Dr. Cruse said. “He got up there and played, and with Stan Getz being the jazz artist that he is, he couldn't stand it. So, he got out of his seat, got his horn back out and went up on the stage with Max, and they played Dueling Banjos (made famous in the movie *Deliverance*). ... They'd never met each other, and they played beautiful music for about 25 minutes.”

Father Andrew Rank, who served as the Sunday pastor at the Betty Ford Center from 1984 to 1992, also got to play with Mr. Geldray at Jazz Without Booze. When Mr. Sharbutt died in 2002, Father Rank wrote a newsletter tribute in which he recalled how his friend Mr. Sharbutt liked to get locals involved in the show too.

“One year he called upon Father Vern Suter, who was a professional pianist and organist before becoming a priest,” Father Rank wrote. “Dr. Jim West, who did one of the first successful kidney transplants and was medical director at the Betty Ford Center—Jim played the banjo. Joining the group was Max Geldray, a BFC staff member and

world famous jazz harmonica player who switched to drums that night, and me on string bass. Del called us, ‘The Preachers, the Doctors and their Friends.’ In addition to the other jazz performers, joining the show that night was Helen O’Connell and comedian Foster Brooks, known for his hilarious drunk routine.”

The banjo-playing Dr. West, who succeeded Dr. Cruse as the Betty Ford Center’s medical director, also assumed some responsibility for the Awareness Hour. “He breathed life into it for a couple of decades,” said Mr. Boop.

PART OF THE FIRST MODERN RECOVERY ADVOCACY MOVEMENT

It certainly was an exciting time for recovery advocacy as a vanguard of Americans set out to challenge generations of stigma by putting a positive public face on recovery.

In June 1975, the National Council on Alcoholism (NCA) held the first-ever telethon dealing with the disease of alcoholism, and a number of recovering celebrities were involved. Eleven months later, in May 1976, the NCA sponsored Operation Understanding, a televised event in the nation’s capital, during which 52 prominent citizens publicly proclaimed their recovery from alcoholism. In June of the same year, [FreedomFest '76](#) was held in Minnesota; it was, and still might be, the largest recovery advocacy event in American history. Just five months after FreedomFest, Dr. Cruse and the Sharbutts launched the Awareness Hour. And, in 17 more short months, Betty Ford would publicly announce that she was in treatment for substance use problems.

“So many things were such a big happening in those days,” said Dr. Cruse, who found himself in the middle of a lot of history.

Interestingly, in 1971, Dr. Cruse visited Hazelden in Center City, Minn., looking for ideas to help propel his dream of opening a residential treatment center. Later, after evaluating a county Driver Awareness School in 1976, he got the idea to spread alcohol awareness to the general public, and a short time later, the Awareness Hour was born. Soon, he also was called upon by the Ford family to help with Mrs. Ford’s intervention, which he did in 1978. A year later, to the day, Dr. Cruse and Mrs. Ford were both part of the intervention for business and civic leader Leonard Firestone, the former U.S. ambassador to Belgium who sat on the board of Eisenhower with Mrs. Ford and went on to co-found the Betty Ford Center with her in 1982. Dr. Cruse, finally able to see his dream through, became a key member of the leadership team that planned the Betty Ford Center, and he successfully pushed for emulating Hazelden’s design and approach, giving him a special place in the annals of the two organizations that are now merged.

When Dr. Cruse resigned as medical director of the Betty Ford Center in 1984, he also left the Awareness Hour, though still attended when he could. Years later, he recognized how special it was to start the Awareness Hour during the first modern recovery advocacy heyday and then to help launch an iconic treatment center.

“I still have a soft, warm spot in my heart for the Awareness Hour. It was such a community undertaking with everybody jumping in, and it was so timely,” Dr. Cruse said in 2016. “After I did a couple of interventions, one of them which was Betty’s, I do remember driving back to Palm Springs looking up at the big mountains and saying, ‘Why, God, do you keep letting me in on these things?’ I was certainly fortunate.”



On Jan. 31, 2015, the Awareness Hour hosted several speakers for a panel entitled: The Legacy of Betty Ford: Women in Recovery.



Hazelden Betty Ford Chief Medical Officer Marvin D. Seppala, MD, spoke about his own recovery journey and the healing power of love and connection at the Awareness Hour on April 2, 2016.

When Dr. Cruse moved on to other pursuits, Mr. Sharbutt—who once used his famous voice to read the entire "Big Book" of *Alcoholics Anonymous* for an audio recording that was distributed to 100 friends of the Betty Ford Center—became the lone emcee for the Awareness Hour. In her biography, Mrs. Ford noted his style.

“Del Sharbutt always greets the audience, and says something like 'Please don't call us reformed alcoholics, you wouldn't talk about a reformed cancer patient, or a reformed heart patient.' Or he may explain that, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Americans drink more alcohol than milk. And another Alcohol Awareness Hour is off and running,” she wrote.

In 1978, Mr. Sharbutt's son Jay asked this of his father in an interview published by the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*. “Some well-known folks like Dick Van Dyke, Ralph Waite of ‘The Waltons,’ Doc Severinson and Betty Ford have publicly said they're recovered alcoholics and can't drink. Why go public?”

“The whole idea of going on the record is not to take glory for having recovered, but merely to point out that alcoholism is a disease, that you can recover from it, and that no stigma should be attached to alcoholism any more than to cancer, diabetes or heart disease,” Mr. Sharbutt responded.

Mrs. Ford agreed, writing in her biography: “That's what all of us, in our separate ways, try to do. Pass along the message. And it is through this sharing, through our own joy in recovery, that we attract others.”

Mr. Sharbutt brought that message to Hazelden in Center City on June 13, 1982—four months before the Betty Ford Center opened—when he delivered the keynote address at Hazelden's third annual Alive and Free alumni event. It was yet another connective tissue between the two organizations.

It was also 1982 when former U.S. Congressman Wilbur Mills agreed to speak at the Awareness Hour. Interest was so great, the event was moved to a nearby hotel, where hotel executive Leonard Bade just happened to catch the talk. It was serendipitous for Mr. Bade, who had been struggling with his own substance use for years. Later that year, serendipity struck again when Abbott Mills (no relation to Wilbur)—a Desert Hospital “alcoholism counselor” who had become active in the Awareness Hour—approached Mr. Bade about initiating an Employee Assistance Program for the hotel chain.



Leonard Bade

“I told Abbott a little bit about my story and the problems I was having, and he invited me and my wife to join him and his wife at the next Awareness Hour. He said it was educational and informal, and that there would be coffee and doughnuts,” Mr. Bade recalled. “I think what appealed to me initially was that it was an educational program. It was sort of a backdoor way of getting people like me to hear the stories that get into our heart and spirit. It became more of an awakening than something that simply landed on my brain.”

Mr. Bade remembers hearing an airline pilot speak at the Awareness Hour that year, and a doctor. Not long after, he decided to get professional treatment for his own disease. In recovery since, Mr. Bade would become a regular reader of the “[preamble](#)” at the Awareness Hour, and later started his own awareness hour in Fort Worth, Texas—a series that had a nine-year run and included a memorable speaking appearance by Mr. Sharbutt, who grew up nearby, in 1993.

“I don't know if I'd be sober today if not for attending those early Awareness Hours,” Mr. Bade said.

EVOLUTION

In the late 1980s, Mr. Sharbutt—though still very much involved, especially in Jazz Without Booze—delegated the emcee role to Betty Ford Center employee Mark Greenberg, who served in that capacity until Mr. McDonald took over in 2003.

By that time, a lot of change had come and gone. For starters, the Alcohol Awareness Hour was renamed the Alcohol and Other Drugs Awareness Hour in 1990. And, in 2017, it was renamed again—this time, simply, to the Awareness Hour.

Another change has been to scheduling. The Awareness Hour series was initially approved as a 13-week experiment, with that first season extending into 1977. The number of Awareness Hours held annually has varied since, and for the past couple of decades, the public education lectures have been held exclusively in the early part of the year.



One more change has been funding. While Dr. Cruse and the Sharbutts helped foot the bill for the Awareness Hour in its early years, the Eisenhower Medical Center Auxiliary, supported in part by Jazz Without Booze and later the Betty Ford Center, became a strong underwriter for many years, even as the Betty Ford Center took over planning and production responsibilities. As a result, speakers could be flown in for the Awareness Hour when needed. Today, in the absence of the jazz concert and the late Mrs. Ford's philanthropic muscle, funding is scarcer. But the Awareness Hour, now replicated in various forms across the country, carries on and today includes occasional livestreams and [recordings](#) that can be accessed on demand, extending the audience beyond the Annenberg Center's auditorium, now known as Helene Galen Auditorium.

“Each Saturday was, and still is a blessing for me. The speakers have been insightful, informative and often entertaining,” said Aaron Green, who has added audio/visual pizzazz to the Awareness Hour since 2003. “The Awareness Hour is a marvelous, organic, program that has helped save hundreds, maybe thousands, of lives over the years, and I hope it continues on this glorious path for many years to come.”

Thanks to efforts like the Awareness Hour, it's no longer novel to put recovering people on a public stage, or to proactively educate the general population. But both activities are still needed. We are now in the midst of a [new recovery advocacy movement](#) and making some progress on public attitudes and policy, yet addiction remains marginalized, misunderstood and costly to too many individuals, families and communities. The Awareness Hour was one of the few advocacy efforts from that first movement in the late 1970s to sustain itself through what historian William White calls the re-stigmatization, de-medicalization and re-criminalization of the 1980s and 1990s.

It stands as a rare symbol of continuity, and also a reminder of how important it is to keep going and not let up.

Jeremiah Gardner is director of communications and public affairs for the [Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation](#).