

**Rt Hon Liam Byrne MP**

**The Annual David Stafford Lecture: 'Break the silence to break the cycle'**

**Tuesday 15<sup>th</sup> February 2016**

**Attlee Suite, Portcullis House**

A huge welcome to everyone to the Houses of Parliament

And a huge thank you to NACOA for bringing us together.

It's not often that we get together like this

And I'm determined that every time we do, we start with a message to Hilary and her team.

For every child you've helped

For every life you've changed

For every life you've saved

From the bottom of our hearts

We say

THANK YOU

We're here today to mark a week when around the world we raise a flag for the children of alcoholics.

The innocent victims of booze who never asked for the pain they suffer, who suffer alone and suffer in silence.

This week we stand together as a global community to say to each and every child of an hazardous drinker:

You are are not alone

Together we're going to break the silence

And together we're going to break the cycle of this vicious disease

## David Stafford/NACOA at 25

Now, this year is a milestone in our fight.

It's the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the creation of NACOA, and it seems to me very appropriate that we meet here in the Palace of Westminster, the heart of power in our country, to remember a man without whom we might not be here at all.

I never had the privilege to meet David Stafford – but I've read his book and admired his work.

It was David, who together with Maya Parker, Diana Samways, Valerie McGee and Hilary, turned some early beginnings at St Joseph's centre for addiction, into the charity we know today.

David was, like my grandfather, born in Dublin.

He was a psychotherapist, a researcher, an author, and a man passionate to help those children growing up in families scarred by addiction.

He gave hope to those lost in pain

He gave the last decade of his life to championing their cause.

He was chair of NACOA's trustees.

And he was taken from us tragically young, on 29<sup>th</sup> September 1997.

So, David, no matter where you're watching from tonight I hope you can see how many people owe you so much, and how grateful we are for the inspiration of your example – especially me.

## **My story**

It was almost a year ago that I was called back to the town where I grew up to be with my father in the last days of his life.

I will treasure forever the kindness, the calm, the compassion of the young locum doctors and the nurses of Princess Alexandra hospital who stayed with my family in that long dark night and grey dawn of St Joseph's day

Folding down the blankets, so we could hold his hand as he slipped away.

I remember thinking so clearly: 'finally, he's in a place where no one can hurt him, and he can no longer hurt himself.'

In the hard months that followed, NACOA gave me the strength to try and make sense of my life as the child of an alcoholic.

To understand that the things I grew up with, were the things every child of an alcoholic gets to learn all about.

The insecurity and the shame.

The worry and the guilt.

The drive for perfectionism.

An instinct to create order where you find none

The worries and the habit of building armour – and never taking it off.

We all know it, all too well

But in the months since I first told my story of the father I loved and lost, I have been overwhelmed by the response.

## MY DAD

As some of you know, my dad was an extraordinary man.

The son of Irish immigrants

The first in his family to go to university

The first quote he ever taught me by a politician was Kennedy's line that you shouldn't ask what your country can do for you – but what you can do for your country.

That idealism inspired him into a life in public service

He loved new towns – and that's where I grew up

He loved the idea of practical idealism, the notion that you could create a model community

Of great jobs and great homes

And when he became general manager of Harlow Council, that was the vision he took to work every day

With a warmth and an enthusiasm and a charisma

But as he rose up the ranks, his dependence on alcohol deepened, and when we lost my mum to cancer at the age of just 52, it tipped him over the edge.

It was he said, a 'direct hit'.

And his slow slide into the abyss just got faster and faster.

Now

I really struggled with the idea of speaking out for a long, long time.

As Hilary said to me when you're the child of an alcoholic, you don't own the problem – it belongs to someone else.

That nearly stopped me in my tracks

I struggled with the idea, of whether I was dishonouring my Dad by speaking out.

But I realised that if people like me, don't speak out, then we risk this problem staying in the dark

And for me this was the clincher.

My dad was the child of an alcoholic too.

And I had to honour the boy, who became the man, who became the dad I loved - and lost.

I suspect, that like me, he got to know about all the feelings I learned about, from the age of eight.

All the things that children of alcoholics get to know.

## THE EXPERIENCE OF COA'S

The sorts of stories people have shared me with since last year.

Many of the stories have been hard to hear – but I recognised the verses all too well

- Lots describe alcoholic parents who were functioning; who looked to the outside world as though they were normal – not like the drunk on the bench – they're the people who all too often think they are fine.
- Lots describe the loneliness: 'we had family and friends that dreaded coming over... we lost confidence in ourselves and began to feel very alone'.
- Some end up hurting themselves: 'I didn't know where to turn' wrote one 'ultimately I took my sadness, fear and anxiety out on myself'
- Some describe abuse, violence
- Others describe moments their mum and dad hurt others – like drink driving, indeed driving into someone's house.
- Others simply describe the special occasions like birthdays or Christmas that were more crisis than fun
- Lots describe parents who passed away early
- And lots describe scars that last for life.
- One man nearly 70 said his dad died 22 years ago – 'somehow' he said 'I couldn't forgive him for spoiling my adolescence'

It underlines my point: I'm not anti-drinking – I'm just anti-drinking too much especially when the innocent victims are children.

I think these are the stories that everyone needs to hear.

I think that if we break the silence, end the shame, stop the stigma around alcohol addiction, then we can break the cycle for many, many more of the 2.5 million children living through their own private hell on earth.

Many who got in touch with me described the help they received from NACOA, AA, Alateen and Al-Anon

Last week, we added to the team

We launched the new All Party Parliamentary Group - which has come together to campaign for change and champion the cause of children.

And I am proud of the priorities we've set out last week.

Our goal is to make a difference and I believe the ideas we've offered would make that difference.

Heaven knows, change is needed.

Last week we published ground-breaking research which reveals that public support for COAs in this country are a shambles.

- Almost no Local Authority is increasing its Drug and Substance abuse treatment budgets, despite the increases in alcohol related hospital admissions
- In fact, over a third are actually cutting treatment budgets
- Referrals for alcohol treatment vary widely from 0.4% of a Local Authorities' estimated number of hazardous drinkers, to 11%.
- Worst of all: No councils has a specific strategy for support for children of alcoholics.

I think this is simply unacceptable.

It's unacceptable because COAs are three times more likely to become alcoholics.

Three times more likely to consider suicide

Five times more likely to develop eating disorders.

Alcohol harm already costs our country £21 billion a year – its the third biggest health risk after obesity and smoking

There's now more than 1 million hospital admissions a year due to alcohol-related disorders; costing the NHS an estimated £3.5 billion –and rising.

There has now been no reduction in deaths from drink driving since 2010 – a crime that injured over 8,000 people in 2014 and killed 240.

And liver disease is the third most common cause of premature death in the UK – and the biggest risk factor for death in men under 60.

That's why we're proposing some common sense change:

1. It would make sense if there was more investment in helplines – like those by NACOA
2. It would make sense if there was a big, public information campaign aimed at hard-drinking parents, making clear the damage they're doing to their children.
3. And it would make sense if there was a clear national strategy, a minister clearly in charge, clear strategies in place in every council, and clear statistics, so we know whether the right treatment budgets are in place in every part of the land.

It's not much to ask – but it could make the world of difference.

This last measure I think would open up a new debate in every community about whether help genuinely is, on hand.

And so to focus the minds of those in government I'm today publishing the Children with Alcoholic Parents (Support) Bill

Its a simple proposal to change the law, to:

To put a minister in charge with the power to coordinate specified health and social services, and required to establish a national strategy

- A new obligation on councils and the NHS, in every part of our country:
- To tell us the scale of the challenge in their areas.
- To tell us what they're doing,
- To tell us what they're spending

I hope the government will embrace it – and I hope you'll feel free lobbying your MPs to give it their support.

These however can only be the first steps.

Indeed over the months to come, I think there's more we should consider.

- I want more research into the scale of the problem – and research into pinning down just what helps works best
- A national league table of which councils are spending what on alcohol treatment – so we can see who is underspending.
- I want the government to change the law so it's illegal to drink at home under the age of 16.
- If the Scottish government wins their case for a minimum price for alcohol, I want the government to look again at introducing the policy in England.

## **MAKING CHANGE HAPPEN**

When I was honoured to speak at NACOA's 25<sup>th</sup> birthday bash last year, I said that while I've not been in politics very long I've learned a lot about how change happens.

I've learned that every revolution starts with a small group of people in a room – and this evening, friends, those people are you and me.

I promised we'd take this fight to Parliament – and now you're here.

This is your place

This is your Palace

It belongs to you

Here your representatives are asked to speak with your voice – and so your job is to give them a script.

Track them down.

Tell them your story.

Express your ambition that we change things for good.

Although it doesn't feel like it, God knows I know, Children of Alcoholics are amongst the strongest of us all.

Their resilience is tried and tested and tortured over years of emotional pain.

We couldn't fix things for our parents – but we sure as hell can change things for our children.

And that's the note on which I want to end

## CONCLUSION

In his book, David Stafford wrote this:

‘I would like you...the child of an alcoholic, to know that beyond the sea of despair and the aching pain of loss and emptiness is a land of hope, joy and fulfilment, and ultimately peace of mind.’

David quoted a great line from Robert Louis Stevenson:

‘Life is not a matter of holding good cards, but of playing a bad hand well’.

David was clear, that recovery is a place we can all go, all get to, if we choose.

And those are the stories of recovery and redemption that have inspired me most.

Because what stands out amidst the pain in the stories I heard was a line one child of an alcoholic wrote me.

She’s a poet now, and she’s written a great book called ‘Spirit Cracked – Not Broken’.

That’s the feeling I’ve heard from so many people in many stories of how they were determined never to break.

They’ve built good lives

They’ve built strong families and while the scars never faded, they broke the cycle of addiction from cascading down the generations.

One mum said to me:

‘Our kids don’t have to race home from school each night terrified that they’ll find us dead on the floor: they’ll never have the guilt of feeling so utterly overwhelmed that they wish they were dead.’

AND another mum wrote to tell me about the moment she had to take her four year old child away from an alcoholic father.

She was the one who taught her daughter to ride a bike, supervised the revision, clapped the loudest at her graduation and when she married, she put a picture of her dad in her bouquet:

“because we’re survivors’ she said ‘and I instil in my daughter forgiveness. Our experience has made us the people we are today.’”

Our experience makes us the people we are today.

God knows, this road is hard

But we have to keep on walking

God knows, this road is long

But the journey is everything

God know, this road at times feels awfully lonely

But in this week of all weeks, we get to remind each other that there are so many of us, determined to make sure that they will never leave us, never leave us, never leave us alone.

That is the example that David Stafford left us.

And for which we are truly thankful.

Thank you

ENDS