



**NC Central**  
UNIVERSITY

School of Law



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I am the first person in my family to graduate from college and the first person in my family to attend postgraduate school. I would venture to say I'm also the only person graduating from NCCU Law School this year that does not hold a high school diploma because I dropped out when I was 18. However, I am probably not the only person here who has struggled with addiction. I wish to share my story because those of us here who do should not feel defective, or ashamed. I wish to share my story because I believe that people should always be cognizant of how grace, mercy and humility can work in all of our lives, and that we should always strive to be of service to our fellow humans.

As I mentioned, I dropped out of high school when I was 18 after struggling for three years and failing multiple classes multiple times. I was raised by my father and stepmother in an alcoholic and abusive household. I took my first drink at age 13, I was drinking alcoholically myself by the time that I was 15 years old. I would drink myself into oblivion with the sole goal of blacking out all throughout high school. My parents were checked out, more or less, when it came to raising or supervising me. I went to school when I wanted to, which was hardly ever. Most of the time I would steal my dad's vodka in a thermos, get picked up by my "friends" and be drinking and playing guitar all day. When I did come around the house, I was attacked verbally and physically by my parents, being repeatedly told I was more or less a failure, a mistake and a bad kid. I was homeless many times between the ages of 16 and 19.

Eventually I ended up living in Athens GA, working in a local pizza shop, playing in bands, and drinking and drugging on a constant basis. I was struggling to survive and I began to realize that I was on a road to nowhere, with no hope for a future beyond the pizza shop. I couldn't even open a checking account on my own. I asked my grandparents on my mother's side if I could move in with them, in Erwin NC. They graciously accepted me with open arms, and I sincerely wanted to improve my life. I attained my GED in Erwin and enrolled in community college, but my progress was beset by challenges because I could not stop drinking. I faced consequences with the law and the DMV; I attended numerous evaluations and assessments, but I could not successfully put down a drink. I managed to get into NC State, secure a job working for leadership in the NC House, and get into my own apartment. The entire time I was plagued by desolation and my addiction; there were many times I thought that I would die alone in a drunken stupor. I felt like on the outside, everything looked fine; but in my own mind I knew that I was slowly killing myself. I was encouraged to go to law school by my professional mentors and people in my family. I thought I would be able to "handle it", given the fact that I had managed to drink my way through life this far and come a long way. I had finished very near the top of my class at NCSU and even written an award winning paper. My first semester of law school marked a turning point in my life. Attending at night while working full time is hard enough, as my colleagues in the evening program know. Attending at night while working full time and trying to drink a fifth of whiskey each night put me dangerously close to destroying my life and the lives of others. My grades were frankly terrible, and I skirted through the first semester by the skin of my teeth.

My life was spinning out of control. In the first summer semester of my law school career, I was convinced by someone in my graduating class that if I did not get help, I was going to end up dead. I contacted Brett Bowers on a Sunday afternoon, and the next day I was in his office. That afternoon I was in touch with the Lawyer's Assistance Program, and a month later I was in a rehab facility in Knoxville TN, under recommendations from NCLAP.

I had to make the difficult and uncertain decision to take a leave of absence from law school during the Fall of 2019. Honestly, I genuinely thought I was finished. However, I was convinced that if something did not change I was going to die. In Knoxville, I was able to connect with other lawyers and professionals, some from NC, who were struggling with the same issues. I was able to read a copy of the book *A Lawyer's Guide to Healing* and I learned that addiction and mental health issues are rampant in the legal profession. I learned that I was not alone, and I learned that I did not have to drink at my feelings, because feelings aren't facts. I had to make peace with where I came from in order to get where I wanted to go.

NCCU Law School had my back the entire time. Ms. Chestnut approved my leave of absence during Fall of 2019; I remember coming to her in person to request it with tears in my eyes. Dean Meddock spent literally hours with me developing a plan to graduate on time, and providing guidance on how to request approval of the overload hours I would have to take to achieve this goal. I spent my nights during the Fall of 2019 in AA and NCLAP meetings, and completing my outpatient rehab studies while my colleagues learned torts and civil procedure without me.

When I returned to school in the Spring of 2020, I barely had four months of sobriety. By the time the pandemic arrived and classes went totally remote, I had about six months. I like to think that I would have been able to stay away from a drink using the tools I learned from treatment, but I can't deny that law school became a means of accountability for me. So much of my drinking had been done at home and totally alone, but with my professors and classmates "in the room" with me, it wasn't so bad to be alone.

I can't believe that I am about to graduate law school, but I am even more amazed that I am approaching three years without a drink. I never thought it would be possible, and without NC Central Law School there is not a doubt in my mind my story would be different. The faculty, staff and students at the law school have played a significant role in saving my life whether knowingly or not. The types of people who find themselves in this profession are uniquely driven, ambitious and intelligent people. These same personality characteristics can often lead us to our downfall—pattern seeking, affirmation seeking, and perfectionist compulsions can be great assets in the practice of law, but a death knell to our wellbeing.

I would implore all of those graduating to make mercy, grace and compassion at the forefront of their hearts and minds in all aspects of their lives. This world, and the law, will be better if we do. We will be better, if we do.