Paying It Forward

Lives of Hope, Success, and Freedom from Addiction Distinguish DePaul Freedom Award Winners
By Bridget Barton

Jim Thayer is married with five step-kids, 49 years old, a physician, and a recovering ex-felon.

On July 22, Thayer will receive the DePaul 2004 Freedom Award. The Freedom Awards recognize people who are public about their recovery from alcoholism, and educate others or directly help others to seek treatment. Thayer might seem like an unlikely candidate for any award. But he can tell his own story.

“I did my residency at Emanuel Hospital,” says Thayer. “I grew up in Indiana. I moved out here to do my residency, then started working for the county health department. I ended up going to treatment for alcoholism after my family intervened back in ’87.

“My father had died, my mother was still in Indiana, but my sister and my girlfriend conspired to get me into treatment, which I needed badly. So I quit drinking and was doing okay. I stayed sober for about a year and a half.

“But then I relapsed, and no one really knew. It really was sort of clear, the last two years of medical school, I was drinking way too much, although no one was complaining. But I knew I was drinking too much. It started getting out of hand toward the end of my residency. I was working and drinking, but not much else. And then when I started working for the county I was 9-5, 40-hour week, so I had plenty of time to drink.

“Anyway, when I relapsed, I was drinking on the sly on the weekends, on days off, that kind of stuff. But I ended up drinking and driving in a blackout. I went the wrong way on the freeway and killed a man. That was in April 1990, on the Banfield, out there by Troutdale.

“It was a guy on his way to work, late at night, Richard Strader is his name.”

Thayer corrects himself. “Was his name.

“They took me to the ER. I didn’t even know what I had done. I had no recollection of the wreck—still don’t really. But they told me what happened and I pretty much freaked out. From reconstructing, I went about three miles driving the wrong way. It was about 11 or 12 at night. I remember leaving the bar; I remember getting in my car and starting home. It’s weird, it didn’t even make any sense for me to get on the freeway—I can’t figure out…as far as I knew, I was headed home.”

It was the worst that could happen, the nightmare scenario—killing someone else and surviving to face the shattered remains of all the affected lives.

Ben Westlund
Co-winner of the 2002 Freedom Award, with fellow state legislator Lenn Hannon

"Two things I'm thankful for that I'm not burdened with," says Westlund. "I don't have to know where my cancer came from—secondhand smoke, agricultural chemicals. A lot of people need to know… I don't care.

"The other is that while I was drinking I never got in one of those wrecks. I never hurt anybody. It was just there, but for the grace of God, go I," Westlund says emphatically. "One left turn, one right turn, one half-second delayed response and I could have been there. Those two things I am eternally grateful for."

The cancer Westlund refers to hit him many years after his recovery from alcoholism, while he was working in the legislature. "I didn't fit the profile for lung cancer because I didn't smoke, never smoked.

"They did cancer surgery on May 16, 2003 and I went back to the session, did chemo, did the radiation.

"September 3, 2003 was one of the great days of my life," says Westlund. "It was the last day of the session, my last day of chemo, results from my first CT scan showing things looked pretty good, and it was my 54th birthday.

Now for some people a battle with alcoholism, followed by another with cancer might seem like a heavy dose of bad luck. But more was on the way. Weakened by radiation, Westlund's windpipe became infected, and likely due to prescribed steroids, last November Westlund's colon ruptured, requiring emergency abdominal surgery. Now, weakened abdominal muscles from that surgery have caused a hernia. But Westlund laughs it all off, happy to be in *improving* health and moving forward. "It's a glide slope down," jokes Westlund. "When I get down to a hang nail next year, no problem."

That just-for-today optimism, and forward-thinking attitude are a recurring theme with all five Freedom Award winners.

Pay It Forward

In the 1999 Warner Bros. movie, "Pay It Forward," Kevin Spacey plays a teacher whose devastating life story confirms that some tragedies cannot be redeemed. Sometimes there's no way to repay, rebuild, or repair past events—the damage, at least in this lifetime, is permanent. No going back; only forward. No *re*paying; the only hope is paying *forward*. He challenges his seventh grade class to grab onto that hope and to change the world, one step at a time. "You take the things you don't like about the world and you flip them right on their ass," he says. "Possibility exists in each of us."

One of his students devises a plan: people must respond to help given them at extremely critical times in their lives by paying it forward three times to others in similar circumstances. His plan, which "requires an extreme act of faith in the goodness of people," changes the world.

All five Freedom Award winners have found ways to “pay it forward’ in their lives. Rather than dwell in past or present dilemmas, these well-known Oregon leaders look for ways to pay forward to others in need. But first each has had to beat his or her own demons.

Going Public

In recovery for 24 years, Westlund was 31 when he got sober. “What a blessing,” says Westlund. “The most genius words I’ve ever heard are Bill W.’s (Bill Wilson, one of the founders of AA), ‘You can’t keep what you’ve got unless you give it away.’ For an alcoholic that’s exactly what it is. I get so much satisfaction helping various people along the way. I don’t go out of my way to find them—they just kind of find me.”

For Westlund, recovery was a combination of chance, fate, fortuity. “Libby (his wife) and my mom were saying, ‘Why Ben, why? Why do you drink?’ It was the intensity of the emotions that I felt…music, poetry, whatever. I wasn’t a violent drunk, I wasn’t a partier, although I did my share of that. I liked being by myself pretty much, and thinking. It was the intensity of those thoughts.

“Somehow one morning, pretty hung over, I found a card that my mom left for a treatment center in Washington, and I called. They didn’t have a place.

“I woke up the second morning still hung over. Now I’m calling those bastards again. I was able to talk my way in. I chartered a plane—I didn’t trust myself to drive there. The pilot drops me off in a pouring rainstorm at a little airport—the only thing there is a phone booth. I call a cab and when the cabbie gets there he’s drunker than I am. I thought, this is divine justice. I’m going to die at the hands of a drunken cabbie on the way to alcohol rehab.

”But, God bless him, he made it. I made it.

“We know what to do. Treatment works. Recovery happens.”

For Westlund, living in the small town of Mitchell, anonymity was always an open question. “Even though we all think no one knew how much we drank,” says Westlund, “everyone knew. So it was kinda big news in Mitchell when I was going up to a treatment center. When you’re coming home, you think, gosh I hope nobody knows.

“Hell, everyone knows and everyone is patting you on the back, saying thank God, good for him…it’s about time.

“As I was approaching getting into public life, anonymity was a dilemma for me. What do I do? Will someone throw mud at me for this?

“The question was answered for me in summer of ’96. The phone rings—it’s an *Oregonian* reporter. First question. ‘Have you ever been arrested?’ It was fight or flight. ‘Well sure, hasn’t everybody?’” I answered.

“From the time I said those words it was very easy for me. ‘What did you get arrested for?’ ‘Well, drunk driving, kinda.’ ‘Kinda?’ ‘Well I was pulled off to the side of the road changing a tire.’

“But that’s not why he was calling. ‘Ben, do you know who arrested you?’

“I said, ‘No.’

“‘Does the name John Minnis mean anything to you? State legislator John Minnis. Do you realize that if you win your race, you’ll be serving in the legislature with the guy that arrested you for drunk driving?’

“We both laughed.”

The headline that ran a few days later read something like, “Officer and man he arrested may serve time in the big house together.” And, of course, they did.

“When Minnis arrested me that was my personal bottom,” says Westlund. “A Portland beat cop just doing his job really helped someone turn his life around and become a productive member of the community. It all comes together–law enforcement, personal resolve, and access to resources.

“But it wasn’t until I got involved in public policy 16–17 years later,” admits Westlund, “that I started to have the conscious connection between the number of facilities, the magnitude of the need, versus what was available. Back then, hell, it could have been the only one on the West Coast for all I knew.

“Other approaches may work for others. But if you’ve tried to quit three or four times and it hasn’t worked, read the writing on the wall—maybe you need a more professional approach.”

Izzy Covalt
2001 Freedom Award winner

“I went to Serenity Lane,” says Izzy Covalt, founder of the popular Izzy’s pizza chain. Covalt has been in recovery since May 21, 1981. “I can’t even visualize being able to survive at the time if I couldn’t have. And then the tremendous desire the first days of recovery—I don’t think I could have gone home and kept it up.

“My father drank but he didn’t go down as far as I did because they were churchgoers,” says Covalt. “There was no alcohol in our home. Some in the barn sometimes. I made up my mind early on that I would never drink at all because a few times my dad got to the pass out stage.

“I didn’t try alcohol at all—I went to nursing school. But we were having our junior/senior banquet. It just seemed so different than my dad having wine out in the barn. They were serving cocktails—it was just so elegant. I had a pink lady. That pink lady didn’t get me drinking.

“Well, it did…,” Covalt admits, “because it was the beginning. But I didn’t drink heavily until I was, I’d say, 35.

Covalt and her husband Jim opened the first Shakey's franchise in Albany in 1959. Busy doesn't begin to describe their new restaurant life, which included five kids, 0, 2, and up. "My parents and sister loaned us money," says Covalt. "I knew that if we didn't make $5,000 a month we wouldn't break even. A good night would have been $400. Jim tended bar and I did the kitchen and many times I was working alone. I remember sitting, *hoping* for someone to come in."

But the drinking and the business soon grew; the next year they opened their second restaurant. "It all happened very fast," says Covalt.

They opened Bend and Eugene in 61. They opened the first pizza place "The Pantry" in Corvallis, then Salem and Great Falls.

"I knew that I was drinking too much. And I was afraid my body was breaking down and it was going to be so humiliating to have anyone find out.

"Our oldest boy was worried about my drinking. And Jim said, 'Don't worry, when it gets bad, your mother will stop.' It wasn't that he wasn't aware, but he never nagged me about it. He just took over with lots of things that a mother would be doing ordinarily. I was working very hard and the alcohol would give me a lift in the evening and afternoon so I could keep going.

Finally, after a short hospitalization, Covalt told her husband, "Jim, I'm not going to drink anymore and I don't want you to mention it again. I don't want you to offer me drinks, but you can drink."

That was 1973. "Believe it or not," says Covalt, "I stayed sober. Jim died five and a half years later, November the 20th, 1978. I think my first drink was three weeks after the service. They were serving after dinner drinks, and I decided that I could have one. It didn't bother me at all, so I decided I could have another one. When I got home I bought some liquor and then I began to drink wine after dinner, and then a glass of wine before dinner, and then during dinner, and after dinner.

"We had six restaurants, probably 100 employees. And my kids were counting on me. There was a lot of drinking going on in the corporation too. I didn't stand out. But I was worried; I could see things not getting done and see things falling apart. I just continued to drink.

Then, 20 years after opening, the franchise ran out. After a 1980 lawsuit over renewal terms, the Shakey's signs came down and Izzy's signs went up.

"I had a three day binge around New Year's 1981, says Covalt. My son was running the business—he was 26 by now. By the last week I didn't work at all. I knew I couldn't go to a liquor store for alcohol—I couldn't drive, I couldn't stay sober long enough—and my prescriptions were running out. I went back to the office.

"As I was leaving my son Jim said, 'Mom we've checked into it and there is help. And we understand most people can't stop on their own.'

"That was a Friday. I wanted to drink but I couldn't get any relief. I called my son.

“He called me right back. I was 54.”

Covalt says that when she left treatment her counselor said, “I expect you to get back in that office and get back to work no less than four days a week and on a schedule, whether you feel like it or not.”

“It was hard,” says Covalt, “but I did it. I won’t say that I was effective, but I showed up.”

It wasn’t until after she got sober that her children came down on her about the business—for not showing up, not following through on things. “My oldest son was really upset,” she says.

But the alcohol was gone and Covalt quickly stepped up, making specialty salads, shipping them regionally, taking more responsibility. The chain now has 30 locations, half franchises, half in the family. Covalt’s oldest son Fred is still the president of the company and all three sons are involved. Covalt served on the board until two years ago.

“It takes a while for most people before they’re willing to admit to the public that they’re in recovery,” admits Covalt. “I was high profile in Albany in 1981, there were only 14,000 people. It’s uncomfortable, but it’s that way for anybody, isn’t it?

For years Covalt did public speaking on her recovery at places such as Linn-Benton College, Rotaries, Chambers of Commerce, churches, and schools. Then, ten years into recovery, Covalt wrote a book, “My Name Is Izzy.” “Along with speaking I decided to put the book out hopefully to be helpful to other people,” she says.

Covalt has found other ways to pay it forward—she currently sponsors 15 other recovering women. “I’ve had one for 22 years, several for 15, 13 years, and so on. It’s amazing. Some of them are 60 years old, but they were young when they came in.

“The more people that can get help and then come back into business,” Covalt says, “and be an example, the better. Because whether they know it or not, they are a testament to alcoholism recovery.”

Sam Wheeler
2000 Freedom Award winner

Sam Wheeler was also 54 when he took his last drink. Like other Freedom Award winners, Wheeler had to deal with his own high profile in Oregon’s business community.

“I was on the board of Willamette Industries, and I belonged to the Arlington Club, and I belonged to the University Club. But I much preferred to drink alone,” says Wheeler. “So I lived a strange life.”

But one moment would change that life, and Wheeler has since gone on to pay forward that same opportunity many times over.

Wheeler explains, “This doctor I went to see about another family matter unexpectedly said, ‘I understand you’re an alcoholic.’

“That’s the first time anybody had ever said that. Nobody said that. That was a shock.

“The big shock,” jokes Wheeler, “was that Mr. Lookgood here, I sort of gulped, and said, ‘Yeah I guess I am.’

I said, ‘I *guess* I am.’ I didn’t say, ‘*Yes* I am.

“But that was sort of a breakthrough. Then the doctor said, ‘Why don’t you go downstairs at noon? There’s a meeting, and all these people were saying, ‘Hi, I’m so-and-so.’

“He said, ‘What did you think of it?’

“I said, ‘I’m not going to say I’m Sam, and I’m an alcoholic.’

“He said, ‘Okay, what are you going to do about it?

“And I said, ‘Well I just won’t drink anymore—I never tried that.

“So I tried to stop. It was awful. I drank a fifth a day, and that wouldn’t quite do it. I liked gin. I don’t know if I liked gin, or if I thought you couldn’t smell it. But you sure can,” Wheeler laughs. “You just exude juniper.

“For once in my life,” Wheeler sighs, “I followed through. I told that guy I’d do this, so by golly I’ll do it. I went to an AA meeting and I got there a few minutes late. I turned around and left. The next week though, I went.”

That was 21 years ago.

Wheeler grew up in a family that was involved in the logging business, and reasonably successful, despite going through the Depression. “My father was very likeable, very capable, a pretty well balanced individual,” says Wheeler. “If anything he might have been something of a workaholic. My mother came from a Southern family, Louisiana. They’d also been in the timber business. I believe that my problem came down through my mother who died of acute alcohol poisoning when she was 44. I was 16.

“I was quite smart, very shy, a loner usually. My father drank, but he drank pretty moderately, particularly for a logger. I think watching my mother deteriorate made it imperative—I was convinced I was not going to drink and I certainly didn’t set out to be an alcoholic or to experiment with it. Not because I thought it was hereditary, but because I’d seen what a mess it could make.

“And I didn’t until I was 19,” says Wheeler. “The first time I got plastered, and got horribly sick and hung over, and I swore I’d never do it again.

“Within two months I figured out I could drink most people under the table, and I felt better when I drank. I thought I was smoother. I’d always had sort of a low opinion of myself, and that boosted my

ego. I won't say that for a while drinking wasn't pretty good, and while I got drunk quite a bit in college, it was only on the weekends."

Wheeler's college career began at Cal Tech, but he was displaced after two years by returning WWII veterans. Oregon State was Wheeler's next stop and his drinking increased. "I had a great time at Oregon State. I really enjoyed myself. I got married and I could still control it pretty well," says Wheeler. "But drinking, you know how it is, it just got worse, that's all. I became pretty erratic.

"When I got out of college I was immediately drafted in the Korean War and, typical service person, I drank heavily on the weekends and didn't drink when I shouldn't. So while I considered myself an alcoholic, probably no one else knew. But I knew there was something wrong."

"I thought I did a pretty good job, but people didn't like to work for me. I was running Santiam Lumber Co.—their plywood plants, three in Oregon, four in L.A., and then we merged with Willamette Industries.

"Some people would put up with me," says Wheeler. "Most people wouldn't. That was 1965–70.

"Then my father died. I came back to Oregon—we had some family businesses. So I'd been married, had four children, and about the time my father died, I got divorced. I was erratic with my wife too. I kept drinking. I was living alone and drinking. I would see my children on weekends. I drank quite a bit with them. Nothing really slows you down, you just keep going."

"When I got sober," says Wheeler, "one of the things I decided was to do everything differently than I'd done before. People who are alcoholic have a tendency to be a little bit grandiose, and they want to look good, and so they don't ask for help. Oddly enough they think that nobody else knows about their problem. Everybody knows.

"So I decided to do everything differently. One of the ways that I've stayed sober is by not trying to hide what I used to be like. Maybe it will do somebody some good. I know it does me some good. When you talk about what it used to be like, you start remembering what it was really like—and it wasn't much fun.

"Luckily I'd beaten myself up enough by the time I was 54 to realize I wasn't going to get any smarter," says Wheeler, "and I wasn't going to lick this think by myself.

"For some reason, I decided to just do exactly what they told me to do, and not fight it anymore—even when I thought they were crazy." Wheeler smiles. "It worked."

Wheeler understands why politicians don't devote more funding to addiction treatment. "People accept that alcoholism is a disease, maybe the majority. But there is a big minority that definitely feels that you should just stop drinking. Knock it off, and there won't be any problem, and don't give me your sob story. It's a vocal minority and it's very understandable," admits Wheeler. "Who would you rather help, a 10-year-old in Doernbecher, or a 14-year-old in DePaul Youth Treatment Center?

"It's pretty easy. You ask 100 people, and you'll get 99 who say Doernbecher, which is fine.

“But which is the biggest policy problem?” he asks. “Alcohol is probably the most prevalent serious long-term disease in the United States. Many people have to go to treatment to start their recovery. I did not happen to. On the other hand I didn’t discover my problem and do anything about it until I was 54 years old, and I wouldn’t wish that on anyone. Early intervention saves a lot of lives–it saves a lot of damage. For every alcoholic there are four or five people badly impacted by alcoholism.”

Ann Miller
2003 Freedom Award winner

Not many people in Oregon know more about adolescent drug and alcohol treatment than Ann Miller, a member of the DePaul adolescent unit advisory board since last winter. Miller established her reputation in the treatment community when she started her own successful youth treatment model, A Minor Miracle.

“When you have a passion, and you start up a business,” says Miller, “you don’t get time off. But the intensity of the work is the price you pay for getting to do things your way and doing what you want to do. Time off was just not in the script.”

Miller retired, but soon she returned to working with kids, becoming a well-known fixture in the Canby school system as their drug and alcohol counselor.

Miller, herself a recovering alcoholic, spends every day paying it forward, one kid at a time.

“We try to put a teenager in the lowest level of intervention that we believe will work,” says Miller. But we need the continuum, all the way from basic stuff for kids who are dabbling, experimenting, up to the highest level, which is locked down secure treatment for kids on that path of self-destruction.

“When you’ve got a kid who is 12, 13, 14 moving through the addiction process, they can do damage to themselves in so much less time than an adult. All of a sudden, they’re an alcoholic.

“I’ve watched kids go from being in treatment to being on the streets in 2-3 months time and shooting heroin. That’s what’s there waiting for them.

“If you are a parent,” says Miller, “and your kid is out of control with their use, you say, ‘Honey, I’m really worried, I see you drinking, I see you using, I’m scared to death for you. We can either all go in and talk to the counselor or you can be seen in a lock-down situation. But I am going to fight for your life; I am not willing to have you stay here in this household continuing to rip, run, steal from the family, cause chaos, influence your younger siblings, and cause nightmares in our life.’”

Miller warns that parents may get to the place where they say to their teens, “Here are your choices—you’re going to treatment or you’re going to Prineville to live with Aunt Gertrude, but you’re not going to continue.

“People have more cards to play than they realize,” says Miller. “I have parents who call up and say, ‘They won’t do a thing I say.’ And the kid is still *driving*.

“I mean, come on. I’ve had people admitted to treatment who said to me, ‘She’s scheduled for a driver’s test Thursday and you have group on Thursday, what should we do?’ And I’m thinking, ‘Drive? You’re kid’s being admitted to treatment because they’re loaded, and you’re worried about driving?’ This is the insanity.

Most parents’ worst fear is that given a behavior ultimatum, their kids might run away. So how many kids hit the streets? “It depends on where in the continuum you do it,” answers Miller, “so the sooner you do it the better. A lot of kids start out using marijuana and they use it heavily. And there’s a place where they get in the progression of that drug where they really don’t care anymore.

“It’s because the relationship with drugs has become the most important relationship in their life—that’s what addiction is—it becomes more important than school, friends, activities, their families. Trust goes, because they can’t say, ‘Hey mom, I’m going out to smoke a few bowls with my friends.’

“A lot parents try to get around that by saying, ‘Just be honest. If you’re going to drink, please tell me.’

“Then we say other stupid things like, ‘It’s only pot.’ Well pot is the number one drug of abuse for our kids in treatment and not just because it leads to more dangerous drugs, but because it trashes lives. Five to six percent of people become dependent upon marijuana. Yes there is a physical component, but it also does the addictive magic—it changes the way we are, the way we feel. So people don’t think that’s serious enough?

“When I’ve got a kid who’s so stoned, so unmotivated, so unable to remember that they can’t get through school, they drop out, do we realize the cost of that?

“When you start getting drunk and loaded as a teenager, you cannot then accomplish the developmental tasks of adolescence, you can’t properly learn how to develop relationships with other people, to abstract. We end up with people who are emotionally, socially, cognitively arrested because of their addiction. And we say it’s not serious enough to treat it?

“I get frustrated because so many adults don’t have the courage to step up to the plate and say, ‘Enough.’

“Instead we play these games like renting them motels and limousines so that they can drink and use ‘safely.’ Our parents don’t even know what their kids know about addiction. We run parent nights and the turnout is abysmal.

“Even without a predisposition, all adolescents, statistically, are at a greater risk of becoming alcoholics—the rate is four times greater if you start as a young adolescent that if you start as an adult. Their brains are more vulnerable.

“Kids that are early in adolescence don’t have the same ability to look forward at the potential consequences of their actions in the same way that you do when you’re 17 or 18 years old. We say, ‘What were you thinking?’ *They aren’t.*”

What are the success rates for treatment? “What if it’s 25 percent, what if it’s five percent? asks Miller. “Do we do that with other diseases? If your kid walks in with lung cancer and I say to you there’s only one thing left we can do, and I say the odds are 20 percent, do you say never mind? No. And yet this disease kills.

“Kids get sober and stay continuously sober. We know treatment works. I can’t understand the flip side of the argument. To just not try, to wait until the kid hits bottom—I don’t think so—bottom is a long way down for these kids. Our jails and our institutions are filled with people who have addictions. Why wouldn’t you provide services at the front end? It’s going to save so much money in the long run.

Ann Miller plans to be a DePaul volunteer when she retires. She will celebrate 24 years of continuous sobriety in August.

Corporations Step Forward on Board

Dan Stancil, Vice President of Standard Insurance Company, has served on the board that governs DePaul’s adult and youth programs for six years. Stancil, though not in recovery himself, is also paying it forward, in a corporate/community way.

“Particularly with alcoholism and drug addiction, most people aren’t very far removed,” says Stancil. It’s not hard to ask—is there anybody in your family that struggled with an addiction problem? Most people don’t have to go that far to say, yeah, somebody had a problem, or that led to a divorce, or some other issue.”

It wasn’t that far for Stancil, whose extended family members have struggled with alcoholism. “The cause resonated with me because I had seen the impact on families,” says Stancil. “So I thought, okay, here are people being treated who probably have far fewer resources to deal with their problem than people in my family did.

“The Freedom Awards,” notes Stancil, “recognize people who are public about their recovery, and help educate or help others to seek treatment. This could be through public policy, jobs built around recovery, or positive public impacts.”

The youth facility at DePaul quickly rose to number one on the board’s priority list, due to inadequate size and high per patient costs. The solution was a $4 million capital campaign to build a new facility, with double the beds. The campaign has achieved more than 75 percent of its goal.

The program, says Stancil, current board president, runs about 90-120 days. “We don’t run a 28-day in-and-out and you’re cured thing. It takes longer than that. A lot of kids have come from very neglected homes. Some even express concern about leaving,” he says. “The situation at DePaul—and it is less than ideal at our old facility—is better than going home. It’s not good for the kids, that many teenagers that close together. It’s tough. Their whole life is turned upside down.”

Stancil explains that DePaul is one of five facilities in the state where operating funds come from the state and the county—each funding a certain number of beds. But it’s the only one serving the Northwest heavily populated region. “It’s a drop in the bucket,” he says. “The need far exceeds that.

“To me it is simple economics,” says Stancil. “You’re talking about time that you’re helping somebody buy. And it isn’t just that you’re sending them on a path for 30 years that might be self-destructive. It’s going to touch anybody else they come in contact with from family to employers… Intervening in someone’s life at any point is going to be helpful, but the sooner you do it, the bigger the payback.”

Ken Austin, who along with wife Joan, founded A-dec Inc. in Newberg, is another active board member and advocate for DePaul Treatment Centers.

“I think young people who get into DePaul, if they truly have a spiritual experience that is the core of this program, will change their lives forever,” says Austin, who is serving a second stint on the board. “It’s the only chance these kids have to turn their life around—they’re not going to get it in a correction institute.

“I got re-involved with DePaul through Sam Wheeler and Jack Hopkins (current DePaul board members). I had known Sam through Oregon State University. Sam Wheeler has been one of the most generous people in this program and so dedicated to it. When I met Sam the first time I was absolutely amazed—he was almost like a father to wayward boys. He would help these young people get their feet on the ground, get them jobs, get them back in school. Sam has an incredible compassion for these young people and it was easy for me to come with him and be part of the board.

“You cannot believe how these young people, who are accepting recovery, feel about themselves and the world and the changes made in their lives,” says Austin.

“It’s an open campus, not confinement. If they want to walk out, and go back out on the streets, they will. There’s nothing preventing them. DePaul doesn’t want to treat kids who want to go back out.

“Damn it,” says Austin adamantly, “tell the people—the kids who are there *want to be there,* and they need help so they can stay there. They weren’t stuck in there by the court; it isn’t fenced, it isn’t secure. The kids want to get their lives turned around and DePaul is the place they can do it.”

Austin understands recovery because he’s been there.

“No one even knew I had a problem,” says Austin. “I never drank on the job, never had a drink at lunchtime. I would leave and pick up a six-pack of beer. I’d think, tonight I’m not going to drink too much, and I’d wake up on the floor at three a.m., the television is fog…get up…go to bed. I never was late to work, here at 8, stayed til 6. In the latter stages I was tired—sick and tired of being sick and tired.

“It isn’t my drinker that’s broken, it’s my thinker,” Austin says. “I thought, ‘I am not this kind of person. What’s happened to me?’ I was a Boy Scout, honor student, an athlete, I was an officer in the Air Force. I don’t know how many honors I had *before* I recovered. And I can’t tell you how many honors I’ve been given since. My thinking was, I can’t be an alcoholic—I wouldn’t be a distinguished alum from Oregon State. Something’s wrong here; I’ve got to figure this out.

“I had the shakes so bad that I would order scrambled eggs and toast and make a sandwich and hold it with both hands because I couldn’t get the eggs on the fork to my mouth. A fellow I was having

breakfast with said, ‘You’ve got a problem.’ And I said, ‘No, I just slept on my arm funny and I got a cramp.’ He said, ‘You’ve got a problem.’”

The same fellow told Austin about a book, “Alcoholism: The Exposed Family,” that he credits with leading him to sobriety. “The fourth time I read the book through,” Austin recalls, “it hit me that all I had to do was admit I was powerless over alcohol and that I couldn’t drink.

“I was reading the book at my beach house on New Year’s Day and I had promised the family I wouldn’t get drunk. I got up before anyone else and when I read that I started crying. And I haven’t had a drink since. The family came out and I admitted to my wife and daughter, I said, ‘I’m an alcoholic and I can’t drink anymore,’ and they said, ‘Oh dad, you just drink too much, you’re not an alcoholic.’ I said, ‘Don’t tell me I’m not an alcoholic.’

“Someone told me to call an interventionist, Dr. Neff, who worked with professionals, and after a year and a half in recovery he told me to go to treatment. I went down to St. Joe’s in Orange County. I hung in there. It’s been a long, uphill battle.”

Austin’s work with Neff would be yet another opportunity to pay it forward, and the Austins’ business success would make it possible. The business, A-dec, employs about 900 people in Newberg, with worldwide distribution and offices in England and Australia. Austin says he doesn’t do sales and doesn’t do money—he’s the engineering and product development and manufacturing side (he holds around 35 patents), and now semi-retired.

Dr. Neff felt there should be a treatment center for professionals in the Northwest, rather than always sending people to Los Angeles and to Betty Ford. When Neff approached the Austins for an investment, they responded with a gift of 23 acres of land. “We gave him the land, put together a partnership, had ten investors, built the facility,” says Austin.

After a number of ups and downs the center, Springbrook, was purchased by the Austins. “We owned it for a number of years, Joan and I. It was up and running, starting to turn a profit, and Hazelden (a nationally known treatment group) came to us and asked to buy it. We sold it, as well as making a several million-dollar gift to Hazelden. They consider it the second best, if not the best, on the West Coast. It’s their professional center.

“Being open about his recovery,” says Austin, “has helped other people. For 13 years I talked to young people up at Camp Menucha—a Rotary program for the best and brightest 18-25 year-old kids. Here was Sam Naito, and Bob Farrell and me, all Rotarians. I thought I was rubbing elbows with the best in Portland. The speaker after us was from MADD. And I said, ‘Have you ever had anybody speak about success and failure and success again?’ They said, ‘What do you mean?’ I said, ‘Somebody who is successful in business who was an alcoholic and was losing virtually everything and recovered and got everything back.’ And he said, ‘I’ve never heard of a successful alcoholic.’ I said, ‘You’re looking at one.’ He said, ‘You’re kidding, you can’t be alcoholic.’ I said, ‘I am an alcoholic.’

From that year on I talked to the kids…about what it was like when I went to college, the kind of kid I was. I was just like them, I was a leader, I was active, but when I’d take one drink I couldn’t stop,’ says Austin with tears in his eyes. “I told the kids, if alcohol makes you thirsty, you’ve got a problem.

The Meaning of Freedom

On July 22, Jim Thayer will receive the DePaul Freedom Award. The same Thayer who can't remember the fatal accident he caused back in 1990, but a different man too.

"I came home from the hospital, not really injured. I had a few stitches in my head, but that was about it. I didn't have an air bag," says Thayer.

"The accident was front to front. He just hit the steering wheel. He was crushed, he was dead at the scene.

"I was profoundly depressed after the wreck and was feeling… I was thinking about suicide. I was feeling bad for me, feeling bad for the family, feeling bad completely for everything.

"I went to Georgia where they send a lot of doctors to treatment. They indicted me while I was gone for first degree manslaughter and driving under the influence. I pled guilty—went to prison, starting December of 1990 and got out February of '92. I went to OSP in Salem, then to Columbia River in Portland.

"I asked to get into treatment because I figured it'd be a better way to spend prison time. I ran into a former patient of mine there, a bad addict. I didn't know he'd gone to prison. He's this large black man, in his 50s at the time. He said, 'Stick with me and I'll keep you out of trouble.' He was a guardian angel in there really. I mean it was bad, but nothing happened to me.

"I got out, got married, and while in prison I was sued by the family for wrongful death, and settled. They took the insurance money and money added from me that I borrowed from my family. I was on post-prison supervision for three years and had no driver's license for five years.

"But I appealed to the board of Medical Examiners to reinstate my license to practice medicine and they did in April of '92. The county was happy to have me back to work but it was just one day a week at Hooper Detox. So I said okay. There were of course no other applicants for this job.

"I still didn't know much about alcoholism except about myself. Then the next job they had open was a clinic for homeless people—a three-day a week job. Of course, there were no other applicants.

"Now it's Sept. of '92, I've been out prison six months," Thayer says. "All I see are alcoholics, addicts, mentally ill, and homeless people, but I really like it, it's really fun. I realized that I probably ought to think about alcoholism as a physician, as opposed to just *being* a recovering alcoholic. I took some courses, and got certified in addiction medicine in '94. Then they got this federal grant and I volunteered—of course, there were no other applicants.

"I also have a clinic to see homeless people at the St. Francis Dining Hall two afternoons a week. I've been medical director for Hooper Detox since 1992—that's four days a week. I work one day a month at the methadone clinic downtown. Then I moonlight—as medical director for some other drug treatment programs, DePaul, VOA, and a couple of the outpatient treatment programs.

“I guess it’s sort of accidental, depending on your attitude about coincidences, but that’s what I ended up doing. To me it’s one of the most rewarding things you can do. I see a lot of people get better; I see a lot of people struggle. You see some of the biggest miracles—people who are incredibly trashed who turn out okay.

”I do it because I like it; it feels good to me. Why it feels good to me is probably part of all my history. I can be a good doctor partly because I know that. I do feel very much connected with people with addiction. I feel like I’m as bad an addict as anybody out there. I’ve certainly done something as bad as you can do.

“I think a lot of medical professionals don’t really quite understand that alcoholics and addicts get better. They’re still prejudiced against us because we’re just sort of a pain in the ass. They don’t run across the people who are doing well. But it’s complicated…what people see is the behavior.

People are mad at us,” says Thayer. “People are mad at addicts because we behave badly. What I did is a prime example of that—people drink and drive and hurt people. And they *should be mad*.

At Hooper we keep people about a week just to get them through their physical dependence. Everybody is a volunteer; the door is not locked. You have to try hard to get in, it’s first come, first served—7:45 in the morning. We turn about 10 people away every day, sometimes more. Then if you don’t get in the first day, you’re the top of the list the second day.

My practice over at the St. Francis Dining Hall is much different—these people are really hardcore homeless, mostly mentally ill. I end up trying to refer people to mental health service but without insurance you can’t get care. They come in for athlete’s foot, scabies, asthma, or abcesses, and the real problem is usually their mental health or addiction. They think I can help with the other stuff, which I’m happy to do. But I’m trying to get to the bigger agenda.

“I’m at Hooper in the morning and St. Francis in the afternoon. It’s a great day. I just feel like, if nothing else, I’m at least respectful and hopeful for these people that don’t really get a lot of encouragement from anyone else.

“I don’t need to be mad at them, I don’t need to punish them, I understand that everything is a mess,” says Thayer. But I have worked there long enough that I have seen people who by *any measure* would be considered hopeless, and yet they manage to quit drinking. There is no such thing as a hopeless alcoholic.

“Places like DePaul end up treating the most difficult patients. By the time you get to DePaul you’ve usually been through other treatments, you’ve lost most of your resources. Instead of spending money on them in the hospitals, emergency rooms and jails, they’re back to work and productive citizens. Every study they’ve ever done says it’s a great way to spend money and save between $5–7 for every dollar you spend.

“No matter how desperate things are, some of those people are going to get better,” says Thayer. “I don’t necessarily know what exactly it is that helps them—it’s miraculous. As opposed to having some logical explanation—a miracle is as good a description as any.”

Expectations

When you meet Jim Thayer it’s impossible not to look for the signs of guilt, to look for hints of depression, or at least deep regret. But if you look, you just won’t find those things. Like the other Freedom Award winners before him, Thayer exudes optimism, energy, even joy. He lives his life by paying it forward. There is no undoing the damage to wives, husbands, children; there is no repair for the years misspent; and there is surely no bringing back to life an innocent victim. There is really no redemption on this earth, only those few chances to pay it forward by sharing a second chance at life, freedom, and joy.

“I’m very honored about the award,” says Thayer. “I’m sure there are a lot of people who do much more than me. I’m involved, but it’s really quite an honor. I’m really grateful for it.

“About 10 percent of the adult population is going to have alcohol problems,” says Thayer. “Places like DePaul are really vital. There are long waiting lists. It’s a shame we don’t choose to help these people; it costs more not to treat them. Instead of being mad at them, and wanting to punish them, we should help them not behave badly. We can do that. We know how to do that. Everybody wins if we do that.”

SIDEBAR: The Freedom Awards

The DePaul Freedom Awards Luncheon will be held July 22nd at the Benson Hotel at 11:30. Entertainment will be provided by Curtis Salgado. For reservations telephone: 503-535-1161