BOB MILLER:
Letter from the Chairman

Each week at Freedom Institute, we hold multiple clinical meetings. Our clinicians, all highly trained and experts in their field, gather to discuss particularly challenging cases. It is awe inspiring to witness the collective expertise of our team collaborating on client cases, suggesting ideas to optimize recovery, offering insight, or recommending an outside provider or program that might enhance any given client’s recovery program. This high level of care and the compassion our team puts behind each and every client we serve is what distinguishes Freedom Institute from other programs.

If one were to equate recovery to a sport, I would liken the work we do at Freedom Institute to a team sport. Recovery does not take place in a vacuum, it is not one size fits all, and recovery often requires many different kinds of clinical expertise. In addition, every addict’s or alcoholic’s disease impacts the people who love them and the family needs to be treated as well. Family work has been at the core of our recovery mission at Freedom Institute since our founding over 40 years ago.

Teamwork at Freedom Institute comes in many forms. We collaborate with our clients. We collaborate with their families, and extended community, and with a client’s existing support system of doctors or clinicians. Frequently, underlying mental health issues, such as trauma, eating disorders, or anxiety are at the root of substance abuse. An individual’s recovery is only going to be successful if those issues are treated and integrated into a comprehensive recovery program. Freedom Institute’s clinicians do not shy away from working with outside professionals and other providers as part of a collaborative team approach to increase support resources and build a coordinated program of recovery.

The notion of teamwork and collaboration is part of the internal DNA of Freedom Institute. Every client at Freedom Institute has either a group counselor or an individual counselor or both. Every client has a team of experts at Freedom Institute and often outside providers at every point along the recovery spectrum. At Freedom Institute we recognize that working as part of a team in designing and implementing a recovery program is the best way to proceed. This teamwork dramatically enhances the quality of care at Freedom Institute and the likelihood of success for our clients. And that is our main focus.

At Freedom Institute, recovery truly is a team sport.

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The Power of Collaboration: A Q&A with Dr. Dan Mierlak

I recently had the pleasure of attending the International Conference on Addiction and Associated Disorders in London, where I was also invited to speak about Freedom Institute’s work with families. It was a fascinating few days. Although the treatment and recovery field here in the U.S. is not without its problems, I came away from my interactions with other professionals and executives feeling tremendously grateful for all that we have in place here.

Both Europe and Asia lag far behind the U.S. in number, breadth and quality of treatment programs, the regulatory climate, and even basic levels of awareness about addiction. There are definitely some solid programs in place, and many smart and dedicated people are working to develop much-needed services to address the growing problems. I feel optimistic for them, and hope that Freedom Institute and like-minded colleagues can be of service in some way.

I imagine that in the next few years, those of us working here will continue to wrestle with questions around the role of medications in treatment (particularly for opioids), the increasing legalization of marijuana, and issues posed by the role of unqualified people who start or invest in programs and services to make a quick buck off those in crisis.

So be it. I think we stand ready for those challenges. And, more than anything, today I am grateful for all the good people doing good work, so that someone struggling with this disease can pick up the phone and get help finding the freedom of recovery.

Dan Mierlak, MD, Ph.D., Freedom Institute’s Medical Director, considers every new patient encounter as a clean slate. He listens attentively to the stories his patients tell him, and listens to how other clinicians see their clients. He understands the power of collaboration to help discover what is best for each individual to heal.

What is your role at Freedom Institute?

I am the Medical Director of Freedom Institute and have an administrative role, but my clinical role is more important, and more interesting. As the Medical Director, I am the addiction psychiatry consultant to Freedom Institute as a whole, and to the staff individually and as a collective.

How do you see your role as Medical Director at FI when working with other clinicians?

Addiction psychiatrists bring a unique perspective to complex clinical teams dedicated to treating addictive disorders in that we are trained in a biopsychosocial model of mental disorders, and we have the medical background to weigh in best on the biological aspects of disease processes.

How do you see collaboration as important to the work you do?

The role of collaboration among practitioners of clinical care cannot be overstated, especially in treating addictive disorders, but is too often neglected for various reasons. I like to think of the importance of collaboration by reference to the parable of the blind men and the elephant. In this ancient story, a group of blind men decide to figure out what an elephant is by touching it. But each one touches a different part of the animal, and therefore comes to a very different conclusion as to what the nature of an elephant is.

What are some of the challenges when you are collaborating with colleagues in psychiatry/mental health?

Modern healthcare has become so specialized that without expending the extra effort to communicate with one’s fellow “blind men,” clinicians draw conclusions based solely on their narrow range of expertise. That may be fine if you’re assessing whether an appendix should be removed, but in matters of complex human behavior, it’s hard to argue that one practitioner can see the whole elephant.

Part of the problem stems from the vast store of information we now have about medicine and psychology. How much can one clinician become proficient in? Of necessity, we end up trained in a small slice of the pie. Another problem is time. Practitioners are so busy that collaboration, even if desired, can be difficult to logistically coordinate.

Rachel Russell
Chief Clinical Officer

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One of the nice things about working at Freedom Institute is that we have imbedded an interdisciplinary approach throughout the institute. Between individual, group, family, and psychiatric perspectives, we’ve got a better sense of what the elephant really looks like. Also, our size and physical plant facilitates easy communication among staff. It can still be a challenge to get clinical data from outside practitioners however. One of our innovations to address this is a clinical service whose purpose is to get a patient’s clinical team together telephonically on a regular basis to share information.

How does collaboration benefit the patient?

The rewards for clinical care that come from collaboration among treatment providers are well worth the effort. Clinical decision-making and patient outcomes are improved when everyone has access to more information. All that is required is time and openness to other perspectives. As practitioners helping patients whose illnesses promote astonishing degrees of compartmentalization, shouldn’t we model an alternative in own our behavior?

“THE REWARDS FOR CLINICAL CARE THAT COME FROM COLLABORATION AMONG TREATMENT PROVIDERS ARE WELL WORTH THE EFFORT.”
Freedom Institute’s annual Spring Gala on April 18 at the Mandarin Oriental in Manhattan to honor Alec Baldwin, a longtime supporter of people in recovery, and of Freedom Institute’s mission. Comedian Dion Flynn, best known as Barack Obama (and 15 other characters), emceed the hilarious and uplifting evening, which celebrated Freedom Institute’s work in prevention and treatment and raised funds to support our non-profit programs. The event’s message was of hope and support as no one is alone in the struggle to beat addiction. The gala was co-chaired by board member, Jessica Mansell Ambrose, and Jennifer Ash Rudick, best-selling author and Emmy-nominated documentary filmmaker. Bob Miller, Chairman of the Board, awarded Alec Baldwin the 2018 Mona Mansell Award.

Photos: Eric Vitale
At the core of all our programs at Freedom Institute is our focus on the family and how substance abuse affects the entire family. We are always looking for ways to improve our programming for family members. Over the past six months at Freedom Institute, we have begun to integrate a multifamily group into our morning intensive outpatient program (MIOP), and in July, we will add the group in our evening programming as well. This three-hour group takes place once per the eight week MIOP cycle.

The multi-family group values the importance of connecting as a family. The goals for the group include normalizing how substance abuse impacts families, supporting everyone in more effectively hearing each other’s perspectives, and providing a place for open discussion and an experience of community. So often substance abuse highjacks family relationships and families lose sight of how they used to connect as a family. We try to help families remember or think of new ways to connect even as they struggle with stress or tension around substance abuse or relapse.

Combined with the nurturing of multiple perspectives, we seek to help families reconnect with the strengths of their relationships through empathy and compassion for each other. All this happens in a largely experiential and interactive format, prioritizing support and compassion rather than confrontation.

We recently launched this new programming and have received positive feedback from clients and family members, some of whom were hesitant to participate initially because of fear of conflict or blame, and feelings of burn out. We spend time in the group modeling active listening and reflecting skills, and families have shared that they feel heard by each other in a way they have not felt in a long time. Our clients and their family members have also expressed the ability to talk about ‘hot’ topics without feeling the heat of the conflict they normally experience. Our multi-family group is supportive and gentle rather than confrontational. Many family members have, as a result of the group, expressed a desire to participate in more family groups as the experience offered them a different perspective on how groups can be invigorating and supportive, rather than depleting, during the recovery process. Our decades of experience at Freedom Institute has taught us that the best way to help families get more involved is to give them a positive experience of doing so rather than trying to convince them through words.

At Freedom Institute, we strongly believe that family involvement in treatment provides resiliency and decreases shame and blame, and we are very happy to have this group as part of our treatment curriculum.

If you have any further questions, please call us for more information: (212) 838-0044

"OUR CLIENTS AND THEIR FAMILY MEMBERS HAVE ALSO EXPRESSED THE ABILITY TO TALK ABOUT ‘HOT’ TOPICS WITHOUT FEELING THE HEAT OF THE CONFLICT THEY NORMALLY EXPERIENCE."
At its core, addiction is a disorder about isolation, disconnection and despair. When an individual becomes dependent on a substance their main goal often revolves around how to get everyone to leave them alone, so they can use freely in the absence of judgment or objection. When left unchecked and unaccountable, the individual’s substance use will often become increasingly unmanageable as they willfully try to take control of their environment and disconnect further from resources and reality.

Alone in their illness and incapable of helping themselves, they retreat further into the dark corners of their addiction. So what can bring them back into the light? What can begin the process of healing? It starts with connection to the self and to others, the realization that they’re not alone, and that through willingness and accountability they can achieve a life worth living.

Recovery cannot happen in isolation. The power of community and collaboration amongst treatment providers, individuals and their families is what supports this move into the light. It’s the reason why at Freedom Institute we strive towards serving individuals most effectively by connecting them to a range of resources that can best support them. It’s part of the reason why we’ve developed our customized evening program that offers a range of group options suited towards each individual.

Groups offer a platform to facilitate connection and accountability to others in a safe and judgment-free environment. Groups offer an opportunity for individuals struggling with substances to realize that they’re not alone, and provide support from others who can identify with similar challenges. We offer a range of outpatient groups, depending on the necessary level of care, that includes groups geared towards early recovery, DBT skills, advanced relapse prevention, advanced DBT practice, significant others, multi-family, mindfulness, long-term psychotherapy as well as Intensive Outpatient services.

We recognize that recovery is not a one-size-fits-all model. This is why we value our ability to offer a wide range of group options, supported by the latest innovations in evidence-based practices. Having this flexibility to create a customized approach allows us to work more effectively with individuals who are already connected to outside clinicians, sober living facilities, outpatient centers, and intensive case managers. We work collaboratively with a team, both internally and externally, offering our expertise in what may be just one piece of a recovery plan that an individual may need. When a client comes to Freedom Institute, we assess not only their clinical needs, but also the resources that are already in place, and we work to enhance that structure and level of care.

New York has become a recovery mecca with a range of resources that is continuously expanding. We’re proud to be one piece of this community and value our continued collaboration with our colleagues in the field.
Mona Mansell, Founder

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