

One Man's Journey Back

Houston CPA Offers Up His Personal Story as Encouragement to Others

[Editor's note: In the last issue of *Today's CPA*, the cover story, "A Place to Turn," was about TSCPA's peer assistance program. Following is a profile on the new director.]

Ken Laney, CPA-Houston, JD, was just one of many professionals who addressed the audience at the Texas Society of CPAs' Annual Meeting of Members last year in Boulder, Colorado. But he was probably the only one afraid his speech might end his career.

As he looked out over the group of Texas CPAs, he remembers thinking to himself, "I hope you know what you're doing!" Why would anyone in his/her right mind ever agree to stand up and talk to a bunch of fellow CPAs about being an alcoholic? "It seemed to me like a very dumb thing to do," laughs Laney. "But I also had faith that it was the right thing to do!"

So Laney told, quite publicly, his own story of recovery as a way of encouraging others in need of seeking help, and to inspire his peers to offer support. Such a leap of faith has become the rule rather than the exception for the Houston CPA in recent years. Instead of ending his career, however, his speech added a new job to his resume. At the end of 2006, Laney was chosen to head TSCPA's peer assistance program for CPAs with alcohol, drug, mental health, and other related problems.

Like any number of professionals who turn to the Network for help, Laney admits to also being a workaholic — driven, ambitious, a perfectionist. Sound like any CPAs you know?

"If you had to deal with all the self-imposed stress that filled my life, you would probably have needed a drink too," Laney concedes ruefully. Excuses like this kept him drinking long after he should have asked for help. At some point, he crossed a line and then, he warns, "no amount of perseverance, intelligence, self-knowledge, or willpower could fully solve the problem. Quitting was easy! Staying 'quit' became impossible."

Laney's self-described journey into "the chains of addiction" began in childhood, although he assures that "being an alcoholic certainly wasn't on my list of what I wanted to

be when I grew up." He recalls, "It seems that somehow I became convinced at an early age that achieving certain goals would prove to the world and to myself that I was 'good enough.' And although each accomplishment yielded some modicum of relief, it invariably proved temporary in nature."



Ken Laney on vacation in Jamaica.

Like many alcoholics, the Houston CPA was introduced to alcohol and drugs at a young age. He can remember drinking by the time he was in junior high, and its immediate effect: "After a few drinks, I became the person I had always wanted to be. Sober, I felt everybody else had been given a set of instructions I didn't have. Looking back, I realize how alcohol began to influence my decisions and, ultimately, take control of my life long before I ever suspected."

Even still, as a very determined young man, Laney managed to remain functional for years before dependency took its toll. He was able to control his drinking and using. It never occurred to him that normal people do not have to "control" their drinking. For a long time, he was a respected CPA with a wife and family, a nice big house and all the trappings of success. True, his relentless work schedule put a strain on his marriage; however, when he was not working, it had become a constant struggle to control his drinking. So naturally Laney decided working was better, and getting his law degree and becoming an attorney would keep him busy — he decided that would solve everything. And in an awful kind of way, it did.

"I was so sure that if I worked hard enough, I'd be successful and if I was successful enough, everyone would be happy," he explains. "The second semester of law school, I finally crashed." At that point, Laney's marriage "crashed" also and he says being away from his family removed whatever hesitance he'd felt about drinking too much. In fact, he says it seemed a reasonable reaction.

Laney recounts, "I was disillusioned, and I had been using work to avoid dealing with issues I didn't want to face. So I took some time off."

Laney calls what followed "the worst years." His memories of that time are torturous: Having reached the point at which he couldn't go three days without getting loaded. Looking in the mirror, he saw a divorced dropout from law school and professional life; he stayed in a halfway house and rode the bus to a part-time job with a broken front tooth because he couldn't afford a dentist.

Laney says grimly, "For the first time in my life, I was beaten. I made countless decisions to quit forever . . . then I came to accept that quitting was impossible for me. It would take a miracle for me to recover."

But that was over 12 years ago. And Laney has been "sober" ever since. How?

"I had to ask for help. I had to reach out for a God that I didn't think cared. Since then, the desire to pick up a drink has been completely removed," explains Laney softly. "I don't have to fight to stay sober — to drink again would simply be insane. And the emptiness that I always thought I could fill with my accomplishments has also gone away. It took me a long time to become willing to do things I did not understand or believe would help. But enough honesty, open-mindedness and willingness unlocked a door I never believed was there. I have finally become, for the most part, the person I always wanted to be. As long as I stay close to God and try to do His work, the thought of drinking never seems to enter my mind."

A Network Volunteer

Laney was a volunteer for the TSCPA peer assistance program for a number of years before having the opportunity to serve as program director. In fact, a CPA in the Network was very instrumental in his recovery. Laney explains, "I could relate to him. He was a CPA who had recovered and he was enjoying life. I read all about the solution and just didn't get it. I had to see someone living the solution. When I started doing what he was doing, that was a big part of my recovery."

That relating is critical when getting help. Laney said, "People tend to look for all the reasons why we're 'different' from others. Network members have already had that experience and can help."

The Network is, of course, completely confidential. "Professionals like CPAs are often afraid 'someone will find out,' which is ironic because the people around us usually know there's a problem long before we even start to suspect it for ourselves. They just don't want to confront us or make an issue of it. So it's usually a delusion that nobody knows."

Today, Laney is once again a successful CPA with more than 20 years' experience in tax

planning and compliance work for estates and trusts. He also completed law school and became an attorney. But Laney says that working for the peer assistance program is becoming the most rewarding experience of his lifetime.

The new Network program director hopes that by telling his fellow CPAs "how bad it was for me then and how good it is for me now," they'll take heart and take steps toward recovery. "If you have what I had and it's not already

so bad that you need help, you can choose to wait a while — and it will get worse. No one needs to wait for it to get worse before they ask for help."

He says, "I've gotten more back than I would ever have thought possible. I went ahead and finished law school, and I keep climbing mountains ... but without expectations this time. Life just keeps getting better. It's been 12 years of miracles." ❁



New Name for the Concerned CPA Network – Accountants Confidential Assistance Network (ACAN)

Announcing an important name change — the Concerned CPA Network is now:

ACCOUNTANTS CAN (ACAN)

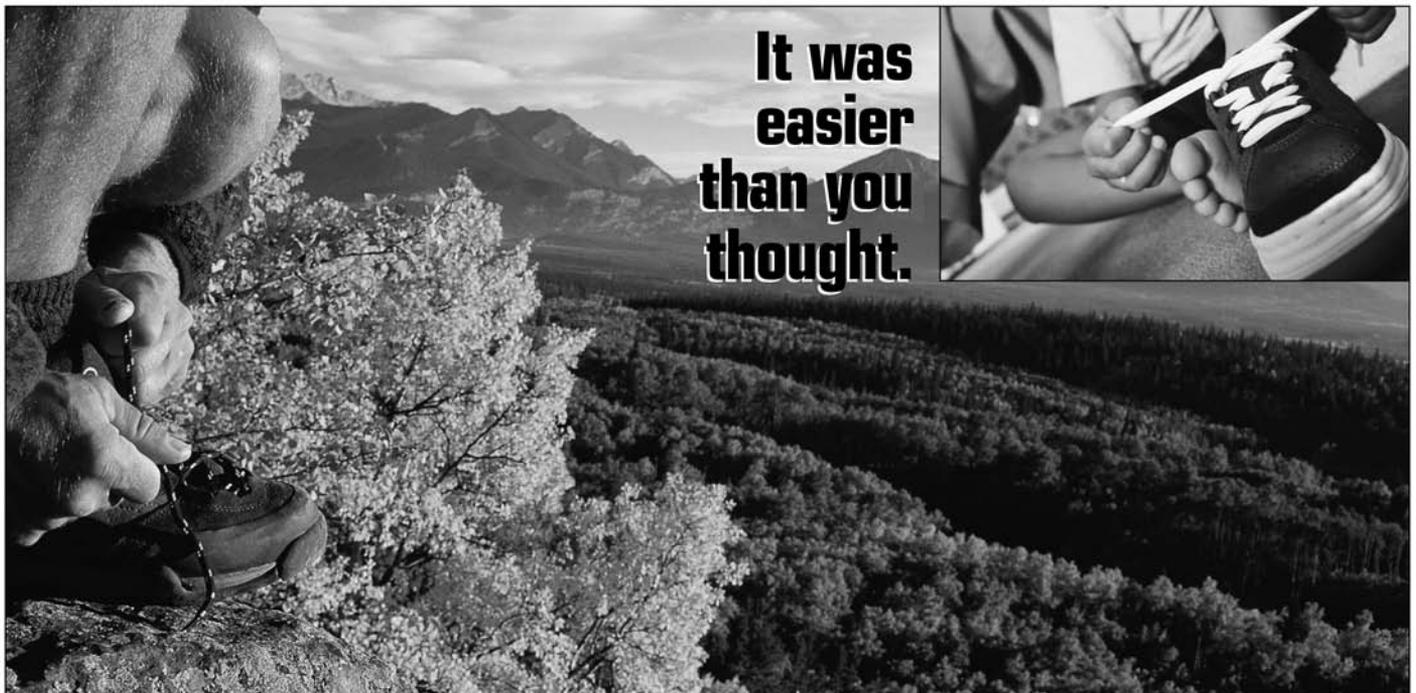
Accountants — Texas CPAs, Accounting Students and CPA Candidates

Confidential — Communications Protected by Law

Assistance — With Alcohol, Substance Abuse, Depression, and Other Mental Health Issues

Network — Of CPA Volunteers Willing to Share their Experience, Strength and Hope

It may be a different name, but it's the same beneficial peer assistance program offering confidential support to those who need it. If you or someone you know requires help, or you would like to assist other CPAs in their recovery, call the 24-hour confidential hotline at 866-766-ACAN, or e-mail program director Ken Laney, CPA, JD, at klaney@tscpa.net.



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