

Stan McKnight is not your ordinary drug-detox 'interventionist'

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On the morning of May 22, 1990, Stan McKnight started drinking at a restaurant near his home in Tequesta.

The next morning, he woke up in bed at his brother's house in Hollywood . The housekeeper, a longtime family friend, was holding his face with both her large hands, lamenting in a Jamaican accent, "Why do you keep doing this to yourself?"

Somehow, McKnight had driven nearly 80 miles - and couldn't remember how he got there.

"That was a day like 9-11. I'll never forget that day," he said. "It was my last drink."

Addicts, alcoholics, they all have stories like these: The night they hit rock bottom. The day they decided to quit. The moment they awoke to a new life.

But for Stan McKnight, who turns 62 on Wednesday, his has been a life of reinvention. He went from a sportscaster at West Palm Beach's WPTV-Channel 5 in the early 1970s, covering the perfect-season Dolphins, to real estate manager, then salesman, then real estate tycoon and commercial developer.

But he also went from being a kid who never touched hard liquor at the University of Kentucky to a hard-drinking partyer in the mid-1980s when he had "more money than brains," with too many nights he couldn't remember.

And that has led him to his newest role: interventionist.

McKnight, who most locals also remember for his commercial real estate holdings and a years-long quest to build a downtown sports arena in the late 1990s, has emerged from dependency into 21 years of sobriety. And now, he's trying to help others do the same.

Ten years ago, McKnight went back to school for two years to take classes on addiction therapy and was certified as a licensed interventionist and an addiction specialist. And this year, he helped Good Samaritan Medical Center in West Palm Beach open a private, in-house medical detox center called The Palms, which he directs.

He's had many jobs over his lifetime, but until now, not one that's felt like a calling.

"It's nice to see somebody find their real strength in life," said Dr. Alan Marcus, an internist at Good Sam and The Palms' medical director. "This is his calling."

Sports was a job - and a fun one, at that - when McKnight graduated from the University of Kentucky, where he was in a communications class with Pat Riley, currently the Miami Heat's president . McKnight enjoyed getting to know athletes, seeing the men behind the celebrated figures, and when he graduated in 1970 with a telecommunications degree, he immediately went into sports broadcasting.

Just weeks into his first job as an anchor at a tiny station in Charleston, S.C., he nearly had the Thrilla in Manila on his hands. Joe Frazier and Muhammad Ali were trying to set up a fight and exhibition in Charleston, and he met both men for the first time. He was awed as he walked the ghettos of Charleston with Ali, as the fighter handed out dollar bills to children.

He was later in South Florida during the Dolphins' two Super Bowls, in 1972 and 1973. But he was restless, and within two years he was out of the business, instead running what is now the Palm Beach Mall, for \$300 a week with a company car.

"It was like being mayor of a town," he said.

With a little money, he started flipping houses as the county started to boom. What started out as side income became big business. He built a shopping center in Juno Beach. Then he renovated the firehouse on the corner of Dixie and Datura. Before he knew it, he had become a well-known developer in a small circle.

Drinking to fill a void

But that lifestyle didn't fill a void. He was still searching, still looking for where he fit in. His friends thought he'd lost it when he bought a 200-acre fern farm in Kensington, N.H., in 1985.

He commuted between there and his home in Tequesta, but the sedentary lifestyle was a burden. He found himself drinking to ease his anxiety and, before he knew it, drinking for the sake of drinking. In four short years, his liver was enlarged, he developed gastritis so severe that he had to have part of his stomach removed, and still he continued to drink.

"When it becomes a daily ritual, you cross a line," he said. "You no longer take a drink; it takes you."

His Rolodex of local and national powerful connections was no help because he wouldn't ask for it. Not until the morning he woke up staring into the tearful eyes of a Jamaican woman with no solid memory of the past two days.

For six months, he was lost. He did nothing but go to Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, sometimes twice a day.

"I didn't know what else to do but go to AA meetings, looking for some direction in my life," he said.

Finally, at one meeting, he just asked the moderator: How do you stop drinking?

"The answer is in the question - just stop drinking," he told McKnight. Over the years, when he's had a tough issue in his life and asks the universe for guidance, McKnight always wonders whether the answer isn't in the question.

His finances dwindling, he decided it was time to reengage with life. Out of the blue, he got a call from a national bank that wanted his help as a real estate agent and developer in selling large tracts of property. He agreed to meet a representative at a restaurant in Tampa.

Throughout the drive, he wondered how he would react if this client - someone who could help get him back on his feet - ordered a drink and asked him to do the same. Could he resist?

At the restaurant, with McKnight's palms sweating, his client ordered an iced tea. McKnight did the same and confessed, before he took the job, that he was an alcoholic and had been sober for six months, bracing for rejection.

"Is that right? Eight years," his client said, and reached across the table to shake McKnight's hand and clink tea glasses.

"I look back at my life, and at all the twists it has taken. How can you not believe there's not some greater force out there?" he said.

Discovering his passion

He thought the next phase of his life would be back in real estate development. Reaching back into his sports background, he realized there was void for sports entertainment between West Palm Beach and Miami.

So he came up with investors and a plan to build a sports and multipurpose arena on Clematis Street that never came to fruition.

And McKnight felt lost again.

"I didn't know what to do," he said. "I became reclusive."

A friend who owned a 12-step treatment center in Nottingham, England, told him to "pray for purpose," and McKnight did. When he heard from a friend about a well-to-do young woman recovering from addiction who couldn't find a halfway house to help her reintegrate into society, McKnight got an idea.

He bought a house and turned it into an upscale safe haven for young women coming back from addiction. Eventually, he renovated five houses, with 28 beds in all, and was getting closer to realizing what his passion was.

"(But) I was like a baby sitter. I wanted to do more than that."

That's when he met a man who was the head interventionist at the Betty Ford Clinic. The idea of being the person who helps another take the first step toward overcoming addiction enthralled him.

"An interventionist is like an EMT - you're a first responder," he said.

McKnight, who has been remarried for five years and has four children, went back to school in 2000 to study addiction therapy.

Almost immediately after earning his certification, he contacted Columbia Hospital in West Palm Beach about opening the area's first high-end, in-hospital medical detox center. Friends who had been prosperous in business but not in overcoming addiction contacted him about interning in his program.

This year, he moved to Good Samaritan to start The Palms program, where three beds on the fifth floor are always reserved for detox patients. His patients detox here and then are sent for follow-up therapy at recovery centers.

Some might be at Good Sam between three to four days for alcohol detox or up to three weeks for addictions to Xanax or methadone. Some patients he knows he'll never see here again. Others, he knows it's just a matter of time. But that doesn't discourage him.

"He knows what they're really thinking when they're not saying what they're thinking. He understands them," said Marcus, the program's medical head. "When I look at Stan, I can't see him as a sportscaster or a real estate tycoon. He seems perfect at what he does."

McKnight is on to the latest of his lives, but with one difference. This doesn't feel like just another job.

"It ranks at the top, because it's what I was seeking," he said. "It's my purpose."

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