

# Ten Heroes Who are Revolutionizing Addiction and Recovery

By [Ruth Fowler](#) 05/01/11

Unlike a certain reality show doctor, most of the nation's leading recovery leaders toil in near-total obscurity. So after consulting dozens of industry leaders and scientists, we decided to salute the ten unsung heroes who've had the greatest impact on research, treatment, and politics this year.



**From scientists to scholars to activists, meet ten of America's recovery renegades**

For much of the American public, "recovery" is associated with images of million-dollar Malibu Beach treatment centers, ailing A-list actors, and people living in cardboard boxes on your corner. Treatment is something Lindsay Lohan repeatedly [tries](#), Charlie Sheen [mocks](#) and a slew of has-beens and never-weres publicly undergo on *Celebrity Rehab with Dr. Drew*. While Pinsky has received his fair share of criticism for the seemingly-exploitative nature of his popular series—there's no denying the fact that his shows, as well as other popular programs like A&E's *Intervention*, have gone a long way toward convincing the public at large that addiction is a destructive problem that can be both treatable and manageable, an insight that will hopefully lead to the continued understanding of a disease [that has been stigmatized for many years](#).

But for every Dr. Drew, there are tens of thousands of researchers, educators, social workers and physicians who have been toiling tirelessly behind the scenes to come up with a solution to a problem that directly afflicts an estimated 23 million Americans and indirectly impacts over 40 million others. So after consulting dozens of experts in the field, *The Fix* decided to spotlight ten relatively anonymous pioneers who've had a profound impact on the recovery field over the past couple of decades. Like any such list, it's bound to be an imperfect document—it's difficult to reduce the army of people working in this movement to a simple ten. So we strongly encourage you to suggest your own nominees. After all, that's what comments are for!

### **Bill White**

[William \(Bill\) White](#), a former community organizer from Illinois, has contributed an amazing body of work on addiction treatment and recovery. One of the most erudite writers on recovery issues—he calls recovery a “[heroic journey](#)”—his scholarship, speeches and writing on the subject have inspired recovery activists all over the world. A former street worker, counselor, clinical director, researcher, trainer and consultant, White’s most significant work has probably been his book [Slaying the Dragon: The History of Addiction Treatment and Recovery in America](#), which snagged him a McGovern Award. You might have caught him in [Bill Moyers’ PBS special on addiction](#) or a Showtime documentary called [Smoking, Drinking and Drugging in the 20th Century](#) but White’s work is mainly cited widely amongst academics, researchers and advocacy groups.

### **Tom McLellan**

“[The Drug Czar!](#)” everyone cries when Tom’s name is mentioned, referring to his 18-month stint as Obama’s deputy director of the [Office of National Drug Control Policy](#), which advises the President and organizes anti-drug efforts. What most don’t know is that McLellan is widely regarded as one of the best researchers on addiction related issues. The only non-alcoholic in his family, Tom credits A.A. with saving the lives of his wife, son and daughter-in-law, and he has been vocal in relaying the message that addiction is a complex disease at once genetic, spiritual, psychological, biological and emotional. With impeccable scientific credentials to boot, he’s focused much of his life’s work not just on studying the problem (addiction) but on helping to determine the solution (recovery). He’s on staff at the University of Pennsylvania heading the [Center for Substance Abuse Solutions](#) and is currently studying other segregated diseases in the past with a view to [understanding, and combating, the shunning of addiction treatment by mainstream medicine](#).

### **Carol McDaid**

Carol McDaid is one sassy lady. In recovery herself for [alcoholism and drug addiction](#), she’s become a powerful advocate in Washington for people in recovery. McDaid has sometimes faced criticism for her own [openness about her recovery](#) and shunning of her anonymity, but undeterred, she chairs the most important advocacy group for addicts at a federal level—[Faces and Voices of Recovery](#). A registered federal lobbyist, Carol led the Parity NOW coalition that

successfully supported passage of the [2008 Paul Wellstone and Pete Domenici Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act](#)—which requires insurers to treat mental and physical illnesses equally. This led Tom McLellan to note, “If Carol McDaid had not been on this planet, there would be no Parity legislation.” McDaid also serves on the [Betty Ford Institute Executive Council](#) and she has had a profound impact in how legislators understand addiction by giving those in recovery a voice and an identity at the Federal level.

### **Phillip Valentine**

[Mark Kleiman](#), a professor, author and blogger at U.C.L.A., insisted that [Phillip Valentine](#) is a leader in the recovery field but when we told Valentine this, he sounded bemused. “How could you pick one person out of the thousands of people working on the frontline?” he asked. And so *The Fix* selected Valentine to represent all those working, without applause or recognition, on the frontline of treatment. As a sober member of A.A. for 23 years and Executive Director of [C.C.A.R., a grassroots organization in Connecticut](#), Valentine heads a staff of 12 as well as over 300 volunteers who work to provide a space for treatment and recovery. This includes helping those in recovery get sober, find jobs and navigate the system. His work mainly involves working with people who have what he terms “Low Recovery Capital”—those who have lost savings, money, families and homes.

### **Don Coyhis**

[Don Coyhis](#), a member of the Mohican Nation from the Stockbridge-Munsee Reservation in Wisconsin, never really lost a sense of emptiness, despite being an active, sober member of A.A. Then, after a five-day fast in the Colorado Mountains, he saw a White Bison rise from the ground. After 15 years in corporate America, Coyhis interpreted this as sign that he needed to combine recovery with his Native American roots and he started a nonprofit organization dedicated to bringing a blend of [tribal culture and the modern world](#) into sobriety--the [Wellbriety](#) movement, as outlined in its version of The Big Book, [The Red Road to Wellbriety](#). The White Bison’s [nationwide mission](#) is to bring 100 Native American communities into healing through its Wellbriety program based on A.A., its [prison outreach](#), and the through educating the culture about chemical dependency prevention through its [Daughters and Sons of Tradition](#) Prevention Program for Young Native Americans.

### **Nora Volkow**

Leon Trotsky’s great-granddaughter, Mexican-born [Nora Volkow](#) is the current Director of the [National Institute on Drug Abuse](#). As a neuroscientist who’s never worked ‘on the frontline’, she’s sometimes seen as [too scientific and remote](#) from clinical study and “the solution,” but Nora’s works have brought the study and understanding of addiction—and some recovery—into national scientific awareness. Until Nora Volkow came along, the study of the affects of addiction on the brain was relatively ignored, and her work pioneering the use of [brain imaging](#) to investigate the toxic effects of drugs and their addictive properties has changed the way scientists understand addiction and [dispelled the myth of](#)

[addiction as a disease afflicting the morally weak](#). She's published groundbreaking studies demonstrating that [drug addiction is a disease of the brain](#), as well as cutting-edge research in the areas of obesity and A.D.H.D. She's also credited for being the first scientist to use brain-imaging technology to study cocaine addicts, proving that the drug [causes tiny strokes in the brain](#) of many addicts.

### **Bill Miller**

Though he's now retired from practice, psychologist Dr. [Bill Miller](#)'s groundbreaking studies on [Motivational Interviewing](#) 30 years ago have radically changed how clinicians think about substance abuse, treatment, and how to most successfully effect change in patients. Early on in his career, Miller broached the idea that not all alcohol problems are severe, and looked into interventions for "mid-range problem drinkers"—echoing Tom McLellan's belief and the approach offered by the [Center for Motivation and Change](#) that the traditional "bottom" cited as essential for alcoholic or drug addict to alter their behavior is a potentially damaging myth. They believe that growing understanding and awareness of how to deal with a potential problem (abuse) can stop addiction becoming a problem.

### **Keith Humphreys**

A former colleague of Tom McLellan's on the White House policy group, Dr. [Keith Humphreys](#) is one of the only scientific researchers who [studies self-help groups](#) such as [A.A.](#), [Women in Sobriety](#) and [M.M. \(Moderation Management\)](#). Though he hasn't "been there" (that is, had a problem with substance abuse or addiction), he helps to bridge the gap between the science and the practice of recovery. Humphreys is currently doing work on the extent to which people in addiction treatment research studies are [different](#) from real world patients, and how that makes it difficult to use science in clinical practice.

### **Paul Molloy**

Molloy started his career in government at the highest level—and bailed out because of his severe alcoholism. He cleaned up, got sober and then single-handedly developed [Oxford House](#), a [community based approach](#) to addiction treatment which provides unsupported [sober housing](#) for people in recovery. The [first Oxford House](#) was founded in 1975, and today there are more than 1,200 homes across the United States, as well as thousands of unaffiliated sober living communities based on their principles and practice, ranging from the affordable to the luxurious. Oxford House was one of the first indications to the community at large that recovery is a [lifestyle](#), not a single scientific, psychological or medical method.

### **Stanton Peele**

Few figures in the recovery world have been as controversial as [Stanton Peele](#). While his arguments have been vehemently challenged by many AA stalwarts, Peele, who has authored countless books and treatises on the subjects, [remained staunchly committed to his thesis](#) that AA is not the only way to treat addiction, and that alcoholism is not a chronic and progressive disease. Most addictions, he believes, are a product of culture and an individual's

response to their personal experience. In his view, “temperance-oriented” cultures like Britain and the United States, who largely believe in abstinence-only cures, tend to suffer much higher alcoholism rates than nations like France, Italy and Spain, where people are trained to develop “normalized” attitudes toward alcohol from a young age. Peele’s moderation-management methods are lauded by a vocal minority of addiction experts and advocates, but [his willingness to challenge A.A. and the complete abstinence](#) model of recovery, have made him a virtual pariah among hard-core A.A. enthusiasts.

*British-born author, screenwriter and journalist Ruth Fowler lives in Venice, California and has written for The Village Voice, The Guardian, The Huffington Post, The New York Post and The Observer, among others. Her memoir, No Man's Land was published by Viking in 2008. She also wrote [Finding the Perfect A.A. Meeting](#), among many other Fix stories.*