

# Utah native's cause is recovery

By Elaine Jarvik

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Robyn Leary's own traumatic story, ladies and gentlemen, begins 13 years ago in a nail salon in Manhattan, where she sits in a comfortable chair, her fingers soaking in a plastic bowl.

A man and a woman walk into the salon. The man has a big portfolio case, the kind you might carry if you were an artist, and the woman, when she sits down to get her manicure, has hands that are greasy and bloody. Strung out on crack, Leary decides immediately, and knows she has to get out of there. But as she stands up, the man takes a gun from the case. He grabs Leary by the hair and drags her into the back room, wraps duct tape around her feet and hands, eyes and mouth, and holds the gun up to her head, a trembling finger on the trigger. Two nail technicians are also bound and gagged and lie whimpering nearby.

Leary is lying with her long legs tucked up to her chest. No one is ever going to know who this corpse is, she thinks, because, as bad luck would have it, she had been pickpocketed the week before and her ID had been stolen. Eventually, perhaps, she will be declared missing after her family back in Utah realizes they haven't heard from her for a while.

Then, suddenly, the man leaves the room, and now the salon is quiet. By this time Leary has disengaged, retreating into a cocoon in which little oval portraits of her loved ones — Grandma Backman and her parents and friends — parade in front of her. Meanwhile, one of the manicurists begins rubbing her hands against the baseboard, slowly sawing through the duct tape. After seven hours of sawing, she frees herself, her co-worker and Leary.

Leary is happy to be alive, but during the next two weeks she is too traumatized to get out of bed. Very long story short: After a while she turns to alcohol to numb herself, and before long she has become an alcoholic.

Eventually though — and this is the most important part of the story, ladies and gentlemen — she recovers.

In Leary's audience there are always ladies and gentlemen, even if the conversation is one-on-one. Her stories are larger than life, delivered breathlessly, full of detours about the time she interviewed novelist Walker Percy, and the time serial killer Ted Bundy fixed her a Denver omelet in his apartment on the Avenues, and the time she worked as a special aide to Edward Bernays (detour here to discuss how Bernays, nephew of Sigmund Freud, was the Father of Public Relations) and the account of the roundabout way, earlier this month, she got an appointment with a big cable network to pitch one of her ideas. "You know what, ladies and gentlemen," she says, "I pretty much can get to anybody, any time."

Getting to people is what Leary does right now as she crisscrosses the country pitching two ideas she hopes will revolutionize the way Americans view addiction and recovery. This month she'll be back in Utah, hoping to get the ear of three Utah billionaires.

Leary grew up here, graduated from East High in 1969 and then from the University of Utah, where she majored in philosophy. She credits her grandfather, former South High principal Ralph Backman,



**Robyn Leary shows Oral Cue, a device she created to help smokers stop smoking. A stone is worn around the neck. Instead of smoking, the wearer sucks on the stone. Photo by Jason Olson, Deseret Morning News.**

with giving her "a need for the big picture," and her father, retired engineer Arthur Leary Jr., with "a zest for inventing." Her career includes a stint as a writer/producer for a CBS affiliate in New Orleans, director of public relations for the American Film Institute in Washington, D.C., director of the Utah Film and Video Center, and freelance articles for the Washington Post and New York Times. One of her several business cards defines her as a "freelance inventor."

She hosts a weekly radio show on WDFH in the Hudson Valley, where she lives with husband Joseph Mancini, spokesman for the New York City police union. The radio show is called "Recovery Talk" — a prototype, she hopes, for everything that will follow.

People can heal from addiction and trauma: that's Leary's message as she tries to launch what she calls The Recovery Channel, a TV outlet that will be all recovery all the time. Leary is founder and executive producer of the channel and president of the Recovery Network Foundation, which she started in 2003.

She is currently in "serious negotiations" with the Discovery Health Channel to televise "Recovery Talk" in a video-on-demand format, as a first step toward round-the-clock programming on her own channel.

The Recovery Channel is not an easy sell, as she is the first to admit. Not long ago she wrangled a meeting with a big executive at a major TV network in New York City. Recounting this meeting, Leary pretends she has a cigar in her mouth and speaks in the world-weary, gruff voice of a 75-year-old network executive. "I wouldn't touch this channel with a 12-foot pole," she spits. "It's the same as having an AARP channel. Who wants to be reminded how old they are? This is morbid programming." Now she goes back to her soft Robyn Leary voice, the one with which she politely contradicted the network executive: "With all due respect, this is life-affirming programming."

Most Americans still think of addiction as a moral issue and recovery as a futile battle, she says. "The perception is that full

recovery is not possible. It's not an expected outcome." And yet, she says, even though it's true that relapse sometimes happens, with professional treatment it is possible to lead a productive, healthy life following addiction or severe trauma. This is the message she hopes to convey in programming that is unflinching, scientific and entertaining.

This past fall, her Recovery Network Foundation also produced a film series called "Under the Influence," featuring recovery-oriented films such as "Days of Wine and Roses." Legendary film director Blake Edwards attended opening night ceremonies at the American Film Institute.

Her own recovery from post-traumatic stress disorder and alcoholism took several years, interrupted by a second incident: In 1997, while walking her dog, she cracked her skull, and two months later developed an inoperable blood clot on her brain. For the next 2 1/2 years, until it finally dissolved, she lived each day terrified that this would be the day the clot would break free and kill her. It was only after entering therapy for this trauma, she says, that she finally healed from the attack at the nail salon.

She represents the face of "the new American recovery movement," she says, because she doesn't want anonymity.

"I believe anonymity will keep people in the basements of churches," she says, with a nod to Alcoholics Anonymous and the long list of other 12-step groups that prohibit their members from divulging their last names. "AA is one of the greatest paths. However, I don't recognize it as the only and true way." She occasionally gets hate mail for this position, she reports.

The Recovery Channel Advisory Board includes some heavy hitters: the director of Neuroscience and Stroke Critical Care at Emory University, singer Judy Collins, and the director of the Center for A Science of Hope, Lamar Carter. Leary first met Carter by chance, in a crowded cafe in Manhattan, where she and Utah filmmaker Diane Orr were seeking refuge from the rain. As Leary tells the story, she and Carter, wedged next to each other at separate tables, both said the name "Walker Percy" at the same time and then struck up a conversation. Leary has a knack for striking up conversations with people who turn out to be well-connected.

That's how she met Dr. Marvin Seppala, medical director for Hazelden, the country's oldest alcohol and drug rehabilitation center, and now Seppala is a fan of her Recovery Channel idea. She has also won the support of other big names in the field, including Stacia Murphy, president of the National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence, the nation's oldest recovery advocacy organization.

Murphy praises Leary as "indefatigable." Addiction historian William White, author of "Slaying the Dragon: the History of Addiction Treatment and Recovery in America," says Leary possesses "a level of energy that would tire most human beings." Her idea for a Recovery Channel, he says, could "bridge the gap between public attitudes and scientific research." While choosing to use drugs is a choice, he says, addiction is not. "It's not a function of volition and morality but of neurobiology."

"There's a small cadre of people out there willing to wave this banner," adds Dr. Duane Proctor, senior communications officer for the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. "If this were an army, she'd be a general," he says about Leary.

She has received accolades but also dozens of rejections as she has made the rounds of TV bigwigs, addiction treatment officials, drug companies, corporations, venture capital companies and private investors.

"Fortunately for me I have a nervous system that doesn't get shut down by rejection," she says. "I just don't take 'no' for an answer."

Which brings us to her stop-smoking invention, the Oral Cue. Leary herself has used the device every day since she designed it more than 20 years ago. The Oral Cue, in fact, is what has helped her work through her anxiety about the Oral Cue itself because, like The Recovery Channel, it's a tough sell.

Here's how she sums up her experience trying to market the thing: "Have you ever sat in a room of men in suits and you have this pink device around your neck and you start sucking on it and you tell them you're going to start an epidemic of nonsmoking?"

The Oral Cue is an acrylic pale pink stone, about the size of an almond, attached to a necklace made out of thin filament or, if you want it to look more like jewelry, a metal chain. The idea is this: in lieu of a cigarette, a smoker sucks on the stone. As Dr. Sanford Gifford of Boston's Peter Bent Brigham Hospital once wrote in endorsing the Oral Cue, "As any heavy smoker who has stopped will testify, the deep insatiable hunger for a non-caloric substance, long after the withdrawal period from nicotine, strongly suggests a primitive craving."

In 1990 Leary was awarded a patent for a "method of treating and curing smoking habits and the like in adults." "And the like" includes all kinds of addictions, as well as trauma, anxiety and stress, she says. Not unlike a baby's pacifier, it can be inserted in the mouth as a comforting substitute for the real thing.

For some people, she says, deprivation of one type or another in childhood leads to what Freud called "early love-object loss," which the grown-up then spends the rest of his life trying to compensate for with "hand-mouth" activities such as smoking, overeating, drinking and drugs.

Leary has been working on her invention for so long that a lot of her original supporters have died, including Harvard Medical School surgery professor and heart valve pioneer Dr. Dwight E. Harken. (His endorsement came in 1985, a time when he could almost get away with calling her "a fascinating little lady," as he did in several letters to medical companies on her behalf.)

Undaunted, Leary presses on. She will be meeting with psychiatrists, psychoanalysts and behaviorists this month, and has approached several smoking-cessation centers. Last month she met with a major cable retail outlet that is considering selling the Oral Cue.

Her New Year's resolution, she says, is that she'll be launching the Oral Cue late this year, when people are making their own New Year's resolutions to stop smoking. She plans to manufacture the product in Utah.

"Where I'm coming from, and I'm not bragging, is that I believe if something is possible, I can get it done," Leary says.

Because the Oral Cue stone is a pendant, the person sucking on it has either a chain or something that looks like dental floss hanging out of the corners of his mouth. No problem, says Leary, who argues that it's no more ridiculous than a cigarette.

"Pretty soon you're going to be wearing an Oral Cue," she predicts. "It's going to be chic, ladies and gentlemen." ■

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