



# LAWYERS CONCERNED FOR LAWYERS COORDINATOR LEAVES HIS POSITION... AND A LASTING LEGACY

BY MELINDA CATREN,  
NEVADA LAWYER COORDINATOR



Coe Swobe has had a remarkable career; he served as a Nevada state assemblyman, a state senator and a member of the State Bar of Nevada's Board of Governors. He earned the gratitude of countless Nevadans and a place in the Nevada

State Senate Hall of Fame for his work to push through legislation preserving Lake Tahoe. But many others are grateful to him for helping them preserve something even more personal: their legal careers, their families and their lives, through his tireless work with Lawyers Concerned for Lawyers (LCL).

## A Personal Struggle

Swobe's work with LCL has its roots in his own personal battle. He spent 30 years becoming very familiar with alcohol abuse and its effects. He began drinking, as many do, in college. He attended University of Nevada, Reno (UNR) and was encouraged by fraternity parties, where excessive alcohol consumption is often almost the norm. His education was interrupted by the Korean War, but his drinking was not.

After Swobe's tour of duty, he went back to UNR, then on to law school at the University of Denver, where he found no shortage of drinking buddies with whom to continue what he saw as his "social drinking." At first, his work didn't suffer; in fact, his career path was nothing short of stellar. Upon graduation from law school, he went back to Reno, married the love of his life, Janet Quilici, and began a career in law and politics. By 1962, he was elected to the State Assembly. In 1967, when he won a Senate seat, he was also drinking more than ever.

"During my legislative years, I was very concerned about my drinking," he told *Nevada Lawyer*. "But I was still able to control my consumption of alcohol. My disease of

alcoholism had not progressed beyond the point where I could ably function and perform my responsibilities.” In 1974, Swobe decided not to seek re-election, and during the next decade, that control slipped - badly. “I was definitely struggling, and my career was going downhill fast,” he explained.

It wasn’t until 1984, when Swobe was 55 years old, that he got help. Those closest to him staged a classic intervention. His family and friends gathered in his home very early one morning (at one of the few times they could be certain Swobe wouldn’t have already been drinking), and confronted him. Thirteen of the people closest to him took turns sharing their feelings, their worry and the pain he was causing to them and to himself through his alcoholism.

That was the end of Swobe’s drinking. He finally admitted that he was an alcoholic and that he needed help. “I will forever be grateful to my wife for arranging the event,” he said. “It probably saved my career and my life.” Swobe immediately checked into a rehab center for a 28-day, in-patient treatment, and he hasn’t had a drink since; in order to ensure continued success, Swobe made Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) a part of his life. His own experience with addiction, and the special issues unique to attorneys with addiction problems, prompted him to make sure other attorneys were able to get the confidential assistance they needed. Less than a year into his sobriety, he became an active participant and founding organizer in Nevada’s Lawyers Concerned for Lawyers program.

## Lawyers Concerned for Lawyers

Although most disciplinary actions taken by bar associations against their members are related to alcoholism, in the early ‘80s, very few state bar associations had organized plans in place to help alcoholic lawyers recover from this destructive and degenerative illness. Nevada was no exception until former state bar President Bill Curran and then-Executive Director Ann Bersi decided something needed to be done. Curran and Bersi were aided by two Las Vegas attorneys who were seeking help related to their own illnesses through AA: Ben Graham and now-Justice Michael Cherry. Graham teamed up with Cherry to form a Lawyers Concerned for Lawyers organization in Las Vegas; working closely with the State Bar of Nevada, they used the bar’s publications to spread the word. The bar’s Board of Governors helped to finance weekly Las Vegas AA meetings for attorneys, held originally in Cherry’s garage. The meetings very quickly drew in not only attorneys, but a few judges as well. At the same time, in Reno, Swobe was hosting AA meetings for professionals in his basement.

It was only a matter of time before the like-minded Swobe and Cherry came together. Through the outreach efforts of Swobe, Cherry and Graham, the number of participating lawyers and judges grew in both Reno and Las Vegas. Graham and Swobe also travelled to Nevada’s rural districts and to Carson City to spread the message and, before long, with the help of the State Bar of Nevada and many dedicated others, they had a statewide Lawyers Concerned for Lawyers organization.

Swobe’s next push centered on making sure that Nevada’s judges and lawyers were educated about the serious problem substance abuse presents to the legal profession. He gathered support from the American Bar Association, the Nevada Supreme Court and the state bar and, in 1994, the

Judicial Symposium on Alcohol and Drug Abuse was born; the aim of the free symposium was to help members of the judiciary, attorneys and law firms recognize and help attorneys in trouble with alcoholism and drug addiction. The event, later renamed the Robert E. Rose Judicial Symposium for Alcoholic and Drug Addiction, now takes place about every three years and has been used as a model by many other state bars around the nation.

Actively participating in the recovery of his fellow lawyers and judges is something Swobe is very proud of. “Our primary goal is to get help for lawyers before they wreck their lives and the lives of those around them,” he explained. With bar involvement, there was one big obstacle to that goal. While LCL relied on extensive support from the state bar, Swobe had realized early on that the two needed to exist separately from one another. Since many members associate the bar with Bar Counsel and discipline, they can be reluctant to call the state bar with serious problems like alcoholism. LCL had moved its help-line and meetings off-site early on; the next move was to guarantee the confidentiality of lawyers seeking help. LCL organizers tried to support legislation that would ensure that confidentiality, but were unable to do so. Swobe took the matter to the Nevada Supreme Court and succeeded in obtaining their approval for Nevada Supreme Court Rule 106.5. The rule, adopted in 2002, provides for confidentiality and privilege between members of LCL and the attorneys seeking help. In 2009, the rule was amended to expand confidentiality.

continued on page 30

# LCL COORDINATOR LEAVES LASTING LEGACY

continued from page 29

## A Lasting Legacy

For himself, Swobe believes that sobriety is enhanced when a recovering alcoholic helps other alcoholics get into and stay in recovery, and he has spent nearly 30 years doing that within his legal community. Since its humble beginnings in makeshift meeting places in 1985, Lawyers Concerned for Lawyers has helped hundreds of attorneys and a great many judges on the road to recovery and helped them stay on that path. There are now two weekly AA meetings for attorneys in Las Vegas, one weekly meeting in Reno and one weekly meeting in Carson City. LCL has also expanded its mission and provides help to attorneys suffering from gambling addictions and depression.

Swobe tendered his resignation in August of this year and, once a replacement has been found, will be stepping down from the position of coordinator. He won't, however, be out of the picture. For those who need help, he will still be available. "I hope to be involved in Lawyers Concerned for Lawyers programs for the rest of my life," he said. "Helping other alcoholics get help and into recovery is an integral part of Lawyers Concerned for Lawyers, Alcoholics Anonymous and the recovery of every alcoholic." ■

Nevada's Lawyers Concerned for Lawyers (LCL) was formed in 1986 by then-Nevada attorneys Ben Graham, Michael Cherry and Coe Swobe. The organization is dedicated to helping members of the State Bar of Nevada recover from alcohol and drug addiction, compulsive gambling, stress and depression. LCL is a voluntary organization made up of attorneys who have fought similar battles and are now dedicated to helping members of the legal community succeed against these debilitating problems. Members meet regularly in Las Vegas, Reno and Carson City.



LCL offers its services with complete confidentiality and does *not* police or discipline attorneys; those seeking help may call, safe in the knowledge that their careers and reputations, or the careers and reputations of colleagues they are concerned about, will not be put at risk by so doing. In fact, the goal of LCL is to *prevent* ruined careers and reputations by providing help *before* the damage is done.

**Confidential help from a fellow lawyer is just a phone call away and is absolutely free of charge. Just call the LCL Hotline toll-free at (866) 828-0022 for advice, referral assistance or individual telephone counseling.**

## NETWORKING in the PALM of YOUR HAND

The State Bar of Nevada puts contact information for the Nevada legal community at your fingertips with the all-new **Find A Lawyer** mobile app.

Not in your office? Not in front of your computer? Not a problem. This hands-on directory provides you with quick and easy access to listings for all attorneys licensed in the state of Nevada, wherever you happen to be.

**Extend your reach by downloading the Find A Lawyer mobile app on your smart phone or tablet today.**



**DOWNLOAD the Find A Lawyer mobile app on your iOS or Android devices here!**



702.382.2200 • 800.254.2797 • nvbar.org