BETTING ON
How one lawyer coped with suspension and found a new path

By C.P. Mirarchi III
As my client and I faced the jury, the judge asked the foreperson to rise and announce the verdict. In the few seconds that it took for the juror to respond, my mind began to race. I thought to myself: Will the jury agree with the prosecution and convict my client of murder in the first degree, or will it accept my arguments and return a verdict of not guilty in this capital homicide case? Did I provide my client with the best defense possible, or was I so preoccupied with my own case that I somehow neglected my duty to him?

Recovery

It all started when I was about 7 or 8 years old. I didn’t know it back then, but my gambling addiction would play a major role throughout my life. Although my dad always said, “You can be anything you want when you grow up,” it seemed that it was assumed I would follow the family tradition and become a third-generation attorney. But I grew up thinking I was never good enough. Don’t get me wrong; it wasn’t anyone’s fault. Low self-esteem is a characteristic of the addiction. However, my father and grandfather, having IQs in the third standard deviation, were intimidating.

Anyway, I started gambling at a young age. When I was in the third grade, I came home for lunch one day and my uncle gave me a list of horses and asked me to pick him a winner. I glanced at the list and without hesitation said, “Yellow Sea.” He said, “Yellow Sea? That horse hasn’t won a race all year.” Later that evening, my uncle stopped by, handed me $10 and asked how I knew the horse would win? I looked at him and said we were studying China in school.

When I was 12 years old I played my first football pool. I asked what was the most money I could win. I was told that if I picked 10 out of 10 teams, I’d win $200, and if I only picked nine out of 10, I’d still win $20. While camping with the Boy Scouts and armed with my little transistor radio, I listened intently to the scores over and over again. I had nine winners out of nine games, with one game left. I can’t remember one single team that won, but in the final game I had Georgia Tech giving Vanderbilt 14 points.
I just always thought I could beat the odds. Gambling took me to the brink of emotional, financial and moral bankruptcy.

Vanderbilt won 28-14. I had nine out of 10 and I didn’t know what the hell I was doing. My addictive way of thinking told me that once I learned about the teams I should be able to pick the winners every time.

I continued to gamble throughout college and law school and beyond. I thought it was the one thing I could do better than anybody. It seemed that everything revolved around gambling. I just always thought I could beat the odds.

Three weeks after I graduated from law school I had a back operation. It ended up going terribly wrong and I was paralyzed from my waist down. Every doctor said the same thing. I would never walk again. I said to myself: “What do they know?” I was used to betting on the underdog. I knew I could beat the odds. It took a lot of praying and months of hard work, but I began to walk.

Gambling took me to the brink of emotional, financial and moral bankruptcy. I didn’t think so, but it caused me to neglect my family and everyone dear to me. It isolated me from everything I ever loved and respected. One cold, snowy December night in 1984, my wife walked out with our two children. I finally realized I had to stop. I knew I had a problem. I just could not help myself. It makes no difference whether the addiction is alcohol, drugs or gambling, without help it is almost impossible to survive. The next day I admitted myself to rehab. At the age of 35 I was sick and tired of feeling sick and tired. I was willing to do whatever I had to do in order to beat this disease.

After a 30-day rehab, I entered Gamblers Anonymous (GA). I promised myself that I would never go into another casino or ever place another bet with a bookie. Over the next 16 or so years, I attended thousands of GA meetings and helped hundreds of people. The GA book says that the greatest obsession of every compulsive gambler is thinking that one day he or she can gamble normally again. Around 2001, I began to “invest” in the stock market. I told myself that this was not really betting, even though the GA
I was sentenced by the court and subsequently received a five-year suspension from the Disciplinary Board.

book says it is gambling. For the next two years I lied to myself. I stopped going to meetings.

Addiction changes the way you look at things. It clouds your judgment. There is a line in the movie “The Mummy”: “It never sleeps, it never eats and it never stops.” Without help, any addiction just lies in wait for you to let your guard down. When you do, it caresses you and says, “You can always count on me to make you feel good again.” There is a book titled Addictive Thinking by Abraham J. Twerski, M.D., which explains how addicts view themselves and the world around them. Twerski calls it “thought distortion,” which to an addict makes perfect sense.

On Feb. 13, 2003, three FBI agents knocked on my door. What eventually followed was my admission to one count of mail fraud, three years of probation, including six months of house arrest, a five-year suspension of my law license and the title of convicted felon. I thought my life was over. It did not take me long to realize that I had to get back into the GA program. I had to start doing all the things I did when I came around the first time. I had to get back into recovery.

From March 2003 until February 2006, every time I walked into court, a colloquy was read to my client explaining that I was either the target of a federal investigation or that I had entered a guilty plea and was a cooperating witness with the U.S. government. The defendant was given the option of allowing me to remain as his or her attorney or having another attorney replace me. You could hear the mumbling from the people in the back of the courtroom. It was humiliating, but I had no one to blame but myself. Regardless of what I was going through, I had to focus on my clients. After all, they were entitled to the best possible defense they could get.

As the foreperson rose, we held our collective breath. Finally she pronounced that the defendant was not guilty of all charges. After the client hugged and thanked me, I sat down and cried. The judge thanked the jury members for their service and dismissed them while I sat with my head in my hands. It seemed as though three years of emotions just came pouring out. → page 30
In August of 2006 I was accepted into the master's degree program for clinical/counseling psychology at LaSalle University, majoring in addictions.

A few weeks later I was sentenced by the court and subsequently received a five-year suspension from the Disciplinary Board. After 27 years of being a lawyer, I suddenly felt useless and became lethargic. My family suggested that I go back to school to become a therapist. It seemed logical because I always liked helping people and by helping others I would also be helping myself. This time I wanted to share my recovery with anyone who wanted help to fight the disease of addiction.

In August of 2006 I was accepted into the master's degree program for clinical/counseling psychology at LaSalle University, majoring in addictions. It was quite challenging at first; after all, I had not been a student for almost 30 years. The turning point of the program came early. I was struggling and becoming a little frustrated. I kept asking myself if I had made the right decision. The faculty and staff appeared helpful, so I put them to the test. What I found out was that if you were willing to do the work, they were more than willing to help.

About halfway through my first semester I finally worked up the courage to make an appointment with one of my professors, Dr. Mary Ellen McMonigle. The support and encouragement she gave me was the springboard to carry me through my entire course of studies. She seemed to care genuinely about my future as a therapist and as a person. I later found that the entire faculty cared as much as Dr. McMonigle. It opened my eyes and gave me a whole new appreciation of life.
Psychology became my passion, and LaSalle provided me with a way to get involved. I became the president of the Master’s Psychology Student Association, a graduate assistant and an academic tutor and mentor. When I graduated with honors in December 2009, part of me was sorry to leave — it was a good thing I had learned about separation anxiety.

I am currently the only National Certified Gambling Counselor (NCGC-II) in the Philadelphia area or in southern New Jersey. I am working toward my goal of becoming a Licensed Clinical Alcohol and Drug Counselor, Licensed Professional Counselor and NCGC-II/Board-Approved Clinical Counselor. I would like to practice law again someday.

Pathological gambling is an insidious, progressive and baffling disease. The gambler and his or her family, career and livelihood can all be in jeopardy by the time symptoms appear. A compulsive gambler can wipe out a family’s hard-earned savings and peace of mind overnight.

Statistics show that 1 to 2 percent of the population is composed of compulsive gamblers and another 4 to 8 percent is composed of problem gamblers (which is like waiting for the call-up to the majors). In adolescents the numbers are higher. More than 14 percent have gambling problems. Seniors are a whole other story. I have seen the elderly wait for their monthly checks, just so they can run to the casino. I have heard one senior ask, “Why can’t the federal government just direct-deposit my check right to the casino?”

I used to ask myself, “What if I had not relapsed?” Well, I don’t ask myself that anymore. I figure that a Higher Power had something else in mind for me. He could have just tapped me on the shoulder and made the suggestion to go back to school. But He knew I would have just shrugged it off, so He sent the three FBI agents to knock on my door. The one thing I did know all along was that giving up was never an option. This time I am betting on my recovery.

C. P. Mirarchi III, J.D., M.A., NCGC-II, the son of a judge and grandson of a lawyer, formerly was a criminal defense attorney in Philadelphia. His law license is still suspended following a conviction for mail fraud.

If you would like to comment on this article for publication in our next issue, please e-mail us at editor@pabar.org.

Tim McQueen, leukemia survivor, with daughter Bredit

Helping Blood Cancer Patients Live Better, Longer Lives

www.lls.org | 888.773.9958

Leave Bequests | Purchase Gift Annuities | Donate