



Photography: xxxxxxxxxxxx0

Finding freedom beyond the bottle

■ BY TALITHA CUMMINS

Many lawyers will relate to Talitha Cummins' story. The former Channel Seven newsreader graced Australian screens for 16 years, but behind the shiny façade she was hiding a dark secret: she was downing up to three bottles of wine alone each night. Cummins exposed her addiction in a telling interview with the ABC's *Australian Story* in 2016 and will be speaking at an upcoming breakfast event at the Law Society in August. She shares her story with *LSJ*.

“My first drink was an innocent affair; in a park, before a school dance with friends and alcohol stolen from our parents. I still remember that first taste. It was like the world lit up. The shy, introverted Talitha became the confident, outspoken person she dreamed of.

Broadcast journalism appeared a strange career choice for a shy girl like me. But my natural curiosity and love of crime drew me towards the industry. It wasn't until my first day of work that I realised what was ahead of me. I was sent to cover a press conference with then Prime Minister John Howard. I clutched the microphone tightly as my hands shook and managed to squeeze out a question, my head spinning. It was the first time I realised anxiety was going to play a significant role in what I'd chosen as a very public career. Alcohol became my nightly release.

I don't know whether it happened gradually or very quickly. What I do know is that I reached a point where I was going home to drink multiple bottles every night. And when you're drinking that much, the embarrassing incidents begin to pile up. Among the most shameful were being carried out of a media awards dinner and being hospitalised several times.

One afternoon I read the 4.30pm news and went to meet a friend for a drink afterwards. My only memory beyond that was waking up on the pavement of someone's terrace in Paddington as morning joggers ran past.

Every time I had one drink, I couldn't stop until I passed out. I was always angry at myself the next day. I would think, "What's happening to you, Talitha? You used to be the life of the party – now you can't even hold your drink!"

I began to isolate myself at home with a few bottles of wine. Alone, where no-one would judge me.

I was a young female professional: educated and high-functioning, and in deep denial that there was a problem. So-called alcoholics were men slumped on park benches clutching booze inside paper bags, weren't they? Surely that label didn't apply to a newsreader and journalist? I had a high-profile job in a white-collar industry. No alcoholics around here!

I would tell myself anything to keep drinking. My mind always had a conga line of little white lies at the ready: "I can stop drinking if I really want to, but I don't just yet." Or, "God, what I did wasn't that bad, lighten up people! I'll just have a few tonight."

The tipping point was when work intervened. One weekend I failed to turn up to work two days in a row and, on the Monday morning, my Chief of Staff at the TV network sat me down and said, "You're not okay, are you?" I just crumbled and said, "No, I'm not."

It was the jolt I needed, and was the beginning of my journey towards sobriety. I was 33 years old.

I decided to go to an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting that night with an open mind. I was nervous – afraid of being recognised. Afraid of having to vocalise my addiction and recount my shameful behaviour. But my desire to seek help was greater.

I sat in the corner hoping no-one would notice me, but that's not how AA works. People told their stories of despair and recovery. They were honest, self-aware and unselfish. I learned that night that alcoholics come in all shapes and sizes. They are obsessed with alcohol and can't control how much they drink, even if it's causing problems at home, their work and

SOBERING STATISTICS

32%

of lawyers are problem drinkers
SOURCE: UNSW, 2014

Lawyers are
2x

more likely to abuse substances than the general population
SOURCE: AMERICAN BAR ASSOCIATION, 2016

1 IN 3

practising lawyers are problem drinkers
SOURCE: AMERICAN BAR ASSOCIATION, 2016

Lawyers are
36x

more likely to suffer depression than non-lawyers.
SOURCE: AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION, 2014

financially. I recognised myself in their stories. Maybe I did really have a problem.

That first meeting kicked off a long period of recovery. I went to the prescribed 90 AA meetings in 90 days, weekly psychiatric appointments, I replaced drinking with exercise, meditation and, most importantly, stayed out of pubs. I tipped my social life on its head. I did my socialising over breakfast, or a walk with friends, or an early barbecue.

I joined Hello Sunday Morning, an online community of people trying to change the culture of drinking. You can choose to take a period of sobriety and blog about it, with the support of others doing the same.

There was a time in my life that the notion of not drinking was absurd to me. I couldn't conceive of it. Alcohol was my mate, my release after a stressful day, deadlines, pressure, typically dealing with humans in crisis. What about my social life? What would I do at a long lunch *sans* booze? I was the party girl, the last one standing, the one who never said no to a drink. But after years of sustained heavy drinking, I realised that my "mate" had turned on me.

I won't lie. Getting sober was the hardest thing I've ever done. But the sense of freedom I feel now – being comfortable in my own skin, the stability, happiness, knowing who my real friends are – I wouldn't trade it for the world. I have since married a wonderful man, had a child and have another on the way. There'll always be challenges – but I've learned to cope without turning to the bottle. In September I'll be six years sober.

There is indeed life without alcohol.

DO YOU NEED HELP?

If this article has raised issues for you, please know that help is available for you and your family.

- Law Society members have free access to the independent, confidential, 24-hour support service **Lifeline for Lawyers**. Call 1800 085 062.
- For ongoing professional psychological treatment support, contact **LawCare** on 0416 200 788.
- Visit **beyondblue.com.au** for information on the symptoms of depression and anxiety, as well as how to help someone. Or, call 1300 22 4636.
- For information on **Alcoholics Anonymous**, visit **aa.org.au**. Call their helpline on 1300 222 222.
- Family members and friends of alcoholics can visit **Al-Anon Family Groups** at **al-anon.org.au**.