It's time to get LOUD

- Bringing recovery into the conversation
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Your guide to Merry, Bright & Booze-Free Holidays

What to Drink when you’re not drinking
If there is anything like an American Mount Olympus, Christopher Kennedy Lawford was born pretty close to its summit. Son of Rat Pack legend Peter Lawford and nephew of John F. Kennedy, Lawford grew up witnessing the success—and excess—of his famous family and their hard-partying friends before succumbing to his own addiction.

Today, sober 26 years, the author, actor, attorney and activist is a tireless advocate for recovery who works with government, business and social service organizations worldwide to erode the stigma surrounding addiction, support addiction research and lobby for the money and policy change required to expand science-based treatment options and make recovery a reality for the tens of millions of people who need it.

Lawford’s new book, Recover to Live: Kick Any Habit, Manage Any Addiction, will be released in January 2013. It features interviews with 100 of the world’s top treatment experts and epitomizes Lawford’s focus on science and his empowering message that recovery is achievable by anyone with the desire to break free of addiction not just to alcohol and drugs, but the underlying causes of all process addiction.

To the recovery community, Lawford’s message is direct and simple: “Get out of your church basements and do something.”

His call is one of challenge and hope, that it is up to those of us who have recovered to step up and take action to protect our rights, build our community and live our primary purpose to help other addicts—not just through Twelve Step programs but in the civic, political and social realms we inhabit.

Renew caught up with Lawford in September, when he was honored in Los Angeles with the Spirit of Recovery Award by the Brent Shapiro Foundation founded by attorney Robert Shapiro in memory of his son, who died of addiction. In December, Lawford will receive the Public Voice Leadership Award from TASC (Treatment Alternatives for Safe Communities), a not-for-profit organization that provides behavioral health recovery management services for individuals with substance abuse and mental health disorders.

Renew: Congratulations on the awards.
Lawford: I’m not a big fan of awards. When they give you awards they don’t let you speak, and I like to talk, especially when it comes to this illness. I come from a political family and it’s hard to shut us up anyway, but when it’s an issue as personal and important as this one, I really like talking about it.

Renew: Then let’s talk. I know you’ve been busy over the past few months.
Lawford: Yes. I’m on the road trying to sell this book, and every chance I get I try to shame people in the recovery field into buying it. I do that because there’s a lot of shitty information in the world put out by people who are trying to sell something else, whether it’s treatment centers or ways to recovery that are not evidence based. We’re talking about people’s lives here. This book is the best information currently available about this illness. Period.

Renew: It’s an ambitious book and quite an undertaking to include all of the researchers and research you’ve compiled here.
Lawford: I have to give credit to Randall Fitzgerald, who helped me do it. Without him, it would have taken me seven years to finish it. It’s as much his book as it is mine. His name isn’t on the cover because nobody knows who he is. People in recovery need to care that people buy this book, because we need real information out there in order to accomplish what we need to accomplish in terms of getting addiction treatment on the national agenda. It’s also an empowerment tool for people who feel hopeless about this thing—that they can get help as soon as they decide to get it. And it doesn’t just apply to alcohol and drug addiction: It’s just as focused on process addiction. We all know that addiction is a brain illness, and if someone has an alcohol issue they probably have a sex issue, probably have a gambling issue or an eating or shopping issue as well.

Renew: There aren’t that many books that deal well with cross addiction.
Lawford: You’d be amazed how many publishers turned the book down for exactly that reason. They wanted me to limit it and narrow the focus. I said no way: I’m going to do the whole thing. It does a lot to break the stigma because when people understand the science, it takes the discussion out of the realm of morality. That’s one of our greatest hurdles—to overcome the moral issue that people seem to have.

Renew: We need more focus on the science, and more people to step up and speak out.
Lawford: Amen, brother. Just make that the article, and we’ve done our job.
“This is the biggest health crisis in America. Cancer costs our nation one third of what addiction costs.”
Renew: What do you see as the stakes in the November election?
Lawford: I ask people in recovery to tell me what the stances of the candidates are in this election, and no one can tell me. First of all, President Obama’s Affordable Care Act is a really good thing for people with this illness. In non-specialty settings it requires doctors to ask questions about drinking and drug use. That’s going to go a long way. Estimates are that 10 to 20 percent of people who would develop chronic addiction will not develop it because of that intervention. That’s a big deal. President Obama and Joe Biden made that happen.

That said, we have not had good leadership on this issue from the administration, but we have had good policy. We would not get that from the Republicans. If you care about this illness, your duty is to vote Democratic. If this is your primary purpose like everyone runs around saying in Twelve Step rooms, then get your ass to a voting booth in November and vote for Obama. Because if Romney wins, this shit’s going to get rolled back and you’re going to get nothing for four years.

Renew: What do we do after the election?
Lawford: We have to get visible. We have a recovery community in this country that’s invisible, filled with people who think the work they’re doing in Twelve Step rooms is enough. If they can honestly make that call knowing what needs to be done, if someone really has nothing more to give and they’re making their commitments and working with other addicts, then that’s fine. But learn what’s out there and what we could be doing for the benefit of all addicts before you make that call. Don’t make that decision in ignorance.

The first tool in this book is, go to a Twelve Step meeting. But less than 5 percent of people who need help will ever even get to a Twelve Step room. And for every two who go, one will never go back. There are people dying all over the world. This is the biggest public health crisis in America. The American Cancer Society raises over a billion dollars a year to fight cancer. Cancer costs our nation one third of what addiction costs, but you know how much we raise? Twenty million. That’s all you need to know. You asked what we need to do? We need to get visible. We need to write checks. We have to create a recovery community. We need to develop a recovery economy.

Renew: A lot of people compare the recovery movement now to the gay rights movement in the 80s. Do you see that?
Lawford: Yes, but there’s a difference. There’s no urgency. HIV was a galvanizing force behind the gay rights movement. It was urgent. People were dying left and right and the gay community stood up and demanded attention. There’s not that urgency with addiction right now. We have to create it. But the other problem is that recovering people have a sense of entitlement that doesn’t go away just because we get sober—especially when it comes to writing checks. We all have this dangerous tendency to think it’s someone else’s responsibility. Someone else will do the work. Someone else will write the checks. They’ve been a drain on their family and on society for years and that behavior is hard to change. So now you have to write a check. What are you going to do? Look. I’ve been there. I know what I’m talking about it. I’ve been dragged kicking and screaming from one level of understanding to the next, and I get it. But this is my message now. Let’s grow up. You asked about the gay community. They were invested. They made it happen. They didn’t wait for someone else to take care of it. A lot of us are segregated in our church basements. It’s time to come out.

Part of getting a life that’s beyond our wildest dreams—which is what we’re promised if we do the work—is commitment to community involvement and social and political activism—the things that make us really well-rounded, fully human beings. It’s not just about staying away from a drink or a drug a day at a time. It’s more than that. Much more.

The Twelve Step programs tell us this is a spiritual disease with a spiritual solution, but it’s more than spiritual. It’s science. It’s up to all of us to understand the science. It’s up to all of us to treat this disease holistically by acting on it from a spiritual, social, scientific, economic and political basis.