

BILL W. AND DR. BOB AT DARTMOUTH

March 2-6, 2011

"In 1898 I left home for Dartmouth College. Finally, I was free! Drink soon cured my shyness—I had an enormous capacity for the stuff!" --Dr. Bob Smith, Dartmouth Class of 1902

Our efforts to use BILL W. AND DR. BOB as a first step in a national initiative to deal with the epidemic of binge drinking on campuses was a resounding success. The audiences grew with each performance and from Thursday through Sunday each session was sold out.

DIVERSE AUDIENCE

Of the 2800 plus seats available, about 2400-2500 were occupied! And occupied by the most diverse audience that we have ever seen: by race, age, ethnicity, and social class. In attendance were Dartmouth students and faculty, other Dartmouth employees, M.D.s and other health care workers, and town people. Many who came had never attended a play before. They came from all over New England, from New York to Maine, Boston to Albany. Every night there were standing ovations, followed by talkbacks that were always moving (the personal stories) and often a wellspring of ideas. (For instance on "medical school night," one seasoned doctor made the comment that in the past he used to dread seeing patients with alcohol-related issues, but now he saw substance abuse as one of the most treatable chronic diseases he saw, with over a 50% cure rate—a sea change from the usual stigmatization of alcoholism.) Professors sat next to bikers, high school students (120 of them one night, some of whom brought their parents back to another show with them) next to seniors. Those in recovery, and those not, mixed and talked. The combination of the talkbacks, of us mixing informally with Dartmouth students and others during intermissions and after, and the remarkable Saturday symposium bringing together Dartmouth alums in recovery, Hanover town officials and police, scholars, students and faculty, public health workers, doctors, leaders of recovery groups and treatment centers—all of this provided new energy and insights on avenues to take.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

We will be preparing a summary of the "action steps" that have come out of these five remarkable days.

OUTPOURING OF GOODWILL AND SENSE OF COMMUNITY

A major effect of using our play in this way was the outpouring of goodwill toward Dartmouth. We can say with confidence that together we accomplished our primary goal: to bring together in a deep appreciative way the community at Dartmouth, in the town, and in fact from all over New England, in appreciation of our trying to do something good in the world, and in lighting a fire to actually start doing it.

Frankly, this outpouring was a little underestimated by us. We had thought that the main "target" would be Dartmouth students. This play brings all kind of people together. It is hard to imagine another event that would do so, in this endeavor. Without the play as the centerpiece, we're not sure that this would have been possible. This is because the play not only stimulates those who know about AA, but because it is a play about the basic human issues of suffering: the danger of

isolation, and the healing power of connection. This has implications for our strategy going forward, and is in tune with a public health, harm-reduction model.

OVER-ARCHING THEME: ISOLATION AND CONNECTION

All week long--and in Steve's packed Medical Grand Rounds on Friday--we introduced the general model of: "The Risk of Isolation, the Power of Connection and Community." Much of the discussion, in talkbacks with the audience and also in many informal talks with students, focused on the ways to build "communities of positive resistance and recovery" at Dartmouth.

Two more vignettes: in the last talkback comment of the week, a man stood up in the back row: "I'm a truck driver, and I don't know about plays. But I know about this play. (choked up; pointing up on stage) Those two men saved my life. Thank you."

Second: one night, during the play, when Janet and Steve were in the lobby, there was a commotion, and dozens of Dartmouth students, loud and drunk, came in and made so much noise that we and the ushers had trouble controlling them. The men were boisterous and rough, the women were in revealing dresses. They were going to a sorority gathering in an upstairs room. We managed to herd them there. The juxtaposition could not have been more stark--"sobering." It was the "play within the play," reality parading before our eyes.

This is our challenge. Talking to some Dartmouth women students who were sitting and watching this, we heard them say how "it's a badge of honor for women to be included in the drinking," and that they themselves want no part of this, but don't have support for that view in the culture. They said that the women join the men--the dominant group--in order to feel safe, and accepted. It's the last thing that they are. Rather, they are at great risk, including that of sexual assault. They are hurt by this, a kind of "second-hand smoking" effect, or "collateral damage." The effect of harmful drinking is not only on the drinker, but on others, many others.

One suggestion: it may be that by mobilizing the women into "communities of positive resistance" we could help make them safe, and reduce harm. This ties in with initiatives on sexual assault.

Our task is before us. Given the shining of the show and of the audience and symposium members, and the afterglow and hundreds of e-mails etc., we are revved up to help deal with this epidemic.

In preparing for the production of the play we were able to draw on the support of a significant number of Dartmouth graduates, who realizing how serious the problems are, responded favorably, not only financially but by sharing their experience, strength, and hope. They--and, studies have shown--a majority of the students--want this to change, from risk to safety, harm to healing.

BILL W AND DR. BOB RETURNS TO OFF BROADWAY 2012

It is clear now that the play can be useful in a national initiative to college campuses. In 2012 BILL W. AND DR. BOB will be returning to Off Broadway for an open-ended, years-long run. It will be unique: not-for-profit, no investors, just donations, under the non-profit umbrella of Hazelden Treatment Center. All revenues from the show will go back to Hazelden to fund a not-for-profit national tour of BILL W. AND DR. BOB to college campuses, dedicated to addressing the epidemic of binge drinking (and also to scholarships for treatment at Hazelden) For us as

authors, the experience at Dartmouth has confirmed the power of the ability we have, in this drama, to attract large and diverse communities of change. The play is already a national phenomenon. We foresee that it, paired with a fact-based program, could become a unique "change-maker" on college campuses.

Note: the play always carries a disclaimer: "This work is not affiliated with nor endorsed by AA World Services."

With gratitude,

Dr. Steve Bergman, Dr. Janet Surrey

March 15, 2011

P.S. Under the title of "DARTMOUTH DOC CHANGES THE WORLD":

Janet and I have come to believe that there had to be a doctor involved in the founding of AA. He happened to be Dr. Bob Smith, class of 1902.

Two little-known facts about what Dr. Bob and Bill W. discovered:

1) by finding out that "The only thing that can keep a drunk sober is telling his story to another drunk," they began the "same disease mutual-help movement," i.e. cancer survivors with other cancer survivors, the abused with others who were abused, etc.

2) they understood that alcoholism was a disease with physical, psychological, and spiritual elements, all three of which had to be addressed for successful treatment. This was the beginning of the holistic health movement.

Together these were the forerunner of our current "psycho-social-spiritual" model.

All of it in 1935!