Francine D. Ward is a business and intellectual property attorney with a focus on copyrights, trademarks, publishing, entertainment, and social media legal issues. An active member of her profession, Francine serves on the Advisory Board to the ABA's Commission on Lawyer Assistance Programs. She is a leader in the ABA's 19,000+ Intellectual Property Law Section, where she is a member of the IP Council, Vice Chair of the Right of Publicity Committee, Vice Chair of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Committee, and she's recently been appointed as the IPL Section’s representative to the ABA's Opioid Summit.

Hi, my name is Francine. I want to share a little bit about what happens when someone gets into recovery and needs to change. That's really my story. I like to think of my story as a story of hope and inspiration, and at least it is for me because I look at my life today, and I cannot actually believe I am standing here before you this afternoon doing what I get to do in my life and even telling you openly who I am.

Just briefly at 14 years old, I was strung out on heroin and alcohol. By the time I was 18 years old, I dropped out of school. I was living homeless on the streets of New York. By the time I was 21 years old, I found myself living a sordid lifestyle is what often happens with young women who are addicted to drugs. By the time I was 26 years old, a God that I did not even believe in at the time knew that something had to happen. And so, when I was 26 the most important and significant defining moment in my life was when I got hit by a car in a blackout.

I'm 38 years clean and sober. I have not had a drink or a drug since July 26, 1979. We often hear about those who don’t make it. We often hear about those who are in and out, in and out. We often hear about those who actually die with a needle in their arm or an overdose of any type, and yet I'm standing here.

I want to share a couple of the things that, for me, have been significant in getting me from that drug addicted alcohol life off the streets of New York at 14 years old to someone who's 65 years old, 38 years sober, and living a life that is so far beyond anything I could have imagined.

The first thing for me was again having a car accident, but having a car accident in and of itself is nothing because if there are any recovering people in this room, you know that no mere car accident is going to stop you if you're on a mission.

If you’re not in recovery but you work with people who are in and out, you see the tragedy of loss of a license, loss of a family, loss of health, loss of a limb, and how it never stops anyone. But for me, that was a defining moment, getting hit by a car in a blackout in Las Vegas, Nevada.

If you can imagine I got sober in Vegas. People say, “Well, how in the world could you get sober in Vegas?” I'm a believer that when your number is up, wherever you're lucky enough to be and that's what happened. So, I got sober in Vegas in ’79, and it was the car accident that was the first thing that happened.
Then the next defining moment was when I was introduced to a community that helped me not drink or use drugs one day at a time. At the time when I got sober, we didn’t have a lot of them. I didn’t have the money to go to rehab, so I ended up kicking heroin, kicking alcohol, and kicking 100 milligrams of valium every day cold turkey. Now that’s not for everyone, and but for me, that’s what had to happen.

The other thing that was significant for me was that I met someone who became a mentor—someone who had the courage to tell me the truth about my behavior. I say all this to say today what we were talking about were all the outside things that can be done to help someone suffering from addiction. We talked about resources, access, and education. But I have to tell you that I am one of those people that truly believes that the missing link is the individual.

We can do everything that we can for them, but if there’s not a person who really wants to stop drinking and using drugs, then they’re not going to stop. It’s just that simple. I’ve seen it over and over and over again. So, what had to happen for me was that moment of clarity where I wanted to live more than I wanted to die. And I don’t know why. I can’t tell you. One day I woke up and I just wanted to live, but it happened. It happened after about 9 months after I actually got hit by the car. Then I came to, and I decided I wanted to stop drinking and killing myself.

I want to wrap it up and say that I have found, in my own experience, that people that stay sober ultimately are people who really want to stay sober. You can come into recovery for any reason. There are lots of reasons that people initially come into recovery—drug court, accidents like my situation, losing a license, losing a child. But in order for someone to stay sober over the long haul, I found that there has to be a desire on their part to do that, and that’s what I had.

Again, I don’t know why. I don’t know why—at this moment in my life when I was 26 years old—I decided that enough was enough, but I got sick and tired of being sick and tired. At that moment I stopped drinking and using.

I will tell you that I’m truly one of the people that took recovery seriously. I was a high school dropout when I got sober. I had a criminal record when I got sober. All of those things could have stopped me from getting sober, and I’ve heard today over and over and over again—not here but with people I’ve worked with in recovery—they use all kinds of excuses why they can’t do anything. There’s always a reason why we can’t do the next thing we have to do for ourselves.

But that mentor that I had was probably the single-most important person in my life at the time, and she’s now dead. She went to that big recovery meeting in the sky in 2002, but again, she was the first person who had the courage to tell me the truth. She didn’t let me finagle my way around. She didn’t let me try to pull something over on her. And she wasn’t afraid to tell me things.

I think, sometimes we walk on eggshells. We’re afraid to tell the addict or the alcoholic that this is the way we see it because we’re afraid they won’t like us, we’re afraid they’ll run out again. Fortunately for me, I had someone who wasn’t afraid. She wasn’t afraid of me, and if she was she didn’t act like it. She was willing to tell me the truth anyway.

She told me that it was my behavior that needed to change—that if I was going to stay sober over the long haul, not for a day, not for 30 days, not even for a year—I needed to change my behavior. I needed to change how I was showing up in the world. I had some pretty nasty little habits that weren’t even about drinking and using, it was the way I behaved. And she said to me, “If you keep doing these things, you will eventually drink again.”

I used to often complain to her about feeling guilty about my past, but just feeling guilty and remember Louise said to me one day, if you stop doing the things that make you feel guilty then you won’t feel guilty. I couldn’t have wrapped my arms around that. But she was right. When I stopped behaving inappropriately, and as a woman, most of my behavior that was inappropriate was around men. She said, “If you stop doing those things then you will feel better about yourself.” She was the first person that said to me self-esteem comes from doing “esteemed” acts. She made a causal connection between how I feel about myself and my drinking and using. Again, to change my behavior, I would stop drinking and using, and that’s exactly what happened.
I went back to school when I was three years sober, and that was a tough uphill battle because again I had a criminal record, and I had a mindset that bought into the messages that people had placed on me. I was really good at buying into whatever you said. If you told me I was a piece of garbage then, I believed it. If enough people tell you that you’re a nothing, then you will buy into it.

And so, she said, “You can hold on to those feelings all you want. You can let other people define who you are, but as long as you do that, you will continue to stay in the place where you are.” I started to change that attitude gradually. It has taken me 38 years to have a different experience. I’m not an overnight success, and fortunately, I had a sponsor who believed in being a tortoise as opposed to a hare.

Some of you might remember the tortoise and the hare story where the hare is the one that everybody is banking on because he’s so quick and he races to the finish line, but he outsmarts himself, so he sits along the side and he falls asleep. Nobody is banking on the tortoise because, of course, the tortoise is a turtle, but it’s the tortoise that wins the race.

That’s how she taught me to be. She said, “Slow and steady is the goal. You’re not going to change your life or your behavior overnight. But if you consistently do the work, you’ll do it.”

I went back to school, and I became a lawyer when I was 10 years sober. I’ve been a lawyer for 27 years. I’ve been sober for a long time, but all those changes took place because I was willing to stay the course.

I’m a different person inside today. I was the kind of person that absolutely no one liked, and no one would like because of how I acted and how I showed up. I’m somebody who makes my recovery number one. It is the most important thing in my life. I have a pretty busy schedule. I’m very active in my profession, and I’m very active in the bar. But my meetings come first.

Last night, had my flight not been so delayed, I had a meeting scheduled that I was going to go to because I know that if I don’t take care of my recovery there’s nothing else. There’s no license to practice. There’s no husband of 21 years. There’s nothing if I’m not clean and sober and if I’m not taking care of my mental health.

I want to say how grateful I am. I’m grateful to be here. I didn’t come here to speak. I actually came here just because the I.P. Section appointed me as the representative to the Opioid Summit, and then I was asked to be a facilitator. But what a gift that is. Nobody would have ever invited me to do anything like this before. Why not? Because I wouldn’t have been qualified.

Today, I’m qualified mostly because I’m sober a long time, but also because I work in this area. I’m active on CoLAP, the Commission on Lawyers Assistance Programs. I’m the current Vice Chair of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Committee for the I.P. Section, and I will be the Chair next year. I want to shout out to the Chair of my section, Scott Partridge. He had to foresight to create a committee.

We are the first—and perhaps the only—substantive committee in the ABA that actually has a committee addressing this issue. And those are the kind of people I like to be around. I’m a doer. I like being around doers.

I think that’s about it. I want to say thank you for the opportunity. I just want to say lastly, what a privilege it was to work with Link today.

You know, I believe that God is very good. I know there are a lot of scientists in here, so maybe God is not the topic. But for me, I have a spiritual life that’s really strong, and I believe there are absolutely no mistakes in God’s universe.

It’s interesting how we were put together. We discovered that he knows my husband very well. We don’t necessarily agree on everything, but that’s what made our session quite interesting because we had different perspectives, and they were both welcome. So, thank you. And thank you, Jack and Marvin, for allowing me to be here.