

Series: *Justice Today* podcast

Episode: Portraits of Recovery: Doreen Schenkenberger

Guest: Doreen Schenkenberger; Chief Executive Officer, Partners for Progress, Anchorage, Alaska

Description: Doreen Schenkenberger describes how she recovered from alcoholism that began at age 13, and now leads a statewide organization that assists others on that same path

This transcript has been edited for clarity and brevity.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: Welcome to *Justice Today*, the official podcast of the Department of Justice's Office of Justice Programs, where we shine a light on cutting-edge research and practices, and offer an in-depth look at what we're doing to meet the biggest public-safety challenges of our time. Join us as we explore how funding, science, and technology help us achieve stronger communities.

I am your host, Karen Friedman. I am the director of Criminal Justice Innovation, Development and Engagement at the Office of Justice Programs—or OJP—Bureau of Justice Assistance, BJA.

September is National Recovery Month, an occasion when we can acknowledge the millions of Americans who have transformed their lives by recovering from addiction or substance abuse disorder. Our guest today is someone who has traveled her own personal journey to recovery and has dedicated her professional life to helping others do the same.

Doreen Schenkenberger is Chief Executive Officer of Partners for Progress in Anchorage, Alaska. Her organization supports people who are addressing addiction throughout the State of Alaska. Partners for Progress plays an integral role in the work of drug and treatment courts in 10 Alaskan cities. It operates a center for formerly incarcerated people re-entering society, and it has organized a statewide network of drug-court alumni that helped give rise to a national movement.

Doreen first joined Partners for Progress as a volunteer, shortly after she herself graduated from treatment court in Anchorage. We are so happy that she has agreed to share her remarkable story and her passion for her work with us.

Welcome, Doreen. How are you today?

DOREEN SCHENKENBERGER: I'm fine, Karen. Thank you very much. Really happy to be here with you.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: We are honored to have you. I enjoyed meeting you a couple of weeks ago at the National Association of Drug Court Professionals (NADCP) and hearing your story. And I knew that we just had to get you on the podcast so you could share your story.

I'd like to start with your personal history, which has led you to where you are today, and to what you're doing here today. Your story is really quite remarkable. You grew up in Nome, Alaska. Graduated third in your high school class. First person in your family to finish college. Got a great job.

But at the same time, your entire family struggled with addiction. You started drinking when you were about 13 years old, and by the time you were in your 20s, you had gotten four DUIs. That sound accurate?

DOREEN SCHENKENBERGER: It does.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: OK, so please tell us about these extraordinary contrasts in your life.

DOREEN SCHENKENBERGER: I think a lot of people suffering substance use disorder and addictions go through this in their family environment. It's really not good at home. Your parents are alcoholic, as well as many people in your family.

Alcohol had a grip on my family for three generations. I sat down one day and tried to think back, through my whole family tree, of anyone else that was sober in my family. I couldn't find anyone except my grandmother on my mother's side.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: Wow.

DOREEN SCHENKENBERGER: Everybody, as far back as I can remember, has struggled with alcoholism and addiction in our family. It's unfortunately taken two of my brothers, both by suicide due to drinking and drugs. Two of my nephews have overdosed. My mother and my grandfather died from alcoholism. A lot of people up here in Alaska freeze to death in the wintertime if they're struggling with substances, and that was my uncle. He froze to death in a snowbank three feet from the front door.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: Wow, wow.

DOREEN SCHENKENBERGER: So, I poured myself into school early on and always managed to do really well. But it wasn't because I loved school. School was an escape from family life and all of the stress at home, the drinking and other abuse.

When I went to my friends' homes for dinner, they actually sat down together, and they spoke to each other cordially, and there wasn't fighting and yelling. So, I knew our family was very different. As a young person, I tried to do everything I could so nobody would really know what it was like at home. There was a lot of shame. And of course, I started drinking very early—13 years old. I can remember it vividly to this day. I got drunk the first time I drank. I think, from the very beginning, I was addicted.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: Tell us about the DUIs. You got arrested four times for DUIs, and then, after that fourth DUI, you successfully completed a treatment program and entered recovery.

DOREEN SCHENKENBERGER: My first recovery period is about 10 years and 3 months. I moved to Anchorage with my fiancé in '88 or '89. Once in Anchorage, I started getting DUIs, one right after another. I got four DUIs in four years, which was horrible.

I went to jail four times, and they started adding on jail time. By the fourth DUI, I was looking at eight months in jail, or a little less. Once I got my fourth, I entered a treatment program, and my husband did it with me. I managed to stay sober for 10 years and 3 months. Went to meetings, had a sponsor. It was really a wonderful time. Had two kids, finished college, got a great job. So, things were going really, really well.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: And then I understand, around that time, you had a terrible tragedy. Your husband was killed in an airplane crash.

DOREEN SCHENKENBERGER: He was, in 2002, he and his father. My father-in-law came up every year, and they would fly to the family cabin and spend two or three weeks of dad-and-son time. They were on that trip, but they didn't come back on the day they were supposed to. So, we started making phone calls, and nobody had seen them.

I just knew in my gut something had happened because he was always in contact. He would have gotten word to us somehow. So, I just was filled with this dread. That night, I remember vividly going to the liquor store and coming home and relapsing.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: Then, not long after that, you got your fifth DUI, right?

DOREEN SCHENKENBERGER: I drank for a year when my husband died. I drank for a year. One of my best friends, who was also my neighbor, came over and practically took my kids and said, "You're not in any shape to watch the kids. I'm going to keep them." I didn't do anything to stop her because I knew they would be better off with her.

I started driving drunk again. And pretty soon—almost a year to the day after my husband died—I got my fifth DUI. Then, I was looking at eight months of jail time and possibly losing my kids.

I had an attorney, and I had heard about therapeutic court from a couple of other people. I asked him about it, and he got me a date to go and sit in and watch the process. I applied to therapeutic court, and they accepted me into the alcohol therapeutic program, and I began my recovery journey.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: Let's explain that a little bit. Therapeutic courts—what Doreen is talking about—are the same as treatment courts. Sometimes they're called problem-solving courts or diversion courts. Many people know them as drug courts.

But they're basically specialty courts that deal with a problem that the individual defendant is dealing with. Whatever you call them, they are very different from traditional courts. Rather than stressing punishment for past bad acts, the goal is to prevent future bad acts by addressing the underlying cause that has brought that individual in front of the judge.

The judges in these courts, the prosecutors, the defense attorneys all work together with the entire specialty court team to address the needs of this individual and to help this person into recovery. And I know that for you, as well as many, many other people, this experience was really transformative.

DOREEN SCHENKENBERGER: Absolutely. It was my first experience in court where it wasn't punitive. My four other arrests in the past for DUI had always been very punitive. We have some of the toughest DUI laws here in Alaska, so it was mandatory jail time, mandatory fines that kept increasing.

When I walked into therapeutic court, I knew, even from sitting in before I was admitted, that this was a very different program. It was a lot more relaxed, and very inviting. Everybody seemed really invested in helping people. So, that was very different.

My first appearance when they let me enter therapeutic court was really comforting. I was so stressed. My kids were living with my girlfriend, and I was looking at all this jail time and thousands of dollars in fines. They told me that they were on my side, and that they were going to help me fight this. And if I did this program, it would change my life and I wouldn't have to go to jail, I wouldn't have to pay the fines. And, so, I absolutely signed the agreement...

KAREN FRIEDMAN: Good.

DOREEN SCHENKENBERGER: ...and started therapeutic court. To this day, I'm in contact with the coordinators. The judge, Judge Wanamaker, is on the Board of Directors of Partners.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: Oh, awesome.

DOREEN SCHENKENBERGER: He's retired now, but I've maintained a relationship with him.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: Love it.

DOREEN SCHENKENBERGER: It's just been a wonderful, wonderful journey.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: As you know, I was a drug court judge before joining BJA. There's nothing more rewarding from a judge's perspective than to be able to see people heal. To be reunited with children, be reunited with loved ones, and become part of their community again in a healthy, productive way.

It's definitely the most rewarding professional experience of my life. Just watching people's lives transform into having hope again and feeling like themselves again. Seeing the effect on the entire family is incredibly, incredibly rewarding and moving.

After you finished your 18-month program in the treatment court, you volunteered to work at Partners for Progress and began mentoring other people who were in treatment courts. You eventually were

appointed to the Board of Directors at Partners, then joined the staff, and now you have risen to be the CEO. Such an incredible story. Tell our listeners a bit about the work that Partners does.

DOREEN SCHENKENBERGER: We were founded back in 1998, I believe. It came to be because a couple of community members—one being Judge Wanamaker and the other being Janet McCabe, a city planner—wanted to do something about the people on the street in downtown Anchorage who were obviously addicted and many of them homeless. Judge Wanamaker had heard about therapeutic courts in the states. We didn't have therapeutic courts up here in Alaska. So he said, "How about we try to start a therapeutic court?"

They started writing grants, they started talking to the court system, and the municipality, and they got the very first therapeutic court going here in Alaska. We've got 17 now statewide. Partners has helped to develop all of those courts, and we're still doing that work. We get state grants every year to support all those courts statewide with housing services and indigent support. We also have in Anchorage a re-entry center that we opened in 2013 that helps formerly incarcerated individuals with treatment and housing and other support to get them back on their feet.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: Wonderful.

DOREEN SCHENKENBERGER: The therapeutic courts use our employment and training center to find jobs. So, we support both therapeutic courts and re-entry, and in many different ways. We have several housing programs throughout the state and several peer-support grants that we also administer.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: Fabulous. I understand you also helped found the Alaska Treatment Court Alumni Association. It's a statewide organization of people who mentor other people going through treatment courts. And I understand it's been in the forefront of a national movement to include more alumni in the treatment court process. How did that come about?

DOREEN SCHENKENBERGER: It's been a long road. After I graduated therapeutic court in 2005, the Chairman of the Board of Partners came to me and said, "You know, maybe you guys should form a graduate group for support." Because our journey through therapeutic court is so special and it's very, very different...

KAREN FRIEDMAN: Yeah.

DOREEN SCHENKENBERGER: ...from other programs. The idea seemed great, so we formed the very first alumni group and started having meetings and dinners and clinics and things like that. People were coming, even current participants started coming. We started going into the courts for graduations, and to share our story with current participants, and let them know that we've got some good sobriety now, some good recovery. We wanted to give back to the courts that saved our lives.

We wanted to help current participants go through the program, which isn't easy. It's the toughest program out there, and not everybody makes it. But if you can get through this program, we always tell the participants, you've got a really high chance of staying out and staying sober for the long term. So, the alumni group has grown since 2006. We're our own nonprofit organization now, and we do peer support statewide. We offer over 40 peer support groups per month to help participants through the program.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: Yeah, that's wonderful. The advice that you, as someone with lived experience, can share with other people who are struggling is incomparable. There's nothing I can say that's going to mean as much as what you can share, having gone through the experience and come out the other side. So, that encouragement that you provide is key to success.

What type of things do you share when you're mentoring people who are going through the treatment court and entering recovery? What do you tell them? What do you think are some of the most important lessons that you can share to help people succeed?

DOREEN SCHENKENBERGER: I think one of the first ones is our own personal stories. And that they're not alone.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: Yeah.

DOREEN SCHENKENBERGER: A lot of people suffering from addiction think that what they've done is so horrible, and what's been done to them is so horrible, and they just can't share that. They don't think anyone else could understand or know what they've gone through. But we do.

As peers, as fellow graduates of therapeutic court, we all have a personal story. We've all been through terrible times, and we've all done damage. We tell participants, "You're in the right place now. This is one of the best programs nationwide, and you could really turn your life around with this program if you do what's advised, if you do what they say. We're here to help you and support you in that because we've gone through it."

We know best what we need to stay sober, those of us in long-term recovery. I think somebody even said that one year at NADCP: "Ask those who have some long-term recovery. They know what's needed to maintain it."

KAREN FRIEDMAN: I think people don't understand that addiction can't be cured. It's not a matter of curing it, it's a matter of learning how to maintain that recovery and sobriety every single day. Because every single day, it probably will be a struggle. But gaining the tools to be able to maintain that sobriety is what's key.

DOREEN SCHENKENBERGER: Absolutely. It's work. And really, it starts after you graduate from therapeutic court because then you're on your own. You have to do this alone. You don't have all of that team wrapped around you anymore.

That's where the alumni come in. We wrap around graduates, and we can share with them what it takes. It takes ongoing meeting support, it takes ongoing peer support, it takes ongoing work every day to maintain your recovery. You need to have a mentor or a sponsor, and you need to be accountable and honest, the rigorous honesty we talk about.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: Honesty is so important.

DOREEN SCHENKENBERGER: Those of us in long-term recovery have certain things that we do to maintain that honesty. That's what we can share with participants and with graduates.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: I'd love if you talk about what is being done nationwide regarding alumni and peer support.

DOREEN SCHENKENBERGER: Sure. From our meetings, and having a regular support network here in Alaska, and starting to build on that, we started going to the National Association of Drug Court Professionals annual conference. We've been going to conference for about 12 years. In the very beginning, there was very little talk about peer support. It was just a mention here and there.

We started presenting about what we were doing in Alaska, about organizing and forming an alumni group, and offering peer support to current participants, and how we work with the courts. All-volunteer, of course. It was really fulfilling something in us that we needed to give back to this program.

NADCP, who's always been researching ways to support therapeutic court, was looking at this, too. It just hadn't gotten any momentum. So, we started working with NADCP. They started asking us to come give presentations, and they invited us to focus groups and planning groups. It used to be just a vision, but two years ago, several of us alumni got together and met with NADCP, and they really want to support this national effort. Now it's really happening. For the first time ever at conference, graduates have their own training track.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: Yeah, it's great.

DOREEN SCHENKENBERGER: Every program now has peer support. Peer support is almost a requirement for programs involving treatment and addiction and recovery.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: If I'm not mistaken, there were over 150 therapeutic court graduates at the conference this year...

DOREEN SCHENKENBERGER: There were.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: ...which is amazing. And I think that number is just going to continue to grow each year.

DOREEN SCHENKENBERGER: I's wonderful, just like therapeutic court, wrapping around you. NADCP is really welcoming graduates and alumni to come back and to join this national effort.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: There's a real recognition of how important sharing that lived experience is for people who are struggling.

DOREEN SCHENKENBERGER: And states are recognizing this. We've been going to our capital in Juneau every year to lobby for more funding for therapeutic courts, more therapeutic courts. Because of that, they actually awarded us a legislative yearly grant for a full-time, statewide peer support coordinator for our groups.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: Wow, that's great.

DOREEN SCHENKENBERGER: More and more paid positions are now being offered nationally through the courts and through the states for people with lived experience. Because everybody is recognizing how important it is for long-term recovery.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: Yeah, wonderful. I know that your recovery has not only had an impact on you, but your children, your immediate family, and your community. You want to tell us a little bit about how they are doing now?

DOREEN SCHENKENBERGER: Sure. As I mentioned in the beginning, growing up in an alcoholic household, it's addiction and substance use. It's just had devastating effects on my family for generations, and that is common here in Alaska. We have some of the highest rates nationwide for substance use disorder. I can remember, at one point in our re-entry program, we had a young man, his father, and his grandfather all just coming out of incarceration and entering our program. Fortunately, we were able to help them.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: Right.

DOREEN SCHENKENBERGER: But in my own family, my recovery has made a real difference in my children's lives. They've seen me sober more than they have not seen me sober. I've been able to maintain that sobriety, and they're doing well today. They both are in college. My son will graduate next May with—

KAREN FRIEDMAN: Yay!

DOREEN SCHENKENBERGER: Yeah, he's going to the California Maritime Academy, so...

KAREN FRIEDMAN: Oh, wow

DOREEN SCHENKENBERGER: ...he'll graduate with his third mate's ticket. He's been working every summer since he's been in college. He just got home from being out in the Gulf of Mexico all summer.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: Wow, wow.

DOREEN SCHENKENBERGER: And my daughter will graduate with her master's degree in anthropology. She's an archaeologist.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: Wow.

DOREEN SCHENKENBERGER: She just got home from a job in Guam all summer, on an archaeological dig in Guam. They're 26 and 28, so there's hope. There's a chance for my kids.

And my sisters—I got to go home for a visit with them this summer. And for the first time in our family's history, all four of us were sober.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: Oh.

DOREEN SCHENKENBERGER: My three sisters are sober now, and I really feel that my journey had a lot to do with that. Because I've shared it with them, even when they didn't want...

KAREN FRIEDMAN: They didn't want to hear about it.

DOREEN SCHENKENBERGER: I was always whispering in their ear: "I've got a remarkable life today, and it's full of joy, and it's prosperous, and it's healthy. I'm really living life. I have a wonderful career." And they could have that, too. So, we're all in recovery now. And I think it's absolutely due to this program.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: Doreen, I can't tell you how much everyone appreciates the work that you're doing and your willingness to share your story with us. Thank you so much for joining us on *Justice Today*. I'm so impressed by everything you've been able to accomplish, and just want to continue hearing your great successes.

DOREEN SCHENKENBERGER: Thank you, Karen, and thank you for your support, too. It's really meaningful.

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