

## The Mooney Family Story



My name is Al Mooney, and I am not an alcoholic or addict, but many others in my family are—my parents, my brothers, Jimmy and Bobby, and our sister, Carol Lind. Drinking and using drugs are more than just a challenging medical problem to me. They're personal. Very personal.

When I was growing up in Statesboro, Georgia, alcohol and drugs were in charge of our family. My father, John Mooney, was a wonderful physician – and an addict and alcoholic. He didn't want to treat any patients when he'd been drinking, so during office hours he used pills, alternating between uppers and downers. At night, he broke out the bottles. He *thought* he was doing a good job of hiding it from his patients.

My mother, Dot Mooney, was doing her best to be a good mom, but she popped codeine for her hangover headaches, tranquilizers for depression, and barbiturates so she could sleep (with an M.D. for a husband, it wasn't hard to get hold of all the drug samples she wanted). Like Dad, she was also doing her best to cover up her drinking and drug use. She would drive us to

Sunday school every week, and then hide in the back of the room so no one could smell the liquor on her breath. Eventually her mind got so foggy that she was afraid to take us anywhere—especially after she dropped my little brother Jimmy at the library and forgot to pick him up.

One night in our living room, my father went into a convulsion from an overdose. That started him on a series of visits to psychiatric hospitals to “dry out.” Each time, my mother tried to cover up his absence by telling us kids -- and his patients -- that he was at a medical conference. The kids believed it for a while, but I’m not sure if anyone else did.

Like so many first born children of alcoholic/addict parents, I felt I had no choice but to do what I could to keep the family going – covering up for Dad’s absences, getting the kids up for school in the morning, poking Mom awake when the car she was driving was drifting off the road, telling her where to turn so she wouldn’t keep driving until she ran out of gas. I remember one time in particular when I was “helping” her to drive – I was so young, I could barely see over the dashboard. But there I was, telling her, “Mom, turn left now!”

Relatives and family friends complimented me on being “the little man in the family” in that and dozens of other out-of-control situations, and I acquired a lot of self-confidence running rescue operations anytime the Mooney family train ran off the tracks. I should have been just a kid playing in the backyard, but that wasn’t the way my family worked.

It all finally turned around when my father, who had written himself hundreds of phony prescriptions, was sent to prison for six months. It was a big wake-up call for him, as well as a blessing. With the help of an AA member who visited him there, by the time he was released from prison, he was finally ready for sobriety.

Back home, after a few months of solid sobriety, an interesting thing happened. Dad’s doctor friends started asking him to care for their alcoholic patients. It turned out he was pretty good at it. Mom, who by then had also sworn off anything stronger than coffee, helped out. As their

reputations grew, more people began coming to them for help. Several hundred people were treated at our big old house on Lee Street; the dining room was set aside for detox.

Eventually, however, their good works outgrew the house (and the patience of our neighbors). So, Mom and Dad built an addiction treatment hospital in Statesboro. My mother named it Willingway. Today it is a successful, fully accredited, 40-bed treatment facility. My parents worked there for the rest of their lives, helping countless people. Despite our family's difficult early years, I'll always remember them not as hopeless addicts but as wise teachers and wonderful parents.

As a young adult, I always knew I wanted to be a doctor like my dad, but I wasn't at all sure I wanted to work with addicts and alcoholics. I'd seen far too much of that world already. I was set on being a surgeon. Ironically, it was my surgical rotation in medical school that changed my mind. While stitching up trauma patients, I realized that it didn't matter whether the person on the table was there because of a stabbing, a car accident, or family violence. In nearly every case, the root cause was alcoholism or addiction. I realized I could do more good helping people to turn their lives around *before* they ended up in surgery. I returned to Statesboro and eventually served as the medical director of Willingway.

Given my family's history, all my life I have done everything I could to avoid alcohol and mood-altering drugs. Addiction is a disease that runs in families, for both genetic and environmental reasons. I kept to the only sure way I knew of to prevent it from taking control of me – total abstinence. You might think that, seeing the mess alcohol and drugs had made of our parents' lives, my siblings would have done the same. No such luck. All of them spent a few years in active addiction.

Eventually, however, everyone in the family found recovery – and a way to help others find it, carrying on the legacy of our parents. Jimmy, Bobby, and Carol Lind have all had wonderful careers helping people: working at Willingway, running a women's halfway house, working with a drug court program, and more. Each one has also now enjoyed decades of personal sobriety.

The Mooney family story was rooted in active addiction for a very long time. Though it often seemed like an impossible dream, every member of our family was able to finally change their own lives and find a content, purposeful and peaceful life in recovery. I truly believe that such a peaceful life is possible for *every* person with addiction and *every* family member who is struggling alongside them.

Al J. Mooney, M.D.

Director of Addiction Medicine and Recovery, Willingway