

**Draft Cover of LGBT Booklet**

# **LGBT VOICES**

**Members' personal experiences in AA**

**Draft Inside Cover of LGBT Voices**

**As a gay man in a very heterosexual AA, it's a bit like being an alcoholic  
in a sober world.**

**Thank goodness for the programme, thank God for the principles.**

**They made it ok.**

**I was able to fit in and recover.**

## **Becoming Myself in AA**

Many AA members describe a sense of not belonging or not fitting in until they encounter AA where for the first time they experience a real connection or identification with other people. As far back as I can remember I had a very clear understanding that I did not belong in the body that I inhabited and that other people did not see the real me. I knew that I was male but I also knew that other people didn't get that because my physical body was female. Growing up was hard. My father was my greatest support in that he bought me the toys I wanted – soldiers, action men, guns, footballs - drove me to judo lessons and took some flak for “making me the way I was”. He didn't, he just accepted me despite not really understanding my condition and so helped me survive. Life with my mum, who loved me just as much, was much more of a battle – about the length of my hair, the clothes I wore, the round shouldered walking I adopted to hide my developing figure.

I became increasingly locked in and hidden as I grew up. School was a relatively safe space. I attended a single sex high school which was torture in some ways but at least meant that I wasn't constantly faced with the experience of being put in the wrong groups for sport or any other gender divided activity as happened at primary school. Some elements of academic work came relatively easily and I learnt that delivering good results pleased people and deflected attention from my weirdness. I knew I was weird because people told me. I experienced bullying, a teacher saying I had personality problems which was true but a bit hard to sort when you're 8 and the increasing agony of my body betraying me.

Home, despite the tension with my mum, had been safe and a place to hide and I found the move away to university difficult. There were things that I could do with freedom – cut my hair the way I wanted, dress the way I wanted but I was still stuck with a female name and not seen as who I was. I had always had a fear of alcohol as I associated it with loss of control and control mattered to me but I eventually took the risk and discovered that I liked what it did for me. The taste wasn't great but it made me feel better – or more to the point not feel at all when I passed out. Booze let me develop an even harder protective shell and let me push the world away. The problem was that people noticed my drinking – I didn't manage to control it or my behaviour – and the attacks on it came quickly. This, of course, only increased my defensiveness, anger and self-pity. My ability to function decreased and my sense of despair at finding a place in the world increased.

After university I drifted. I couldn't even manage voluntary work – my drinking would wreck my efforts. At the same time my struggle to get help to become myself intensified and I did encounter people who wanted to help. However, they all wanted me to conform to my body and I knew that was impossible so I had to run and defend myself from the help on offer.

Eventually I ended up in an alcohol treatment centre and the issue of my gender identity surfaced again – and again the solution proposed was that I should surrender the real me to appear the way everyone else wanted me to. I was forbidden to cut my hair which for me was agony but I realised that unless I conformed I'd never escape.

I'd not been very receptive to the AA message I'd been exposed to in treatment but something had sunk in because I realised that, for me, drinking would only result in bad things and in a moment of clarity I decided that I wanted to stop drinking. I prayed, genuinely asking for help for the first time, and engaged with AA. I got sober and gradually found people with whom I could share the truth about myself. God provided another pre-transition transgendered member for me very early in sobriety – someone who understood. Another member fully accepted me for who I was and I eventually accessed help to transition into myself. The first time I used my male name in a meeting was a fantastic moment and I received support. I only experienced one instance of behaviour which felt like rejection and AA had given me the tools to challenge that in the right way – privately, taking the member to one side and explaining why what they were saying wasn't ok. The member was long term sober and changed their behaviour towards me – this programme works. I was a Conference delegate during my transition and members on my committee just worked it out for themselves and accepted me which was fantastic.

I've been through surgery and living as me for years now and am happy in ways that are beyond my wildest dreams but I'm very aware that without AA and the gift of sobriety I would never have managed to engage appropriately with the professionals who have supported me through transition. My drinking was not the only form of self-harm I engaged in and I'm sure that suicide would have been a very likely outcome for me. My relationship with my mum is very good now and I'm grateful for that.

I don't think of myself as transgendered. As far as I'm concerned I'm male and that's it. I don't share this part of my story in meetings and I hesitated to put pen to paper. In fact, it was only the prompting of a member who knew me pre-transition that persuaded me – if someone in AA asks you to do something the right answer is usually "Yes". I was asked some time ago to contact another transgendered member to offer some support and I'm pleased to say that I did that whilst encouraging them to contact other support organisations and professionals. I hope I will always be willing to do that but I am submitting this article anonymously and though I'd like to say that is an act of humility it isn't. It is about just being able to carry on being me and that is important because now that I'm whole and myself on the inside and the outside I am much more willing and able to be of help to others both inside and outside of AA and that as I understand it is the point and purpose of sobriety!

Anon

## Happily and usefully whole

I have been asked to write a little about what difference it has made to me, as a gay alcoholic recovering in AA. I came to AA when I was twenty-one. At my first meeting at least one other attendee was gay, I was later to discover, but the composition of AA tends to reflect that of society as a whole, and those in attendance on that winter night in 1993 did just that: they were variously old, young, male, female, smart, shabby, radiant, withdrawn ... I am grateful that this first AA meeting was so diverse; there was no pattern to the attendees; since there was nothing to 'fit in with', everyone fitted in, including me. The one thing that everyone did have in common, however, was their self-proclaimed identity as alcoholics, something they announced, one by one, matter-of-factly, and without any fuss. I had often declared—grandly and with one eye on the dramatic effect my statement had on others—that I was an alcoholic, and thus doomed. Here, the statement was a deflating one. True, granted, but neither dramatic, nor grand, nor portentous, for two reasons. Firstly, being an alcoholic in a room full of them is nothing remarkable. Secondly, the fact of alcoholism, in a room of those who (largely) had recovered, or in whom the condition was for the time being arrested, was no longer a death-knell but a waystation. The attendees spoke in unison, but each distinctively, of the full, rich, challenging, but rewarding lives they were now living sober. You will probably have noticed by now that, contrary to my stated brief of writing about my experience as a gay man in recovery, the fact I was gay has barely been mentioned. That is my entire point: my sexuality was not a block at my first meeting, and has never been a block since then. Of far more importance in that group was the fact I was given a cup of tea that was not quite full because I was shaky. That I was welcomed; that I was even allowed to participate by 'sharing' (our term in AA for taking our turn to speak).

Over the last 22 years, the fact of my sexuality has indeed played a role, although it has been a thread with which the fabric has been shot through rather than a prominent motif. One aspect of AA is what we refer to as fellowship. To me, this is the companionship along the path. One remarkable feature of fellowship is this: whilst I do need fellows whose practical life experiences mirror my own, partly to eliminate the separateness I can feel when tricked by surface appearances, and partly to be guided in pragmatic matters, those whom I have counted as 'fellows' over the years have been a disparate bunch indeed. Some of those I have identified with the most and learned the most from have had nothing in common with me in a surface or material way, whether the Wimbledon housewife, the Texas oil man, the Clapton road worker, or the eccentric Countess of Wherever. There have been times I have attended LGBT meetings of AA; yet I have gone for years belonging only to mainstream AA groups.

Before I came to AA, I believed my sexuality was my defining characteristic, or at least a chief one. I used it as a banner to separate myself from others and to think myself special. What AA has taught me is that it is my connection with others and the fulfilment of my many different roles in the world that are important; it has shown me that my various traits are not who I am but merely tools to enable me to become all I could be.

The solution to alcoholism provided by AA—the adoption of the Twelve Steps of AA as a way of life, combined with fellowship with those on the same path, plus service within AA and outside—has enabled me to become happily and usefully whole. AA has provided, consistently and reliably, the feeling that drinking excessive amounts of alcohol gave me elusively and fleetingly: the sense that I belong.

Tim

## **Alison's Story**

My name is Alison and I have been sober for 20 years thanks to AA and the programme.

After 23 years or so drinking I had all the symptoms - paranoia, madness, hypersensitivity, self pity etc, being lesbian and having suffered homophobia in the outside world, I had no reason to believe AA was any different. Indeed at one meeting my fears were confirmed; the guy doing the chair came out as gay - doing an honest share - I remember hearing one homophobic share back and at that point I nearly left the meeting. Thank God I forced myself to stay and there were more humane kind shares that redressed the balance.

Whilst you can't stop people sharing as in the above situation and nor should you, as these are exceptions; this to me was the spiritual side of the programme working perfectly, the kindness and goodness shared far outweighing the bad.

I found a meeting I could go to that was emotionally safe; a Lesbian (unrestricted) meeting where I could safely share my experiences honestly, especially in my early days [and not pretend that she was a he etc] and find myself a sponsor who was less likely to judge me.

At lesbian and gay meetings I was told I should go to mainstream meetings as well, in fact get as much variety as possible, this I pass onto newcomers or anyone. LGBT/Women's meetings are a very small part of a huge AA.

The LGBT meetings are a safety net as with "women's meetings;" women who have been abused by men need to feel safe especially in the beginning.

There are some extreme AA members who say these meetings should not exist, they obviously have not had the need for them. If these meetings were not necessary there would be no attendance. Didn't Bill W say that AA will need to move along with the times; he wasn't specific but I feel that these meetings fit under that umbrella, because in his day 1930's/40's there were very few women in AA and violence towards women, homosexuality, lesbianism, transgenderism had no voice.

We definitely do not live in an ideal world. Hopefully if the world becomes more tolerant, LGBT/Women's meetings will be needed less and less and decline naturally.

## Neil's Story

I first realised there was something different about my sexuality when I was about fourteen. On top of all the other problems in my life that really was the cherry on the top of the cake. For many years of my life I kidded myself that I was bisexual, but to the outside world I kept up the pretence that I was straight.

I hid my sexuality and for many years I lived in terror of being found out. My head was full of guilt, shame and fear and I know now that that to hide things like that can only damage my life. When I was 19, I tried to commit suicide because of the trouble I was having living with my sexuality. All that happened was I made myself extremely sick.

Over the years, my drinking increased and my mind became full of all sorts of unhealthy thoughts. Eventually I arrived in AA and I knew this was what I needed. Very quickly I stopped drinking, got on the Steps (trying to do them on my own). Then I asked someone to help me. On my first visit to my new sponsor's home, as soon as I stepped in to the living room, I told him I was gay. I told him while I was standing up in case he set the dog on me and I needed to reach the front door before the dog reached me. Fortunately, that turned out to be unnecessary. We sat down and we spoke about it for a while. Then we spoke about other things as well. Gradually, I learned to trust him. And as time went on, I've learned to trust other people as well.

I can never remember if I was one and a half years sober or two and a half years sober when I made a major decision. One night at what is now my home group, when it was my turn to share, I announced that I'm gay. It was the hardest thing I've ever done in my life but it's also one of the best decisions I've ever made. I spent the rest of the week going round meetings repeating the announcement. Comments ranged from "you don't look like one", "you don't walk like one" to the classic "I don't care who you sleep with as long as it isn't me".

Nowadays, most people in my life, not just in AA, know that I'm gay and they seem to accept it. I don't know if I could ever have done that without AA. My AA friends have supported me and accept me as I am. Not one AA member has said anything derogatory to me about it. If people are talking about it behind my back, it doesn't really matter.

It's been part of the process of getting to know myself, learning to trust myself and learning to trust other people. I feel far more comfortable with myself as a result. I go to sleep at night knowing that the people I've met during the day have been dealing with the real me.

## **Journey to Recovery**

The realisation that I was gay coincided with my alcoholism taking hold in adolescence and the feelings of being different, an outsider, diminished when I drank. Drink made approaching the opposite sex easier and when I drank my personality changed so completely that, in some naive way, I felt I could hide my true sexuality. From my mid teens to mid 20s life followed a familiar pattern – a succession of chaotic relationships with women, where I drank heavily, behaved badly and the fling would end. Looking at that pattern now, I might say this was a way of ensuring nobody got close to me. Nobody knew the real me, because I didn't know who I really was either.

I stumbled through university, somehow managing to graduate and finding a job that gave me financial security and the new-found freedom of a place of my own – and that was when things really spiralled out of control. It was around this time (aged 24) I had had my first brief encounter with AA. Urged by family and friends, who could see the problem I had with drinking, I began attending meetings. Hedging my bets, I simultaneously enrolled on an NHS 'controlled-drinking programme'. Needless to say the two programmes were incompatible and within 3 months alcohol won. I managed to convince myself that I wasn't really an alcoholic. However, I'm grateful that the NHS assigned me a counsellor and after several months of talking therapy, I finally came-out to my counsellor – the first person to hear me acknowledge something I had secretly known for as long as I could remember.

I came out gradually to other people. Most significantly to an ex-girlfriend, who became a huge source of support. My growing confidence led me to launch myself onto the gay scene - an astonishingly unfulfilling experience, which I felt incapable of doing sober. For the next few years the weekends (and most week-nights) passed in a haze of drunken, half-remembered, encounters. I tried to convince myself I liked this hedonistic lifestyle, however, the emptiness echoed around me and I drank to fill the void.

At the age of 26, I met a guy who I cared for enough to tell my family the truth. This was difficult and the fall-out significant. It also provided a very rich vein of self-pity and resentment on which to carry on drinking.

My 30s were spent structuring the trappings of a successful life around me. However, behind closed doors, it was a pretty miserable existence. I was on the frightening hamster-wheel of binges and hangovers. I realised our lives had entered a new era when the arguments about my drinking stopped. My hollow apologies and brief spells of not drinking meant nothing and we were in danger of leading very separate lives.

I was a ticking time-bomb and in the event reached my jumping-off place alarmingly suddenly, triggered by a crisis at work, and so, finally, at the age of 39, I acknowledged I was beaten.

I returned to AA that same day, anxious that if I dwelt on those feelings too long, I might again convince myself I didn't need help. This second encounter with the fellowship has been completely different. This time I did what was suggested. I got to lots of meetings, I made sure I had a Home Group and my AA friends, recognising the need to establish a



newcomer into the group, made me literature person. This began my journey of service and crucially forced me get to meetings early to set everything out, so by default, I chatted to people - slowly learning more about the programme of AA.

In sobriety I've experienced great happiness - marrying the wonderful guy, who stood by me through all those difficult years, our relationship stronger now than ever. I've coped with the huge sadness of illness, bereavement, job insecurities, life. The support of friends in AA who have helped me through difficult times has been a hugely positive influence.

Would I share anything of particular interest to other LGBT people? I would say don't get too hung up on some of the wording in the original AA literature. AA has, throughout its existence, encompassed a cross section of society. The Responsibility Card, which we read out at the end of my Home Group meetings states "*I am responsible. When anyone, anywhere, reaches out for help, I want the hand of AA always to be there. And for that I am responsible*". That does read *anyone* – there are no qualifications.

My journey to recovery has been a long and tortuous one. It started with periods of denial – firstly about my sexuality and then about my drinking. There have been two fundamental watersheds in my life – admitting I was gay and then finally admitting I was an alcoholic. Being gay and an alcoholic doesn't mean we need to feel different from others in AA and other than writing this, I don't think I have ever said those two words together, so here goes... 'I am a gay alcoholic'.

I have always felt comfortable in sharing what I need to say in meetings and with my sponsor without fear of judgement and that has been the case whether the people sitting next to me are gay, straight, young, old, male or female.

It is our recovery that is important, not the detail of who we choose to sleep with.

Anon

## **Paul's Story**

My name is Paul and I am an alcoholic.

I don't remember my first meeting. I'm not sure how I found my way into the rooms. I did about one meeting a week for a year. I was very resistant.

I was quite internally homophobic and I thought the gay meetings would be really gay, quite over the top and not relevant to me.

I had been quite involved in the local community, really mixed – black, white, gay, straight, etc. So I thought a 'mixed' meeting would be more appropriate for me. But later I found the gay meetings to be quite helpful.

I was really scruffy, all my standards had just slipped away over the years. But I went along and I wasn't really coherent. I just thought maybe I'd pick someone up but wasn't really logically thinking anything through. It wasn't so much of a fully formed thought, but a vague half idea that maybe this is what happened.

Very slowly, everything started to sink in and over the years, what's happened, despite not being a model of AA conformity, doing all the suggestions, is that 'somehow' the principles have been engraved into me.

It's not about alcohol anymore. It's about love, and learning to have friendships with gay men and showing each other vulnerability. I think people wear incredible masks in gay life, but gay AA encourages such genuine interaction between people. The more honest you are the more it helps other people. The more honest you are the more it helps you.

The most important thing in recovery for me is that the rooms are the antidote to loneliness. It creates friendships. I'm so distant with people generally; they get close and I push them away. I'm getting better at it, but people in AA always reach out and work to build friendships. It helps me to come back to my senses after a life anesthetized by alcohol.

I didn't really know what to expect, but I'm very grateful for the changes I've been able to make within myself.

## **In The Shade of Others**

Arguably it was as a consequence of my being gay that I arrived at the door of an AA meeting, for it was during the experience of my first time cohabiting that I ended up calling AA for help. However, it was not help for myself, but for my profoundly deaf boyfriend. I had cunningly hidden my own drinking under the shade of some one else's, whose more obvious powerlessness and unmanageability I was able to point the finger at and exclaim 'look at him, he's far worse than me!'

One night, drunk and bored, but genuinely concerned as well, I rang AA, leaving a message, smug in the expectation that I would hear nothing more. I actually heard back the next morning, and when I explained that it was my boyfriend, they said they could send someone who could sign to explain all about AA. I ended up attending meetings with my partner in order to interpret for him, experiencing the irony of closed meetings being made open especially because I was there, as a non-alcoholic. We attended a variety of meetings, including non-restrictive LGBT\*QQI ones, and where ever we went, we both received a warm welcome. And there I was, delivered into AA, listening to, and passing on, the message of recovery right from day one. It didn't take long for its personal relevance to dawn on me.

I didn't stop drinking at first, but I did get a sense of hope, that there was something here that was definitely working for other people, who were getting on with their lives, coping with what was thrown at them, bad and good, and were comfortable and even happy living a sober way. My boyfriend didn't sober up, and neither did I. Our relationship deteriorated, we stopped going to meetings and I ended up in a homeless hostel with a belly full of beer and a head full of AA. It didn't take too long before my fear of where I was going became greater than my fear of trying to live without alcohol. I returned to the rooms of AA, and this time it was different, because what I did was different.

This time, I not only listened, but I put what I heard into action. I went to ninety meetings in ninety days, immersing myself in recovery, and then did it another three times. I went to a meeting instead of going to the pub or the off licence. I read Living Sober and clung on to the practical tips and information on staying sober a day at a time. I started eating properly, and washing, and resting and perhaps most important of all, laughing. I spent time with other recovering alcoholics, those who were newly discovering the joys of sobriety in tandem with me, and those with many years under their belt, who gladly shared their experience, strength and hope, and who listened patiently, as I groped with sharing what was going on in my life. I found the willingness and humility to ask a kind sponsor to take me through the twelve steps of Alcoholics Anonymous, which he lovingly did, and just as I had progressively become more and more ill, physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually, so I progressively became more well, more able to live a useful and enjoyable life. He was gay, but when he died sober, I asked a straight women to sponsor me, which she did for over fifteen years, until she too passed away. I miss them both.

I have now experienced over twenty years of continuous sobriety, and I was told early on that I could expect a life beyond my wildest dreams, but that was untrue, for it has been far, far beyond what anyone could have imagined for me when I crawled in, desperate and scared. I joined the Army and still enjoy a successful career there today, I have travelled around the world, I own my own beautiful home and I have had successful, loving relationships that I have had the courage to

end when it was right to do so.

I went to AA because I was afraid I would die, but I keep going because I love living. I no longer hide myself in the shade of others but can now enjoy the warmth and light that comes from taking the steps to recovery.

Anon