

March 2018

Beyond the Bars

Carrying the AA message of recovery in British prisons



Welcome to the first edition of *Beyond the Bars*, a quarterly newsletter aimed at Regional PLOs and anyone interested in this vital aspect of service. Here you'll find articles, news and stories from AA members that reflect over 60-years of hands-on experience.

58 Years of bringing freedom to those imprisoned by the demon drink

Submitted by Bruce Budge

The first prison meeting was formed in Wakefield prison on 27th December 1957, when the Leeds group of Alcoholics Anonymous responded to a prisoner who had learned of AA while in prison in America. As this meeting was treated as an experiment, for a period of 5 years no other prison Groups were formed in

England and Wales until 1963. After this time as prisoners were moved round the country they would make contact to request help in getting a group started in the prisons and AA groups began to flourish.

The first prison meeting was formed in Scotland in Barlinnie Prison in 1960. The editor of the Scottish Daily Express had learned of AA's experience in American prisons and was keen to see if AA could be introduced to Scottish prisons. He made contact with AA and found the members willing to help. A few weeks later, a meeting was set up in the prison.

As in England and Wales, when prisoners were moved around the prison system, in Scotland they made requests for meetings to be held in other prisons, and soon meetings were held in Peterhead, Edinburgh, Perth and Gourock prison. As Alcoholics Anonymous held no record of its members, it is difficult to establish how many of its current members first made contact with AA in prison, but evidence suggests that many of those who attended prison meetings continued to attend AA on release and go on to lead sober and worthwhile lives.

AA has transformed the lives of many inmates. Our actions and thoughts have been put on a more positive footing. We try to practice the programme in our daily living. This would be impossible if the hand of AA had not been there to guide us. We no longer feel the pain, frustration and fear that accompany the active alcoholic. We have thrown off the chains that bound us. Today we have freedom.

The Greatest Liberation

“My name is Davy and I'm an alcoholic ...

The acceptance of this statement was to set me on a journey of recovery and self-discovery. A journey where I would finally become comfortable in my own skin.

Every time I lifted a drink, just one drink, I ended up drunk in a blackout, coming to in hospitals, police cells, the streets, strange houses. Sometimes I even made it home, but had no idea where I'd been, who I'd been with, or what I'd done or who to. This led to fear and anxiety, not knowing whether it was the police chapping my door, or someone wanting to do me harm because of the things I'd done in a blackout.

Regardless of how bad things got, my head told me it was never that bad and I'd be away once more on a bender to repeat it all over again.

After years of this behaviour, I found myself sobering up in prison once again. I'd been told of alleged crimes committed by myself, to which I had no alibi, no reason or sane argument for doing so. The only common theme was that I had blacked out once again. The feelings of fear, remorse, guilt, uncertainty and impending doom were running riot in my head. The charges were serious. This was usually when I would reach for a drink, but that wasn't an option now. I decided after a few days that I HAD to do something about my drinking. At this point I had no idea what I was getting into and just to be clear, I didn't drink every day, so in my head I couldn't be an alcoholic, but I knew, or at least I thought I knew my drinking was the problem.

It turns out that my drinking was but a symptom of the way I viewed the world, my place in it, the way I viewed others and most importantly myself. Alcohol did something for me. For a long time, it freed me up and took away any worries, concerns or feelings of inadequacy. But over a short period of time the compulsion to drink and the obsession that I could someday drink safely took over. By the end of my drinking I was spending hundreds of pounds on cocaine, when I bought a carry out so I wouldn't get drunk, but I ALWAYS ended up drunk. I never thought even once of just not drinking. I was to discover I suffer from a threefold illness of a mental obsession, a physical allergy and a spiritual malady.

I quickly identified myself as an alcoholic by listening to other alcoholics sharing their experiences, their thoughts and their feelings. I also heard that I did not need to feel the way that I did any longer. That there is a solution ...

I had spent 22 years taking something that made me feel different, or usually not to feel anything at all. I was finally ready to look at myself and the part I had played in the world. My behaviours, my attitudes, my beliefs, my character defects and attempt on a daily basis to live my life sober and clean with honesty and integrity, helping others. This is done with the help of my sponsor (someone who you can relate to and more importantly someone who you can see is well, full of gratitude for their sobriety and trying to live a productive and sober life). I'll be eternally grateful for the patience and guidance I was shown when I first got sober and am still shown today.

I attend 3 or 4 meetings a week now and I joined a prayer and meditation group, which has been instrumental in my recovery and continued sobriety. I am surrounded by people who simply "get it" and understand the disease of alcoholism.

I believe I had to be locked up away from alcohol to get sober. That's been my experience and my life began, really truly began, the day I walked into my first AA meeting. I now thank God in the evening for another sober day.

News Roundup

Criminal Justice Partnership

The government have now amalgamated Prison and Probation Services to form Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) as reported last year. The GSB decided to hold Combined Prison/Probation meetings throughout the country, to form a Criminal Justice Partnership. We hold four per year in Cambridge, Swindon and Stirling in late summer/autumn and Warrington in late spring. These meetings are proving to be a success. They are open to every AA member who works or has an interest in working within these disciplines, and are geographically situated that no overnight stay would be required. So pop along to your local intergroup/region and declare an interest in attending.

Charlie R (Trustee Prisons)

Prison Postal Service

Another vital aspect of prison service is postal sponsorship. The Prison Postal Service enables inmates to correspond with prison sponsors - via our service address - so that we may share our experience, hope and experience. For further details contact Steve: PPS Request, GSO, PO Box 1, 10 Toft Green, York YO1 7NJ. 01904644026 aainformation@gsogb.org.uk

Discussion on agreements in prisons

The issue of agreements between AA and prisons was discussed at a recent AA Prison & Criminal Justice Partnership meeting held in Cambridge. Suggestions were made as to how we can clarify the difference between cooperation and affiliation, in line with AA Traditions. As each prison is autonomous, agreements between staff and outside agencies can differ. Some forms are causing problems with access and can delay members being sponsored into service. Shared experience and recommendations from those in service are extremely helpful and go a long way towards helping to resolve this issue.

Editor's Note: We would welcome any stories or articles from AA members willing to share their experience of life behind bars and how they found recovery. Also, the experiences of RPLOs within the prison system. Please email material to Adam: beyondthebars@aamail.org