

June 2018

Beyond the Bars

Carrying the AA message of recovery in British prisons



Welcome to the summer 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.

An Alcoholic, Me of all People!

Submitted by Terry J

I started drinking as a teenager and drank for over 20 years, I served four prison sentences

during that twenty years and generally caused havoc and not once did I ever consider that I had a problem with alcohol!

In March 1995 I woke up in a police cell, not knowing what I was there for, not knowing where I was. I thought "oh no, not again, I've had enough of this." I didn't know three things at that moment, the first was that I didn't know I'd spend the next two decades locked up, secondly, that that was my rock bottom and thirdly, that I was an alcoholic!

I didn't drink for the next sixteen months but my behaviours were exactly the same. In July 1996 I was moved to Wormwood Scrubs Prison and on arrival the prison officer who escorted me to my cell was flicking through my prison file. He came back a short while later and offered me a blue book and said "you may want to look at that", I took it, read it that night and the Doctor's Opinion told me what was wrong with me, I was an alcoholic, me of all people!

I went to my first meeting two days later, one meeting a week, sometimes cancelled, for the next two decades. I got released in 2014 and recently collected my 23 years sobriety coin from one of many, many dear friends that I have made in AA since I got released.

The Promises, which I dismissed as utter rubbish two decades ago, have well and truly come true for me and I definitely have a life beyond my wildest dreams today and it's all down to AA.

A Common Goal

"My name is Jamie W. and I'm an alcoholic. I could write about what age I started drinking, or why I drank, but people who are in the same addiction as me will have similar stories to share. I'm writing about where I am today and hopefully people who read this might feel, 'Well, if Jamie is doing well, why can't I?'

Before I came into prison I made the decision - I am going to stop drinking and I stayed like that for eight weeks. In 2012, my wife kicked me out because my drinking was affecting my marriage, so we split up. As I stopped drinking and was showing change, my wife gave me a second chance after five years apart. A couple of days later, I got remanded. I was gutted and I remember being sat on the bus thinking I've lost everything. Usually when I come to prison I have nothing to lose and plenty to gain, but this time it was the opposite.

I arrived on D1 and put my name down for AA just so I could get out of my pad and to see if any of my mates were attending. I've tried AA before and because I was chilling with my mates I never really listened and I knew I was drinking again anyway. A couple of weeks went by and the cell door was opened and the officer said Jamie, you're down for AA. To be honest, I wasn't going to attend as I came in sober so I'm alright, but I thought I will go.

I didn't really get much from the first meeting as I just listened, but the second meeting a woman came in to share about her experiences and the damage it caused her. It wasn't the similar lifestyle we had in common or the pain it had caused, it was the passion and the will and self-belief, the desire and motivation not only to get sober, but after five years she hasn't touched a drink. I was sat there and she had got my attention and it felt like she had a fishing rod and I had bit the bait, she reeled me in.

After that session it felt weird as I couldn't wait to go again. Each week a new person comes in and shares their experiences and talks about AA. They also talk about the 12 Steps and how it has helped them.

I am currently a Drug and Alcohol Recovery Champion and I am currently doing my 12 Steps. I'm not going to lie, it's challenging mentally as I've struggled with anger issues and I used to blame a lot of people for my drinking, but it asks what part I played and then I realised it was about me. It was painful but it was also a relief. Now I can focus on my wrongs, and my sponsor always says there's two things you can't have in your life, and that's anger and resentment, and I am starting to realise they are not good to have.

There are four people in my life that are so important to me and they help me on my road to recovery, and that's Andrew, my sponsor, Lacey, my drug and alcohol worker, my wife, and Sue at the library. These people give me so much confidence and motivation and I can be honest and open and they never judge me, and these have been amazing.

Since I've been going to AA I have learnt so much about myself, and a couple of weeks ago my sponsor asked me to share my experience with alcohol and what damage I have caused to myself and others. I was nervous at first as I've never really told anybody about why I drank and the damage I've caused, but in AA it's like a brotherhood and I knew everybody in that room might have a similar story. I got a bit upset, but after I felt like a weight had been lifted and all this baggage I have carried around for 20 years has gone, and that's because of the 12 Steps.

I know AA might not be for everyone, but I thought that and gave it a go, and I'm glad that I did as I wouldn't be able to write about it today. I know a lot of people who are reading this are saying 'I'm alright' or 'I haven't got a problem' and that's fine, but please be honest with yourself and ask, 'Is my drinking costing more than money?' If it is, you don't need me to tell you. Ask a DART worker to add you to AA meetings and you never know, it could change your life and be the start of your recovery.

Jamie W.

C-wing Drug and Alcohol Recovery Champion

News Roundup

The importance of PLOs at intergroup level

Some intergroups don't see prison service as part of their remit (the nearest prison might be many miles away and already covered by a neighbouring IG). The position of Prison Liaison

Officer is then left vacant and any news and information that might be relevant isn't passed on through the usual channels.

But the position is a vital part of the service structure and ought to be filled whenever possible. In some instances, a former inmate might move to a new area having been introduced to AA in prison. The intergroup PLO can provide support and details of local meetings, becoming the much-needed link in the communication chain.

AA Guidelines suggest that a PLO be appointed to each intergroup, even when there are no prisons in that particular area. This ensures that no one is left out and the message continues to be carried in the most effective of ways.

Unlocking AA's potential in prisons

Public Health England is committed to improving the nation's health and wellbeing, a remit that includes those currently in UK prisons. 'Groups often include people who are abstinent and want help to remain so - these people are actively changing their behaviour using a programme of mutual aid. They also include people who are thinking about stopping, or are actively trying to stop their drug and alcohol use.'

As one of the many outside organisations that go into prisons, Alcoholics Anonymous relies on the cooperation of prison staff to ensure that meetings go ahead and that AA sponsors are escorted to and from the meeting's location. Although the keyword is cooperation, prison staff are often unaware of what AA does and this can lead to confusion.

Part of Public Health England's manifesto is to ensure a greater level of understanding all round. This can range from better training for prison staff, to ensuring that inmates are given all the information they need upon induction. Any moves that help smooth the process and inform other organisations about AA are to be welcomed.

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