

December 2018

Beyond the Bars

Carrying the AA message of recovery in British prisons



Welcome to the winter 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.

Colin's Story

I spent much of my life on the outside embroiled in an unhappy alcoholic and drug-fuelled world, not really caring about what was happening to me. Often, when intoxicated, I would cause harm to others and this would lead to me being arrested and held in the cells before

going in front of the judge. I've unfortunately done a fair amount of time behind bars through my own stupidity and for a long time I believed that this was the best place for me as I didn't belong anywhere else. It was good to dry out for a while, but I knew that as soon as I got out of prison, I would be back drinking straight away.

When I first got the jail many years ago, the prison officers I encountered had either come from an era of working in Scottish prisons in the tough 80s and 90s or had been trained by said officers. It's fair to say that expressing your innermost thoughts and feelings to them back then wasn't the thing to do - not that I ever tried.

During my first sentence, I was locked up for 23 hours a day and I only saw staff during opening up times, shower times, feeding times and lock up times. I did have a drugs/alcohol worker in the jail, who put the effort in with me, but I didn't give her the respect she was due, so it was a bit of a futile exercise. I was quite happy to fly under the radar and get out of the jail unscathed if I could.

This attitude and behaviour changed though in 2007, when I was about a year into my tariff in HMP Shotts. I had entered the jail telling myself that my life was done and there was no point in even trying. So, I began to follow the mundane routine hundreds of other prisoners were following.

I befriended someone in my section who was one of life's great optimistic souls and I'll admit, it was a bit annoying at times that he was always happy. But there was also a pleasantness to it too. He had quite a lot of literature in his cell concerning AA, and as he talked about his experiences with drink, his stories resonated with mine in a lot of ways.

I hadn't planned on making any radical changes with my life back then, but I found myself one evening outside the room where the AA meetings were held. Before I knew it, something (I now know it as my Higher Power) made me enter the room and take a seat. Inside, there were a couple of guys from the outside taking the meeting, along with about 15 prisoners who were in attendance. I've heard this said from several people over the years with their experience off AA, but I really did get so much identification from those who shared during my first meeting.

Things went so well that night that I decided to go back the following week. After my second meeting, I knew that this was for me and I wanted to share the news with my mum. But fate can deal you a devastating hand when you least expect it.

For several years, my mum had been battling cancer, but it eventually took her from me over the week I had attended my second meeting. I never got the chance to let her know that I was actually putting a bit of effort into changing my ways and this left me feeling so embittered. I had had so many opportunities to sort myself out over the years, and yet as I was just starting to make the effort, I lost my wee mum. Losing her tore me apart, but I quickly found that I wasn't going to go through things by myself, even if I wanted to.

My newfound friends in AA rallied around me and supported me in so many ways, it really was an incredible experience. One of those guys organised it so I could borrow his suit for the funeral and I had so many people sitting with me when I felt my head was about to burst.

In 2010 I moved prison again, and in 2013, the appeal court reduced my tariff, which offered me hope about gaining my freedom one day. Suddenly, there was light at the end of the tunnel. Just days later, AA was introduced to our hall in HMP Glenochil. It wasn't lost on me that this wasn't the first time AA has been put into my life when momentous things have happened to me, only this time this was a much happier experience.

When I talk to other alcoholics and drug addicts who are just starting out on the road to recovery, I see and hear myself from all those years ago when they are talking. I hope they get some form of identification from what I say to them when I talk about my experiences, as I did with my friend from HMP Shotts all those years ago.

Today, I live a life blessed with serenity and inner peace. Over the years, since I have been attending Alcoholics Anonymous, I use the Serenity Prayer we say at the end of our meetings as a form of philosophy. When I am faced with my everyday ups and downs, this has carried me well and kept me right. I feel happy and blessed that I have this chance with life, and when I woke up this morning sober and safe, I knew it was a good day to be alive.

Colin

AA in Scottish Prisons

The first prison meeting was formed in Scotland in Barlinnie Prison in December 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 contacted AA and found the members willing to help. A few weeks later, a meeting was set up in Barlinnie.

As in England and Wales, when Scottish prisoners were moved around the prison system, they made requests for meetings to be held in other prisons. Soon, meetings were being held in Peterhead, Edinburgh, Perth and Gourock. As Alcoholics Anonymous holds no official record of its membership, it is difficult to establish how many of its current members first made contact with AA in prison. Evidence suggests that many of those who attended prison meetings continued to attend AA on release and went 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 accompanies the active alcoholic. We have thrown off the chains that bound us. Today we have freedom.

I take great pleasure in sharing with you what's going on in Scottish prisons. Today, AA take meetings in 14 out of 15 prisons and are looking into setting up a meeting in this last one also, in line with our primary purpose. I have been a prison sponsor in Barlinnie for almost five years. Barlinnie is the flagship prison to which all prisons, not only in Scotland but also the UK, are trying to replicate. With four meetings a week and prison sponsors allowed to bring in guest speakers, we hope the boys will be able to relate and realise that they don't have to pick up the first drink and return to prison.

AA sponsors not only attend weekly meetings but also help when asked to take prisoners through the 12-Step programme of recovery. The prison authorities allow AA sponsors time on a

one-to-one basis on a different night from the group meeting to replicate as much as possible what happens on the outside. I would love to see AA have a presence for new recruits at Polmont and to pass the AA message at grass roots level. This would give the new recruits an understanding of AA and enable them to point anyone struggling in our direction.

AA will soon celebrate 60 years of service in Barlinnie Prison, an amazing statistic. We currently hold 4 meetings a week - this involves a prison sponsor who brings in an AA guest speaker to share experience and pass on the message of recovery. It is my hope that any AA sponsor who has completed disclosure and all necessary training will one day be able to cover any prison in Scotland. This would act as act as a kind of AA passport and would help ensure that no one on the inside would miss a meeting.

Hugh S

PLO for Barlinnie Prison and Glasgow Region

Prison Subcommittee

News Roundup

Service positions needed

Regions and intergroups across the country are short on liaison officers for Prison and Probation. As with all disciplines, it is of vital importance that these positions are filled in order for the Fellowship to be more effective in reaching the still-suffering alcoholic.

Could all PLOs please raise this issue at the groups they attend and encourage others into service.

AA making inroads

The government drive to encourage outside agencies (Mutual Aid Groups) into prisons has created exciting opportunities for AA. Two speakers from the Ministry of Justice gave a presentation at the recent Criminal Justice Partnership Meeting in Swindon, outlining the possibilities.

One of the key points was how prison staff might be targeted more effectively and offered education as to how AA works. Other options included, gaining access to officer training establishments, and appealing directly to prison governors who have the authority to allow outside agencies inside their prisons.

Valuable contacts can often be made by PLOs or prison sponsors and the details passed on to the relevant channels in the AA service structure. Lockdowns, staff shortages and other issues continue to be a disruption in many prisons, but the commitment of AA members and the cooperation of staff, ensures that progress continues to be made.

Clearance forms

One of the obstacles to prison sponsorship has been the clearance forms required by all British prisons. AA has been working hard to make the process easier. One suggestion is to approach the Home Office and request a standardized pass that would enable those cleared to visit all prisons in England and Wales. A similar system is being proposed in Scotland and would act as a kind of prison passport, as described in the article by Hugh S.

Some of the problems the government are keen to solve are:

- Vetting process as a barrier to clearance
- Security clearance for members with previous convictions
- Difficulty some members find in completing forms
- Dropout rate due to long delays in clearance resulting in wasted effort

Hopefully, these issues will soon be addressed, and a smoother process put in place that will make prison sponsorship more attractive.

Public liability insurance

Could all PLOs and prison sponsors please check that the prison meetings they attend are insured for public liability. Most regions have a blanket policy for all the meetings within their catchment area, so it may be a case of simply adding a prison meeting to the list.

Vulnerable people

How can we help vulnerable people access AA meetings, particularly those who may be out of prison on licence and cannot attend regular meetings due to legal requirements? Prison and probation LOs may be able to liaise with social workers/authorities to work out alternative approaches, such as one-on-ones, or alternative venues.

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

From everyone here at the Prison Subcommittee - wishing you a Merry Christmas and Happy New Year!