

June 2021

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.

George Alcoholic Here

I entered the world of prison after a relatively short period of chronic alcoholic drinking. My alcoholism was the symptom of the problem. It was the early 1970s. I went into HMP Brixton, HMP Wormwood Scrubs, long-term wing, then, the seclusion unit. After reassessment by a Home Office psychiatrist to go into HMP Broadmoor, I went to a psychiatric prison called Grendon.

I never was right, I never felt I fitted in and I also had a lot of other mental health issues. I have had a pathological breakdown and was not a well person at all. Everything I owned and possessed was sold, as I was not expected to ever come out. I was just 28.

When I attended my first meeting, it truly was a light-bulb moment, a moment of sanity, a spiritual experience. I knew I had messed up my whole life, and if there was to be a way out apart from suicide, it was going to be AA. I made the surrender unconditionally, and turned my will and life over to the care of AA, got an outside and an inside sponsor, and started my recovery.

Inside, it was psychotherapy groups, and they all said that recovery could not be worked inside as there was no alcohol? I related this to outside sponsors, who said AA was not about being tested with alcohol, it was about altered attitudes and change from within, primarily it was about Not Drinking, but all that was an inside job, inside me. The availability of alcohol was a total irrelevance, this was about not drinking. I felt a lot more secure about that.

We were very lucky that our psychiatrist was a good friend of an eminent psychologist and was very pro AA. Also I had the life-saving good fortune to have a guy in there who was in recovery and he passed on a lot of very valuable stuff to me. We had our group meeting every Monday night, with different members coming in, we even printed our own AA magazine called HOW, that went out to a number of regional prisons. I wrote 14 letters a week to AA groups out of the Where To Find, and built relationships with a number of people nationally.

I had that level of commitment and service right from the beginning. Regardless of the trauma that went on in that institution I remained focussed on my recovery, I had something at last that was mine and it was working for me.

To give you an idea, back then there was no back-up on release, and if AA had not been my only priority I know I would have killed myself. Thanks to a sponsor I got to meetings and we had to travel then as not like today, there were only a few meetings, no phones, no computers etc. I was still very depressed, hallucinating, no self-worth, crippled with guilt etc etc.

I had to live life, get a job. I met a girl who was in an alcoholic relationship, we moved back to my area, got married and eight years later, having hit her own rock bottom, she came into AA. We have been together 41 years now and just had our 40th anniversary. I will be 45 years sober in May.

Throughout my whole recovery, at various points I have needed to get outside help with mental health and am just about to embark on another course of treatment. AA said I need never drink again, that it would give me a new way of life and solutions to most things. Drinking has never been an Option or a Choice. I have taken this deadly seriously, knowing that on a daily basis I need our programme to function.

I still go into a secure unit to carry the message, it probably helps me more than them but I give it my best shot. Also, I live in Greece five months of the year, no meetings where I am, so I am on Loners; a small tight closed site for loners around the world and I do my sharing there online. I get out what I put in, grateful alcoholics don't get drunk. It does not matter how low you have been with this illness, regardless of mental health issues, this works if you really want what we have got.

AA does offer a way out, you got to want it though. *"Rarely have we seen a person fail who has thoroughly followed our path."* (Big Book p58). Thank you AA, thank you sponsors, thank you all for helping me to stay sober and stay stopped.

George, East Sussex

(First published in *Share* magazine, July 2019)

On Being a NAT

When Adam approached me and asked if I would contribute something to this edition of *Beyond the Bars* he left me with a major conundrum. He said to me "write about anything", to say this to someone who has spent most of his life writing on demand and to other people's deadlines creates a much bigger problem than you might think.

I am well used to churning out copy on demand but very often have little choice about my subject material, so I sat back to think about what I might say and decided to write about why I became a non-alcoholic trustee and what it has meant to me thus far.

I have worked with the Scottish Prison Service as my day job for over 20 years and for almost all of that time I have been the liaison between Alcoholics Anonymous volunteers coming into Scotland's prisons and the prison service.

When I took on that job I must confess my knowledge about AA and its members was rather limited. However, I have to say that I quickly came to appreciate the tremendous difference that the fellowship had made to the lives of very many people passing through our care over the years. I have Willie D, Charlie, Pat, Bruce B, Hugh and many others to thank for the help and support that they showed me over those years.

I have come to know as friends many people who had been in our care and for whom AA had been the helping hand which had helped to transform their lives.

One of the first open AA meetings which I attended was in Rose St in Glasgow and I shared the top table with two young men who had been released the day before from Barlinnie Prison in Glasgow. That was over a dozen years ago and I'm proud to see that one of those young men still leads a group in Barlinnie, is still sober and has reclaimed a life that he thought he had lost - that is an example of the transformational power that AA can be for many people.

Prior to becoming a NAT I used to describe myself as an "AA groupie", a fan of what this fellowship does for its members. I have never seen or experienced anywhere else the unconditional accepting and supporting love that I've seen in an AA meeting.

Many years ago when I was a student, I was struggling to come up with the topic for my final dissertation when one of my professors handed me a book as a suggestion. The book was written by an American psychologist and psychoanalyst called *Erich Fromm* - the main thesis of the book which is called "*The Art of Loving*" is that we can only learn to love other people if we learn to understand, accept and love ourselves. This book was a transformation for me and gave me an insight that I had never possessed before. There is a copy of that book sitting on my desk as I type this over 40 years later.

Every AA meeting I have attended reinforces the validity of that insight. People in despair and at the lowest possible ebb are helped to recognise that they have value and that there is hope and that with the help of others and help of a higher power they can change themselves and help others to do likewise. It is a hugely powerful thing to see.

I became a NAT 12 months ago, so I can now say we have a great deal to be proud of.

I became a NAT at almost exactly the time when we went from, in excess of three and a half thousand meetings a week in our area, to none. The response of the fellowship to that challenge has been awe inspiring. Within a few short weeks an online presence of hundreds and hundreds of meetings was created, continuing to offer support to still suffering Alcoholics. It stands as a magnificent testimony to the commitment of the members of our fellowship to providing service and to support others.

Is pride a sin? Well maybe, but I think we should be very proud of the response of the fellowship over the last year. We should be very proud of the hundreds indeed thousands of members of this fellowship who have given of themselves to help others.

To ensure that helping hand which has been here in Great Britain for 75 years next year would still be there.

Why did I become a NAT?... Because I wanted to say thank you AA because I've seen lives transformed. Because I believe in the ability of human beings to change for the better and because AA has provided ample evidence of the truth of that statement.

I believe we can all change, we can all be better people than we are, but it takes some of us longer than others.

“Anyone who believes that all fruits ripen at the same time as strawberries, knows nothing about grapes.”Tom F.

Non-Alcoholic Trustee

General Service Board

News Roundup

Current restrictions and the year ahead

All prisons in the UK have had to adapt their visitors' policy due to government restrictions regarding Covid-19. Although these restrictions have been challenging for staff and inmates alike, there have been positive developments.

Prison authorities are looking at making electronic meetings available where possible, although these will not take the place of face-to-face meetings whenever and wherever these become available again.

AA, like all other organisations, has had to adapt to the changes brought about by Covid-19. Electronic meetings have now become a widespread feature, enabling members to connect via an alternative format while their physical meetings have remained closed.

Prison inmates have a strong need for communication, having lost many of their privileges due to the current situation. AA has continued to provide a valuable lifeline through its Prison Postal system, and through the literature supplied by AA members in service.

Although the restrictions continue to be enforced across the country, there are encouraging signs that meetings will be resumed at some point in the near future. Prison staff from a number of prisons have expressed their desire to have AA back as soon as possible.

Whatever the outcome of this testing period, the hand of AA will always be there.

Vacancies for Prison Subcommittee

There are several vacancies for the Prison Subcommittee due to rotations. These will be advertised in the *AA Service News* and mentioned at Conference. Guidelines for application are five years sobriety and a working knowledge of the Steps, Traditions and Concepts.

For more information, please contact GSO



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Polish-speaking Alcoholics Anonymous Helpline
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Saturday, Sunday 17.00 - 21.00

www.aa-pik-wielkabrytania.org.pl
e-mail: pik.aa.london@gmail.com

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