

April 2020

Beyond the Bars

Carrying the AA message of recovery in British prisons



Welcome to the spring 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.

My Old Life for New

Reflecting back on how I used to live, caught up in the madness in and out of prison. It had become my second home because of bad choices I made, driven by my alcoholism and irrational thought process.

Thank God it's not like that today and my life has totally transformed. I gave up my old life for a new one, which wasn't easy and took time. But with that has come so many amazing things - life certainly took on new meaning.

I have my family back, I'm repaying society, working back in prisons, speaking at public events, working in community rehabs, volunteering abroad, working in the community, going into different schools to share my story and just trying to help other people.

This has been my journey which has kept me well, along with continually working on myself and attending Alcoholics Anonymous. The Twelve Step programme of recovery saved my life. Never did I think I was capable of living a life like I do today.

I've built myself up from rock bottom and it's been an amazing couple of years that makes everything so worth it. Being able to sit at home, content and happy within myself is the best feeling I've ever experienced and long may it continue. I wouldn't change it for the world now.

I look forward to what I can bring to another year, as this one is almost over. Anyone who is struggling should always remember they're worth more than they maybe credit themselves for, and that there's loads of help and support out there. All you have to do is take that first step towards a new life and have a desire to change and a willingness to go to any lengths to do so.

No matter what it is, there is guidance from genuine good people who want to help and want nothing in return other than for you to get well. And that's what I found at the start of my journey in that first meeting of AA in prison.

Gary R

Glasgow region

Alcoholic Commits 16 Bank Robberies!

(The following is a translation from Bulgarian to English of articles which appeared in Haskavo.net, a local news station in Haskovo, Bulgaria. The two AA members featured were attending an International Prisons Seminar in Stara Zagora Banni, Bulgaria).

Bruce started drinking at age 13 with friends in a local park, sharing a bottle of wine and some cans of beer. Alcohol gave Bruce comfort, restraints fell, and his constrictions disappeared, especially when talking to girls. At the age of 18, he felt that when he started drinking he could not stop. Thus, day after day, and as alcoholism is a progressive illness, his drinking became worse.

At aged 24 his alcoholism prevented his nursing career from developing further when he was sacked from his position. Over the next six months he lost his relationship with his girlfriend, a property he had purchased to renovate to live in when married, and his rented accommodation. All his possessions were either sold or pawned, with the result that Bruce ended up living on the streets or in cheap accommodation.

Around this time Bruce consulted his GP, who suggested he be admitted to a psychiatric hospital for detoxification. Bruce refused, as this would mean being admitted to the Unit where he had formerly worked, and his pride and ego would not allow him to admit this to former colleagues.

This pattern of homelessness, being on the streets, living in temporary accommodation and sofa surfing, continued for 4 more years with the rare "dry spell" along the way. During one of the dry periods he managed to get employment in a bookies shop and became friendly with the manageress of the local bar. There was a mutual attraction. There was free drink to be had, accommodation in a flat above the bar and a warm body to sleep with, in other words the "alcoholic's dream".

Subsequently his girlfriend became pregnant. Bruce thought this was wonderful; he resolved to get sober, as this was an opportunity to show the world that he could be a good husband and father and that he was not a useless drunkard. His plans failed, as he restarted drinking. "The marriage was doomed from day one. I never truly loved her, I just used her". They had a mountain

of debt due to his unreliability; he didn't know how to get out of this situation and drank to blot it out of his mind.

A short time later Bruce was sitting in a bar reading the local newspaper and a particular story caught his eye, it was about a man who robbed a bank using a shoebox bomb, "I fell off my seat laughing at this, as it was just the most brilliant thing I had ever heard of". The next day Bruce walked into a bank, not with a shoe box but with a note saying he was armed with a weapon, and robbed it of a substantial sum of money.

Bruce paid his debts off and found he had a surplus of funds, so he did what any alcoholic does and drank the money. Bruce subsequently robbed another seven banks. "I had a mental obsession and a compulsion to rob banks and drink".

Bruce was arrested in 1982, after his 4-month long robbery spree came to an end, and was sentenced to 6 years imprisonment. 3 years into this sentence he was allowed out for a day to attend a college interview. "I never made the interview; I went for a drink instead and came out of a blackout having robbed another bank".

During a 5-week period of being at large, Bruce committed a further 7 robberies on banks in Scotland and England. "For my troubles I was given another 10 years in the High Court in Edinburgh. It was quite clear society and I did not get along too well".

At that point, Bruce was 33 years old and just resolved to do his time and push any issues he had with alcohol to the back of his mind. The years just rolled by. "I was on this journey down a long dark tunnel with no light at the end of it". This was to change some 5 years later when Bruce was 38 years old.

"My buddy Paul and I were clean out of cigarettes, and we plotted and planned how to get a couple of smokes. As we saw it, we had but one choice. The salvation Army were due in that evening and it was open to all wings of the prison. We thought if we went along, we could use our powers of persuasion to cadge a couple of smokes there. This filled me with dread because if

no other guys showed up I would be stuck with these Jesus-loving tambourine-bashers. I hated religion and anything to do with God and immediately discounted this idea”.

Bruce and Paul thought some more and then Paul said something that changed Bruce’s life forever, “There is an AA meeting in Pentland Hall, you get real cigarettes there”. Bruce went and received his cigarettes, he also had some tea and cookies, but most importantly he was given the offer of SOBRIETY and began his journey of recovery from alcoholism. He had a sponsor; he did the steps and was eventually released from prison to start a new life free of alcohol.

Bruce realised that life could be good. “I did so many things that as a child I would never do”. He graduated from Dundee University with an Ma Hons in English Literature. Worked for a major Electronics contractor and travelled throughout Europe and the UK until ill health forced him to stop. He worked as an advocate for people with Mental Ill Health issues, and as a Life coach for ex-offenders before and after release from prison.

Bruce was also instrumental in setting up two charities, one to peer mentor ex-offenders after release and the other a Recovery Café in Edinburgh. Bruce also discovered he was blessed with a talent for writing and subsequently wrote a play on his life in prison.

Bruce now lives in Varna, Bulgaria with his partner Iliana who he met at AA GB’s General Service Conference in 2016. Bruce shared that he was not afraid to rob banks, nor was he worried about being arrested, all he cared about was the release that came with the continuous use of alcohol and cared for nothing else. Asked if he would ever rob another bank, he answered emphatically, “No, I am a different person now, I have a Higher Power in my life, and believe with His help I can continue to have a good life”. When asked if he was at all ashamed of his past he said “My past life has made me what I am today, one where honesty is paramount. I would not now be in Bulgaria if it were not for my past”.

(Original article written by Aneta Kulcheva)

News Roundup

Making contacts

Efforts are currently being made to introduce AA to professionals working in the prison and probation field. The success of recent seminars has helped to raise the Fellowship's profile and the importance of the work we do, opening doors for future partnerships.

As regular visitors, AA members are often in an ideal position to make good contacts. These can then be passed on through the relevant channels at intergroup and region to help carry the message.

Potential supporters of AA can be found among the Drug Strategy Team, the Chaplaincy and prison staff, many of whom are often in a position to help, and with the right approach would welcome the support AA has to offer.

AA literature in prison

For the inmate locked up in a prison cell, a *Big Book* or *Share* magazine may be all there is in the way of recovery until the next meeting. Some prisons don't have an AA presence at all, which makes the literature even more vital.

As part of AA's primary purpose, intergroups and regions are asked to provide the funding that makes this possible. Inmates can then be supplied with the books and leaflets they need, when they need them. It is our responsibility as trusted servants to ensure that this process continues and is not held up unnecessarily.

National chit system

The General Service Board has approved a national chit system, which will be accessible shortly. The chits will only be issued to groups registered to GSO, and will be immediately identifiable as belonging to AA. Because of the ink used, they will also be difficult to copy.

Intergroups and regions are free to use up any chits they may have been using prior to this. As the cost of printing is minimal, the chits will be free.

Zonal meetings

Dates for the forthcoming Zonal Meetings have now been announced, although the venues are yet to be confirmed. Following on from the success of last year's meetings, the format will remain roughly the same. Among those invited, will be representatives from the Ministry of Justice, prison governors (subject to availability), and a selection of speakers.

Travel expenses can be claimed by intergroup and regional PLOs (Prison and Probation). Due to the regional location of each meeting there will be no expenses paid for overnight stays. Dates are as follows:

Warrington 31st May

Cambridge 26th July

Stirling 26th September

Bristol 25th October

Meetings are due to run from 9:30 am - 4pm. If you have space in your car, please bring visitors!



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**DO YOU HAVE A DRINKING PROBLEM?
DO YOU WANT HELP?
RING ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS**

 020 3916 00 97

Polish-speaking Alcoholics Anonymous Helpline

Monday - Friday 19.00 - 21.00
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

Due to the coronavirus alert and subsequent closure of AA meetings across the UK, some of the information/dates in this newsletter may not be applicable: please refer to the AA website for further details and updates. While the situation has caused unprecedented disruption in all areas, it is hoped that meetings, both in prisons and in the community, will resume as soon as possible. Wishing everyone a safe journey until then.