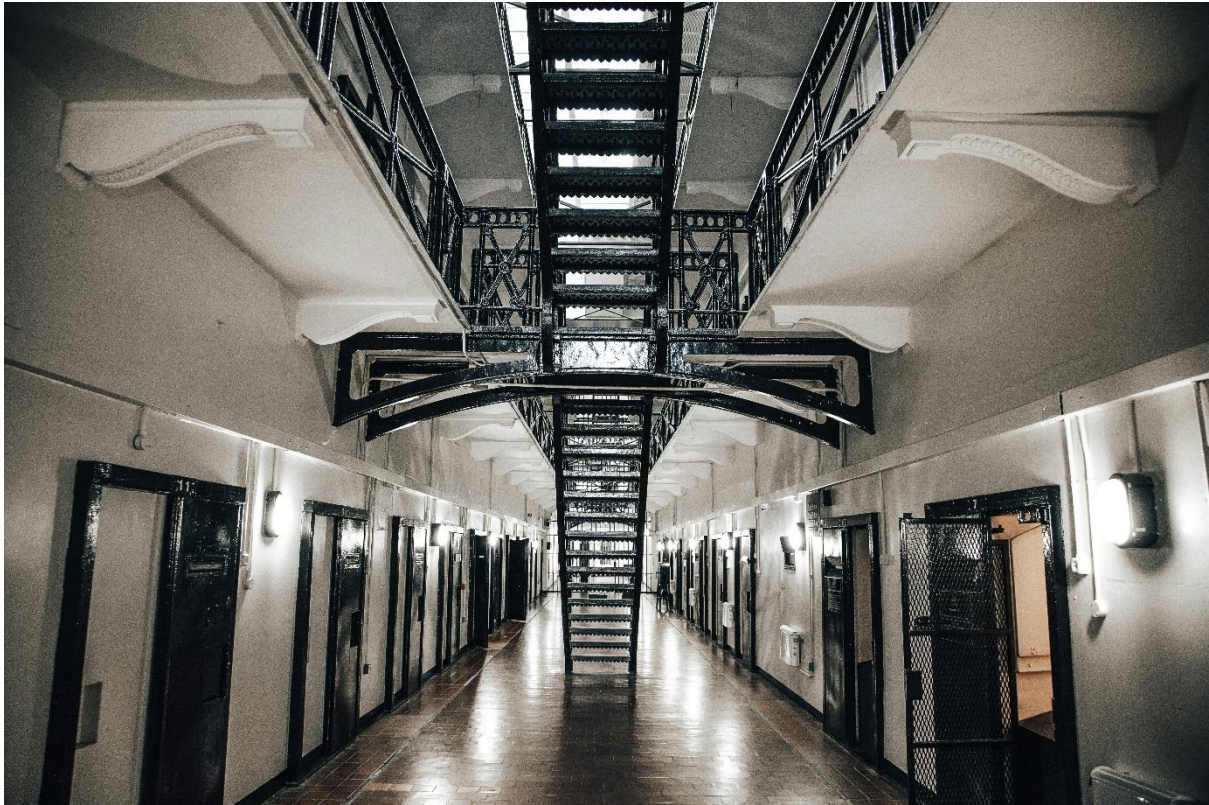


Beyond the Bars

Carrying the AA message of recovery in prisons.



Welcome to the Autumn edition of Beyond the Bars, this edition features contributions from Scotland, Wales and Bulgaria. To demonstrate the value of this newsletter, Lenny C, sub-committee member has informed me that after an initial run of 50 copies of the newsletter were printed by HMP Kilmarnock, a further 60 copies are being printed and distributed in HMP Kilmarnock. It reflects an upsurge of interest by the population of the prison. This for the sub-committee is fantastic news, it also emphasises the importance of this newsletter in carrying the message to all prison populations.

They Call Me the Seeker.

My name is Mark, I'm an alcoholic, and a grateful recovering alcoholic.

When I think about the times before when I was drinking alcohol I try to remember some good times I had with it, unfortunately I cannot honestly say there were many at all, yes at the start of a night out with friends, or weddings or parties I'm sure they were good times, yet I only ever have flash backs of those moments, and no one ever talks about those moments to me only about the disgusting behaviour that followed a couple of drinks later.

You see, as I like to tell people who don't understand the AA program, I am an ex-professional drinker, an all or nothing type of alcoholic, the type who you didn't want anywhere near you whilst I was on a binge.

If you're reading this I'm sure you can probably relate to what I have outlined, if not I'll go a bit further to see if you can.

Drinking for me stopped being a fun time after two drinks, something happened that I was unable to explain, I thought I was just getting drunk, little did I know I was actually going into a blackout. 'Only two drinks I hear you say', well that was the moment I lost all recollection of who, what and why I was drinking... you see I didn't have one drink for taste, nor to be able to have a nice meal with someone, nor to socialise with friends or work colleagues, I drank to hide from myself, a person I didn't like, a failure, a fraud, a deadbeat of a person who I was ashamed of. I drank to get mortal, pissed, drunk, whatever you want to call it !

What started out as an innocent first drink back when I was young turned out to be something much more deadly than I could have ever imagined.

The things I did, the things I would say and the things (people included) I have lost because of my alcoholism make a very sad list indeed. The problem was I was in denial about my drinking problems...I would never admit that I had a problem !

However, I can't live in the past nor change it, nor can I live in the future, I can only live in the here and now and where possible try to make an amends for those past times by understanding my own character defects and why I did the things I did.

Let's roll onto today as I'm here to share my experience, strength and hope in the faith that someone, somewhere will read this and realise they are not alone. Through this perhaps I can help them to understand there is an alternative.

One of the hardest things for me in early recovery was listening to suggestions from AA members or my sponsor, I had to learn to take the cotton wall out of my ears and stick it in my mouth. Although I wasn't willing to admit it at the time I was a narcissist, a liar, a cheat, and an alcoholic.

I learnt after many relapses that there are five pillars of recovery which are all fundamentally just as important as the other:

- Meetings
- Step work
- Sponsor
- Higher power
- Service

If I wanted to recover and stay in recovery I needed to follow these simple steps. And follow them I do. I am not perfect, nor am I a saint, but I do know that I'd rather choose any bad day in recovery over any good day in active alcoholism.

So, this brings me to one of the five pillars which is service, service comes in many forms, I've done many different duties over the years, from being the:

- tea and coffee maker
- guy who gets to the meeting before everyone every week to set out the tables and chairs
- go to person for literature
- Treasurer of the meeting group
- Chairperson of the group
- minutes taker at group meetings

However, over time I felt there was more I could give, and more I wanted to give.

So, one day my sponsor suggested to me (actually at this point in my recovery it was more this is what you are going to do now Mark!) that I go and do some prison service. My initial thought was 'are you crazy', and then 'what, there are people in prison who want to recover from alcoholism'.

My first meeting was a bit nerve wracking if I'm honest (and this programme is all about honesty). I seriously had so many thoughts in my head; as I've said above I try

to live in the here and now, and I'm not perfect. So yes at times I still get very anxious because I'm literally living in the future, in the time that hasn't even happened yet.

The thing is, after that first meeting, I was actually more nervous of the prison guards than any prisoner, you see I felt at home in that meeting. I felt like I was with friends to whom I could relate to and also they could relate to me.

I'm realising while writing this that I'm guessing you're probably thinking I am going to prisons where they speak my native tongue (English), unfortunately I haven't yet had that opportunity.

When I finally got real with myself, I accepted my denial, applied myself to the program and listened to suggestions. It took me over nine years in and out of the program, playing with fire, trying any way possible to get some sort of control over my alcoholism and life none of which had actually worked.

So I did what any good active alcoholic does and made another geographical move this time to another country, a move that I've completed many times over the years.

Again the move didn't work. However, at this point, whilst living in Bulgaria I was introduced to someone in AA who I just seemed to be able to relate to, someone I felt I could be honest with, someone to whom I could actually say "I can't do this anymore". I somehow finally understood I am an alcoholic and the only way to get better and live a life in sobriety was to be part of the AA program.

So, I now give away what I have freely received from the organisation. I give it in Bulgarian prisons, and outside prisons too.

The language barrier has been fun at times (I have learnt Bulgarian but at first it was very difficult for the prisoners and myself to fully understand each other). But, somehow we got through these early barriers and continue to do so. During the first few meetings none of the prisoners wanted to talk, I guess they didn't trust me or understand why a British person was in a Bulgarian prison talking about AA. Little by little things have changed, now it's very different, many prisoners who attend the meetings were actually arrested while intoxicated or committed a crime whilst intoxicated, some even committed crimes to get intoxicated! The pain, anger and frustration of many prisoners in not knowing why they drink so much is such a similar experience to mine and I'm sure many other alcoholics in the world today.

I generally don't talk about anything other than recovery, although at times I do get asked questions which I feel it's my duty to answer. The meetings are more or less the same structure as AA meetings that are held outside of prisons, the only thing is time is short, the normal chit chat after meetings or going for a coffee unfortunately doesn't happen in prison. I do get to chat for a few minutes after each prison meeting, I wish it could be longer, but our visits are strictly timed so we can't stay much afterwards.

I have an amazing memory of when I took into prison lots of nice note pads and pens which the prison guards allowed so every person who attended could write down whatever they wanted, ideally about AA. Some wrote the steps down, others used the pads to write about themselves, but for me the main thing was for us all to be in this together, never above, never below, always by their side. A key part of recovery is step work, and in my mind having a note pad and pen to write helpful bits and pieces is definitely a massive help to begin working those steps.

I still find it difficult to do sponsorship in prison, but I'm sure in time this will change, sponsorship is something that has bought me so much joy and happiness to my own personal recovery, helping those outside of prison recover, and again I'm sure in time I will get to be a sponsor to a prisoner also.

I was asked by the AA Bulgarian prison committee to help organise a two day AA prison seminar for prison guards, prison doctors and prison psychologists. This actually was a massive wake up call for all who attended:

- the lack of knowledge about alcoholism
- the effects of being an alcoholic
- everything else that comes with being an alcoholic came as a surprise for all of the prison personnel

AA Bulgaria have actually been able to open new prison meetings in different provinces because of the initial seminar, and it seems that the Bulgarian prison authorities are gaining a greater understanding about the need to have AA meetings for prisoners to attend.

To finish I just want to tell all those alcoholics still suffering in and out of the meeting rooms, to those who's journeys haven't begun yet, those who have been on the journey for years, those who haven't even realised there's help out there, and especially all the prisoners worldwideYOU ARE NOT ALONE !

Sending my love, my hope for your recovery and my faith that someone, somewhere will offer you their hand in the path of AA recovery like I received so freely in the past and continue to receive today.

BA Mark
Velicko Tarnovo, Bulgaria

You Got a Friend in Me

Davie's Story

I got sober in HMP Barlinnie in 2013. I didn't know why I was there (again) but I don't know how I physically found myself in an AA meeting either.

The man who was doing most of the talking ,(the boss I presumed) said that I never need to sit in that seat and feel the way I'm feeling ever again. (I had been running from every feeling since I could remember) and crucially that if I don't take the first drink then I can't get drunk. (I had tried every way imaginable to stay sober whilst drinking and I almost fell off my seat when I heard that)

I quickly embarked upon the 12 steps of recovery. I missed my daughters birth. I first met my baby daughter sober but still in prison tiny and vulnerable and defenceless, she on the other hand BEAMED.

Soon after my release I was asked to share my experience with prison staff and other alcoholics who have had a similar experience. What I didn't know then was that I was doing service from day one, was accepted for who I was and what I was trying to do with my life and not for what I had done.

I was also taken by my now good friend with his arm around my shoulder and when I asked him where we were going he simply said "to learn how to live." At this point I simply didn't know who I was, how I liked my coffee or indeed how to order one in a thriving coffee shop in the centre of Glasgow. I was being steeped in service and fellowship from the beginning.

I became good friends with members of the prison service who said repeatedly that his wife, colleagues and family members couldn't and wouldn't believe the friends he had due to Alcoholics Anonymous. (Season ticket holders), he would kindly refer to us to save our anonymity at service meetings and prison workshops. He believed as I do that we can reach people on a level which no other services can. Alcoholics carrying the message and helping another alcoholic. Hope to the hopeless. To

people who if we don't take the meetings to them, they simply won't get one and the sickness of alcoholism continues throughout generations of families.

Here in Scotland I owe my life to AA and the prison service who allowed them into their halls and cells to speak to the still suffering.

To the men and women who made this possible and still do. I thank everyone of you and would encourage anyone to consider prison service.

Yours in service,

Davie (Scotland)

How Green is my Valley.

Zelma's Story.

Hi, my name is Zelma, and I am the Trustee with responsibility for Prisons. The date of my sobriety is 27th March 2000.

My first prison was Parc prison, Bridgend in 2007 where I had been asked to share my experience, strength and hope. I had never set foot inside a prison before and was nervous, not knowing what to expect. I was amazed by the reception I received and came away from that meeting with a sense wonder hearing the shares from the men. The week after I was invited into Swansea prison to again tell my story. I was asked to become part of the team there. I continued going into the Prison until lockdown.

After some time, it was suggested I took on the role of IG LO. I then attended my first IG meeting. Swansea and District had been without a Prison LO for some time and was told that if I returned to the next meeting I would be appointed. When my term ended, I became Regional Prison LO for Wales and Borders. I enjoyed attending the Regional LO meeting in York. Meeting with other LO helped me learn more about how to deal with things and that others had the same problems as I had. It really helped to have people I could contact should I have any questions.

When I applied to become a member of the Board of Alcoholics Anonymous and got accepted, I was so pleased to be asked to be the Trustee of Prisons.

I have a wonderful Subcommittee who all work hard behind the scenes dealing with problems and keeping up to date with any queries regarding this discipline.

Being involved with prisons is something I never thought I would do. When people ask me why I do this I will always tell them that I get much more out of it than I put in. It is a real privilege to be welcomed into a prison to help facilitate a meeting. On occasions, I see people on the outside in meetings continuing their recovery. I feel so lucky to have been part of this. Someone helped me when I first came into AA so I do my best to pass it on.

Yours In Fellowship,

Zelma K, (She/her)

Trustee for Prisons Alcoholics Anonymous GB.

I'm A Soul Man.

Hugh D

I had woken in a police cell with literally blood on my hands and wearing a white forensics suit and not much else, I was shaking and shivering the usual for a morning after and head was spinning a lot more as couldn't recollect a thing about the night before . The slide on the cell opened and a police officer peered in the cell and said in no uncertain terms that I had gone and done it this time. I had breached my bail conditions I had pushed it all way, way to far, my using had spiralled out of control for years I had tried various methods to curb it however I didn't do what was needed I don't think I wanted to prior to this point in my life otherwise I would have gone to any lengths to sort it for myself, I later learned

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I dropped to my knees I didn't know what the funk I was doing or who/what I was asking for help to as I was not a religious person in fact, I blamed a god for my problems and would rather dance with the devil in the pale moonlight. That's all I knew was that I had had enough of the way that alcohol had the power over me and that I really, looking at my current predicament in the harsh light seeping through the glass bricks in my cell, had no control at all over myself or my life and I really didn't want that anymore. I didn't want it so much as that was when I made a conscious decision to stop and to stop lying to myself , making excuses and generally being a twat about things. I knew this had to be done I had known this for a long time. I had destroyed lives including my own and had hit the

bottom hard this time. I humbly asked my higher power for help. I didn't know at the time that I was taking the first step on the recovery road and opening the door to a new life beyond my wildest dreams.

I was questioned by the police, taken to court and remanded in custody within days. I saw the prison doctor and for the first time in my life I turned down the offer of Valium for detox purposes, it had begun something had changed I could feel it. I also knew this wouldn't be easy yet was not afraid. I was offered some gear on the wings, turned it down flat and in fact was very aggressive with it I didn't want to be that person anymore.

It kinda of hit home to me then that this was it, this was the time, this was my chance I just had to grab it with both hands and not f—king let go.

About a week into my remand, I was standing on the landing shaking and feeling like shite when an officer, who I knew, came up to me and said that there was an AA meeting in the prison and that it may be something that would help me. I put my name down for a meeting and went along to the meetings. AA and NA were at Swansea Prison over 17 and a half years ago. Now I had attended AA and NA meetings in the past in the community and had been on various drink and drug courses/ interventions. I honestly thought that it was all just bollocks and that it wouldn't work for me. I paid lip service to it all then I went back to my drinking and thought this time it would be different as I could handle it. I thought that the meetings were full of religious nuts who **probablywent** home and got hammered. It turned out that I was very wrong about this **perceptionof** the fellowship. I was also very wrong about a lot of things and that I could if I **reallywanted** to manage myself and with the working of the 12 step programme live a life free of alcohol and a life that was proper living for the first since my childhood.

This didn't happen at the first meeting as my head was still proper f—ked, It took a while however I just continued to attend them, one of the meetings was chaired by an old using acquaintance of mine Marie. We are still in contact and she is still clean to this day, I believe she has well over 20 plus years of sobriety. That in itself for me was an eye opener at the time as I would never have had her down as anyone who would ever get into recovery. While I was on remand Marie gave me a 12-step working guide which I took to every prison with me and to all the meetings I attend and chaired while in prison the book would come with me too. I returned to her personally 11 years later when I was released from prison. Marie still attends meetings to this day. I met my sponsor through prison

meetings and another member of AA who I work with now through service and both have been inspirations to me on my journey.

I had started drinking at an early age I can remember being drunk at about 11 and was using drugs at about 15 . Pretty much most of my offending was done while under the influence of alcohol, drugs or usually a combination of both. I had numerous **drinkdriving**, TDAs (known in those days as tickling a dogs ass) taking and driving away was the correct term , many assaults including a couple of GBH and assault police , handling stolen goods , possession , possession with intent to supply , weapon charges ect ect

I had had a few shortish sentences along the way and loads of community service and fines so when I was later hit with the IsPP sentence I should have seen it **cominghowever** I really didn't as I was still blaming people , places and things for my problems and not taking any responsibility for my actions . It did hit me for six however I took it as an opportunity to change me for the better. I had a 2 years and 24 days tariff and ended up serving 10 and a half years.

I found freedom in prison, I found myself through the 12 step programme and I was able to break the shackles of addiction and find peace and serenity . I looked inside because that's where the answers are and still are, manging my emotions became easier and manging my thoughts too. I started practicing mindfulness and still mediate today. I found my spiritual pathway through the programme, and I am currently AA Prison /Probation liaison officer for Wales and Borders and sit on the AA Prisons subcommittee.

Through these roles I can be a part of passing on the message of AA within the prison service ensuring that prisoners these days have access to AA meetings in Prison and the support of the fellowship when they are released. I learned and am still learning so much through the fellowship and the steps that it still to this day blows me away. Amongst other things these days I promote Northern Soul events around the country and on occasions DJ too. I really do have a great life and couldn't have achieved this if I was still drinking. There are many other things that have come about through my sobriety, I have amazing relationships with my family and friends and really can't explain how good it is to live sober. I don't get good days or bad days. I get adventures and experiences; I am able to live in the moment and take the highs with the lows **withoutwanting** to try and change the way I feel with alcohol or drugs. My advice to anyone in the prison system is if I can change anyone can and trust me you won't be disappointed in sobriety as it's the gift that keeps giving.

Be lucky and may peace, love and serenity travel with you always.

Hugh D

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

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 Bruce @ prisons5.sc@aamail.org