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AA Grapevine



Interview

with the author of

"The Independent Blonde"

NANCY F.

Nancy F. is the author of "The Independent Blonde," which appeared in the Second Edition of the Big Book. She was interviewed in the Grapevine's offices by the Managing Editor and a staff member.



GV: How did your story get in the Big Book?

Nancy F: We had several writers around and they wrote my story. I didn't write the story — someone wrote it for me. I don't even remember

being interviewed. I never thought much about my story, to tell you the truth. I don't even think I knew it was in the Big Book.

GV: So your story was picked because someone knew you?

Nancy F: We all knew each other in those days. Because we were all in one clubhouse.

GV: It was a small world, wasn't it?

Nancy F: Absolutely, and we were all together. In those days, nobody was anybody. Not like today. Nobody had any money, everybody was poor. Everybody was coming back from the war, so

nobody had anything really. I don't mean we were hungry, I don't mean that. I had an apartment and so forth. But we were all sort of starting from scratch. We used to go down to Greenwich Village and eat for fifty cents by candlelight.

There was great camaraderie in the clubhouse. It was on Ninth Avenue and Forty-First Street. Nobody was on Ninth Avenue and Forty-First Street in those days, so the first time I went to a meeting, I thought there would be a bunch of bums. Then I thought, you're one too, so you better get over there. I decided not to get dressed up because I didn't want to look better than everybody else, and when I got there, Park Avenue was there and everybody was there. So I learned my lesson —

never think you're better than anybody else, just go. It was quite an education to see how everybody was suffering the same disease. I met people like Felicia [see "Stars Don't Fall" interview in the August 1995 Grapevine]. I never knew a princess before. I never knew a countess before! I can tell you, I never could have gotten anything like that

anywhere else. And there was a humanity in all of us for each other. I was so welcome. It was the first time I felt welcome.

GV: You did a lot of Twelfth-Step calls in those days.

Nancy F.: Oh yes, we went everywhere. We'd go on buses all over to speak. People's houses, or rented rooms.

So many lived in such lonely rooms, all by themselves, no bathroom.

When I came into AA I was about thirty-nine years old. That was in 1945. There was another woman who was as young as I was, and they picked us to go to hospitals and drying-out places because we were younger and presentable. In those days, if you were a drunk from a rich family, they put you

away. You were hidden in hospitals and all kinds of places. So she and I bought little hats with flowers on them and we had little black dresses and pearls, and that's how we'd go. I was very naive; I said, "Gee, there's bars on the windows and no doorknobs." I saw so many young, young rich women, incarcerated by their families.



Once we went to the apartment of Miss X [a celebrated actress] and she told us such wonderful stories, we forgot why we were there. We didn't have the nerve to tell her that she was a drunk. Later she did get sober.

GV: Did you take literature on Twelfth Step calls?

Nancy F: There wasn't much literature. We'd just go and talk and be friendly and say how long we were in AA and where to go to meetings. But our intensity when we were talking to drunks was very effective, because they knew how we felt. They knew that we cared about them. And nobody had cared about them in so long. So that's how it worked for us. We didn't have any spiel of any kind. We'd say, "You'll be okay, and you'll go to meetings with us and we'll come and get you, and if you have any trouble, call us right away." It was very simple but very effective.

I didn't like the families in the beginning. I was mad at the families. I wouldn't talk to anybody but the alcoholic. A friend of mine said to me, "Nancy, I think that it's time that you begin to accept families." And I said, "Do I have to?" She said, "I think that it would be a good idea." I respected her but I thought, I'll think it over but I'm not ready yet.

I had never felt like I was anything in my whole life, that I had anything to give and then here I was told that I had something to give someone —



well, I could hardly wait to go on those Twelfth Step calls. I didn't care if somebody lived in Philadelphia or Hoboken or Timbuktu, I would go. I was so eager to give what I had. I went right from the First Step to the last Step. For me it was just wonderful. I got in with people and I cared for somebody. You see, I had never cared for anybody, not even myself. When you care for somebody, you begin to heal yourself. You don't even know it.

I left home when I was fourteen. My mother died when I was three, my father remarried when I was fourteen, and my step-mother threw me out. When you're thrown out, you don't feel like you're anything. You know

something's got to be wrong with you or they wouldn't have thrown you out. And they tell me that psychologically I felt abandoned by my mother. So here I was in AA and there were people who told me I had something and that they had the same thing that I had — you can't imagine how important that was.

One woman at the clubhouse was a scrublady and I think I learned more from her than anybody. She lived in a tenement house, happy as a lark. Her name was Annie and she came in when she was sixty-seven and she died when she was about seventy-four. I was in a beginners meeting when she came in. And she laughed at me and said,

"You're jealous of me because I've had a few drinks and you can't have any." I said, "You're so right." The rich ladies used to come down from Connecticut on Friday night and they'd look at Annie, and she was poor, she was uneducated, she had nothing, and she was having a ball. She was having the best time she'd ever had in her life. And there was no way, looking at Annie, that you could complain. These women couldn't say their alimony was cut off or they were getting divorced because Annie was sitting there with not a word of complaint. She had a quality that was so easy, so simple. She used to curse a lot when she spoke and a priest would be in the audience and she'd say, "Excuse me, Father, but I'm trying to be careful."

GV: Was this Annie the cop-fighter, whose story was also in the Big Book?

Nancy F.: That's right. She lived on First Avenue across from a church. She got sober and then she got drunk again and she went up to High Watch Farm, and when she came back, I said to her, "Now you have to make an amends list, but don't tell me your story because you'll hate me if you do. You've got to find somebody you can tell your story to. You can have a priest or Dr. Silkworth or whoever you want." She said, "I'll take a priest." So we found a good old fellow of a priest and I said, "Now remember, he's no better than you are so don't be afraid of him. This isn't confession, you're just going to tell your



Every time somebody wanted a job, I'd grab them and give them a permanent wave, set them up to get the most.

GV: You mentioned Dr. Silkworth. Did people regularly talk to him or see him?

Nancy F.: Oh yes. If we were in trouble, we'd go to Dr. Silkworth.

If we were in a situation and we didn't know how to get out of it or were afraid we might get drunk, we could talk it over with him. He was a very simple, wonderful man. He said to me once, "The day that you can sit down and just be honest with yourself in this situation, you will know what to do." That was the kind of a man he was.

GV: You knew Bill W. Did you ever go to Bill to talk?

Nancy F.: No, no!

GV: Why not?

Nancy F.: I was in awe of Bill. It would be like going to God! Also I didn't think that was his job. But he was around all the time.

GV: Did he speak at meetings a lot?

Nancy F.: Yes, he did and he was a lousy speaker. He said so himself—he laughed at himself. He always thought it was kind of funny.

GV: Why wasn't he a good speaker?

whole story." They met at my apartment and I made coffee and then I told Annie, "You come over afterward to the meeting." We had a Friday night meeting a couple of blocks from there on Fifty-Eighth Street. So she came over afterward and she was so relieved. The first time she did go to confession, she said, "Father, I'll tell you everything, but don't ask me how many times."

I was in the hairdressing business and Annie used to come to the beauty shop I had and I used to charge her a dollar because I never wanted her to think I just gave her anything because she was very proud. So I'd charge her a dollar. One time she got a job up in the country and they charged her six dollars and she said, "Hell, I can get it done for a buck up on Park Avenue." I gave more permanent waves to people who had never seen a beauty shop.

Nancy F.: I don't think he was interested really. It just wasn't his main thing. He knew he wasn't any good and he didn't care and it wasn't really important to him. He always used to say, "If they want me to get sober on, they'll never get sober." He meant if you wanted Bill W. to get you sober, that's the first thing that would get you drunk.

GV: What about meetings? Did you go to one a day?

Nancy F.: I went to the clubhouse every day from eleven o'clock in the morning when they opened up until they closed at night. It was the only place I felt safe. It was a church and they held the meetings in the church part and then in the basement they had a card game, which I never knew. But I heard later there were very hot card games down there. You could eat at the clubhouse too — upstairs we had a restaurant. You could have coffee any time of the day and night. Eventually we went broke. I remember we had two refrigerators and we used to say that only drunks would buy two refrigerators since we only needed one. Excessive behavior cost us. We were \$5,000 in debt and the landlord didn't trust us and wanted us to get out. Norman B. was a great member and he gave everybody money; he was a rich man when he came in and he gave all his money away. We had a meeting of a hundred people, and Norman got up and said, "You bunch of drunks, you've spent all

the money at bars — threw it away. Now go home, search your conscience, write a check, and send it in. Let's move out of here with honor." And that's what we did.

GV: Do you see a big difference in meetings today?

Nancy F.: There's not as much giving and Twelfth Step work. People are busy and working harder, I guess, than we did. We seemed to have more time. But I don't know. I know we didn't get eased off alcohol as people do now in treatment centers. We went through it and I think it was a different experience in humility and suffering. You'd be getting off a drunk for days. And never be so miserable, never. I didn't know anything about pills. I never knew what a sleeping pill was. If you were not in that "set" you didn't know about drugs. I never heard of cocaine, people didn't have it in those days. So it was different. It was only alcohol. Now it's quite different. People will say, "I'm a druggie," and make some of the alcoholics mad. I think if you're suffering, you're suffering, but I don't have a strong opinion about it.

GV: Tell us more about your early days. Nancy F.: I was in a women's group for many years. Marty M. had asked a woman named Elizabeth to have a women's meeting in her home, because she lived on Fifty-Eighth Street in midtown Manhattan. Elizabeth's husband was the alcoholic; she was not. For fif-

teen years I went there every Friday night until she gave it up.

Once I had to hospitalize my landlady; this woman was a drunk and I put her into Knickerbocker Hospital. And that night Elizabeth said, "Nancy did the most wonderful thing today." And I thought, what did I do? I had never been praised before and I felt so warm inside and I thought, This is wonderful. And then I thought, Maybe there is something about me that she sees. If a woman like that sees something in me, maybe there is something. Elizabeth started me off, she encouraged me. Whatever she told me to do, I did. She took me in sort of as a member of their family. For the first five years, I did nothing but go to AA. I couldn't do anything else — didn't know anything else to do.

GV: Then you started your hairdressing career?

Nancy F.: I was in business for twenty-six years on my own. I always said to Elizabeth, "I'm afraid of everything." And she said, "But that never stops you from doing things." She just nurtured me. I told her I should take lessons in English, and she said, "No, you should

take lessons in speech." So she sent me to George Dixon who coached Rex Harrison in "My Fair Lady." He had a sign up over his door which said, "Create yourself; everything else has been done." I went there for a year. I went everywhere: churches, psychology, therapy. Whatever she suggested, I would do. She was the one that taught me that there was something inside of me — that I could do things.

You know, Marty M. [a founder of what is now the National Council on Alcoholism] was going to hire me as a speaker. She sent me to Yale to take alcoholic studies and I was thrilled. Oh my God, I thought, I won't have to work hard, I'll go there and I'll go around speaking.

Oh it will be marvelous. Because I had to go out to hairdressing shows and I was scared to death to do that; I had to improve my skills and work hard and go into business and learn about labor laws and all that. See, I didn't want to do that. Then Elizabeth said to me, "Do you think you should earn your living over what's wrong with you?" "Oh," I said, "is that what I'd be doing?" No, no that's not what I want to do." So I came back and told Marty that I

wasn't going to work for her. I want to tell you, I never had such a difficult thing. But I had to do it. I wouldn't have liked myself if I didn't.

GV: You were married?

Nancy F.: I met my husband when I worked on a ship. He was an officer on a ship; he was a big tough man, very handsome. He was in the Navy during the war. He could drink and never get drunk. Well, he got drunk but he was never like I was. I was sloppy. Sometimes I'd go to sleep and sometimes I'd fight. I'd say things that I didn't have the courage to say when I was sober. One day he beat me right down to a pulp and I took care of myself from that day on. When I left him, I just took my coffeepot, no furniture. He put his mother in our house. She was a sweet lady, and I went up to see her and I looked at that furniture and I said to myself, "The next time you be little yourself for sticks of wood, let me know." And I never asked anybody for anything again. I found the answers in myself, which was the greatest thing that ever happened to me.

GV: You went back to school in sobriety?

Nancy F.: I went to high school in my fifties and went to college when I was seventy. I called up a therapist I'd gone

to and I said, "How can I prevent myself from being frightened of old age? I'm watching a friend of mine who's scared to death about getting old — and she's got a companion and children and everything. How can I prevent it?" And he said, "Go to school." So I did.

GV: What did you study?

Nancy F.: Behavioral science. A lot of psychology and sociology.

GV: Did you have a career goal in mind with that major or did you just like the subject?

Nancy F.: I just knew I wanted to spend my time in some way and I loved to learn and I liked to write. I went to college for nine and a half years. Saturday night I'd go out. I always went out

on Saturday night. And at six-thirty on Sunday morning, I'd get up and write my papers. I got people to help me. The day I passed algebra, I was coming down Fifth Avenue and I was crying and laughing. I thought, "I know what makes me happy — accomplishment, doing something that I never thought I'd be able to do." I was exhilarated.

A friend told me, "Work hard and try to get an A." He was working for me to get cum laude and I didn't know



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what he was doing and I said to myself, "I'm lucky if I stay in school, let alone get an A." But he nurtured me, you know. Everybody nurtured me. I graduated cum laude. I really enjoyed it. When I graduated, the graduates had to walk several blocks — I was on my cane then — and all my friends were in the car driving along behind me. They thought I was going to faint and they said, "Get in the car." And I said, "Get in the car? My God, I worked nine and half years for this. If you think I'm not going to walk in this parade, you're crazy!" It was a wonderful experience.

GV: Do you miss it, a little bit?

Nancy F: No, I live in a Quaker community where there's a lot of things being done. I'm teaching English to migrant workers.

GV: Are you a Quaker?

Nancy F: Yes, now I am. I've been a Quaker for two years. They do things. I like that. It impressed me that a lot of women had lived wonderful lives, men too. So I said to them, "How do you get to be a Quaker?" And they said, "You just write a letter." So I said okay, and I wrote a letter.

GV: How did you feel about a Higher Power when you came into AA?

Nancy F: I didn't believe in God, and I didn't want to hear anything about it. But I said maybe there's a power without him. I was mad at my father and I

was mad at men and I didn't want any authority figures. I had a human being in my mind as God. I didn't know if I was more scared of God or my father. But after I got sober I went everywhere. I went to a man who taught that if you think right, you'll be all right. I went to places for two or three years. I went searching around. I believe that there's a universal something in the world. And I don't question it too much, but I know it's there. If I behave right, I'm tuned in on it. I believe in a force because I experienced relief from myself and my emotional problems when I first got sober. You know, everything comes up, one right after the other. It makes you dizzy.

GV: So whatever defensiveness or feistiness you had about the Eleventh Step, you managed to resolve it.

Nancy F: Yes, but I didn't go deeply into a lot of things. For example, making amends — there was nobody left to make amends to. I was by myself. But I went back to my job, because I had quit my job, and I made amends like that. But I didn't do very much other than work with people. I'm much better that way than I am on trying to solve the mysteries of life. Working with people, that's where I get my satisfaction.

AA has given me so much. AA was the greatest education I ever got. Where else could I have gotten that kind of education? For nothing. For a dollar a week? 