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Fragments of AA History

AA in Prison

The following excerpts from old Grapevines are reprinted here with the hope of providing a little history of an important aspect of the Twelfth Step.

From the February 1958 Grapevine comes this brief report:

The year 1943 ... marked the first chapter of one of the most significant and moving of all the AA special services. A modest little story from 'The San Quentin News' dated June 17th reads:

'Approximately one year ago a handful of San Quentin inmates, after reading the book *Alcoholics Anonymous* met with Ricardo Maestas, special commissary inmate clerk, and arrived at two definite conclusions. First, they decided they were alcoholics. Second, that they should do something about it in an attempt to prevent further disaster after their release. Despite ridicule of being dubbed "winos" by their fellow inmates and the bantering challenge of skeptics, this nucleus won the support of Joseph H. Fletcher, Captain of the Yard ... obtained a go-ahead nod from Warden

Clinton T. Duffy, a small appropriation by the Board of Prison Directors for books and pamphlets to come out of the inmate library fund, and the attention of the Board of Prison Terms and Paroles. Membership now exceeds 225.'

"This quiet report from the prison paper rings the bell on one of the chapters in AA history that perhaps reflects the most widely copied and publicly acclaimed sections of our fellowship . . ."

From the November 1960 Grapevine comes this article entitled "A Twentieth Century Miracle," by Alfred E. Dowd, Warden, Indiana State Prison:

"It was in 1944 that a twentieth century miracle came to the Indiana State Prison—Alcoholics Anonymous. Our group, one of the three oldest prison groups, was inaugurated sixteen years ago, about the time that Warden Clinton Duffy of San Quentin, California, and Warden Joe E. Ragen, of Illinois State Prison, offered AA to the inmates of their respective institutions. The story

of our group is filled with tears and laughter, heartbreaks and happiness. ... If you will double and triple the obstacles faced under free world conditions, you will realize what we were up against. Prison environments, as well as some prison officials, do not readily accept the development of new reforms or ideas. When I first talked of introducing AA inside the prison many skeptics argued that it was a useless fad. But today my original conviction of the value of AA in prisons is revealed as correct. For we find that the man who takes a sincere part in our Bar-Less Fellowship Group is more than two times as likely to make a successful parole as the man who has disregarded the program.

". . . There is no question but what the AA program is a source of strength and courage to the prisoner having a drinking problem and wanting to do something about it."

From the September 1950 Grapevine, reporting on talks given at that year's International Convention:

"Next came that wonderful session on prisons. Our great friend, Warden Duffy, told the startling story of our original group at San Quentin. His account of AA's five-year history there had a moving prelude. We heard a recording, soon for radio release, that thrillingly dramatized an actual incident of AA life within the walls. An alcoholic prisoner reacts bitterly to his confinement and develops amazing ingenuity in finding and drinking alcohol. Soon he becomes too ingenious. In the prison paint shop he

discovers a promising fluid which he shares with his fellow alcoholics. It was deadly poison. Harrowing hours followed, during which several of them died. The whole prison was tense as the fatalities continued to mount. Nothing but quick blood transfusions could save those still living. The San Quentin AA group volunteered instantly and spent the rest of that long night giving of themselves as they had never given before. AA hadn't been any too popular, but now prison morale hit an all time high and stayed there. Many of the survivors joined up. The first Prison Group had made its mark; AA had come to San Quentin to stay.

"Warden Duffy then spoke. Apparently we folks on the outside know nothing of prison sales resistance. The skepticism of San Quentin prisoners and keepers alike had been tremendous. They thought AA must be a racket. Or maybe a crackpot religion. Then, objected the prison Board, why tempt Providence by freely mixing prisoners with outsiders, alcoholic women especially? Bedlam would be unloosed. But our friend the Warden, somehow deeply convinced, insisted on AA. To this day, he said, not a single prison rule has ever been broken at an AA meeting though hundreds of gatherings have been attended by hundreds of prisoners with almost no watching at all. Hardly needed is that solitary, sympathetic guard who sits in the back row.

"The Warden added that most prison authorities throughout the United States and Canada share his views of Alcoholics Anonymous. Hitherto 80% of pa-

roled alcoholic prisoners had to be scooped up and taken back to jail. Many institutions now report that this percentage has dropped to one-half, even one-third of what it used to be."

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And finally, comes this excerpt from "Keep AA Alive in Our Jails!" by Austin H. MacCormick, former nonalcoholic Class A Trustee, in the April 1963 Grapevine:

"Of all the dark corners of the earth in which Alcoholics Anonymous has taken root and grown to mature strength, the 502 prisons and jail groups with over 20,000 members and the 445 groups in mental, veterans', tubercular and other hospitals with about eleven thousand members give me the greatest satisfaction, because of my professional career of 45 years in the correctional field and my life-long interest also in the field of mental health.

"It is perhaps not fair to call these

hospitals 'dark corners,' for humanity and modern medical science have brought light and hope into the bleak 'insane asylums' and the vegetable bins for the 'incurably ill' of the past. . . .

"There can be, however, no denying the fact that American jails are places into which little light ever penetrates . . .

"In most of the county jails of the country, no ameliorating influence of any sort, no application of either humanity or science, no effort to salvage the inmates is ever seen, with one exception—when AA comes in and stays in, although it is usually working under almost insuperable handicaps with men and women who are hard to reach and hard to hold.

"It is in this area that I hope AA groups will increase in number and in effectiveness . . . AA has brought some light into this dark picture, and must steadily bring more and more."

