

September 1977

International Lawyers in AA

They are regular AAs, but they search for opportunities to serve through their profession

IN A PLUSH, sophisticated office in downtown New York, six attorneys gathered one evening in mid-April. Their subject was not some colossal corporate merger or antitrust litigation; it was individual sobriety. They shared their experience, strength, and hope to reinforce and deepen their sobriety. Out of this meeting, another group of International Lawyers in Alcoholics Anonymous (ILAA) would, they hoped, carry the message to other alcoholic lawyers that they were not alone.

ILAA was founded in September 1975 at a meeting in Niagara Falls, Ont., at which twenty lawyers were present: sixteen from Canada and four from the United States. This was the first opportunity for members of the legal profession to share their AA experience.

The second annual convention was

in Buffalo in September 1976, and again there were about twenty. The convention started on Friday evening with a real down-to-earth sharing session. We talked about a lot of things—ourselves, our drinking, and what we were looking for in such a group. Insofar as our drinking stories were concerned, there was a lot of good, solid, relevant identification. We were not alone. All kinds of difficulties experienced in the practice of law, as a result of booze, were shared.

On Saturday morning, we focused on problems encountered in our practices when AA principles or policies were involved. When and under what circumstances should we divulge our affiliation with AA? What can or should we do if we see another lawyer or colleague in difficulty as a result of booze? Or perhaps it is a client who is in difficulty. One cen-

tral thread was the many opportunities for service that lawyers have in carrying the message of AA. The conclusion was that with caution, sensitivity, and a keen eye on AA principles, we could do much to carry the message, without risking our professional reputations or practices.

From the outset, ILAA was heavily indebted to International Doctors in AA for advice and inspiration. We learned from the IDAA members that IDAA is not a special-purpose group—that these doctors belong to regular AA groups in their home communities and get together annually in IDAA for supplementary sharing, identification, fellowship, and support.

Like IDAA, the lawyer groups can serve as a vestibule of AA for lawyers who have developed a drinking problem. Initially, they would find it easier to go to a group where there were other lawyers. Later, it would be natural for them to enter the mainstream of AA. Another advantage is that ILAA provides an opportunity for discussing certain matters of common interest to AA members in the legal profession, an opportunity not really available in one's home group.

We in AA are not the only ones concerned with the problems of the drinking lawyer. Around the nation,

various state and local bar associations have turned their attention toward the problem of alcohol and drug abuse in the profession. These include: bar association committees designed to educate association members on the problem; in some states, grievance procedures mandating treatment; and in some states, active groups of lawyers finding self-help and hope as recovering alcoholics.

The official efforts show that there is concern on the public level. On the private, personal level, ILAA seeks to be there to provide the helping hand of AA when an attorney hits bottom. ILAA emphatically does not seek to form a separatist or elitist group. Instead, it serves as a sharing community, demonstrating to the frightened, guilt-laden lawyer that he is not alone. It is a bridge to regular AA, rather than a closet for self-proclaimed professionals.

ILAA is still a fledgling organization. Through correspondence and a periodic newsletter, it shares information on the alcoholism field of concern to lawyers. A third convention will be held in Toronto in September.

Those who wish to be added to the mailing list may write to: Secretary, ILAA, Room 202, 111 Pearl Street, Hartford, Conn. 06103.

/ S., Hartford, Conn.