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Fragments of AA History

As published in the 1985 A.A.W.S., Inc. souvenir booklet, "Fifty Years with Gratitude," the following excerpts highlight some of the history of AA's longstanding relationship with professionals in the spirit of cooperation without affiliation (statistics reflect 1985 levels).

AA "Behind the Walls"

Alcoholics Anonymous was just seven years old when a pioneering warden at San Quentin asked nearby AA's to carry the message to alcoholics in that fabled prison. The year was 1942; the warden was Clinton Duffy. He was heard to say, "If the AA program will help just one man, I want to start it." Later, on November 28, 1943, Bill W. was a guest speaker at the facility's AA group. In an article which referred to the guest speaker as "Mr. Bill," the event was reported in the *San Quentin News*. Despite the skeptics, AA "behind the walls" began to grow.

By the mid 1950s AA meetings in prisons were beginning in other parts

of the world: Ireland and Finland began to carry the message "inside"; the Magpie Prison Group was formed in Fremantle, Western Australia in 1958 and had 14 members. Scotland and England then swelled the ranks, soon to be joined by many other countries. Prison groups sprang up everywhere—Bonne Nouvelle, Rouen; Northrand, in the Transvaal; Lansfengselgroppe, Klofta; Rising Sun, Queensland; and Down Under, New South Wales — just to name a few.

Today in the U.S. and Canada structure, for example, there are more than 1,370 AA groups in correctional facilities that are serviced by local correctional facilities committees.

Speaking the "language of the heart," AA is reaching out in every corner of the globe to our fellow AAs "behind the walls."

AA in Hospitals and Treatment Centers

After Bill sobered up at Towns Hospital, he continued to try to help other alcoholics there. Later, New

York AAs regularly referred prospects to Towns and to Knickerbocker Hospital for sobering up and took AA meetings into these institutions.

In Akron, through the thirties and forties, *all* newcomers were hospitalized — first at Akron City Hospital and later at St. Thomas Hospital, under the care of Dr. Bob and Sister Ignatia. Over 4,800 passed through the alcoholic ward at St. Thomas alone during the early days of AA! Part of the treatment were continuous visits from AA members, telling their stories. Warren C., who came from Cleveland in 1939, recalled considerable debate over whether he should be admitted to the Akron group, since he had not received this hospital treatment!

In 1939, High Watch Farm in Kent, Connecticut, became the first free-standing treatment facility. Actually, it was called a "drunk farm" — operated by an independent board of AA members and with an AA oriented program. AA members from nearby towns brought AA meetings to the clients at High Watch.

Also in 1939, Dr. Russell E. Blaisdell, head of New York's Rockland State Hospital, a mental institution, learned of AA and immediately accepted the idea for his alcoholic inmates. He welcomed AA visitors, later allowed the first "institution group" to be established in Rockland, and let busloads of patients on the AA program go to meetings in South Orange, N.J. and New York City. At about the same time, similar

beginnings were made in hospitals in Philadelphia and San Francisco, and the idea soon spread to all points between.

At first, the zeal of individual members and groups provided the initiative for working through institutions; later, institution committees were formed by intergroups and general service areas to ensure that contact was maintained. Presently more than 1,200 treatment centers in the U.S. and Canada have AA meetings and about 31 percent of members joining AA come from treatment centers or through alcoholism counselors.

AA in Business and Industry

Pioneer members, eager to twelfth-step other alcoholics, sometimes divulged their AA membership to their employers and fellow-workers — a brave step in those days, considering the stigma attached to alcoholism. Their sobriety and their spiritual way of life became an example to those around them. In this way — informally at first, and later as part of the corporate structure — they served as a resource and a referral for drunken employees.

Dr. John L. Norris, associate medical director of Eastman Kodak Company in Rochester, N.Y., in the late 1940s, often described frustration at his inability to help alcoholic employees who were referred to him, while those sent to Bert, an AA member, seemed to recover. His curiosity sufficiently aroused, "Dr. Jack" resolved to learn about Alcoholics

Anonymous. This led to his meeting with Bill W., and eventually to his becoming chairperson of the AA General Service Board. Thus Eastman Kodak became one of the first large corporations to have an alcoholism program.

The Du Pont Company in Wilmington, Delaware, was another. The program operated successfully for three decades under the direction of Dave M., an AA member. In New York, pioneers in Employee Assistance Programs, EAPs as they came to be called, included the transit system, Consolidated Edison, the New York City Police Department, the Port Authority, and the *New York Times*.

The idea has since spread throughout the United States and Canada, and it is estimated there are upwards of 9,000 organizations — corporations, unions, and governmental departments — that have programs to help their alcoholic employees. AA does not itself establish alcoholism programs, but it cooperates with these programs in any way it can, and individual AA members acting as individuals are often involved.

AA in the Armed Services

When AA was young, the armed services were not a very favorable environment for recognition of alcoholism, let alone recovery from the disease. Indeed, heavy drinking was not only condoned among sailors, soldiers, marines, and airmen, but even problem drinking was tolerated

far beyond the limits that prevailed in the civilian world.

Only slowly did the services come to view alcoholism as a disease; and more specifically, as a deterrent to their efficiency and state of readiness. Through efforts of individual members, AA meetings began to be permitted on military bases, and eventually alcoholism treatment programs were established by the services themselves. Notable was the the U.S. Navy Program, centered at Long Beach, California. It relied heavily on Alcoholics Anonymous for its program orientation and for referral for after-care. As a result, there are now many "Dry Dock" groups of AA at Navy facilities, including a number on shipboard! The other services followed suit.

The General Service Office was in correspondence with AA members in uniform from World War II onward, helping establish groups and maintaining records of them. By the early 1970s, letters were coming in from the command level of the armed services requesting advice and help. In 1974, a pamphlet, "AA and the Armed Services," was published and ordered in large quantity by the services. In addition to basic information, the pamphlet contains ten personal stories of recovery. Within AA's tradition of "cooperation but not affiliation," Alcoholics Anonymous has been able to provide much-needed assistance to the armed services in their own efforts to help their still-suffering alcoholics.