

Mike M is one of our long-term members of AA in Northeast Florida. Mike celebrated 58 years of sobriety last December. Mike is an active member of AA. His home group is the I Am Responsible Group. He still sponsors men and has an enthusiasm for AA, which is contagious. He was our speaker at our anniversary banquet last year. Mike taped his story for our Intergroup Archives in 2006. The following had been excerpted from those tapes with his permission.

Interviewer: Your sobriety date is December 7, 1952, is that right?

Mike: Yes.

I: What motivated to get you into AA?

M: A desire to reunite with an 18-month-old son, who was with my wife. My wife and I were separated at that time because of my excessive drinking. I approached AA in 1949 at the urging of my wife. Somewhere along the line she had heard of AA and suggested I go. So I went to AA in New York City and was not at all impressed with the people I saw there. They were a motley bunch and I certainly did not feel I fit in with those kinds of people. So I went home and told my wife that they told me how to just drink one bottle of beer. That night I had a quart of beer. She bought that story for about 2 or 3 days and then that was the end of that. I agreed to go back to AA but I still wasn't impressed, the men there were haggard and the women were not proper looking. Later in 1949 Maggie and I were again separated because of my drinking.

I had gotten a job at that time in Connecticut and was driving back and forth to work. I picked up a couple of DUI's and one involved an altercation with the local police force, it was my second DUI and I was threatened with doing at least 1 year at the county Farm. I wound up, a 31-year-old man, calling on my mother in New York to come bail me out. She did, she bailed me out, paid for the policeman's uniform and his hospitalization costs.

At that time we had dear friends in New York who were concerned about getting Maggie and me reconciled. So I had gone to AA meetings in Fairfield, CT and Bridgeport but I didn't still feel connected, I didn't feel that I identified with these people

I: You said you went before the court on these charges of attacking a policeman, did they recommend AA?

M: I did say I had been to AA and apparently it didn't seem to impress them because I wasn't working the program.

Our furniture was still in storage due to our separation and I was back from CT as a result of losing my job over my problems with the Bridgeport police. When I came back to NY we got back together and we took a furnished room in Regal Park, NY, a very small furnished room. I got another job and with my first paycheck I got drunk, fell down the subway stairs, came back all bloodied and Maggie said, "Can't you please stop drinking?" And I said I'd try. The effort never seemed to be strong enough. My job went well, I was offered another position with another company in downtown New York and Maggie was also interviewed, she made a fine presentation and it was because of her I was hired

I: How many meetings were there in New York City?

M: I wish I had a handle on that, but I knew there were 10 or 20 in Manhattan. I really wasn't active in AA at all during the first year of my son's life.

Maggie took me to court for non-support, I was still employed and my employer got the notice from court about withholding my pay to give to Maggie. I had to go to court and sit there and listen. Maggie was back with her mother and going back to work to earn money for a divorce because she couldn't get a divorce in New York because of regulations at that time. I was afraid of losing contact with my son, who I adored, so I went back to AA. The meeting had moved from the place I'd gone originally to another, nicer neighborhood. The gal at the desk, Hazel, she's no longer alive, but was a sweetheart of a woman, suggested I follow the steps, suggested I do this and suggested I do that, and to listen to people and I did that.

I: Were some of the meetings in churches?

M: Yes, most of them were in churches, I can't think of any of them being anywhere except in church. We went to one in Forest Hills, an upscale community and it was my first or second meeting, I sat next to guy who had a Rolex watch and lots of fancy jewelry and he said to me, "Maybe I can help you." In the meantime I'd written some bad checks in Montreal at the hotel, gambled up there, lost all kinds of money, it bankrupted us. So he said maybe he could help me and I said, "Can I possibly get \$2000 or \$5000?" He said, "I tell you what you do - you call the hotel, tell them you're a drunk and you've joined Alcoholics Anonymous and you want time to pay the debt." Well, that wasn't what I wanted to hear! (chuckles) He also said to do the same at the gambling casino.

In New York at that time they had open and closed meetings. Open meetings were attended by many non-alcoholics, many family members and I was finally able to convince Maggie to attend a meeting. I found a group at a Catholic Church, there were 4 guys there I related to and their wives attended meetings regularly and they did all the things in the kitchen, we always had goodies. Maggie finally agreed to attend. She said it was just another scheme of mine but these women convinced her to give us another chance and she did. The meetings were different, both open and closed and another thing was that we socialized. We wound up going to baseball games with these people; we'd play cards on Friday nights with these folks.

I: Was there prayer at these meetings?

M: Yes. We didn't do the holding hands but The Our Father was said at many meetings, not all of them, but many of them. It wasn't until I was in Ohio the practice of holding hands was popular. At the closed meetings we took the steps in detail and discussed things that were bothering us. At open meetings we had speakers and they were usually 3 people and a chairman who led the group. An individual would talk about their drinking experiences, not about their childhood or employment unless it affected their drinking. You would qualify

yourself as an alcoholic, you tell how much you drank, where you drank, how you drank and what happened to you. It took about 15 minutes. Then the leader would highlight some of the points - no comments from the audience.

At an open meeting I attended at the Catholic Church, a priest was also a member of our fellowship and he and other priest's with the same problem would attend. My dear mother came to a meeting with Maggie one night, saw these priests there in their cleric collars and said, "Oh, how nice of them to come here in support of the poor unfortunates!" (chuckles) This is my typical mother! Maggie said, "But Mildred, they're part of the group!" And my mother said, "No! No! Not Catholic Priests! They couldn't be!" (chuckles)

We moved from New York to Wisconsin and AA there was entirely different. Meetings were primarily the discussion type and there was a lot of conflict. Some meetings were by invitation only or private. I was invited to one those types and the members were doctors and lawyers and others who had been trying their best not to let their affiliation with AA be known. I was very uncomfortable. I had come from NY I thought meeting should be open like they were in NY.

On a business trip to Minneapolis I ran into Hazel who had introduced me to AA in NY. She was now on the staff with Bill Wilson and I talked about Milwaukee, particularly this private type meeting. She suggested I get in touch with Bill and talk about it, which we did. We talked on the phone and he suggested I arrange for him to talk to the group. We had a telephone with a loudspeaker set up in a member's den and we agreed on a certain night that Bill Wilson would call during our meeting there. His wife was in on the scheme and the when the phone rang she told him it was for him and the guy was upset. He said, "I told you not to disturb me during a meeting!" And she said, "But it's Bill Wilson!" There he was on the line, talking about meetings and the solution for alcoholics, talking to everyone, not just a select group of people. They had a meeting but it wasn't an AA meeting, it was another kind of meeting, not AA. He went on for a few minutes and then Lois got on and said, "Hello! I want to talk to the Al-Anon people," but we didn't have any Al-Anon people at that meeting. The group appreciated Bill's comments and they were amazed that he would take the time to talk to a small group in Milwaukee.

I: This sounds as if Bill Wilson didn't approve of special meetings - men's meetings and women's meetings.

M: I don't think he objected so much to men's or women's meetings but he was very much opposed to private or invitation only meetings. At this time Bill was promoting the traditions and he strongly felt that the only requirement for AA membership was the desire to stop drinking.

I: Where did you go after Wisconsin?

From Wisconsin we moved to Columbus, Ohio. I took a very active part in AA in Columbus and became chairman of the Central Ohio Group Fellowship. The area stretched north to Mansfield and south to Cincinnati: approximately 44 counties. I encountered a lot of varied personalities and egos and found myself doing a lot of politicking to get anything accomplished. I didn't like that aspect of it.

I: Were there women in meetings?

M: Very few women. In fact some of the wives took a dim view of the women involved in AA at the time. Thank Heaven that has changed and women are today well represented in AA and play an important role,

I: Any particular names of people in the beginning who affected you?

M: There were four guys in the beginning, Jim, George, Tom and Ed. Jim had 5 years of sobriety, George had 4, Tommy had 2 and Ed had just a few months. I was impressed by these guys, so active in applying the message to the drunks under the bridge as well as to the bankers. Hopefully I learned from them. They were excellent role models for me, they practiced the program. Unfortunately, Ed could not get it and died as a result of drinking and smoking in bed. That was a terrific lesson. He was a dear friend who could not get the program.

I: Did people make a fuss about anniversaries?

M: In our men's group we celebrated anniversaries and I'll never forget my first anniversary. We had cake and within our own little group we exchanged gifts. A week after that Maggie said, "Mike, when you were drinking you were a son-of-a-bitch. Now that you've been sober this long, you are a complete asshole." I went oh my. Everyone in AA I thought was so super great and reasonable but at home everyone had to do it my way because now I was sober. I didn't realize how arrogant I was. We ended up separated again for another 3 or 4 months. It was a credit to AA that I stayed sober during this trying time.

I: What about 12-step work both in New York and Ohio? Any interesting thoughts?

M: Twelve-step work was done primarily through churches and people calling AA because of a spouse.

You were never to go on a 12 Step call by yourself and a man never made a 12 Step call on a woman. If there was no woman available, you kept looking until you could find one.

I: How about conventions, we had one in Jacksonville several years ago?

M: In fact I was chairman of the tennis committee - I love to play tennis and we were able to get 8 or 10 people. We had a lot of fun. It was one of the most successful, I understand, we were able to carry the message without incurring excessive expenses. Everyone did an excellent job.

I: What groups do you go to now?

M: I Am Responsible is my home group and I go to the Dutch Group on Monday night at Ponte Vedra. This is a small, intimate group of people and I'm comfortable there, I'm only 5 minutes away from my house.

I: How many meetings a week do you go to?

M: At least 2, occasionally 3, sometimes 4, but a minimum of 2.

I: What do you find different about these meetings, especially the open meetings?

M: I find the speakers talk about family relationships and personality disorders more than they talk about the drinking problem. If I'm talking with an alcoholic I talk about my drinking problem, I share what booze did to me and then what AA has been able to do for me.

I: What was the situation as far as treatment when you came in? Were there treatment centers?

M: There were not many Treatment Centers around. People would go to hospitals and be run out after sobering up for a couple of days. It was hard to get people into hospitals, you had to get a doctor to admit them with something like a stomach problem, he couldn't identify them as alcoholics.

I do appreciate the opportunity to share my experience. I hope it has helped for historical purposes if nothing else.

I: It has been very beneficial to all of us and I thank you very much.

M: One thing I forgot to mention, one of the most important thing the NY area has in carrying the message of AA is through the open speaker meeting. They have exchange meetings where groups exchange speakers with other groups in the area. I believe it is a good way to carry the message especially in open meetings. I'd like to see us do have exchange meetings here in Jacksonville.

I: Thank you, Mike!