

Allyson W. is one of our AA pioneers. (DOS 6/28/1975) She has been sober for 43 years. She taped her story in 2016 and the following has been edited from that tape with her permission. (Interviewed by Charles H., transcribed by Rhonda B. and edited by Charlie M.)

Interviewer: How did you get to AA?

Allyson: I went to my first meeting on a Saturday night and had to walk up a big hill in the snow. There was a greeter at the door, his name was Bill. He said to me, "Allyson are you new?" I said, "Certainly not. I know you, you wrote the Big Book." He never corrected me but he took me to a beginner's meeting. I didn't think I was an alcoholic. So, for me it was a slow, gradual process of getting educated to be able to look at my past in order to see that in fact I was. My early sobriety was exciting. It was thrilling and painful. I got married on June 28th and that was my last rum and coke. Three months later I walked back into AA and I was stark, raving sober and ready to drink. Quitting was never a problem, staying stopped was my problem. My parents were both alcoholics and violent alcoholics, and so a lot of my memories were repressed and I had a lot of denial when I got here. I went to meetings and they didn't talk about the Big Book. They talked about the slogans: Easy Does It - Live and Let Live - One Day at a Time. My sponsor started me on step 10. She would call me every morning at 9:00 and ask me what had happened yesterday and what did I need to talk to her about, how could I have handled it better, and what were my plans for the day? At that time I was so terrified of everything because I wasn't drinking and alcohol had been my courage. As long as I could drink I was fine. We didn't have very many meetings. We had meetings Sunday night, Monday morning and Thursday. We were told to go to a speaker meeting to remind you where you're coming from and to identify with the feelings, to go to a discussion meeting to keep you current and to go to a literature meeting to learn something. We didn't have Big Book studies back then, we had 12 & 12's, because when Bill Wilson died AA got so frightened of losing this gift, this unmerited gift of recovery, that we were taught the traditions. For my sponsor, they told me to find somebody I wanted to be like. She had her hair in curlers. I had 2 children and I was a homemaker, so I asked her to be my sponsor and she never told me her drinking story. I was sober a year when she told me she was a bar drinker like me. I didn't know that. She listened to me and she fed me back my strengths. We didn't talk about character defects. We just talked about how you get through one day at a time sober. The meetings were pretty loose. We believed that the God consciousness took over when we read the 5th chapter and whatever else we read and that the fight with the husband went away and the problem with your flat tire went away. All of a sudden God was in the room and we depended on that. We didn't have any rules, because we knew from the traditions that rules didn't work. We had a secretary. She was the one who opened it up. We had a coffee maker. We had a treasurer. I had an As Bill Sees It meeting for 3 years and my job as the secretary was to open it up, have a coffee maker, and then it was up to me to ask someone to chair the meeting. I wasn't to chair it. I was to get somebody. We always greeted people at the door. If we had a visitor from out of town we would talk to them, find out if they had some time, and then we would ask them to chair the meeting because we got bored with one another. We had a fire chief. He had 45 years in the program. His name was Glen. We had Dotty O. She had 46 years. They sponsored each other. Glen was all over the place with his firemen contacts and he did a lot of 12-step work and he didn't worry about his anonymity.

In my second year I went to the Philippines and I found that there was no AA there so for 9 months I was a loner. There was no AA and I was really pissed. My home

group back in the states had a group conscious meeting and they decided to tape their Thursday morning meetings for me. So, I got one of those and I had the Grapevine. There was a group way up the road but was difficult to get to because I was 7 months pregnant, and this was my 3rd child, and so I prayed every day. Later we moved to a small community where there were a few AAs. There was me and 5 guys. I think God knew that I was terrified of men. I needed to be with them. I also got a job working in the ARU, which is the alcohol rehab unit, as a peer counselor. I loved it. I was learning so much. I was taking classes. I was learning all these things and back home we were told in the beginner's meetings that it was okay to have "budding" (building up to a drink). It was okay to do a 10th step and know that you needed extra care and put yourself in a detox before you drank. It was okay to have a dry drunk and have no shame over that because it was part of the disease. By being responsible and learning everything I could about my disease and then finding my Higher Power, I had to have 3 stools. I had to have the physical, mental and the spiritual. I came back to the states and I went on a lot of commitments. I had a lot of fun. We went out after meetings. My sponsor didn't talk to me about steps. When I was ready, I said to her, "Can I do my 4th step now?" She said, "Yes." She waited for me and she was gentle. She said she would not take my 5th step because this was a spiritual program totally and that she wanted me to grow spiritually. I went to the Jesuit Priest and for 8 years I was able to do a twice-a-year 5th step with Father Emit and that was nice because I went to the same person every 6 months.

I have 3 stages in my recovery. I have my recovery, my first year in Maine and New Hampshire and then I have the Philippines 2 years, and then I came back to the states and Maine and New Hampshire meetings. I was 18 years sober when I moved down here. It was very difficult for me in Florida. Sometimes I'd leave a meeting and I'd say, "God, I know I have a relationship with you but I don't want the one I'm hearing about." I know that AA works here but when I came down it was 20 years ago. I was in my 40s. I had more time than the men in their 60s. I later found out that part of the problem was that I was from up North. I was an opinionated woman. I was independent. I was single. I was not well received. I have to respect that AA works well here. It really does.

I shared at the meeting the other day that when I was depressed my sponsor said to me, "I'm so glad we need to be grateful." I said why, and she said, "Because that tells me you're not a psychopath." She also told me, "The first year you are in intensive care. You are number one. You take care of yourself. You are no longer selfish. You are becoming self-caring". It was okay to say to the kids, "When I get home from work please don't talk to me until I've had a have my cigarette and my cup of coffee." I was a 3-pack-a-day smoker back then. I got a paint by numbers kit and when I needed to be alone I got out my painting of the last super. This was my signal to my family.

I was being respected by AA people. AA people were shaking my kids' hands; they were 5 and 7, and I had the baby. Pinky was one of the guys and when we got an aquarium my 5-year-old son named one of the fish Pinky. So, AA was becoming a part of my whole life. I went upstairs one day and my 5-year-old was standing in front of the desk and my 7-year-old was sitting behind the desk. I walked in and my son is standing there and he is rocking back and forth. He saying, "I got drunk. I ran in the woods. The cops chased me. Things are good now I go to AA." I turned around and I started crying and I thought I can have my kids play Mommy AA instead of Mommy Drunk. I couldn't get sober for my kids but I could get sober because I wanted to be a mother. I wanted to be a wife. I wanted to be a friend. I wanted to be all these things. That's what they stressed back then is what do you want, what are your wants and what are your needs? We used to say things like, "Bring the body and the mind will follow." That happened to me. They said that every alcoholic has ungrounded, unfounded fears. (That's from my favorite pamphlet "Members Eye View of Alcoholics Anonymous") If we stayed sober long enough we would find out that they were grounded and founded. So, in Salem, Massachusetts, which was close to me, women squashed their daughters because they didn't want them burned as a witch and that just carried down the generations. So

I believe that some people need to have their egos inflated, women and minorities in particular and some people have to have their egos deflated. I was one who had to be inflated. You had to love me enough so that I could feel safe enough and that's what they said. They said you have to be safe enough in AA before you can start dealing with the ungrounded, unfounded fears. Well, later I found out in the 10th year I wanted to kill somebody. I prayed. I did everything AA said. Finally I said okay God if I can't get rid of this then maybe you want me to learn how to kill somebody. So, I signed up for a karate class. I studied for 6 years in my 40s. I got a trophy. I wrapped my hand around that trophy and I said, "Do you see what that son-of-a-bitch got me? I got a trophy." I was now learning productive anger. Karate is slow, exercise, moving meditation. You kneel for 45 minutes on your knees in front of a brick wall. That's meditation, step 11. My sponsor told me in the beginning, step 1 you admit you are powerless, step 2 you will be restored to sanity so enjoy your insanity while you have it. Insanity is the stinking thinking that precedes the first drink. When things are going good and you pick up a drink that is the stinking thinking, that's the budding. That's what we have to be careful of.

Anyway, what I finally came to terms with was that I had been attacked in my home. I spent a month in the hospital. I was left for dead. I was medicating a post- traumatic stress disorder.

AA took care of me and my drinking so that all things could be revealed more and more to me as I stayed sober. Father John Doe says, "I stay sober on God because of the rewards." I did a lot of 12-step work. I was a Grapevine representative. For 5 years I did the answering service up North. I loved that because I would go to a lot of meetings and sign people up to take the calls and for people to go on the 12-step calls. Father Martin used to say, "What do you get for being sober, you get to drive across town and let some drunk vomit on your shoes." We brought people home to detox at home. I was told first you got to find out what you have done to your body so you get a physical. I was told every time I called my sponsor the question was, "Where are you physically? Is it once a month? Is it that time? Are you pregnant? Are you losing your testosterone? What is going on physically with you?" When I moved down here with 18 years my thinking went kind of screwy and I went to my doctor and he said you're dehydrated. I know that I need to take care of my physical, mental and the spiritual conditions or I can get in trouble.

I have not sponsored anybody in 20 years down here. The reason for that is because my program is different and they go to meetings and they get confused. I talk to anybody that wants to talk to me. I spoke at Westside and there were 52 people there and there were 4 carloads of people and they were the young people. I don't sponsor them. I just share what I can and they come to me. They call me. I had somebody call me last night and I say to them don't give me your authority because the process is booze dependent, group dependent, sponsor dependent, God dependent, and then interdependent. I don't conform well to a group that has a lot of rules because I know that the grace of God sits in all of us. I find that we are too quick to fix them. We forget that they are good and to nurture the strengths that they do have to make them the person that they are supposed to be. Bill Wilson said on page 21, my favorite, "We will someday rejoin the human race that we once rejected and they had rejected us."

I remember a young man who was slipping and slipping and he said, "I'm bringing all my chips back to the club." I said, "Well yes bring them back and I'll show you what we're going to do with them." He brought his chips and we went down to the Dollar Store and he picked out a frame with a pretty blue backing. He got some glue and placed them on the backing. I said, "On the top I want you to write, "I responded." He wrote in tiny letters, "I responded." He got them all placed and I said, "You see these chips as failures, don't you?" He said, "Yes I do." I said, "Well they're not. Each one of those chips represents that your God called you and you responded and that he called you again and again and you responded. You have just made a picture of your conception of God that keeps reaching for you and one of these days you will be able to stay sober. He is sober today.

I: Are you are very involved with other groups besides Orange Park?

A: Mostly, I've been coming down here. I have been coming here since 1990 something but I also go to Westside, Winners and San Marco. I do not fit everywhere. So, that is why I have to pick and choose; what's the culture of the group, what are the norms, and are they flexible, are they God conscious ruled or are they people ruled?

I: What year did you get sober and what year were you in Jacksonville?

A: June 28, 1975, I had my last drink, walked into AA 3 months later, and then went to the Philippines in my second year.

I: Your philosophy on AA is a bit different. You believe more in the metaphysical part of the program, fellowship, people with people, building relationships.

A: And I'm a loner. I talked to a young women the other day and she had 5 years and she went out and I said to her, "Your AA people let you down, the program didn't let you down, your teachers let you down" because she got sick and her resistance went down physically, so then she wasn't thinking well. Just like when I got dehydrated, I wasn't thinking well, and I said, "Nobody has ever taught you how to recognize a dry drunk. Nobody has ever taught you and God forbid you go to a meeting and say, I've done that, I said, I'm in a dry drunk." I'm not ashamed of that. I know that my God carries me when I'm in those times. I also want to really respect the fact that when I got here I needed God not to be that important. I needed them to say to me, "If you don't have a God, you can use mine till you find your own. Go on with the next conversation." It was no big deal but down here it is. You have also got your southern flavor, which is grandmothers and great-grand mothers, now you've got your grand sponsors, which is exclusive. It's not real inclusive. That is cultural.

I: This is a personal question. Which individuals were especially prominent in your sobriety in Jacksonville?

A: James R. I trust James and I check everything with him because he knows everybody. I rent a room and I always check with James, are they an okay person?

I: Any other thoughts before we close?

Our 11th step prayer says, "It is better to understand rather than to be understood." We were asked to understand the disease of alcoholism and its recovery. We were asked where we fit in our group, practice our program with each other because we played together, learned to pray, laugh and cry together. In some ways reborn was that AA became our family. There we would learn how we interact with others and receive loving feedback. Eventually we join the world we once rejected and once rejected us.

The Big Book suggested we accept outside help that would benefit us. I went to a Jungian therapist for 7 1/2 years. Carl Jung was very helpful to Bill with the spiritual program and sponsors did not hear our 5th step. We went to clergy because we wanted to understand our spiritual malady.

This is a God ordained program given to drunks. Carl Jung believed man's basic drive is to be reunited to his/her creator and he shared that with Bill. We can and do learn from other's experiences. We do this when we share our experience strength and hope but not when we quote, teach or preach.

I: Thank you for sharing your wonderful story.

