

Bob F. is one of our AA pioneers. He has 42 years of sobriety (DOS 2/16/76). Bob taped his story for the Intergroup Archives earlier and the following has been excerpted from that tape with his permission. (Interviewed by Tom W. and Charles H., Transcribed by Rhonda B. and edited by Charlie M.)

Interviewers: Bob, please tell me a little bit about your life before you came to AA. When and where were you born? What kind of childhood did you have?

Bob: I was born in McComb, Mississippi, on October 4, 1936. My mother was afraid to go to the hospital because she did not want the babies to get mixed up, so she had me at my grandmother's house where we were living at that time. My father was in the Navy, so we moved around a lot. During World War II my mother and I lived with one of my aunts and her husband in New Jersey. My dad was on a ship that got sunk and he survived after 12 hours in the water. He spent a few months back on the West Coast recuperating and my mother went out there to be with him. I stayed in New Jersey with my aunt and uncle and when my mother came back she was pregnant with my sister. We eventually moved to Miami and in 1946 my dad came back. My dad stayed in the Navy so we moved every year or two. I never stayed in one school more than two years and there were a few years where I had to go to two different schools because of the moves. I was able to spend my last 3 years in high school in New York where I graduated. That's where I started drinking.

Drinking was not frowned upon. My father drank a little. He did not drink excessively. I think I only saw my father drunk one time. My mother drank a little bit but I never saw her drunk. I was very close to my mother and father. I had a lot of support from them. They made all kinds of sacrifices to make sure I did well in school. They even sent me to a private school when we went to Bermuda, which resulted in me jumping ahead a grade when we came back. I got into a high school fraternity which was a social club and a lot of drinking went on there. I did get drunk a few times and got sick a couple of times. In spite of these experiences I still wanted more. I had this idea of being a John Wayne like character, somebody who drank a lot but could still be the hero and function. I wanted to be a big drinker. I wanted to be known as the guy who could drink a lot. So, I tried until I got there.

After high school I went down to Mississippi because I was too young to go to the Naval Academy at that time. I was going to go to Southwest Junior College for a year and take the competitive exam for a presidential appointment to the Naval Academy. I only did a semester there before I realized the stuff I got out of high school was further ahead than what they were giving at the Junior College. So, I just got a few books, took a couple of cram courses and stayed at home and had a job until I took the exam and passed it and got into the Naval Academy. That was in June 1954. I stayed in the Navy until July 1981 when I retired. I had a very good career. I had some problems with my drinking on a few occasions but in those days being a heavy drinker was kind of par for the course, part of the culture, you know play hard, work hard. I succeeded in that for the most part but I did get into some trouble from time to time, being late, but they weren't really serious things. I had duty at sea a lot my first 5 years serving on destroyers and I never drank on the ships.

I then volunteered for submarines and I was glad I did. I went through the submarine school, the nuclear power school, the nuclear power prototype and went to my first submarine in June 1965 out in Hawaii. It was the USS Barb. I qualified for submarines on that ship and was transferred in 1967 to Dam Neck, Virginia, to go to navigator school. In 1968 I reported to the USS Simon Bolivar, which was a polaris missile submarine. I did a couple of patrols as navigator and then moved up to Executive Officer. I did a couple of years on that ship as the Executive Officer. The skipper that brought me on there had been a pretty heavy drinker in earlier periods of his career but he did not mind me drinking. He knew when I had a heavy night. I went on to Air Command and Staff College for a year down in Montgomery, Alabama, and

that was a real opportunity to show off my drinking skills. Everybody down there was having a good time. It was a good course but there were a lot of parties, a lot of entertaining going on. I did very well down there and got selected for command and did that until 1974.

My next duty station was in Norfolk, Virginia, the staff at Commander Operational Testing Evaluation Force. It was there where my drinking turned into something more. I went through a period of about 6 months causing a lot of problems with my wife for one thing. On one occasion she threatened, "If you don't do something I'm going to go to AlAnon." I thought that was the most disloyal thing she could have ever said. It really ticked me off. At one time I quit for 6 months and I can remember a cousin of mine and his wife coming to visit us. They drank a lot and they were kind of surprised that I was not drinking. She asked me, "Well, Bob is this a permanent thing, this not drinking?" I said, "I don't know." I hadn't made any promises to anybody. I had a 16 foot runabout boat and during that summer I always asked a neighbor friend if he wanted to go fishing with me. He jumped at the chance because he didn't have a boat and he loved to fish. We would go out there in Chesapeake Bay and by the Bay Bridge and we would fish for blue fish and that kind of stuff. I'd be drinking my ice tea and he'd be drinking a beer. On one of those days on the ride back that beer just got to looking so good. I asked him if I could have one. I'm sipping on this beer while we were going in. Well, that worked out okay. About a week later I went over to his house to talk about something or other and he offered me a beer and I took it. I kind of got the idea that I wouldn't drink at home. I would just drink when I went over to his house. That lasted for about 3 weeks before I was back drinking. I still wasn't drinking at home, though. I started finding excuses to leave the office early to get lunch and have a Budweiser sandwich about 10:30 to 2:30 in the afternoon. When I'd come back in the office I was basically worthless. At that point the Navy had decided they'd had enough. The Chief of Staff calls me in one day and he says, "I've been getting reports from people that work with you. They are saying that your personality changes when you've been out drinking, not getting your work done. I made an appointment for you. I want you to go call these guys over at the alcohol rehab center for the Navy." He gave me the phone number. I said, "Well, I don't really need that. I can quit anytime." He said, "No, I want you to call." So, I called those guys and made an appointment to go see them. They said, "Well, bring your wife." I said, "Oh no, I don't want to do that." That was just too much humiliation. They insisted. I had to bring her. Well, they got me in there. The CO and executive officer of the unit indicated that they had both been drinkers and they told me their stories basically and asked me a little bit about my drinking patterns, that kind of stuff. After hearing me talk for a while and they were looking at me. I didn't have the shakes or anything. They decided that I was up there on the edge of the cliff just about ready to fall off. They said, "We don't think your case is severe enough to go to in-house treatment. We think what you ought to do is agree to go to three AA meetings a week for 2 years." They said, "You don't have to do that but I just want to remind you that when fitness report time comes up it might affect your fitness report." I reluctantly agreed. I didn't feel like I had any choice. I was willing to do anything at that point, I guess. One of the funniest things about that experience was after they talked to me and got me to agree to this they turned to my wife and said, "Do you have any questions about all this?" She says, "Yes, just one." She says, "I've been beating on this guy for years trying to get him to do something about his drinking and in 30 minutes you guys get him to go to AA, how come?" They said, "Well we threatened his livelihood (a silent threat to his livelihood and his source of income)." That was pretty much it. I understood that.

I: Was that your bottom?

Bob: That was my bottom. I think we had had a party scheduled for Friday the week of that interview and I had some people coming over. I think I drank that Friday night and that was my last drink. It was February 16, 1976. I have been sober ever since.

The first AA meeting I went to was in a basement of a Methodist church in Norfolk. I'm not sure I could ever get to it again because it's been a long time. I walked up there and there was a guy standing there; a standard AA greeter and I thought he was there specifically to meet me. The executive officer gave me three particular meetings to go to and I thought they had called in advance and said, "We got a guy coming over and take care of him." He was probably just greeting everybody. It turned out to be a great meeting. The people in it were a little bit like our Friday morning meeting; older and a little more mature, and when I first started there it was in a small church basement room and they had the steps and the traditions hanging up on the wall. I looked up there and read those steps. I said, "Huh, that's pretty good stuff for the folks that need it." Little was I aware at the time how much I needed it. I went to that meeting and then there was another meeting I went to on Thursdays and then one on Friday I had a meeting I went to one that was in a basement of a Catholic Church near Virginia Beach. I did my first year and a half in AA up there in Norfolk going to those meetings. My sponsor turned out to be an executive officer of the rehab unit up there. I have not had a sponsor since I came down here. The Navy flew me down to be interviewed for a position on the Admiral's staff here at Mayport. They put me up at the Days Inn down here on Atlantic Boulevard and I went to my first AA meeting at Penman Road and that became my home group for quite a few years. I retired from the Navy in 1981. I met Norm at Penman; he was a very fine guy who passed away several years ago. He was on the board of Al Pablo, and so just after I retired from the Navy elections for Al Pablo's board were coming up and he asked me if I would consider running for office and he mentioned treasurer, sitting on our Board of Directors and that kind of stuff. I said, "Sure, I could be treasurer, I guess." Not that I really knew all the duties. At that point in time I had one accounting course in my life. That's how I became the Al Pablo treasurer. I got elected because nobody else was running. In fact, I have been getting elected for the last 35 years because nobody else wants the job and I haven't run off with the money yet so I guess I'm doing okay.

Although I always took care of my Al Pablo service work for various reasons I did begin tapering off meetings due to resentments and such and eventually I stayed away from meetings for about 13 years until Mary Ellen and Bob got me going to a Friday morning meeting. She and Bob both had been going to that meeting. She encouraged me to try that meeting. She said, "I think you'll like it." One Friday morning I went down there and sure enough that got me back to going to meetings. That was four or five years ago, I guess. I've been going to that meeting and that's still basically the only meeting I go to. Occasionally, I will go to one of Terry's meetings when she is having a birthday.

I: What about your step work?

Bob: I just kind of did steps on my own basically. I really procrastinated on step 4 for a long time. I used the excuse that I wanted to do it perfectly as the reason for my procrastination. I hear other members talking about being very decisive and very thorough. I was nothing like that I just kind of eased through it and for my 5th step I just kind of did in pieces all around. I do not hold myself up there as an example for other people to follow as far as executing the program.

I: You're still sober though.

Bob: When I talk about the 13 years of not going to meetings people usually gasp and wonder how I stayed sober. I tell them there was a little series of pamphlet books called "The Golden Books." In one of these the author talks about establishing daily minimums. He wrote that it doesn't matter what they are just have a set of things that you'll do every day no matter what happens.

Bob: I do 3 things basically. I read something out of either the Daily Reflections or the Twenty-Four Hour book or something like that. Then I get on my knees and pray, not praying for myself but praying for others. I would then ask God to help me stay sober and not take a drink that day and at night I thank him for keeping me sober through that day. That was my daily minimum so that's basically what I did for those 13 years. In addition I would try to practice the AA program in my life. I had just gotten discouraged by the resentment that I had over some of the meetings I attended.

I: What was your perception of AA in your first years and how has that changed?

Bob: I think I was actually doing more for individual drunks during my first three or four years than I do now. I think I was closer to being a drunk, of course, at that time, so I had a lot more in common with somebody who was still having trouble with drinking. I was always available to drive people downtown. I did that a couple of times. While I was still on active duty I would volunteer to pick up the movie camera and get some films from the unit on the base and show them on Sunday nights at Penman Road. We would also go around to different meetings as representatives of Beaches Unity Group, maybe once a week, something like that.

I: Did you share your story?

Bob: Well, sometimes it would be as a speaker but mostly it was just to show up and say, "You know we're from Beaches Unity Group." I have only sponsored two people in AA and both of them fired me after two years. I haven't sponsored anybody in a long time.

I: Do you remember working through any of the steps?

Bob: They were mostly always there in the background. I went through a period here where I was just kind of not in a book study group. I just started reading the Big Book after not having read it for a few years. I remember going out sitting in a lawn chair reading the Big Book and thinking you know this is really good stuff. I really like the way this guy writes. Then I get to the Friday morning meeting and guys like Bob C. would kind of challenge some of the things in the Big Book. I loved the fact that he could challenge things that otherwise I would just kind of accept without thinking about it too much. His challenges would make me think a little deeper.

I: Any changes in AA that you notice that you don't quite agree with?

Bob: I don't remember them saying, "Ninety meetings in 90 days." I don't think they did that up in Norfolk where I came in. Had they pushed that very hard on me I'm afraid it might have taken me a little longer to get AA embedded in me; I would have revolted.

I: Any closing statement thoughts on the future of AA, any thoughts where it is heading, in the right direction or the wrong direction?

Bob: I think as long as we have got AAs helping other drunks that we don't have much to worry about, as long as we keep adhering to AA principles. Sure things are going to change over the times. It's kind of remarkable to me when you take the AA Big Book and when I read that the language is almost archaic but still applicable. Sometimes I think we have lost, in our general society, the ability to communicate with the written word. This is just a different style. I'm old so I happen to like the older style. There is not anything

that I could point to that should be changed for the better and I'm not worried about the survival of AA as long as people keep going to meetings. As long as they don't do the stupid thing that I did - not going to meetings for a long time. We had a lady that used to come to Atlantic Beach meeting that I became very good friends with. She was about 15 years older than I was at the time. She had been a newspaper woman in her earlier days and she has since moved out to Colorado to live with her daughter. She was 93, I think, when she died. She told us at the time when she started coming to the meeting up here that she had been living in Jacksonville for a while and had not gone to a meeting in 5 years. She had been in AA for much longer but she had not gone to a meeting for 5 years and she did not recommend that. That thought would occasionally go through my head. I knew I was on unsettled ground.

I: The younger people coming in today want to make a duality that every drug and alcohol is just another drug. Do you have any thoughts about that from your experience?

Bob: I do have some thoughts about that. I don't know if my feelings are all that smart. This goes back to my high school days. We moved to New York City. My dad sat me down and he said, "Son you might run into some drugs up here. Whatever you do; if you want to drink that's one thing, if you want to smoke, your mother and I smoke and we wished we didn't but if you want to smoke we'll put up with that but we don't want you to. (I didn't want to smoke.) If you want to drink, you know you can do that. We drink." They would even give me a sip of a beer or something like that from time to time. He said, "I'm deathly afraid of drugs because once you start drugs you've got no control. At least with booze you get drunk and get sober. Drugs - no control." Surprisingly enough all during high school drugs were not a big thing except maybe in Harlem or over in the Bronx somewhere but none of the guys that I went to high school with did drugs that I knew about. None of my buddies in the fraternity did drugs. We drank a lot. We had a couple of alcoholics in there that were recognizable as alcoholics even at that point. In my social crowd drugs were not even thought about. When I went down to Mississippi, same thing. There was no problem with drugs. I did not give much thought to drugs. I never gave any thought to taking drugs. I personally, and I could be faulted at this saying in the meetings, have never been able to understand or see anything appealing about drugs, especially stuff that you have to shoot up in your arm or you got to sniff up your nose. Where's the glamor in that? Taking a sniffer of brandy or taking a nice cold Budweiser or something like that can look very appealing. Watching somebody sniff something up their nose or shoot something in their arms or between their toes I don't see where there is any appeal there.

I am not as much of a hardliner as my old friend was on a Wednesday night meeting. He was a fixture at the Wednesday night 8:00 meeting at Penman Road and if somebody brought up the fact that they were a drug addict. He would say, "This is not a meeting for drug addicts. This is a meeting for alcoholics." Wednesday night then was a closed meeting. He was a hardliner in that regard. By this point in time I was beginning to see that younger people coming in had problems with drugs and alcohol. Still I kind of bristle when people, especially non-alcoholics come up and say that alcohol is a drug. Alcohol is alcohol and drugs are drugs as far as I'm concerned. There is a distinction. When used to excess they are both bad for you.

I: Thank you Bob

