

Final Draft

Bob S
St. Augustine
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Bob S. is another of our AA pioneers. He got sober in New York and has been sober for 52 years. He is a vital force in the AA fellowship in St. Augustine. Bob taped his story for the Intergroup archives in 2014 and the following has been excerpted from that tape with his permission. (Interviewed by Kevin G., transcribed by Rhonda B. and edited by Charlie M.)

K: Can you tell us a little bit about your life?

B: I was born in Brooklyn over a fish market. I lived in Brooklyn till I was 14 years old and then my father got a job working for the City in sanitation and he moved us to Queens, Long Island. Most of my young adult life was spent in Queens. I had 2 brothers besides myself, I was the middle child. I don't know whether my mother and father were alcoholics or not but they did a lot of drinking. My father would sometimes come home plastered out of his mind. I would say they had a problem. They both passed away and then I lost my younger brother too. I got one older brother and he is in a nursing home up in New York and then that's it. That's my family.

K: How was your childhood in New York?

B: I was always the rebel in the family, the middle child syndrome. I always thought I was being picked on. I was always getting in fights or in trouble in grammar school. I was introduced to a bar when I was 14 years old and the only reason I got away with it was I knew the right people. I started to hang out with these people. I got tied up with a bookmaker. I was a runner. I used to collect the bets and take them back to the bookie. I got busted many times. I enjoyed drinking at the beginning. I was young and I was having a good time. I got progressively worse; it started to take hold of me. I took my father's car one time to go for a road trip and I was half drunk. I wrecked the car. I couldn't get a license for a long time.

K: What age were you then?

B: I was about 17 years old. I never had a teenage life. Alcohol took it all away from me. I worked construction and I used to get laid off in the wintertime. I would

collect unemployment and pick up odd jobs now and then. My first stop every morning was the bar. I couldn't keep myself out of the place. In those days you paid a dime for a glass of beer and the house would buy two. It just got worse.

I know God was with me because I worked that job under the influence of alcohol many times and I don't know how I did it, I really don't. My mother and father used to take trips and I broke into their house and stole their liquor. I would say at 18 years old I was a full-blown alcoholic. This is my opinion about myself. I would say that I had a problem but I wouldn't accept the problem. If only my mother and father would leave me alone, if only everyone would leave me be and let me do what I wanted to do. It wasn't the people, it was the alcohol and I just kept going.

I met this girl. I was in the bar and she hung out in the Candy Store. And, we, well it is a long story. Eventually we got married and we were married for thirty-five years. She passed away since, but I was sober, I had some sobriety. I put this woman through living hell. I wouldn't come home, I would spend the paycheck and I was drunk when my three kids were born. A couple of times I was so drunk when I got off the bus that I fell asleep in the lot across the street. My mother and father bought a 2-family house in Queens and it had a nice apartment upstairs and we had to move in there. She was never happy living with my parents. She never left me because my mother used to find out how much money was missing out of my paycheck and they made up the difference so my family survived. They didn't charge us rent for living in the house. They were very good to her, but I just kept on and nothing stopped me.

K: What happened?

B: She put me out. My father and my mother wanted nothing to do with me. I had no place to go, no place to sleep, and I wound up on the street. I wound up in the bowery of Queens, hanging out with the bums there, drinking Thunderbird wine, a quarter for a bottle and I wound up sleeping in a cardboard box and not bathing, not taking care of myself. I wound up there. I was standing on a corner, trying to put the hit on people for money so I could get another bottle and this bum comes up and says to me, "I know where we can go to get warm and maybe get enough money to buy a cup of coffee." I said, "OK, we'll go." It turned out to be an AA meeting at the church where my kids went to school. I was ashamed but I went. Of course, they didn't know who I was. I had a beard, I was very unsanitary, very, very unsanitary but I didn't care. At that time the only thing that was important was to drink. And we went down there and I walked in there and these people walked up to me and one guy came over and reached out. (I break up when I think about this) and shook my hand. You know, I couldn't believe that these people were shaking my hand. One man said to me, "You're going to come home with me tonight." I said, "Oh no I'm not (laugh). I don't buy any of this stuff."

K: Did you go?

B: Yes I did. I always say I didn't have time to change my underwear. Later I got back into my house with my wife. They did that too. They were at my doorstep every day. At one point I was thinking why don't they just leave me alone?

K: They came and got you?

B: They kept after me. I say today thank God they did.

K: Did they have a meeting every day?

B: Oh yea, Queens, every day, and then I said to myself, "Well I'm going to stay away from a drink just to get my 90 day thing". In those days you had to have 90 days before you could qualify. We could sit out in the audience and share but you couldn't lead the meeting. I stayed sober for 90 days. I led my first meeting. I got to speak and again the big ego. I was Mr. Hot Shot. Half of the story I told wasn't true, I still had that alcoholic thinking. Then, I was sitting at this closed meeting in Queens and they were going around the room and when my turn came I really don't know what happened to me. I said, "My name is Bob and I'm an alcoholic" I said it from my heart and I think that was the first time that I really accepted the first step. I admitted I was powerless over alcohol and that my life was unmanageable.

K: How many days sober?

B: I was about 5 months, 6 months sober and I looked at it this way. My life was unmanageable, but powerless, not me, but then something happened to me at that meeting. I'm not going to say it was a stroke of lightning but from that day on I got active in the program and I started doing what they told me. I was so grateful just to be sober.

K: You were working on the railroad then?

B: Yes, I was with the railroad and I was getting promotions. I never thought that my life could be this way. Because I was sober I retired from that job 32 years later. I was a supervisor with 45 people working for me.

K: Did you have a sponsor?

B: Yes. He was one of the first people who ever talked to me when I came in. He was one of those guys that shook my hand. He was 78 years old at that time and I was scared stiff of him. He said this is green, not red, you know that's the way it went.

B: When my first wife was alive we always went to meetings together. We used to go to each other's homes. We used to talk. We were alcoholics yes but we also were friends, if you know what I'm saying.

K: Your wife went with you?

B: Yea, she was part of it and all their wives were part of it too.

B: They had Al-Anon in those days but the women always came to the open meetings we had. They went to Al-Anon meetings on occasion. It was all a happy family. Then we lived in my mother's house. I didn't have a happy sobriety with my first wife. I tried to make amends but I don't believe she ever really forgave me for what I put her through. When she got sick, I did what a husband was supposed to do. I took care of her for 8 years. She died of Lupus.

Mike taught me you have to get the spiritual end of this program to stay away from a drink one day at a time. Of course, when I first came in, I had none. The only Higher Power I believed in was AA for the longest time. I would say for about 5 years.

K: Really. Were you working the steps?

B: Yes, I went through the steps. I am 52 years in this program and I still go through the steps. You know a lot of times I get different meanings out of them when I'm reading them, so it is not a one-time deal. Everybody thinks it's a one-time deal but it's not. You have to get active in this program and you have to humble yourself to admit that as long as you stay away from a drink a day at a time there is nothing you can't accomplish because I got my self-respect back. I got my decency back. I know who I am and I know where I am. I didn't have much of a formal education but I did very well as far as providing and taking care of people. That's all because of what I learned in those 12 steps.

B: After my first wife died, a year later I married a lady in AA. We are together now 28 years. She's got almost 29 years of sobriety. We have a beautiful relationship; we have a good life together. Right now she is not doing too well. She smoked too many cigarettes in her younger days and has lung problems. We've been together for a long time. People took bets that we wouldn't stay together a week when we got married but it's been 28 years, going on 29.

My wife and I both love the ocean so we bought a house in St. Augustine by the ocean. We moved down here after we retired. I've been retired for about 20 years.

K: How many children were there?

B: She had 2 boys and I had 3 but they were all grown up.

B: Getting back to my story though, I was still living in Queens and like I said I used to go around talking at different meetings. One day I'm talking at a meeting, I forget where, some church in New York and I talked and somebody comes up afterwards and taps me on the shoulder. I turned around and this individual says to me, "I want you to talk at my 32nd anniversary in the Hotel Stratton in New York." I look at him. I don't know who he is but you know, again, big ego, "Sure, why not." It was Bill Wilson.

K: Wow, and you didn't know who he was?

B: I didn't know who he was when I first met him but before I got to that meeting I knew who he was. I'll never forget that night. We were in a big hotel, very fancy. Here I am, I am only a little layman, you know. I got up there and I looked out there and I said to myself, "I can't do this." I froze. I got too nervous. I'm standing there like a dope because I couldn't talk. He taps me on the shoulder and he says to me, "Tell them how you feel." Okay and I got through it. I talked for about 20 minutes. I couldn't wait to sit down. But I got through it and then I got to meet his wife, Lois, who was the sweetest lady, and all the people from the Manhattan Intergroup. Marty Mann was the only paid individual. I also visited Bill at Stepping Stones a couple of times.

K: Do you see a change in AA at all in the people or the organization from what it was when you came in?

B: In my days, it was all alcoholics. You didn't hear about anything else but alcohol. I don't know how to put this but today everybody you talk to it's not just alcohol anymore. Even in AA, it's a combination. At our Tuesday night meeting we try to have an open format. Somebody qualifies for 15 minutes and then everyone has a chance to share if they want to. I don't stop them from sharing about their drug problem, but I do remind them that this is a meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous and we also want to hear about your alcohol problem. You know what I mean? That's what I want to hear. That's the way it goes here. I don't know how it goes in other meetings but that's the way it goes in this meeting.

K: You talked about your first sponsor. Did you sponsor people?

B: I have sponsored concert pianists. I have sponsored priests. I'm talking about over the years now. I have sponsored pastors. I have sponsored Broadway stars. I have sponsored quite a few people in my life.

K: How do you sponsor?

B: Basic AA.

You want to lead a life? You want to stay away from a drink? You want to be happy with yourself? Come to meetings. Sit there and listen for 90 days and chair at the end of the 90. If you don't like what you hear, don't let the door hit you in the backside on the way out. It's that simple. Only you can make the decision what you are. We can't make the decision for you. You've got to do it. You've got to accept the fact that it's alcohol and you've got to accept the fact that it's a disease and not only is it a disease for you, it's a disease for your family too and everybody else that comes around you. You have to do it. We'll help you do it. We'll help you stay away from a drink a day at a time. I'll always be there for you but you've got to make up your own mind. If you want to play with it or fool with it, don't bother to call me. When you are ready to really put the cork in the jug, call me. I don't like to be that way but you cannot sponsor an active alcoholic. You can help them get into a rehab or detox today like they do, maybe that might work and that's what I generally tell them. I'll bring you to a detox. You get yourself straightened out a little bit. When you come out, maybe you can see what AA is all about.

B: My stepson got in big trouble with drugs and alcohol. He ended up getting busted for a felony and went to prison. I said to my wife that the only way this guy is going to straighten out is if we bring him down here and get him out of the environment up there. There is better chance here I feel than up there and we talked about it and she agreed. We brought him down here and the next thing you know he is in church. To make a long story short, he goes back to school, gets his college degree and he becomes a pastor.

K: Wow

B: And I am very, very proud of what he has turned out to be. He married a girl from the church and he is 48 or 49 years old now and all of a sudden she gets pregnant and I've got the cutest little grandson you'd ever want to meet in your life. He is going to be 5 years old and I say that's God's baby.

That's my story and I have been sober for 52 years and I love every minute of it. I wouldn't want to go back to that life that I had before I came into Alcoholics

Anonymous for all the money in the world. It's out there for everyone all you have to do is reach in and take hold. Just sit there and listen and try to comprehend what we're talking about. If you got a problem, there is much more to life that you can have than picking up a drink. I never turn my back on anybody as far as AA is concerned. The way that hand was out for me, my hand is out for them. I have the same love and the same enthusiasm for Alcoholics Anonymous that I had 52 years ago.
K: Bob thank you very much for your story.

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