

Cathy V. is another of our AA pioneers. She has over 40 years sobriety (DOS 5/3/76). She taped her story last year and the following has been excerpted from that tape with her permission. (Interviewed by Teresa H., transcribed by Rhonda B. and edited by Charlie M.)

Interviewer: Tell me a little bit about your life before you found AA? When and where were you born and what was your childhood like?

Cathy: I was born in the suburbs of Cleveland, Ohio. I grew up in a very normal, middle class family, my father worked and my mother stayed home. They were both college educated and both were heavy drinkers, as were the rest of their friends. I grew up with alcohol being the norm. I thought everybody did it and I thought everybody's parents drank to excess. Teenage years were typical, I went to high school. I drank a couple of times. We would take off and go to Kent State University with fake IDs and we drink 3.2 beer. I did not drink in excess until I went to college. That's where it all started. I always had felt as though I was somewhat inadequate and not worthy of good relationships until I went to college and started drinking and found out life opened up and boy was it good. Drinking never really affected my studies. I was able to stay on the Dean's list, make good grades and carry on, but every time I drank, I got drunk. I never drank just to have 2 beers and that was okay. I drank to get drunk because I loved the effect. I loved being smarter, more beautiful, more accepting. Lots of boys were interested in me and that's what alcohol did for me. I got out of college, met a guy, and we got married. He also was a drinker in college and alcohol started to be a daily part of our lives. He owned a company, which started to make quite a bit of money and entertaining was part of our lifestyle. Here again, I drank until I got drunk. I realized when I was 22 or 23 that I was getting drunk too often and I was turning into my mother and that was something I promised myself I'd never be. So, I gave up drinking. A couple of years later I thought, "Well, you know I'm pretty successful now and I thought, "I bet I can start drinking again," and that's where things escalated and my marriage started to go on the rocks. He was drinking in excess. He was finding a lot of interest in other women and I drank because it was the only friend that I had. We had moved to Upstate New York and lived way, way out in the Finger Lakes area and I started to find that I was drinking earlier and earlier every day and by that time I had 2 little kids. I thought I was still capable of being a mother but it was becoming questionable. Drinking escalated and the marriage really started to deteriorate. I found that I was drinking and driving with the kids in the car. I had an accident with the kids. The policeman told my husband that he smelled liquor on my breath but he didn't give me a ticket because he was one of his buddies. That's where alcohol takes us. It takes us to dangerous places, puts other people's lives in danger. I continued to drink until it got to a point where it affected my physical life. I was starting to lose weight because I didn't eat. I drank from morning till night. I ended up going in the hospital. My husband took me back to Cleveland and dumped me off at my parent's house and they took me to the hospital. They thought I was going to die. I stayed in the hospital a few days and one of my mother's high school friends came and twelve-stepped me but that didn't do any good because when I got out and started to feel better I went back to New York State and started drinking again. Then divorce was in the air and I was interviewed by one of the representatives from Family Court and for the first time in my life I was honest because alcohol came up in the court case and I was honest and said I didn't know what I could do. I felt as though life was over.

I.: How old were you?

C.: I was 27 years old. My downward spiral was pretty quick. I weighed 86 pounds and I looked like walking death. He told me of a rehab that I could go to that just started. Hazleton had their first offshoot in Clifton Springs, New York. He said they thought they could maybe help me. There was a program there.

Here again I really knew nothing about Alcoholics Anonymous. I just knew that one of my mother's friends was in it. So I went and talked to them and I met with the doctor there first. He asked me, what was the matter with me, and I said, "I'm going crazy and I drink from the emotional pain." After a few more questions, he said, "Honey you got it backwards. You drink and then you do crazy things and you think crazy thoughts. We have a program that will help you." I told him to take me right then. I didn't want to go home and get clothes. I was afraid because I'm a liar and a cheat that I would never come back. So, they took me in and a friend of mine was willing to take care of my 3 little kids and she brought me clothes and I stayed there for 28 days and that was my introduction, via Hazleton, to Alcoholics Anonymous. That was that painful, horrible, paralyzing fear that led me there. They opened me up to a whole new world.

I.: So, then that is the first time you heard of AA besides your mom's friend?

C.: Correct.

I.: Do you remember your first meeting?

C.: Oh, absolutely, I remember my first meeting. I went to Hazleton at Clifton Springs and we had AA meetings almost every single night at the rehab. That was my introduction into AA and I will say that they did an excellent job of tearing down all my defenses and starting to show me a new way of life. When I got out I lived in Canandaigua, New York, and that's where my home group was. I consider May 3, 1976, as my sobriety date because that was my introduction into Alcoholics Anonymous in Clifton, Springs.

I.: Can you tell me about your early sobriety, a little bit about your step work, any problems that you had in those first days?

Cathy: Well, in early sobriety I got very active in my home group. Back in those days there weren't many women in AA and all the people in my home group were men. They took me under their wing with tough love and drove me all over Upstate New York to meetings because there weren't many meetings where I lived. There was one meeting in Canandaigua and that was my home group. So, we would go to Rochester and Syracuse and we went all over, Attica Prison, you name it, that's what we did. They took me to the VA mental hospital and showed me what a wet brain was like. They showed me all the things that alcoholism will do to you. So, that was my introduction. I got very active. I did all the steps. I had 2 sponsors, a married couple, because I was a pretty sick puppy, and they led me through the steps. You know I really had no choice in the matter because that was the last door on the block for me.

I.: Did you have a problem with God?

C.: My perception was that God was a punitive God and if I did something wrong I was going to be punished. I didn't learn this in church. They didn't say that. My parents didn't say that. It was my warped perception. When I talked to my sponsors about this, their names were Al and Rita, and Al said to me, "Hon, you can borrow my God." Al had been on the Bowery in New York City. He had been in jail. He had gotten multiple DUIs. He had done a lot of things that I hadn't done and I looked at him and he was 10 years sober and I wasn't. So, he had to have a loving and forgiving God, had to. So, I adopted Al and Rita's God and he said, "Someday you're going to have your own God, probably pretty close to this understanding but you will have your own relationship." That's what took me on this journey of having an understanding of the God that I didn't quite understand yet but was willing to have a relationship with that God.

I.: Do you recall what AA's reputation was in the community?

C.: Here was my understanding of AA. AA back in 1976 was fine for men. Women drank and died. You know when you were a guy and you got drunk you were one of the boys. When you were a woman and you drank you were scum. That is not the perception and understanding today but that's the way it was back then. So, like I said, I got into AA and I jumped in with both feet. I was the women's representative for the jail and the Catholic Church, and I'm not Catholic, but the young priest there came to me and said that he had some parishioners that needed help and would I be their contact for Alcoholics Anonymous? I said, "You're dammed right I will," because I was really proud of being in Alcoholics Anonymous and I'm proud of what all these wonderful people and the God of my understanding did for me so I didn't die.

I.: Beautiful. What was your perception of the success of Alcoholics Anonymous in the general population and how has that perception changed over time?

C.: Well my perception when I came into Alcoholics Anonymous was if you want to be a sober human being you have to participate in your recovery. Tough love was the mantra that we heard back then. You had to do the work and take hard line suggestions, if that's what you want to call them; it was not an option. Those were the things that you had to do if you wanted to have a sober life. Today I think it has gotten softer. I think that relapse is something that is almost a given and I feel as though the tough love approach that I understood in the beginning is almost gone to the wayside. I am absolutely astounded at the amount of people around the country and around the world who are enjoying Alcoholics Anonymous, but I wonder on a per capita basis about successful sobriety, if people are taking it as seriously because this is a deadly disease. Alcohol and alcoholism is out to kill you and that is a fact. So, I feel that the perception for Alcoholics Anonymous has improved today, I feel that it is most welcoming and women are very active and women are no longer shunned.

I.: How long did it take you to ask Al and Rita to be your sponsor? How much time did you have?

C.: About a day.

I.: What type of sponsorship was that?

C.: Tough love sponsorship. I met Al at Clifton. He was a counselor. That's how I met him and of course met his wife through Al. Al was an absolute puritan as far as Alcoholics Anonymous was concerned. AA saved his life and that was his approach to Alcoholics Anonymous. If you want to get sober you had better be serious about this because it's a killer and that was his approach. He would do anything to help you but he made you understand that this was your recovery not his. He already had his. So, he was tough love and that's exactly what I needed.

I.: What was the format used in some of your early meetings; how were they run, what were they like?

C.: Pretty similar to today; read How It Works and the Twelve Steps and the Twelve Traditions. Discussion meetings were discussion meetings; there was always a topic. Speaker meetings were pretty much the same. I would go into Rochester for the speaker meetings. So it was pretty much the same as it is today. We did not have women's meetings. We didn't have young people's groups. We didn't have any of that. If you were an alcoholic you went to AA. So, that is one major difference. Maybe there weren't enough

people in AA to have the different types of meetings. All I know is it didn't matter what age or what sex you were you went to AA because that's all there was.

I.: When was AA started in your town or your area and how often?

C.: Bill W.'s brother-in-law was involved in the first alcoholism program in Rochester, New York, so it has to be back in the 1940s that AA started in the general Rochester area. What was the other question?

I.: How often were the meetings held?

C.: In Canandaigua, there was only one meeting a week so we went around to different towns to go to other meetings. We'd travel 30, 40, sometimes 100 miles to go to other meetings. There were large conventions. There were large meetings where Father Martin would speak and you could go into Rochester. I was extremely fortunate to meet him and be able to sit there and talk to him. What a marvelous man and what contributions he made to Alcoholics Anonymous; a common understanding of the disease of alcoholism. A Chalk Talk was something that I was able to see on a one-on-one basis at a large meeting in Rochester. You know these things are amazing and still work today.

I.: Besides Father Martin what individuals were especially important in your sobriety?

C.: Well Al and Rita for sure and when I moved to Jacksonville of course my sponsors here were. They played a major part in it along with the strong sobriety here in Jacksonville; Dave T., John T., and I can go on and on about the really strong sobriety here in Jacksonville. I jumped right in with them.

I.: How were new members contacted back then? How did you find new members or did they have help lines? Did they have any group offices?

C.: There was a main office in Rochester that I knew of. The newcomers coming into Alcoholics Anonymous either came from jail, institutions or Clifton Springs (the rehab). Some of their churches sent them. Like I said the priest wanted me to be the primary contact for that Catholic Church. That was the source of new people coming into Alcoholics Anonymous. You know it was a community effort back then because we did not have the amount of meetings that you have here, the knowledge of AA, you know. They didn't have Intergroup in my hometown; the closest one was in Rochester.

I.: How long did it take you to work through the 12 steps?

C.: A year.

I.: Are there any twelve-step antidotes that stick out in your mind you want to share?

C.: Well, I think that we as recovering alcoholics can plant a seed of recovery. We cannot force anyone to get sober. They have to be at that level of pain where they are willing to turn and ask for help but I do believe that we can plant the seed and I think that AA does a wonderful job of planting that seed. I think that we can give people literature but I think the strongest thing that we can do is share our experience, strength and hope because that's what made me understand that I'm not unique, that there are other people that felt that same level of pain that I did and there was hope. I think that's our strongest tool.

I.: Tell me about your experiences sponsoring others.

C.: Well, I have had some successes and I have had some failures for sure. I believe that people who were a success in Alcoholics Anonymous, with maybe some help from me and some guidance, wanted it really bad.

I.: What are the characteristics of some of your sponsees that have accumulated time in this program?

C.: Well the characteristics prior to getting sober were that level of pain, that level of desperation. The characteristics of them staying in Alcoholics Anonymous was jumping in and getting involved. Get a home group. Get a job. Meet every week with your sponsor. You know get those secrets out because our secrets are the ones that absolutely keep us in bondage. The people who want to get sober with the guidance of whether it's me or other people in Alcoholics Anonymous do it because they want to be sober more than they want to drink and die.

I.: Is there anything else that you would like to say or add?

C.: I can say that the 9th step promises I've been able to experience multiple times, multiple times. They told me when I first came into Alcoholics Anonymous I never had to feel this way again and I never had to do those awful things again if I was willing to work the steps with someone who had quality sobriety and if I was a willing participant in the organization of Alcoholics Anonymous but it was up to me. It was contingent on my willingness to be deeply involved in Alcoholics Anonymous and that has been the guiding light for me and my sobriety. Fortunately, I've never had to go out again and pick up a white chip. I've never had to experience that pain again. But, like they told me in the beginning, this is up to me. How willing was I to be a sober human being. If I was extremely willing every day, one day at a time, to complete the steps of Alcoholics Anonymous including the daily maintenance steps that we have, then I was guaranteed to have a life of being happy, joyous and free. That is exactly the result that I got.

I.: Anything else you want to add?

C.: Nope. I think that pretty well tells who Cathy was back then and who she is today.

I.: Great, thank you. I love you.