

INTERVIEW WITH JIM F.

June 20, 2011

Jim F. is a long time member of AA. He has been sober for 51 years. He got sober in Santa Barbara, California and later moved to Jacksonville. Jim taped his story for our Intergroup Archives in 2011. He was interviewed by one of his sponsees, Steve V. The following has been excerpted from that tape with his permission.

Interviewer: I am here with Jim F. I met Jim in 1976. He was 15 years sober at the time and got sober in Santa Barbara. Tell us about when you first came into AA and your relationship with your dad and Alcoholics Anonymous.

Jim: January 29th, 1961. I initially went to AA in the fall of 1949 with my Dad to encourage him and support him in his entry into Alcoholics Anonymous. I went to a few meetings with him. The only meeting they had at that time in Santa Barbara was the Monday night Mother Group that met on the second floor of, not abandoned but no longer used, school administration building. There were maybe 8 or 10 people there, maybe 12, and they opened with reading chapter 5 and then had the people identify themselves as alcoholics and the leader would call on them and they'd stand up and speak right where they were. They'd share for 3 or 4 minutes, and then he'd call on somebody else. That was the format of the meeting. I was fascinated by the people. They were all very warm and friendly and I remember thinking if I ever have a problem I'll know where to go.

I couldn't keep all those things in my head because it was interfering with my drinking. My quote "social drinking." So I spent the next 11 years after that struggling with alcohol and trying to prove I wasn't one. I identified myself as being a social drinker because I didn't drink in the morning. I became sober in 1961 not because I was an alcoholic but because I was in so much trouble and had worn out every resource for bailing me out of whatever trouble I was in. I had no place else to go. My Dad suggested it. He said I might like to "try it." It is a way of living. So I really listened to my father because he had a lot of money and I figured if I pleased him that I could screw up my courage and ask him if he could help me bring my mortgage up to date and things like that.

So I went to AA and learned the lingo, what you wanted to hear and I liked all of you, thought you were great, I didn't identify with you but I thought you were really nice people and I felt safe in the meetings which I couldn't explain at the time. Today I would say it is the love that made me feel safe. I was going to meetings every day and after the first meeting a guy came up to me and said "Jim, we can do this, not take a drink for just one day, just 24 hours". I said "I know, but I can't do that". And he said "I can't either but we can and if you make a commitment to yourself that you'll call me when it's necessary to take a drink I promise I won't try to talk you out of it". That seemed very strange to me and I was pretty sure he was lying. So when I really did need a drink I called him. I said "I've just got to have a drink, I am about to come apart" and he said "Jim, if you have to drink, you have to drink - that's what alcoholics do. My only suggestion is that before you take a drink that you think about where it is going to take you".

I hadn't had a drink in 15 years that I didn't drink until I passed out. I'd never taken one drink, not three or four drinks, I always drank until I passed out.

So we didn't argue about it but it would keep me from drinking. Sometimes I'd call him every 3 or 4 hours and he'd tell me the same damn thing over and over and over again. Later I realized the thing that kept me from drinking was the willingness to make that phone call. Not what he said, or even if I got hold of him. I just needed to make that phone call. I kept making them, hundreds in my first 6 months.

In those days there was only one meeting a day in Santa Barbara so you saw the same people over and over again. I'd sit in the meeting and they'd go around the room and people would share and I'd say, that never happened to me, I'm not like that, I'm not that old, I never drank that, I used any excuse not to identify with them. At every meeting there was a guy there named Charlie who would share for 15 minutes of the hour. And it was always about his mother in San Diego. I would get livid. Finally I called my sponsor and said, "I'm not going to anymore damn meetings". He said, "why not" and I said, "Charlie takes up a quarter of the meeting and nobody stops him, he keeps talking about his mother in San Diego and I'm fed up with it". He said, "you need to go to every meeting and listen to everything Charlie says because there is a sentence somewhere in that diatribe that will help you". I said, "that's absurd". He said, "I promise what I am telling you is true". To prove he was wrong I started really concentrating on what Charlie was saying and I discovered my sponsor was right. There was always one sentence in there that would help me. It was either something that would help me grow or something to help me not drink for a few minutes. But it was always something to help me. That was one of the most profound lessons I've gotten in sobriety. The ability to listen. That has been such an important ingredient in my sobriety.

Early in sobriety a man came up to me who turned out to be my sponsor. I didn't know he was my sponsor and I don't remember even asking him and I don't remember him saying he would be my sponsor but he was my sponsor for 35 years until he died. Howard passed away 15 years ago.

I: I didn't realize Howard was your original sponsor, I knew he was your sponsor when I got sober, I never made the connection.

JIM: He was my first sponsor. He didn't take me to that first meeting but he was there. And there was another fellow who was my co-sponsor that first year, Jack P. Jack and Howard were close buddies. I thought Howard had been sober forever but he had only been sober for one year. He got sober in January 1960. So Howard and Jack were pals. Howard was a sea captain and drove a vessel that served the oil platforms off of Santa Barbara. Jack would play cribbage with him on his ship. Jack was a car salesman. Jack was a buddy and mentor and co-sponsored me that first year and then moved to San Diego. He lived there until he died. Good man. He became a painting contractor and invented a new kind of paint brush.

Howard was away at sea a lot but I continued to use him as a sponsor. He was a good friend and a good sponsor but there is a difference in having a sponsor you are looking in the eye and one you only talk to on the phone. During the times we were apart geographically I did some things I probably would have done differently if he had been in Santa Barbara. He would have been looking at me as I explained what I was doing and he would have asked some questions he thought I needed. But it sounded great to me at the time and from the perspective of today, they were good experiences because it taught me about the deviousness of my disease and that I truly had it and it was out to kill me. I read something the other day which described an alcoholic as someone who lives in a mind where the walls are totally made up with mirrors so every place he turns he sees himself. And the miracle of recovery starts happening when some of those mirrors become windows. Wow!

I: What was group life like, your home group, the dynamics of that? What kind of service work did your group get into?

JIM: The original old group was the Mother Group. That was the main meeting. When I was sober 5 months my sponsor, Jack and I started a men's group. I was appointed first secretary, I didn't have a choice. That group is still going. When we got into that group we did a lot of things. First thing, we started a jail meeting. Two of our members went to the jail every week on our meeting night. The result was that the two guys were always late for our meetings. Because of this and because the group got larger the eight o'clock meeting would sometimes go to ten o'clock. We changed the format of the meeting to have a coffee break at nine so those who wanted to leave could and those who wanted could stay. The next thing we got into was to disseminate information to the medical profession so that they would have a resource to refer people. We decided once a month we'd buy a subscription to the Grapevine for a doctor's office. We'd go to the doctor first to be sure they'd put it in the waiting room. Those were the two main things servicewise. We were faithful to Intergroup and for years I was active in that. We always had someone on the board.

I: What about Jacksonville? What brought you here? What were differences between California and Florida?

JIM: I came to Jacksonville because of some real estate investments I had here. I found that AA is alive and well in Jacksonville as it is in Santa Barbara and the rest of the world.

I: Tell us about what AA was like when you first got here.

JIM: Originally I went to the Tuesday night men's group, and then I went to the JABA club all the time and that became my home group. I went to San Marco a lot but never considered it my home group. Now I think St. Nicholas is my home group. Betsy and I attend there at least 4 times a week. I am blessed to be married to a lady in the program. Betsy was saying this morning that it's amazing that people are married who both love AA so much. We love going to meetings. When we hear people say they are bored with AA I wonder where they are going to meetings.

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I: How would you say the treatment today has affected the alcoholic cause - positive or negative or no affect at all? What about the government getting involved with all of that.

Jim: We know how to deal with our fellows, how to interact with our colleagues. We know how to give them the support they need to build muscle into their own recovery. We don't do it for them. We do it with them. The minute the government gets involved, they have all kinds of ideas that have nothing to do with our recovery.

I: I like that tonality, building muscle into their recovery, I think that's terrific. That is a real powerful statement. It is critical. Would you say that you love alcoholics, you love going to meetings, participating? I know you sponsor a lot of people, you have a sponsor. How would you say the state of AA is today?

Jim: I hear people criticizing AA and saying it is not what it used to be, and it probably is not, it is probably better. More people are coming every day. There are clearly more distractions today. A lot of these so called recovery programs are a distraction to sobriety. The idea that you take people that are practically still wet, take them into a facility and take them through 4 or 5 steps in a month is absurd. I'd be real surprised if there was one alcoholic in a thousand that could even understand what you are talking about in a month. I seriously doubt it. In that case, I've heard of people getting through the steps in 2 or 3 months, which I think is wonderful, it is phenomenal, I don't think you could have been very sick to do that. But in my case, I didn't take the first step in six months and I didn't take the fourth step for a year after I stopped drinking.

I: I really appreciate you sitting down with us and thank you very much.