

Jim S. has been active and sober in AA for 44 years. He first got sober in New York, then moved to Fort Lauderdale and has been a very active member of AA in Jacksonville for the last twenty seven years. He taped his story in 2014 and the following has been excerpted from that tape with his permission. (Interviewed and edited by Charlie M. and transcribed by Rhonda B.)

Charlie: Tell us a little about yourself and how you got to AA

Jim: I got sober June 13, 1972, in New York City. My background is Irish Catholic from Boston. Alcoholism is not a problem where I come from. Getting arrested is a problem but not alcoholism. What was important to me as a kid was to drink with the guys. I grew up where all the neighborhood activities took place in a bar or gin mill. If it was a christening, a marriage, a birth, a priest's birthday or whatever it was, we were always in the gin mill. My father and mother were dead set against any drinking. They did not drink but every one of their 9 children was a drinker. There are 5 of us who eventually got into AA.

When I was in high school I used to sneak out of school with a young teacher from high school. We would go down to this Portuguese bar where no one spoke English and they didn't care how old we were. He was in his early 20s and I was 16. I started drinking whenever the opportunity arose. I knew right from the beginning there was something wrong because I couldn't predict the outcome of having a few beers and that got progressively worse. Blackouts were very common but I thought everyone had them. By the time I was 18 knowing what I know today I was in the full throws of alcoholism. By the time I was 18 I had a lot of alcohol issues, driving issues and police issues. There was not a lot of money in our family so money was hard to come by. I solved that by helping myself. It's called stealing. I suffered a lot from guilt because the way I was brought up did not connect to what I was doing.

By the time I was 19 or 20 years old I had a ton of problems. I was being told by judges, parole officers and family that I was a nice guy but I drank too much. Why don't you smoke pot? If you smoke pot you won't be as crazy. I ended up in front of a judge and was given an option. The option was jail or the US Military. I went into the military and I did very well in the military. Alcoholics love structure and especially structure that allows us to get into trouble. It's called the buddy system.

I was a draftee for two years and they offered me NCO school but I couldn't wait to get out. I wish I could say things went well after I got out of the service. I did well professionally but other things went crazy. I did the worst thing an alcoholic could do. I got married to try to be normal. Guess who we marry? We marry people who enable us or who are just like us. My wife was just like me, she did more with pills and pot while I did more with Chivas Regal and beer. We had a horrendous six years, horrendous. In 1967 I rolled a brand new automobile on the East Side Drive. There were guns. There were crazy things that happened in that marriage. The fact of the matter was that when I put alcohol into my system I was unpredictable and dangerous.

My last drink consisted of Mad Dog and Vermouth and I weighed 100 pounds. I hadn't worked for two or three months and was living at a men's shelter in the Bowery. I met an AIA lady and she ended up taking me to the Intergroup Office. I fell in love with AA immediately. There was a beautiful girl who was the receptionist and I fell in love with her thinking I was slick and cool at 100 pounds. I was just amazed at the reception I received from total strangers. They called a guy from Queens and he came in and took me to a meeting and the man invited me to his home group which was in Queens. I went the next day; I think it was, a Sunday afternoon. This particular meeting was a beginner's workshop at the Not Queens Group. The Not Queens Group had 3 meetings a week. They were just unbelievable. I kid about it but I am an Irish Catholic. If you asked me who my Higher Power was at that time I had two; one was Archie Bunker and the other was Howard Cosell. So, you get the mindset of where my spiritual life was. Anyway, these guys welcomed me. Bernie S. was one of them. He is believed to be the first Jewish guy sober in New York. He used to work at Towns Hospital, got sober in the late 1950s, I believe, or early 1960s at the latest. The groups that I went to were Elmhurst Group, Van Whip Group, and Bay Side Group. These guys all hung around together. I moved from Manhattan to Queens and stayed with a family there to get introduced back to work. My sponsor went with me to the corporation I'd worked for. I believe it was about a week or two after I was stable enough to be able to get on a subway and travel and he made it clear that what we had to do together was to see if: "Did I have a job?" The answer was, "I don't know." "Would they accept me back if they did have a job?" The answer was, "I don't know." "Is there anything that I should tell him about the job that he should know about?" I said, "I think I owe them a lot of money." Today it's called embezzlement. Long story short, I went back to where I'd worked and I met with the President of the Division. We got everything straightened out. I got a loan from Chemical Bank which took 5 years to pay off. He put me back to work after a major demotion and he said that he understood the disease. I was very fortunate. He had a brother who had a drinking problem. I would be allowed to come back to work but no more expense accounts and no more travel without permission. They put up some boundaries, and they were sane boundaries.

I became part of this home group and I don't believe for the first 3 years I ever went to a meeting alone. They picked us up. Most of them were at night. There were very few daytime meetings. I did go to Mustard Seed meeting every day, 5 days a week. I had lunch there and went back to work. That used to be martini time for me. My continuing education happened as a result of an insistent sponsor; nine credits a semester minimum; seven meetings a week, minimum. You will take the commitment to Riker's Island every Sunday whether you like it or not. We did. We also went to Elmhurst Hospital every Saturday morning with my home group and got a shot of vitamin B12 in the butt. What I remember about was that it stung like heck. They kept me extremely out of myself and into the group and the group was committed tremendously to helping other groups and exchange meetings. We made meetings in New Jersey. We made meetings in the Bronx. We made meetings in

Brooklyn. We made meetings in Manhattan. We made meetings in Connecticut. We went to Suffolk County and Nassau County. We were always on the go. The best AA meeting starts like this: Your sponsor picks you up in an automobile. You talk recovery. You go to a meeting. At the meeting you talk recovery because you're identifying, identifying with each speaker. Afterwards we would go to a coffee shop and have ice cream or some other dessert. Then you get in the car and talk recovery on the way home. So, that was called 4 meetings in one, all about recovery and some of the funniest things you ever heard in your life. That was my introduction to Alcoholics Anonymous.

I was transferred from New York City from Manhattan to Fort Lauderdale. It was a small town. Here's how AA works. I went to a meeting in Fort Lauderdale and I called my sponsor, Bernie S. I said, "Bernie, you're not going to believe what these guys do in Fort Lauderdale. They read all this stuff which we didn't do in the city; they say the Our Father and guys hold hands with guys." Bernie said to me, "AA don't need you, you need AA" and he hung up on me (click). So, him being Jewish and me being Irish, I called him back collect. Guess what he did again (click). So I found out that I had to adapt.

I was almost 4 years sober and my wife had become a member in recovery. So, we started having a family of recovery which makes a big difference. AA in Fort Lauderdale was unbelievable. We were fortunate enough to start a lot of groups. That was the responsibility. I went to Florida Mental Institution, Florida State Prison Forensic Unit for years and years. The same thing I was doing at Riker's Island. It was always service connected. It was never on an individual level. It was always on a group level. Groups survive; individuals run out of gas or disappear. We call them slips. So, I was taught to maintain that part of the service. My wife was very involved with General Service and Intergroup. I was more Intergroup, she was more General Service. She was District 9 chair for many, many moons. We stayed in Fort Lauderdale for 17 years and then we moved to Jacksonville. During those 17 years, I spent 7 years in airplanes, 39 countries mostly in Central and South America and the Caribbean. I had groups on boats. I had groups in St. Thomas, St. Johns, and St. Croix. I had a Home Group in Caracas. My Spanish was not bad.

I found out that Jacksonville was very different from Fort Lauderdale. There were a lot of clubs and it confused me. However, everything works when people get sober and anything that helps an alcoholic is good. I got involved with some great people here. We started the Men's Redeye Group. We did some other stuff and it took us away from the clubs and brought us to churches where we had the responsibility of cleaning it and then we had the responsibility of outbound service things like taking meetings to the Salvation Army.

That's basically my AA history. I get involved. I plead guilty to enthusiasm. Some people think that's insanity but I consider it enthusiasm.

Unfortunately, my wife died in 1997 after 31 years of marriage. I believe I had 26 years of sobriety and she had 21 years of sobriety. That was a hard time in my life. I had to begin all over again. Grieving for normal people has got to be unbelievable. Grieving for people in AA is unacceptable. New people do not let you

grieve. They are too selfish. I say, "My wife died" and they say, "Can I go out with this girl?" They could care less about you, not that they could care less, the self-centeredness of this disease diverts us from thinking about others and that was a life saver for me and so that was a good experience. Now, I am remarried and educated a couple more kids through college. God had different plans for me than to slip quietly into the night.

C: How many kids do you have?

J: My oldest son is in his 40s. He does drink. I have 2 step-children, one is 34 and one is 25. I have 4 granddaughters. My mother passed away at 94. Eight of her children were still alive at that time, it's now 7. There are 23 grandchildren and 21 great-grandchildren. I have a brother with 39 years sobriety. I got another brother who has 36 years and a sister who is coming up on 5 years. I have one nephew in the program and I have a brother who comes in and out. He is a Vietnam Vet. There is some schizophrenia there but when he is doing well, he is doing well because he goes to AA. So, we have an AA family.

C: How about sponsees? Have you had a few of those?

J: I was taught you put your hand out anytime when you are asked but not to babysit. I have a lot of guys I sponsor. We all go to the same groups. We all go to the same place for breakfast on Saturday mornings. We all do things with our families together. I go slowly with people. I believe that the healing is needed. While I sponsor a lot of guys, I don't make that my whole life. I have a balance. I have a job. I have a family. Balance is critical. I still make at least 5 meetings a week.

C: You now have a second career in the recovery field. How did you get into that and how do you feel about it?

J: I'm 70 years old. I probably have more energy and more life and more future than I did at 28 or 29 years old and what that is all about is anytime there was any difficulty in my life I always turned to sponsors who would say, "Who you helping? What are you doing for others, etc.?" Now to take that and be paid to do it, that is a blessing. I have seen how this disease continues to destroy lives and families, like never before and so I know that it's going to take a lot of us old-timers who are willing to get out of the mindset that we are old, get out of the mindset we don't have anything to contribute, that the new guy has got to carry the ball, that may be true to a certain degree, but they don't carry the wisdom. They have no idea how to honor the system any longer. Not because they don't want to do it, but because they have been taught not to do it. When a new man comes into AA, we cover him with love and attention like no other organization. We still do that. We do a good job of that but when an old-timer comes into a meeting, he is just another old-timer. The respect for his recovery has been lost. It's not the individual, it's how did he do it? What he is

like today? How did he stay sober when his kids went to jail? How did he stay sober when his kids stole money? How did he stay sober when his job went South because of cutbacks? There is a whole host of answers out there that only the people with the experience can answer. We got to get the people to start asking the questions and stop having these closed meetings where they talk about themselves.

God has a plan though. It is very interesting and I have seen this in recovery. I have lost a lot of people because of my age and time in recovery. Luckily every time I lose someone, God puts a new one in place. So, I don't have time to be grieving about the loss of the other one because you've got a job to do with the new one. So, the numbers are horrible but I believe the oldtimers can change it. We got to go backwards before we go forward. What I mean with that, we got to stop depending on rehab centers and detox centers. We've got to start depending on ourselves. We got to start doing what was done for us. We need to make it a personalized process. Everybody that has ever been sober for any period of time has always had a personal relationship with someone thorough recovery. I want to have a new guy tied up with a guy that has been around for a while. Let the guy that's been around for a while take him and bring him to his home group. Everything should be based on the group. Let them see what AA is all about before they get out of the institution so that when they go there they're prepared. We should be actively involved in Intergroup. We should be actively involved in General Service because these groups are our life blood.

C: Thank you Jim.