

Mike J.

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Mike J. is one of our AA pioneers. He got sober in New York and has been sober for 43 years. He has been a vital force for AA in Jacksonville as well as in many of the other places he has lived. Mike taped his story for the Intergroup archives in 2014 and the following has been excerpted from that tape with his permission. (interviewed by Bob G., transcribed by Rhonda B. and edited by Charlie M.)

Bob: Tell me a little bit about yourself. When and where were you born? What kind of a childhood did you have?

Mike: I was born in 1947 in Brooklyn, New York. My father was an alcoholic, a binge drinker basically, and he was very violent when drinking. I grew up in Queens, New York. I was the oldest of five siblings. I went to parochial school until I was 13. At 13 years old I started at a public high school.

Bob: I think there was a personal connection between you and Bill Wilson?

Mike: A very vague one. My father went to jail when I was 13 years old for a drinking episode. During the 3 years he spent in jail he got reconnected with AA and was active in AA in New York City in Queens County. He also participated

in the New York City Intergroup, knew Bill and went to some of the same meetings that Bill went to. He was very active in what used to be called the New York Intergroup Annual Dinner which later became the Bill Wilson Dinner after Bill died. So, I saw Bill on occasion but I did not actually know him personally. That is my claim to fame.

Bob: You were not in AA yourself at the time?

Mike: No, I joined AA the same year that Bill passed away (1971). I joined AA in January and he died in November.

Bob: Do you remember your first drink?

Mike: No, I don't remember my first drink but I do remember having alcohol as a toddler. As a 6 or 7 year-old I would sample the dregs of alcohol left over from family parties. My first conscious pursuit of alcohol occurred when I was 13. I barged into a circle of older guys who were passing a bottle of wine around and I managed to snag the bottle a couple of times as it came around the circle and took a couple of hits off of it. It was the first high that I can recall and from then on I was hooked.

I joined the Navy Reserves when I was 17 and went on active duty the next year after I graduated. I served three years of military service during which time I perfected my drinking. On returning to civilian life I knocked around for a while. I drank and went to meetings for a number of years before I

ultimately threw in the towel and decided to stop drinking.

Bob: When and how did your drinking get out of control?

Mike: It was out of control from that first time at 13. It made me giddy that first time and that evening I started to do some comical, outgoing things. It was a profound personality change for me who was the shy, wallflower type of kid when I wasn't drinking. From then on I don't remember any real fun drinking. I know that there were times when I had some enjoyable occasions or some situations that were entertaining, at least some where I was told that I was entertaining but all of them turned out the next day to be very painful for me because I had horrible headaches and hangovers. I always got drunk when I drank. I always wound up experiencing some period of blackout. I always got violently sick to my stomach. I learned 5 years after I stopped drinking that I was physically allergic to alcohol and didn't assimilate alcohol into my digestive tract. It collected in my stomach and then came back, so I got sick to my stomach 3 or 4 times a night. I learned through hindsight that I was really trying to drink myself to death because I did not like my life the way I perceived it to be. Life really wasn't as bad as I thought it was when I look back at it with some clarity but perception is reality.

Bob: When did you know you hit bottom?

Mike: Well for me that basically is a 2-part answer. I hit what I thought was the bottom when I came out of a blackout in New York City one Saturday morning and didn't know where I had been or where I was going or why I was in the middle of New York City. I didn't know where my car was, didn't know what I had done or what had been done to me, or anything at all other than the fact that here I was. I came to sitting on a curb. I noticed a bar behind me and I went into that bar to make a decision as to which way I was going to go from there and I had an experience that made a real impression on me. I ordered a beer and I know that they set it on the bar in front of me. I don't remember whether I drank it or not but I do remember that the atmosphere in the bar seemed to be closing in around me. Everything started to get darker and dimmer and I got this claustrophobic sense and the hair on the back of my neck felt like it was standing up. I was thinking that I had been halfway around the world with the Navy and was 23 years old, fairly intelligent and I had nothing to show for my life's experience to this point except that I could tell you what bars were like around the world and they were all the same. That was the sum total of my life and I recognized on some level that if I didn't do something about my drinking there was a strong likelihood that I might have to spend the next 40 years of my life or more living this way and not amounting to anything and I don't think I drank that beer. I do remember making the decision that I was going to go to AA and that I

was going to try to stop drinking and I consciously remember making the decision that I was not going to go to meetings in Queens because that is where my father's home group was and I didn't want to run into him or any of his friends so I was going to go to meetings in Nassau County. I stayed dry for about 90 days and then I started to have second thoughts. I began to question some of the things that I heard around the meeting rooms. To make a long story short I decided to try some controlled drinking. I was dating my fiancée at the time and we would have dinner on Friday nights. I decided I could have one drink on these Friday nights. I had one drink and nothing happened. Each Friday night for quite a few weeks I would have a different drink and I didn't have any cravings or urges or desire for another drink. After 8 or 10 weeks I decided not to drink on a Friday night and didn't have any urges or cravings. However, that weekend on Sunday we went to a Veteran's parade that I marched in and went back to the Veteran's Post afterwards for the reception and I still had no intention of drinking on Sunday because it wasn't Friday but somebody asked me to get them a drink. I took their glass and I went to the bar. I don't remember getting up to the bar. I don't remember getting drunk. I don't remember being in the reception room in the basement of this Veteran's Post with 50-60 of our friends and family members and my fiancée. I don't remember putting the make on a 65-year old woman. I don't remember getting into an argument with my

fiancée about who was going to drive home from the Post. I vaguely remember driving home from the Post. I think I had one eye open. I took her home. She was still living at her mother's house and I spent the night there. I got sick to my stomach on her mother's good carpet.

That proved to me that I was powerless over alcohol. If I could drink and lose control like that without planning to drink then I was certainly powerless over alcohol. It didn't occur to me that it had also made my life unmanageable but I was certainly powerless over alcohol and that was basically when I decided for the second time to stop drinking at least for the time being.

Bob: What about your early sobriety, working the steps and learning about AA.

Mike: I was very rebellious. I was very arrogant and self-righteous having been to so many Al-Anon and AA meetings because of my father. I thought I knew all of the steps and traditions. I didn't think that I needed a sponsor. I did stop drinking and I went to meetings. I did get a home group and I did get involved in doing things with the home group, particularly things that I thought made me look like I was getting sober. I hid out in service work. I didn't do anything to stay sober other than act as if I was staying sober that is why it frustrates me when people say, "Fake it till you make it," because I know faking it doesn't

make it. Faking it will more likely than not get you drunk if not kill you.

I spent 4-1/2 years on a dry drunk doing that kind of thing and I found myself sitting out in front of Islip State Hospital in Long Island in my car looking at a bar in my rearview mirror, looking at the doors to the State Hospital across the street and looking at the gun on the seat next to me in the car trying to decide which avenue I was going to pursue to put me out of my misery. Something told me (my higher power?) to go back to AA and try it their way, which is what I did. However, being the arrogant, self-centered drunk that I am somewhere between making that decision and getting home, I qualified that to I would go to AA and do it their way for 90 days because 90 days compared to the 4-1/2 years of doing it my way seemed like a fair enough balance of time but if their way didn't work, then I could go back and sit in front of the State Hospital and chose one of the other three options. So, I went to this St. James Group in Smithtown, Long Island. I picked the oldest guy in the group to be my sponsor because I didn't think he would live for 90 days and I would be able to get out of my commitment to myself. Fortunately, both Bill and I made it through more than 90 days and Bill introduced me to a step study meeting where they read a step out of the 12 and 12 and shared their experiences about how they practiced that step in their lives. A step study meeting is the basis of my program and I haven't found it necessary to take a drink in 43 years.

Bob: How were you sponsored?

Mike: Oh, like I said the first 4-1/2 years I wasn't sponsored very well because I did it myself. When I finally surrendered and asked somebody to be my sponsor, Bill picked me up almost every night to take me to a meeting and we would stop and pick up 2 or 3 other people and we would get there early to help set up the meeting and we would stay after the meeting to help whether it was our home group or not. After the meeting we would go to a diner and have coffee or sandwiches and after that we would take everybody home and we would spend 10 or 15 minutes in each guy's driveway and talk about the plan for the next 24 hours and usually I was the first one picked up and the last one dropped off and I would be getting home at 1:00 or 2:00 in the morning. When I started to complain to Bill that I couldn't keep up this pace, he looked at me and he said, "What time did you get home when you were drinking? See you tomorrow night Mike."

I moved a lot because of my military service, moved 5 or 6 times, and when I moved I always gave myself 30 days to get at least a temporary home group and a temporary sponsor. Usually, both the home group and the sponsor became at least permanent while I was assigned to that particular location and I tried to do sponsorship and work with a sponsor in basically that kind of format even today. I rarely go to a meeting by myself. I usually pick up at least



one other person, sometimes 2 or 3. Most times that I go to a meeting we go out for a meal afterwards. I generally like to get there 15 minutes early and we generally stay around after the meeting and help cleanup.

Bob: What was AA's reputation back then and how has it changed?

Mike: The reputation of AA was pretty good among people who knew what AA did but it wasn't well advertised and so the vast majority of people didn't really know what AA could do. Treatment wasn't available back in the 1970s. It didn't become mandatory by Federal Law for the insurance companies to provide treatment until 1978. Prior to that alcoholism was treated as a mental health or warehousing issue in the asylums and drying out places. When treatment became more available it became more socially acceptable to be an alcoholic and things began to change. More meetings began to pop up with more women and younger people. AA became more available to more people. This presented new challenges to AA and we've had controversies about all kinds of things like dual addictions, mental health issues, smoking issues, etc. It's been an interesting journey.

Bob: What kind of 12-step work was going on then and what changes have you noticed over time?

Mike: Well we did a lot of what we called wet drunk 12-step work back in the 1970s and even into the early 1980s because there weren't treatment centers. Word of mouth was the primary early means of communication. Intergroup was the contact point between AA and the public. Intergroup would initiate many 12-step calls and provided meeting lists. Sometimes meetings were listed in the newspapers. When new people would show up at a meeting we would introduce ourselves and give them our phone numbers. More importantly we would get their phone number. We would tell them, "Call me by 3:00 tomorrow afternoon. I'm going to XYZ meeting, call me and we'll arrange where we are going to meet so that we can go to the meeting together." If you didn't call me by 3:00, I would call you after 4:00 and arrange to pick you up and take you to the meeting. My purpose in life was to help you achieve sobriety. It wasn't to stand by and watch you achieve sobriety. That meant that we took them along the path of sobriety. We didn't just point out the directions for them to go. We didn't wait for them to pick a sponsor necessarily. If they called us, then we were their sponsor. If we picked them up and took them to a meeting, we were their sponsor until they said otherwise. You know asking the sickest person in the room to make the most important choice of their life is like asking a crazy person to pick out the right doctor. How the hell do they know?

Bob: What about your experiences sponsoring others? Did you have any favorites?

Mike: I don't think there is any one favorite. I liked them all. I loved them all. Some of them were more entertaining than others. Some of them were more challenging than others. Some of them were more interesting than others. Sponsoring people is, I don't know, it's a special blessing. It's a kind of a unique relationship; it's different from a friendship, although you get friendly with sponsees. It is the kind of friendship where you have to be willing to lose that friendship in order to save their life by telling them the truth whether they like it or not if that is necessary and often it is. At the same time you have to be willing to support their choices even if you don't agree with their decisions. I don't know what their Higher Power has in store for them. I have no crystal ball that tells me this isn't the right choice for them. There is a fine balance between being supportive, remaining objective and at the same time caring what happens to the individual without becoming possessive or controlling and without having them become dependent on you.

Bob: Has sponsorship changed since you started AA, in general?

Mike: In general it has. The intensity of sponsorship has changed overall. The intensity of the intimacy of sponsorship has changed. I think in a lot of cases it has become more

friendship than sponsorship although there is a lot of sponsorship information and a lot of genuine caring going on. I think there is some intimacy that is still there. I think partly because of the influence of treatment and the medications that are used now-a-days has moved or softened the bottoms that people hit and has lessened the desperation that a lot of people experience coming into AA.

Today the Bridging the Gap program, the Telephone Army and taking meeting to jails and treatment centers is the new 12-step work. Only a small percentage of AA members support these activities. We are not selling this. Sponsors are not promoting it. We should be making this stuff attractive as a means of demonstrating our gratitude for what we have been given. Our primary purpose is to carry the message.

Bob: What has been your experience in service work?

Mike: As I said earlier, I started out in service work as a good place to hide. It was also a good place to get to meet people and to get to learn how the program of AA works on a bigger scale. I have had the privilege of being and working in the service structure in many areas of this country. It is just amazing to be able to see people working together for the common good of AA and being willing and able most of the time to put their personalities aside for the good of making AA work and available for anybody who wants it. This is from people who are essentially selfish and

self-centered, ego maniacs with inferiority complexes, it is a miracle.

Kevin: What is like today? How is your life today and how do you think AA has changed it or impacted it?

Mike: My life is good. All of my needs and most of my wants are taken care of. In terms of AA, sometimes I get a little frustrated at the moment because things seem not to be working fast enough or moving in the direction that I think they should go or what have you. I think by and large that AA is as well as it has ever been.

Bob: Thank you.

Mike: Thank you, my pleasure.