

INTERVIEW WITH PAPPY N.
Past Delegate, Jacksonville, Florida
Suzanne H., Interviewer
July 17, 1988

(Pappy N. was a long time member of Jacksonville's AA. He helped establish three Jacksonville Clubs and for many years was involved in operation of the JABA club. He passed away in 1997 with 51 years of sobriety.)

S: Let's start with when you came in.

P: It was around Thanksgiving Day of November 1945. The circumstances were normal for me in those days, I came in handcuffs. I was sentenced by Judge Charlie M., so I came into court with a policeman on each arm and they took me to an AA meeting on Forsythe Street. That was what is now the San Marco club.

S: So the San Marco club wasn't open in 1945?

P: No. It was once an old barn and out back was a stable. It was bare brick walls with a carriage house downstairs and the one room upstairs was for AA. It had a long bar and they served coffee and coke. To my knowledge it was the only club in North Florida. It was called the Friendship Group, and then Central Group split about that time and went to West Adams Street. There was one at 10 West Duval, too. Then the head of the Central Group moved across the river to 1423 San Marco Boulevard. The San Marco group opened in 1953. It was the back of a restaurant at the time, a filthy, dirty building.

S: Getting back to the Friendship Group, the Central Group was at 10 West Duval and the Friendship group did what?

P: They went to Forsythe.

S: What was your reaction when you first came?

P: I'm like the average alcoholic, what you tell me to do, I don't do, what you tell me not to do, I do. One of my drinking buddies met me when I was sitting back in the corner all by myself, I was in total denial. He was practicing medicine in Jacksonville. He walked up to me alone in the corner and shook my hand and said with a smile on his face, he was a huge man and when he whispered you could hear him two blocks away, "Pappy, what are you doing here?" I forgot to tell him about the police and that I had been arrested and was staying at the halfway house. I told him a big fat lie. He said, "Pappy, let me remind you of a few things. You're hardheaded, you're thickheaded, and somehow you managed to wreck up everything you've ever come in contact with." Very abruptly he said, "Pappy, pack up and get out of here NOW, before you louse up Alcoholics Anonymous!" He defied me, he scared me. I took the challenge and I've thanked him ever since. A little candle lit up in my chest, a light of hope.

S: Do you think he did that on purpose?

P: Certainly he did it on purpose. He couldn't stay sober in AA either. He died drunk. Sad thing.

S: So he lit a candle in you?

P: Still burning in me. I remember what he said, it keeps me sober. That little candle and that desire is what keeps alcoholics alive. We have to have a faith and be faithful to that faith. As far as I'm concerned if we don't accept a positive attitude we aren't going to get anywhere in a sober way of life. I have to maintain a positive attitude every day of my life and then in some small some way I may be able to help somebody else. I thank God for what AA offered me.

S: I want to get into other groups in the area then. How did things progress?

P: I was a traveling salesman and had the opportunity of moving all around. I was selected to be the Delegate from North Florida. This was 1956-57. I believe General Services in New York says we're one of the oldest groups.

S: You've been involved with starting 3 different clubs?

P: Yeah. I had the pleasure and reputation of opening more AA meetings than anyone around because I had to travel, it was convenient. I'd go to a small town, like Madison, FL for example, would look for an AA meeting, find some people to talk to and the next time I'd come to town they'd have an AA meeting going. It was so easy, but so self-serving and so nice for me. Many times in Georgia, Alabama and Florida that is what happened.

S: Do you have an estimate of how many meetings you started that way?

P: I did keep track and at one time it was 56 all over, but I wouldn't swear to it anymore. It's very rewarding in helping someone get what you've been able to get. Here at the JABA Club we have over 400 members with 36 meetings a week. We have some special groups here some people don't approve of, two doctor's groups, a nurses group and a lawyers group but we don't interfere with them in any way. We have 6 Al-Anon groups. Some special groups get displaced and filter off into regular meetings. One of the doctors is a member of the professional group and a speaker's group. He loves both groups.

S: These other groups, Al-Anon and Al-Ateen just pay rent to the club?

P: They just donate, we don't charge them. We don't put a specific rate on any of them. It works out. Everything we've done we've paid for.

S: Can you tell me how you first got into General Services before you were an elected delegate?

P: I hadn't been sober 5 years when I was elected. There was very little coordination with General Services. The year I was elected for North Florida I don't think there were 60 people in attendance.

S: What went on while you were a delegate?

P: No change. It's like any other group convention. You stand up for what you believe in.

S: What has changed over the years?

P: The Board of Trustees. We lost control to the Board of Trustees, they run the business, and it's a business now.

S: Have you considered running for Trustee?

P: I wouldn't have it. I'm doing what I love to do, I'm happy.

S: So you think we could do away with the yearly conference?

P: It's a waste of money. Delegates come back with and pick arguments. They don't realize how tough it is to deal with alcoholics. Once a person goes off as a delegate you don't see them anymore.

S: What was your opinion of Bill Wilson?

P: Bill and I had an argument. I loved Bill and I think he loved and respected me. But I left Jacksonville with a letter to be read at the Conference and Bill said no. He said it would cause problems. So I read the letter anyway and it created hard feelings. We ended up good friends. Bill did a lot of things and dealt with his power and problems in his own way. Bill was busy on the road for several years promoting groups, doing what had to be done.

S: You've certainly made the JABA club friendly place.

P: That's what we do. We're not in this for the money.

S: Do they still have the annual banquets?

P: Yes. Since 1965.

S: That seems kind of late to start.

P: A lot of them started earlier and have closed up.

S: Intergroup was started before that and the Add-a-Line was first published in 1962.

P: I voted against Intergroup then and I'd vote against it now, too. Serves no purpose, committees on top of committees on top of committees. Organized mayhem.

S: It is supposed to help communication. Can you tell me about the 12 Step work in the 1950's and '60's.

P: That's the saddest thing about it - the saddest point in the history of AA, the lack of 12 Step work today. The greatest reward you get out of being sober is to have the ability in the world to carry the 12 Steps into action. It's a lost cause without it. We've made millions and millions of calls to treatment centers.

S: Usually the treatment centers get people before AA does.

P: And AA sends them there, that's where they have to start. AA is involved in the challenge. I can remember there weren't many centers when I came into AA. We'd go to a person and stay with them until we got a definite yes or no if the person wanted help. They don't do it anymore. It irritates me to get on the phone and tell someone I have a hard-core case and no one is there to go with me.

S: Do you suggest taking someone with you?

P: Anybody who goes on a 12 Step call without someone with them is a fool. It's dangerous go to by yourself. Had a man pull a gun on me once when I was foolish enough to go alone. But he came into the program and is still in the program. I don't think he remembers what happened.

S: Maybe if someone were with you he wouldn't have tried to be violent.

P: May have but two heads are better than one in an emergency.

S: Do you see many changes in the meetings over the years?

P: That's sad, too. We had a meeting last week for beginners, raw recruits, not many members in the program were invited, so they had nothing to offer. It was chaired by new people. It's like kindergartners running the school. That's sad. We never would have had that. New people would sit on the front row and if they started to open their mouth the chair would say, shut up! Six months later if they were still around we'd be happy to talk to them. That was a good philosophy.

S: You had a JABA Board at that time?

P: Even before we had a club we formed a private corporation, the day we started we had federal taxes handled, everything. San Marco has a board, too.

S: Did you have open membership business meetings?

P: No ma'am. The board runs it and if people don't like it, don't come. We're not going to have a bunch of controversy.

S: I can't think of any more questions - can you think of anything that would be historically interesting?

P: I'm sure, being the oldest member in AA in town along with a guy at the beach, I could go on. Our biggest enemies in this world are greed, resentment, envy, fear, frustration and self-pity. We have to deal with them one at a time and AA is the highest place a person can turn in this world. If you've paid your dues, why not enjoy the benefits? You don't have to be a drunk to be useless. If a man answers to his belly he drains away, if he answers to his head no one can take that away from him. The Five D's of AA - desperation, desire, decision, determination and dedication. Work with the construction crew, not the wrecking crew. When God seems far away - who moved? In praying it doesn't matter what position your body is so long as the brain is on its knees. You'll never get a busy signal on God's telephone line; His office is open 24 hours a day. You have to be thinking about drinking before you actually do it. It's wonderful to be wanted. If you have diabetes you take insulin every day, if you have alcoholism you take AA every day. Coming into AA is like walking out of a dark room into the sunlight - and I know that's true because that's exactly what happened to me. You should be enthusiastic about AA as you were about your drinking. When your head begins to swell your mind stops growing. The time to attend an AA meeting is when you least feel like going. Easy does it - sometimes that's all I have done. My job today is that I don't have to drink. When a man tries to control his drinking he's already lost control. If you aren't satisfied with AA after 90 days, we'll gladly refund your misery. If you have 4 problems when you get drunk, you now have 5. That's about it. I have pages and pages of this stuff from over many, many, many years. Just things I've picked up from meetings. One day at a time. Stuff like that. Each one of them helps you stay out of trouble.

(tape ends)