

Nefl1Ron E. is another of our AA pioneers. He has 52 years of sobriety (DOS 3/17/1961). He taped his story last year and the following has been excerpted from that tape with his permission. (Interviewed by Chaz H., transcribed by Rhonda B. and edited by Charlie M.)

Chaz: Ron please tell me a little bit about your life before AA. Where were you born and what kind of childhood did you have?

Ron: I was born and raised in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. I lived in a house full of drunks and I swore that I would never drink. I meant it then. I was maybe 10. My family drank all the time. Holidays were more than special. Thanksgiving is always on a Thursday and sometimes we had it three or four weeks later. They cancelled Christmas. This is not made up. This is a fact. I went to high school and was the first one in my family to [graduate from](#) high school. I played sports in high school and so I spent a lot of time in the gym playing soccer and basketball. The school that I went to did not have a football team because it was a school they considered the last stop. The next stop was jail. It was a trade school but I did learn a trade there (carpentry) and while I never used it to earn a living it helped me because I could fix up every house I bought. Somewhere along the line my parents stopped drinking, which surprised me. They would have maybe a six-pack twice a week and they would split it, two or three beers. I guess you'd call that normal drinking.

C: What did you want to be when you grew up?

R: I wanted to be a truck driver, my father was a truck driver.

C: When did you start drinking?

R: The first time I drank I was about 12 years old and it was VJ Day and they had a party on the street. They had a party there for the next 25 years on VJ day. They'd decorate the street. Anyway a friend and I had a dollar and we bought a six-pack for a buck. It was cheap. I drank that night. I had four beers if you take two and divided it into six, you know it should have been three a piece but he gave me some guff and I cold cocked him and took the last beer. So, the effect there was instant because it changed my whole personality. I was not somebody who looked for fights, although I never backed away from one in my life but I didn't go looking for them. I probably started a lot of them when I was drinking. That was the first time I drank. You know before that night was over I'm throwing that beer up on the street. I never did like beer. I never had a taste for it at all. That was the first time I drank. The next time I drank was about six years or seven years later. I was almost finished with high school. There was a New Year's Eve party and I got really drunk and sick because we were drinking hard stuff then. If you'd have asked me what flavor it was, I don't know, it was just whiskey and that was the second time. The third time I drank I was probably 19 and experienced the same results; I got very sick. There was nothing in between those episodes until I was about 25. I remember going to work. There was always a saloon right across from whatever plant I worked. Well, that night I stopped in with the guys and I got really drunk. The next day I woke up and I was sick again and shaking like a dog. I always had that problem and my mother said to me, "Ronald, me boy, you know you shouldn't drink, but if you're going to drink for God's sake don't suffer like that." She said, "You get the hair of the dog that bit ya." She insisted and so I took a drink and I found the magic elixir. It was like heaven. You could drink and feel good the next morning, just get a couple of drinks. That was the start of the trip. I drank for approximately 2-1/2 maybe 3 years and had really bad things happen, fights and going to jail but no serious time just overnights. Then one day I quit. Just like that because I wanted to quit. I didn't drink again for another 2-1/2, maybe 3 years, and then I started again and went through hell. I have a very short drinking

career, somewhere in the neighborhood of 5 or 6 years. For the last 3 years I was constantly being locked up. They let you out in the mornings so you could go to work. They actually were doing me a favor because they kept me from killing somebody on the way home when I was drunk as a skunk. I was a member of the Teamsters Union and always had a job. They always protected me. Over 5-1/2 years I went to jail 68 times.

So, that was the extent of my drinking. Blackouts galore, mostly every night, could never remember what day it was let alone what I did last night, you know, so that's kind of where I was at with my whole drinking career.

C: We'd like to hear about the bottom. What made you just end your career with alcohol?

R: Actually, my wife said to me when I was sober once, "Why don't you try AA?" I looked at her and I said, "What is the automobile club going to do for me?" Even with all the drunks in my family I'd never heard of AA. My father died when he was 46. My mother's brother, he was 32. My mother lived a long time and I've lived a long time. I'm 83 now. That's a long time. That is also a long time between drinks. That was how I got introduced to AA. She said that and apparently she knew somebody, another truck driver who drove for Pepsi Cola and he apparently got sober. Bob never stayed sober. He's dead now. He was younger than I was.

C: When and where did you attend your first AA meeting?

Ron: That was in Oakmont, Pennsylvania, which is about 12 miles northeast of Pittsburgh where I was living at the time. When I walked into that meeting, I remember saying to my wife, "Go in and look and see who is in there." Just because she wanted me to get sober, she went in and looked. She said, "They're just regular people in there." What did I expect her to find, a zoo? I sent this little girl in to see who was in there. If it was a saloon, I wouldn't have sent her in to see who was in there. She was willing to do anything I think to get me sober. That was my first meeting and I was drunk.

C: What was the name of the group?

Ron: Oakmont Presbyterian Church Group. I didn't get sober right away. I went to that meeting and I stayed sober until the next Saturday night, which was their meeting night, and I was drunk again.

C: What did you think about the people in there?

Ron: Oh, I had an opinion. They were all idiots. The women in those days that were at the meetings were basically taking their husbands to the meetings and the women sat on one side of the room and the men sat on the other side. Now, I never knew what the purpose of that was nor did I ask but they were segregated in the strictest sense of the word. It wasn't a fun place. There was a guy right inside the door and he put out his hand to shake hands with me and he said, "My name is Joe. We're glad you're here." I said, "You're glad I'm here, you don't even fucking know me. What is your problem?" That was my first person that I spoke to in the meeting. It was really like farting in church.

I met a man Bill D. and started going to the meetings all the time. For the next 87 days I would sneak a drink here or there. Because I knew you people were full of it. You don't take the first drink. One drink will screw up your life. That's BS. One drink is not going to hurt anybody. It's ridiculous to even say that. What I didn't realize was that that 1 drink would lead to another drink and another drink. So, I probably had 4 or 5 drinks for the next 87 days.

Obviously, I didn't tell anybody in AA that. Why would I let the cat out of the bag because it's gonna mess up their whole program.

I've been sober 52 years; I know how to stay sober. I haven't changed anything. That's where the arrogance comes in with me because here in Jacksonville they don't do things the way we do in Pittsburgh. It's entirely different. What I do is what I did in Pittsburgh. If somebody needs help, I'm not gonna back away from that. I'll try to help them. If you don't like the way I do it, that's okay. If you stay sober, find somebody that you can talk to. Find somebody that will sponsor you like my sponsor did to me. I'm still sober and Bill D. was my sponsor and still is today. Unfortunately, I can't talk to him because he is suffering from dementia and that hurts. I talk to his wife every once in a while and just say hello and she knows who I am and everything. It's kind of hard to watch somebody that you genuinely love go down the drain. If you haven't held somebody in your arms while they died, then you don't know Jack shit about the disease of alcoholism. The first 5 people I tried to help died. One shot himself. When I went into the room, there was blood everywhere. That's a tough wrap. That's hard to accept. I talked to my sponsor about it but not until the 5th one died and then I called my sponsor and he wasn't home, so I called my sponsor's sponsor, another Irishman and when I called him I told him the story. A guy just blew his head right off. He said, "Ahh." I said, "What the fuck is this, John?" He said, "It's not your fault." "You know everybody I touch dies. Why would I want to do this?" He said, "Well, why wouldn't ya?" I didn't answer that. It still hurts today and you know it's not easy to think about it. The thing that was always instilled in me was no matter what happens, my sponsor told me this, no matter what happens, no matter how bad it is, if you don't take a drink, you're going to win and here I am. I'm a winner. I don't care what you think about me. Anybody that can stay sober this long has got to be considered a winner whether you like what he has to say or not. I'm not any different in a meeting except that the one thing that I got here that I didn't get in Pittsburgh is a Big Book study group. I think it's paramount that groups do this all over the country. We read it sentence by sentence and after about 4 or 5 paragraphs we will have a discussion on those paragraphs.

C: How did you feel about doing the steps and what problems you might have had with them?

R: First of all you have to understand that when I came to the program I couldn't read. I had dyslexia but back then they didn't know what that was. They thought you were a fake, phony in Catholic schools. The nuns said, "This kid is not dumb. He does math and gets A's in all of his math work and E's in everything else" E was a bad mark back then. I didn't read a book until I was 46; the first book I read was the Big Book. Once at a meeting somebody handed me "How it Works" to read and it was upside down. I didn't know it was upside down. I read it because I got it memorized. I read this and Jack M., another Irishman, was sitting beside me. He leaned over the table and he said, "Ron, why didn't you tell me you couldn't read?" I said what the are you talking about, I just read the 5th chapter for you. What the hell is wrong with you?" He said, "You always read with the card upside down?" Caught. I said, "Yea Jack, okay, so what?" Jack told Coleman M. who asked his wife to teach me how to read. So, I go to Coleman's and he introduced me to his wife, who was gorgeous. I talked to her a little bit and she said, "Okay, we're going to go back here and do this Ron and I want to talk to Coleman for a minute before we start. Just go to this room." Well, she's Irish too. The Irish don't know how to whisper. They whisper and everybody in the whole house can hear them. She said, "Don't you dare leave me alone with that crazy bastard." So, I had a reputation even back then. I had to tell you that because it was funny.

Coleman would not go on a 12-step call without me. He would take me on every one because he and I were the only two guys that would go into a black neighborhood and speak and/or visit if somebody called and wanted to get some help. I remember that somebody asked me to speak at this meeting in Elmwood and I said, "Yea, sure." That's my kind of meeting.

People were down to earth. So, I go to the meeting and there was this big guy out front of this place who is like 6 feet 8 inches, weighs 400 pounds. I pull up with the brand new Cadillac that I bought for my wife. Anyway, when I got out of the car he said to me, "That's a nice car you got there boy." I said, "Yea, I like it too." He said, "I'm gonna watch it for you." He said, "I'll be out here the whole time you're in the meeting. Somebody mess with that car, they're gonna have to mess with me." He was one of the members of the group and he knew I was coming to talk and it was good. He watched the car while I was in there. I decided from then on I'd take my truck.

C: How's AA changed over the years?

Ron: I think it has to do with the institutions you have. When I came to AA, there was one institution in the whole state, 22 to 25 million people, there was one institution. The difference is that is all we had and there were a couple of hospitals that took in drunks. One was in Johnstown, St. Mary's in Johnstown, and St. John's in Pittsburgh, which I frequented a lot of the time. They had an AA ward and that's where I watched people get sober. They used to give you embalming fluid to get you off the juice, paraldehyde? Today most everyone comes to us from an institution and none of these differentiate between alcohol and drugs.

Whenever I speak I mention that I do not know a thing about drugs. I never took a drug in my life. I never smoked a left-handed cigarette. I never took a pill for any reason other than when I was force fed something in the hospital. Whenever I speak I want everyone to know I don't know anything about drugs. I'm here to talk about alcoholism. I am anti-institution except that it can be a place that you can get dried out.

C: Going back to 1961, do you think the formats were any different than they are today?

R.: Pretty much the same. If you're in Arizona or New Mexico meetings are often in Spanish. When I was in Puerto Rico, I went to a Spanish meeting there. It's really funny. They have this meeting in Spanish and when the meeting is over everybody speaks English. It's like, "Oh, what is this?" I don't think there is a big change in meetings anywhere. I think basically it's the same, except small cities that are different, friendlier. Out west, anything past the Mississippi River, the people are entirely different; polite, "Yes sir, No sir," no matter who you are. If I was going to move anywhere, I would go to Bend or Portland. Portland is kind of my favorite.

C: Did you do the steps rapidly or was it slow.

R.: I'm a believer in slow. Anybody that asks me to sponsor them I tell them that up front. I'm not going to tell you how fast to go or how slow to go. The slower, in my case, was better for me. I was 12 years sober before I read the Big Book. You just have to listen to the people that are talking to you, people that you trust. You have to learn how to trust. It takes some education before you can jump into the fourth and the fifth, and they say, "Well if you do it right away, then you'll be done with that and then you can move on." To what, what are you gonna move on to? You still won't know what end is up. Ninety meetings in 90 days, I don't have a problem with that but that's what they tell you in the institutions and if you get out of there and your wife takes you back, if you're fortunate to have a wife that will put up with you, you can't have her be a AA widow. You can't and expect that to last because generally speaking you would be sober but your wife is alone, your family is alone and how do you justify that. I can't justify it. I'm thinking slow. It's just my opinion now. I'm thinking there is a better way to go because somebody is teaching you. That whole 12 years, somebody is teaching you. I'm not saying that anybody should do exactly what I did. I'm just saying slow it down. I didn't do the fourth and the fifth step until I was sober about eight years. That did not mean that I was not working on it. That did not mean that I was not studying and trying to be a better person. I

stayed on that first step for 2-1/2 years and then I moved on. I always had my Higher Power. I didn't have to look for one. That was not a problem for me. I needed to do it right instead of what I thought was right.

C: Did you go into hospitals, prisons and jails?

R.: Yea. I used to go every Tuesday night to the Allegheny County Jail with Coleman. We also went to the institutions and a lot of us would go to hospitals where they knew us because we were alumni and they would let you into the drunk tanks to talk to people. St. John's was like that. St. Francis Hospital, these are Catholic hospitals that allowed this and Mercy Hospital. Back then we did all of the things that they do that our group does down here.

C: When did you leave Pennsylvania and come to Florida?

R.: I worked out of Florida but I lived in Pennsylvania. If you own your own truck, you can live anywhere. Because I worked out of Jacksonville, I got to go to meetings here in Jacksonville. At that time, I went to almost all of them. When I was on the road I'd plan my route so I could get to meetings.

C: I understand you met Bill Wilson.

R.: I had personal meetings with Bill Wilson on 3 different occasions. My sponsor and his sponsor were personal friends of Bill and they told him all the problems I was having trying to stay sober and that I wasn't doing real well, although I didn't drink, but I was, I guess today you would call it, depressed, angry, frustrated, because I didn't seem to be able to do what other people in this program do. I didn't have any success with it. For instance, my first 5 pigeons died; two of them in my arms. One burnt a hole in his esophagus and he bled to death. I was holding him. I was unable to help him.

Anyway, there was another pigeon I had that I was trying to help and he couldn't stop. We were at a meeting in the North Hills area in Pittsburgh and he was with me and he was drinking again and/or taking some kind of depression pills. I don't know what they were at that time. My wife was at his house with my children and his wife and his children. There were 8 children there and when we got home from the meeting we were going to have coffee with his wife and my wife and he said, "I'll be out in a minute." He went into the bedroom and the next thing I hear is a cannon going off. He took a 12-gauge shotgun and killed himself. So, that was two but before these two, there were three other people that I tried to help and I wasn't able to get very close to them. I don't mean close like friendship or going to somebody's house. It was kind of funny because they were all "fat cats," meaning they had money. It was amazing that with all their funds and stock market stuff all three of them died. So it doesn't matter how much money you have or how many things you have. None of that seems to count when it comes to alcoholism. You continue to drink; you die. Don't think for one minute that you can tell me something different. You keep drinking if you have this problem, you're going to die or you're going to be in a funny farm. I've been in a funny farm seven different times and I've been in jail 68 times; none of which is fun but they didn't have the rehabs back in the 1960s. I honestly think that God put those five men in my life so that I would wake up and smell the coffee. I know that sounds terrible but I think that's what happened.

In any case, I was taken to Founder's Day by my sponsor, who's Bill D., and his sponsor, John M., who is deceased. When I got to the meeting there must have been 500 people in line waiting to get their book signed, and my sponsor asked me, "If you want to do that, get a book signed, just get in line?" I said, "I don't care. I'm not going to do that." My

sponsor took me over in front of all these people and said to me, "You're going to meet him, be cool. Don't be some dumb ass, okay?" So, we walked to the front of the line. I was introduced to him, and he said, "John and Bill told me that they were going to bring you over but they didn't tell me that they were going to bring you to the front of the line." Obviously, we all laughed. He said, "We're going to meet later on and have a talk." We met and had dinner. It was Founder's Day that's why it was over in Akron that day. So, we talked about me and the trouble I was having. That I didn't feel like I was able to help anybody for any reason, and AA works for other people and it doesn't seem to work for me and that was the general conversation that we had. Bill Wilson told me how lucky I was to know that I had these people in my life, meaning my sponsor and his sponsor, that cared enough about you to bring you here to talk to me and I'm just a man like you. I'm not any different than you. Most of us don't have these kinds of tragedies in our lives but some of the things that happened to you were, you know, in your eyes inexplicable, but in our eyes, it's what happens to people who continue to drink. That's all they have to look forward to and you jumping in front of that door so that his wife and children couldn't see that mess in the bedroom was heroic. You made sure that your children didn't see that and nobody else was exposed You handled the police. You gave your wife the keys to the car and told her to take the kids out of there.

The other two meetings with Bill Wilson were relatively fun because we had talked to a lot of people since then and it was really a pleasure and I guess that those encouraging things from Bill really helped, you know, because he told me about some things that happened with him and some things that happened with other people that he knew in very early AA. I don't know what else I have to say about that, although I can say it had an effect on my life. It made me actually feel special that I had that opportunity but I didn't learn that right away either; that came later. I felt wow how lucky I was to have the sponsor that I had and his sponsor that were friends with Bill and how lucky I was to get a chance to talk to him about the things that most people don't get the opportunity.

My second meeting with Bill was at Founder's Day again, my sponsor and his sponsor, the same scenario. We were walking in and I made a comment to my sponsor. I said, "That's probably that same line of people that I got ahead of last time." So, as we were walking up passed the thing because I wasn't going to get in line. An autograph is not going to keep you sober. If you get lucky, God will help you. So anyway, I'm walking passed him, maybe 30 yards away and he hollers, "Hey Ron!" I'm looking around because I heard my name called and I'm looking around and Bill Wilson is over at the desk waving his hand at me like this. I put my hand up dumfounded like and waved back, and I said to my sponsor, "Is he waving at me?" He said, "Yea, do you see anybody else here he's waving at? Do you see anybody else waving back?" I was not laughing at the time but I couldn't believe he remembered my name. I was quite shocked that he remembered my name because I don't think I said anything to him that would have impressed him. So, it's just funny but that happened; I couldn't believe that he remembered my name, I could not.

C: Any closing remarks about AA?

R: AA is not for everybody. For me it's a life saver. I'm 83 years old. I've had five heart attacks and I've had heart surgery twice. I've had cancer surgery. I'm not what you could call a healthy person. I've been blessed that I got through all this and I'm still sober. I've never forgotten where I came from. You can't ever forget where you came from because you can go back there in a heartbeat.

C: Thank you Ron.

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