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George K. is one of our A.A. pioneers and lives in St. Augustine, Florida. George got sober in St. Augustine on July 30th, 1976. He is a vital presence in the A.A. community in St. Augustine. George taped his story for the St. Augustine Archives in 2019 and the following has been excerpted from that tape with his permission. (Interviewed by LeeAnn K., transcribed by Mykel M. and edited by Charlie M.)

LeeAnn: What was life like before you got sober?

George: Painful, very, very painful. But it was painful long before I ever became an alcoholic. Alcohol was my benefactor for many years. It gave me relief from the pain. Then I got sicker to the point that I really just wanted life to end. Alcohol was never my enemy, it just stopped being my friend.

I have nothing bad to say about alcohol. I'm very grateful that it's still being made. I'm very grateful for the barrooms, for people like me to have that moment of relief from their cares and troubles and woes. And especially for those who are prone to have suicidal thoughts to be able to get away from that pain.

L: So what happened on that July 30th that brought you in? How did you find A.A.?

G: That's one of the great mysteries that I still ponder to this day because I couldn't tell you why I called A.A. I had no thoughts of it, and I was just tired, and I just had enough. I am led to believe that it was the grace of God that said, "Okay. You've had enough. Now, here's what to do," without me recognizing that it was the grace of God or knowing that it was the right thing to do. I just did it.

L: You picked up the phone?

G: Picked up the phone and called. I was told that somebody would call me back in a few minutes. A few minutes later a woman called and said, "Are you the one that called A.A.?" And I said, "Yes, I am." And she told me her name and she said, "My husband's in the shower. He'll be out in a moment, and we'll be there in about 15 minutes, can you wait that long?" That automatically ticked me off and I said, "Of course I can wait that long" And I did. They came and she bounced out of the car and she said, "Are you George?" And I said, "I am." She introduced herself and her husband and said, "Let's go get a cup of coffee." We went to what is now the village Inn and sat there for several hours. They quizzed me for several hours, not in a pushy way but in a genuinely interested sort of way. I responded quite candidly and openly and that's how I was introduced to Alcoholics Anonymous.

From there I went to my first meeting. They were being

held at Flagler Hospital which is where we are now, but we're in the new hospital and the old one was down on Marine Street. We met in a little room, no bigger than a closet that wasn't finished. It had exposed beams, and there may have been 10 or 12 people, if that many, at the meeting.

In those days there was only one meeting in St. Augustine and that was the meeting I was at, the Oldest City Group. Attendance was about 15 to 18 people if we were lucky. We had two speaker meetings a week and one discussion meeting. The logic being we need to hear twice as much and speak half as much. Now it's the opposite with very few speaker meetings and mostly discussion meetings.

L: So what happened when you first got here?

G: Quite honestly I had never attempted to go without booze, it never crossed my mind. I would wake up in the morning and would end up in the pool halls, then the barrooms at noon, and cocktails in the afternoon, and dinner and wine and cocktails at night, and it never struck me to not drink. So away from booze and other sundry things I was good for about four or five days and then withdrawals like I have never known before set in. I nearly died from withdrawal and didn't realize how close to death I was. I learned later how dangerous it was withdrawing from booze and having no medication or booze to come down quietly, I came down with a crash. I'm very fortunate today to be able to say I'm grateful that I went through all that because, like my life,

I never want to go back to nor do I ever want to go through withdrawal again. I just don't want to do it.

As far as what I thought about the meetings and the groups, I'm convinced, based on what I know today, that when I came in I did the very best I could do with what I had to do it with. As I also know today most of the people that come through the doors do the same thing. I heard a speaker say one time at a meeting, "It's all right to come here sick, it's not all right to stay here sick." That there is recovery, and if you want to stay sick, that's your choice and if you want to recover, that's our choice.

So I took an active role in my own life for the first time devoid of what other people wanted for me. I began to develop a life that I would like to achieve, attain, and live, and I have surpassed that over the years.

L: So when you first got here did you think, "I want this or I don't know what I want, but this is Better than what I had." What kind of feelings did you have?

G: I know today, that everything I became I was taught. My guilt was not becoming sick, my guilt was being the performer of what my sickness caused me to do. And at that time I knew nothing about trusting. I really knew nothing about the 12 steps principles.

I learned it's not important what other people do,

It's only important what I do. That's what I teach the men I work with. If other people want to stay sick, that's their right, allow them that privilege and keep progressing with your own life, which is what I had to do and did do.

The joy of recovery is that I became convinced that my life was unmanageable and could readily recognize what my sickness caused me -- how my sickness caused me to live. I was full of all those negative emotions that had become my traveling companions. Wanting to rid myself of them did not rid myself of them.

What that want has done and is still doing for me 43 years later is propelling me to continue on seeking, to continue on learning, and to continue on practicing. It's so much easier to understand sickness today than my capabilities were when I came into the program.

I advocate to every person I work with, "Do not accept me as a bastion of truth, accept the Big Book as being truth and me as a purveyor of that truth, not me being the truth. I am the purveyor of it." I live the truth today as best I can.

L: So when you first started doing the steps with your sponsors what was that like?

G: My sponsors never spoke to me about the steps, never, never. Never talked to me about the principles. They were big proponents of, and their lives denoted it, of

gratitude. And every time I would speak with them they would say, "Oh, boy, don't you have something to be grateful for." I would tell them about a new revelation, "Oh, don't you have something to be grateful for."

I asked them one time why they never spoke to me about the steps. And the reply was twofold. "We don't want you to put all your eggs in our basket because we have clay feet, too. If you're in a meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous, you're going to hear about the steps. You're going to have different types of input from different people concerning the steps. You're going to have different degrees of expectations as to what the steps will do for you, and we don't want to prejudice you with what we feel and how we feel the steps should be worked because to us there is no right way or wrong way to work the steps."

L: So then how did you work the steps?

G: I lived the steps. And it's not a question of working, it was a question of accepting the steps. I hear that word "work" all the time and it's most daunting for me because it belittles the individual and it belittles the program of Alcoholics Anonymous.

L: Right. Because it sort of says, do 1 through 12 and you're done versus this is a lifelong process?

G: Absolutely. And it countermands all that these people love to gloriously espouse acceptance. Acceptance is the key to my program. Well, you can't practice a principle until you accept the principle. If you don't accept the principle, you

haven't got the principle and then there's no way you can practice it.

I spoke the other day on forgiveness. After I completed the 4th step, again went to my sponsors and told them and it explained to me the cause of my symptoms. From an abusive mother, to an absent father, to sibling rivalry, to social condemnation, to all the things that created my sickness and kept me in bondage for so many years. And I was very resentful and even more resentful after really seeing it in black and white than ever before.

And I went to them and they didn't tell me anything, all they said was, "Well, it sounds like you just might need to start forgiving." And that absolutely floored me, to forgive. How do you forgive? I didn't know how to forgive. Do you know how to forgive? How do you forgive?

L: I've studied for a long time on how to forgive. I've done a lot of work. I didn't just know automatically.

G: And I spoke on that very thing. I had to go to people in this program that I didn't like and yet I would hear them say something and it would be good and logical and even though I disliked them I liked what they had to say. And I would go to them and ask them about it. I would go to people I did like and did respect and ask them, "What does it do for you? How does it make you feel?"

I use the very thing my sponsor said about the principles of the steps, I have used that formula in

virtually every stage of learning. Never accept one person's opinion, but learn the variants of how to get to Jacksonville when one person's only giving you one road there and you know there are many more. So I find that fascinating today and I revel in it.

Am I capable of having a resentment today? Absolutely. That's part of my normal state of human psyche. My joy today is that just as quick as it comes in, it goes out. It doesn't take root and grow and that's my joy. What took time, was the learning stamina, just patience, tolerance, understanding, kindness. Every time I had a resentment I had to practice each and every one of those in order for it to vacate. If I didn't practice or left out any, if I wasn't kind to myself I had a resentment toward me. If I wasn't patient with them, I kept a resentment. If I wasn't capable of desires and becoming willing to re-enter their life in a helpful stage, stay away from them. These were things that took time.

L: How much time?

G: I understand today that any time I have been given a

dose of medicine I have had to wait for the medicine to
impregnate my body in order to do what it's supposed to do.
And the same thing is true about spiritual and mental
evolution. Exposure to does not mean instant understanding, it
just means exposure to. I was exposed to everything concerning
recovery in the first 30 days, but it's taken me years and I'm
still finding out and experiencing things that I learned and
was exposed to in the first 30 days. I'm a big proponent of
giving time, time.

L: So did you have other sponsors or did you just have
the one set of sponsors?

G: Only had the one set

L: Did you do a 5th step with them?

G: No. I did a 5th step with my friend Melrose George, I
have never learned his last name, he's
now gone. But I met him the first time and he came in the

room and he said, "My name is George. I'm on the 3rd step practicing the 11th step," and I liked that. I liked that. Because that really was what I know today, and every person does, when they come in the rooms and not realizing they're doing it.

They come in the rooms and recite The Lord's Prayer and recite The Serenity Prayer and hold hands and have a moment of meditation. And the 11th step simply says, "Continue to improve our conscious contact." Steps 2 and 3 get us in contact with that power and the intermediate steps are the ones that bring understanding and right to that power. I will not proclaim myself as weak, dumb or ignorant because that would be saying I don't have any right to that power. Today if I make a mistake it's just what the last word says, a mistake. It's not an intent. I make many mistakes. If I have to, I am so grateful that making an amends is like forgiveness, it's a nanosecond. I don't have to wait until nighttime to go up to someone and say I'm sorry.

I've had so many wonderful experiences

outside of the program. In the third year of my program when I wanted so desperately to be convinced that not only had I turned my will and life over to God, but that God truly accepted it. I wanted that desperately and yet everything in my world was falling apart.

The third year was worse than any year that I have ever had in my life. My life partner was dying, I had no job, I had no money, I went hungry and I was living in a truck. I wasn't homeless but I had no money for motel rooms. I was undergoing cancer treatment in Gainesville. And I would walk three miles to a meeting, and at the meeting they had a big bowl of popcorn, and I would try to get there early enough to sit next to the popcorn so I could get something to eat.

I was in a laundromat while my partner was in the hospital. I was hurting so bad and there was a black woman there and I had nobody to talk to and I looked at her and I said, "Please, talk to me." And she said to me, "Mister, wait a minute. Let me talk to Jesus first." And she walked around behind the dryers and then about a minute later she came back and she said, "All right, mister," she said, "Let's talk." And I told her everything that was going on, the pain I was in and she looked at me and she said, "Mister," she said, "You gonna be all right. I know you gonna be all right." And I ask her, I said, "Have you ever undergone

anything like this before?"

And she smiled and she



said, "Mister, I had twin boys and I loved them dearly and still do," and she said, "They went swimming together in the coquina ponds and they drowned three months ago." I really broke down then and I said, "I'm sorry, I didn't know that otherwise I wouldn't have talked to you." And she says, "Oh, no, mister, don't worry about it." And I said, "If they were back what

would you say, would you say anything, or do anything different?" And she said, "No, sir, not one thing." And I said, "Why?" And she said, "Because every day of their life I told them 'God loves you and I love you.'" And I have never forgotten that and every man that I work with when I leave them, that's the last thing I leave them with "God loves you and I love you."

So you know fellowship is one thing, all my principles and all my affairs are different, I don't seek total recovery in the rooms, nor do I bring total recovery to the world. I let the world do with me because that's how I'm directed by the God of my understanding. The Book says, "We stop fighting anything and anybody, even alcohol." I had no axes to grind with the churches, I had no axes to grind with the institutions, I had no axes to grind with the judicial system, I just stopped fighting all that.

L: How many men do you sponsor now?

G: Quite honestly I don't know.

I was thinking the other day I am truly blessed. I have over eight men that still consider me their sponsor that have over 30 years in recovery. They have men with 20 and 25 years of recovery. I teach the ripple effect, that one good deed begets another good deed begets another good deed. And so does one bad deed. Make a decision if you want to put out good deeds or bad deeds and it's your right to do either one. I do not believe in telling another human being what they should do or shouldn't do. I can only share my experience and my strength.

L: That's good stuff. Is there anything else you want to include in your story?

G: The one great lacking in my life and what I'm convinced is lacking in every alcoholics life initially is belief in self. There is a meditation tape on the line today that's really intriguing. It's titled "F all that stuff and Recover." And I love that. I don't mince words with people in the rooms or out of the rooms, I don't, I can't.

The joy is being true to self. On one of our medallions we say, "To thy own self be true". When does that begin? For me it began the moment God allowed me the privilege of putting that drink down and then growing into the right to keep that drink away from me. Because I am protected today. I was then, but I didn't recognize it, it had no meaning. I do recognize my protection today. It

has every meaning to me and that's what I am more willing to fight for today than anything else in my life. Above everything else in my daily prayers is the power to have no other guide before the God of my love and understanding. I had many God's as a drunk: the God of fear, the God of grief, the God of sex, the God of lust. Today I only seek two things and the two things I seek cannot be torn down. They can only be rejected, but they cannot be torn down. Truth is perfect, love is power. The more I love you, the more powerful I am.

L: Amen.

G: So anything else you'd like to know?

L: That was pretty awesome. How many meetings do you go to?

G: Two or three a day.

L: A day?

G: Yes