

Steve V. is one of our AA pioneers. He got sober on June 27, 1976 and has 43 years of sobriety. He is a vital presence in the AA community in Jacksonville. He recorded his story in 2018 and the following has been excerpted from that tape with his permission. (Interviewed by Tom F., transcribed by Rhonda B. and edited by Charlie M.)

Tom: Tell us a little about yourself. What was your childhood like, where were you were born, when did you start drinking, and when did it became a problem for you?

Steve: I was born in Brooklyn, New York, but I have been down here in Jacksonville since I was an infant. I never knew my father or my mother. I was raised by my step-father. I took my first drink when I was around 14 or 15 years old. I had run away from home and was on a buddy of mine's boat and I drank my first drink which was Black and White Scotch Whiskey and Colt 45 Malt Liquor mixed together, perfect. I knew from that moment that I had found the secret of living for me. It changed my whole perception and I was pretty thrilled about it. Of course I didn't tell anybody that but I just knew if I could keep drinking I was going to be okay. That first time removed all the anxieties and fears in my life. Up until then I was terrified that I was not capable of surviving.

Tom: When did your drinking begin to get out of control?

S: When I was 14 years old (laughter). At that particular moment I was willing to go to any length to continue to drink. I got sick that first night and I thought to myself it is worth it. For what I got out of this thing I was willing to get sick. It did not hinder me whatsoever. I got sick many nights after that and got in a lot of trouble after that but I certainly wasn't willing to give up the magic of alcohol.

T: What is your sobriety date?

S: June 27, 1976.

T: That means you've been sober 42 years next month. How old were you when you finally hit bottom?

S: Are you asking my opinion of when I hit bottom or what other people around me thought when I hit bottom? The first time I had an opportunity to come to Alcoholics Anonymous was in 1974. I was 23 years old and facing 5 years in prison. I had had more DUIs than you can count on both hands and my license was permanently revoked by the state of Florida. I had been in and out jail numerous times, been married and divorced 3 times, and had never kept a job for over 3 or 4 months at the most but I worked consistently, I just worked in different places. I called my mother in 1974 because I was facing 5 years in prison and she for the first time said, "I think you're an alcoholic." That would be unusual today because today if you get one DUI you go to a meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous. It almost goes hand-in-hand. Back then I had 10 DUIs and no one ever said to me, "I think you're alcoholic" until that day. I didn't think I was an alcoholic at all. The first guy that actually 12-stepped me was Sam. Sam had been sober for a long time. He talked to me on the phone for a shot time and then he had one of his sponsees call me and his name was Marty. Marty talked to me on the phone for quite some time and asked me if he could come out to see me and he did. He came out to my office to see me and he asked me questions and I was sure at that point that I was an alcoholic. Because now I'm getting ready to go to prison and I'm terrified. I just

thought if I could just get them to think that I am an alcoholic maybe I won't have to go to prison. I asked Marty after he asked me questions for about 10 or 15 minutes, "Do you think I am an alcoholic?" He said, "Steve, normally, we would allow you to make that decision but in your case I'll make an exception. Yes you are an alcoholic." I thought I had really manipulated this guy. I didn't realize until years later that I had come as close to telling him the truth about me as I had anybody in my entire life. It didn't dawn on me. I thought I was manipulating him but what I was really doing was telling the absolute truth about what was going on. I ended up only going to jail for 30 days. I saw a psychiatrist and he recommended I be sent to a treatment center in Avon Park. I don't even know if it is there anymore but back then it was kind of a big thing. The judge said, "Okay, everybody here seems to think you are an alcoholic but I don't think you're an alcoholic, I think you're crazy." He was right. I knew I was not a drunk, I knew I was crazy. He said, "If you come back in front of me I don't care if it is for jay walking you're going up for 5 years." I got out of jail. Marty called me and wanted to know if I wanted to go to an AA meeting and I didn't. I thanked him for his help, and I said to him, "If I could ever help you please feel free to call me." He said some things to me that day that I never forgot. He said, "Steve, Alcoholics Anonymous is not a game and we don't come here to play." He said, "Alcoholics Anonymous is a way of life and you get out of it exactly what you put into it." He said, "People come in here and they play around with this and they die or go insane because of the use of alcohol and drugs." I thought to myself who is he trying to scare. When I was sober 3 years I came back to Jacksonville. I looked for Marty because I wanted to tell him that I had gotten the message that when alcohol quit working for me and I was ready I knew where to go because he carried the message to me. What I found out was that after about 5 or 6 years of sobriety Marty had gone back out and drank again and he took a gun and blew his brains out and all I could hear him saying was "Alcoholics Anonymous is not a game, people go back out and drink." He actually 12-stepped me twice. I got the message the second time loud and clear.

That experience in Jacksonville was the beginning of me coming into AA. I didn't stay sober. What happened was I violated my probation and the probation office called me and they wanted me to come down and see them and I was sure they were going to send me to jail. What I did instead of that was I wrote a bad check to Delta Airlines and got on a plane and flew to California. Back then there were no computers so they really couldn't track you down. Delta couldn't tell that the check didn't have any money. I flew out on a Saturday. I got to Santa Barbara and I stayed there. I didn't come back to Jacksonville at all for 3 years but I lived out in California for the next 10 years. I ended up on the streets, and I ended up all alone, and alcohol quit working for me. All I could remember was Marty in Jacksonville telling me it was going to be okay. On June 17, 1976, I called the Intergroup Office. Back then it was not called Intergroup. It was called Central Office. I called the Central Office and Katie was working in the Central Office and she told me to come in. I went up there that day and Jim F. was there. I met him the first day I came in and he became my sponsor and was my sponsor for over 41 years until he died. God bless him.

T: How many meetings were going on when you first got sober?

S: When I got sober there were no noon meetings. All of the meetings were an hour and a half long and that was in California. When you came to Alcoholics Anonymous part of the introduction was that if you had less than 30 days of sobriety they asked you not to share at those meetings. If you needed to share they wanted you to share with your sponsor one-on-one. They did not want anybody with less than 30 days to share at meetings. So, you just could not share. What that actually did was it forced you to listen because you did not have to figure out what you were going to have to say to impress everybody. You could just listen. Of course I figured back then that they did not want me to do it because they realized how

brilliant I was and they didn't want me to take over AA. I listened and I am so grateful. I am grateful for the fact that they knew exactly what they were getting and that was a guy with a big ego with an inferiority complex that had no idea what to do.

Tom: Tell us about early sobriety. Where did you go to your first meeting? What kind of issues or problems did you have when you started working the steps with Jim?

Steve: The first meeting I went to in Jacksonville was at the Baptist church on Atlantic Boulevard. I went to that meeting several times. I went to Central Group one night and that was about it. I went to only about 5 or 6 meetings. When I got sober in Santa Barbara I went to a meeting at a care unit there in Santa Barbara and I was living on the streets at the time so I would have to walk to the meeting. The main reason I kept going initially was because they had donuts and I could steal them and so I would put them in my pocket and I would sit there. I went to Alcoholics Anonymous June 17, 1976, and every day when I would leave the meeting I would smoke marijuana from June 17th to June 27th. I never told anybody until Jim said to me, "It's time for you to pick up your 90-day chip." I said, "I can't do that, I have been using marijuana." That's how my sobriety date became June 27th. Every meeting started either at 8:00 or 8:30 and didn't get over until around 10:00 at night. I was grateful for that because I hated being at home by myself. You have to remember back then television would go off at midnight so you couldn't watch TV all night. Of course back then I would tell them, "I can't sleep at night," and they would say, "Nobody died from lack of sleep."

T: What were the meeting formats like?

S: My home group was a speaker meeting. The meeting would start at 8:00 at night and they would have two 10-minute speakers. These would be people that would have had more than 30 days but less than a year of sobriety. You would have two 10-minute speakers and then they would take a coffee break. Then, they would have a main speaker and this person would be somebody who had about 10 years of sobriety. There were also discussion meetings and there was one meeting that I started going to that I carried around every community that I went to and that was a roving men's meeting. I started going to that meeting in Santa Barbara and every place I have ever moved to I have been able to start a roving men's meeting. It has always been very good. I enjoy that and I enjoy men's meetings because I believe that a lot of guys can get more honest in those than they do in mixed meetings.

T: What kind of group issues did you see back in the 1970's when you were getting into AA?

Steve: There weren't as many groups and there were no cell phones. So, meetings were a lot more disciplined back then. It was the job of newcomers to set up the meetings and break down the meetings. While we were breaking down the meetings and setting up, all of the old timers (the old timers would be anybody with a year or more of sobriety) would be sitting around and talking to each other and taking our inventory because that was their job. You had a job to make the coffee and all of a sudden when it got time for you to move on and do something else you resented the fact that they were taking away your job. What happens is when we did that kind of stuff I think we got more unity. Although I think clubs are a tremendous asset, I also think they can be a detriment. AA members don't participate in making the coffee and cleaning up. Of course back then everybody smoked at meetings. So, it didn't matter if you actually smoked or not you got to smoke if you went to a meeting because the rooms were full of smoke. Today there are no ashtrays to clean.

T: How did the group relate to newcomers? How did they treat newcomers when new people were coming into the meetings?

Steve: Well, they treated me okay but there was no discussion. They were pretty clear on the fact that my best thinking got me to Alcoholics Anonymous and if they were interested they would let me know. There were specific things they wanted me to do and there was no room for error. They were not interested in my side of the story. They didn't like that. They were just interested in what I wanted to do. If I wanted to get into a long, meaningful conversation I could talk to my sponsor later but he usually didn't want to talk about it. They made it very clear they were just interested in what we were doing. They said things like, "We know what you're thinking. We don't need to know what you're thinking. What you're thinking got you here, so why don't you just do what we ask you to do and see how that works for you." So, I was so grateful that I was willing to do whatever they asked me to do.

T: What was the public's view of AA back then?

S: AA was pretty well known. I didn't go out and advertise that I am in recovery but I didn't want to hide it either. I never said to anybody, "I'm in Alcoholics Anonymous," unless they asked me. I would tell them I'm in the program. In southern California it was pretty well accepted. There were actually some treatment centers and things there that were not here at that time but they did have them there. I would say overall it's not like it is today, where the court sends you to Alcoholics Anonymous if you have one DUI. It wasn't that. It was starting to get better known, and California was right behind New York in the growth of Alcoholics Anonymous.

T: What is your view on how AA is doing today?

S: I think that Alcoholics Anonymous today is better than it's ever been. One of the reasons I think that is because it doesn't matter why you get here. It does not matter why you come to Alcoholics Anonymous. If we said, "You've got to have your motives right before you get here", we would have very few people. The fact that there are so many different facets of recovery that people get exposed to in Alcoholics Anonymous I think is tremendous. If they come in, go to meetings, and stay sober, they will eventually understand the significance of Alcoholics Anonymous. In that aspect I would say that Alcoholics Anonymous has so much going for it today. On the other side of the coin, I see a lot of disruptions and distractions at meetings. People come to meetings and they are on their phones. I think that is a real detriment. I think it is important that members with some sobriety set an example. If I get off track and I start doing those things and get distracted at meetings, then I think it gives the newcomers authorization to do that and I don't want to do that.

T: When did you start doing service work in AA?

S: Immediately. Service work has all kinds of aspects. Service work begins by getting involved initially in taking care of the meetings, setting up the meetings and taking the responsibility for the coffee. You know it was really critical that you get involved in the aspects of Alcoholics Anonymous. I have been chairman for Intergroup. I was on the Gateway board. Anytime you get an opportunity to get involved in service work it allows you to feel like you are in the middle of Alcoholics Anonymous. You are in the middle of recovery.

You know that you are actually part of the solution. That is so critical. I think anybody that wants to grow in sobriety really needs to get involved in service work. The key is that it is work. It's not pleasant all the time but it is always rewarding.

T: What kind of things are you doing in your service work today?

S: I sponsor a lot of guys and as you know I had the same sponsor for 41 years. I just accepted a position on the board of Alco House. I have served on the committee for the Florida State Roundup. I don't want to get in a situation where I think I need to be involved in everything but I want to be available when I am asked and that is what I try to do. I do a lot of speaking which is not something that I really love to do but I am willing to do it whenever I get asked. I have had the privilege of speaking in Canada, all over the United States, and I am still grateful for that. It's amazing to me when you go to these other communities to see how Alcoholics Anonymous works. I would say to people even if you are not speaking at a conference you can go to conferences. If you are in a situation you can visit outside conferences, you should do that just to get a perspective. This thing works everywhere. It is incredible.

T: Thanks for that. During your AA journey what would you say are your failures that have spurred you on to really take the next step in your spiritual journey?

S: We come to Alcoholics Anonymous and we surrender. Our primary defect was drinking but I carried every single defect that I had when I was drinking and using into Alcoholics Anonymous. When we come to Alcoholics Anonymous we are beat up, we throw in the towel, and we surrender, right? The only problem is that we take the towel back and then the longer we stay sober we start pulling pieces of that towel. It has been my experience that I surrendered different areas of my life the longer I stay sober and the catalyst to that has been the pain. God has been very gentle with me. He has tried to get my attention every way he possibly can and unfortunately sometimes the pain has gotten to be excruciating before I have surrendered. I'm a guy that came to Alcoholics Anonymous and I was married and divorced 3 times by the time I was 23 years old, and now I am a guy that has been married to the same woman for 29 years. Now, that is impossible. That is what Alcoholics Anonymous is. My sponsor said, "Leaving is not an option for you. You made a commitment you're going to honor the commitment." Boy, I didn't want to hear that. The pain I was in because I couldn't surrender that defect, I was terrified. That is how Alcoholics Anonymous teaches us to grow up and to trust in God. One of the things I hear tossed around a lot is, "I'm grateful I trust in God." It is one thing to say that you trust God; it's another thing to really trust God. That is a tough, tough deal but that is where all the reward comes from. When I can truly trust God then I'm free and when I don't trust God I'm living in self-will and I don't want to be there.

T: In closing what message would you like to leave us with.

S: If you are an alcoholic like I'm an alcoholic, your disease requires that it be treated. We are either going to treat it with alcohol or drugs or we are going to treat it with tools of Alcoholics Anonymous. The difference is of course if you treat it with alcohol or drugs you die one day at a time and the thing that we learn here in Alcoholics Anonymous is we truly can do this one day at a time. You think that is just a flippant statement but it's not. The reality of it is what I can't do forever I can do one day at a time if I surrender today and that's the deal.

T: Thank you Steve.

S: My pleasure