John R. is one of our old timers from St. Augustine. (DOS: June 10, 1985) (36 years)

John R began his sobriety journey in New York, but for the past 33 years has resided in St. Augustine. He taped his story for the archives in December 2019
(Interviewed and transcribed by Sally F; edited by Mykel M).

Sally:Let’s start with your name and where were you born.

John: My name is John R., and I was born in Freeport, Long Island New York on June 27, 1957. I don't remember much of my early childhood. My dad left when I was about three years old. I don't remember him ever being around after that, although I maintained a relationship with him. I was the youngest of three kids. I lived in a big two- family house with my two older sisters, my mom and my grandmother who lived upstairs. Mom was a German hausfrau and everything had to be in order. For me, it was a bit too strict. My way or the highway. No wiggle room at all.

My stepdad came along. I was real young. He was all right, not a bad guy. I recall what I missed most as a kid was that the families in the neighborhood would go to the beach, the movies, bowling, and do other family activities together. My stepdad wasn’t into that. We did big things, I got to travel to Europe, Canada and San Francisco. He omitted all the little things but I really think I would have preferred a lot of the little things instead of the big ones.

 I did complain one time that I wanted to play catch with him because I was into little league baseball. The first ball he threw was a fastball. It slapped me right in the nose and that was intentional, I believe. He was pretty strict too. He got the belt. You had to go in your room and wait for him. The wait was worse than anything else, but that only gave me more of an attitude like, “up yours”.

I first started seeing alcohol at the family gatherings. It was pretty much routine. The family gets together and the bar is open. They drank various mixed drinks. I was probably eight years old. We all had chores. At gatherings, I was the bartender. I don’t know if I liked it, but I started sipping. That’s how I knew if I made the drink right.

 School was normal up until junior high. If I could get out of washing windows or weeding gardens, I played in the neighborhood. Most of the time I was stuck around the house doing chores. It taught me discipline and responsibility, but I think I missed a lot when I was little.

 My Bavarian grandfather went to Europe every year. When he came home, I got a beer stein. I have a collection of steins. My first beer stein was two ounces. I was allowed to have two ounces of beer in that little stein on holidays. If you look at my beer stein collection, they get bigger with time. The last one was a two- liter stein. It reflects the progression of my disease.

My oldest sister was a rebel. She became like a surrogate mom. There was a lot of stuff going on, divorce and whatnot, money whatever. I found safety at the foot of her bed. I would curl up like a dog there during thunderstorms, and I became very attached to her. We were carbon copies. My middle sister was the scholar

When I was 10 years old, I came home from school and there was a note telling me to go play. You never got to play after school. You had homework and chores. My stepdad came home. He took my middle sister and me to dinner. That was way out of the norm. Something was up. Around 11 at night, my mother came home and announced that she had put my sister on a plane to Seattle to live with our biological Dad. It devastated me. I found out thirty years later that I put a box around my heart. It hurt so bad. That was the only security I had. We didn’t get to say goodbye or anything. Poof! She was gone.

 I remember the first time I drank alcohol outside of family events was in junior high. We had a little sweetener bottle that had contained saccharin. Five or six of us took turns every day bringing that bottle home to fill it from our folks’ liquor cabinet. We met in the locker room a couple of times a day, and got about four drops. We were in 7th grade, and we were cool.

By the time I was in the 8th grade, I could buy beer at the stockcar races. I was into stockcar races, drinking beer and looking for girls. It didn’t seem to be a problem. I had discipline issues with family and school.

I was a Boy Scout. I was a patrol leader. We had patrols -- The Broken Arrow, Bear, Flaming Arrow patrol and then you had R.’s Riots with a skull and crossbones flag. That was my patrol. We were the guys who cut your tents down in the middle of the night and set fires in the fields, but we ate better than anyone else. I was known, and it was good. I learned a lot of things including survival. One time some scoutmasters invited me to have a little of their apple wine. They didn’t know that I had two quarts back at my tent. They could not understand how those two sips could trash someone so bad. I got a reputation. Scouts went from being good to it got me out of the house on Friday night.

 With girls involved, it wasn’t cool to be a Boy Scout. I wanted to be accepted, somebody cool. I wasn’t fitting in anywhere yet and then I moved on to high school. I like to say now that I misread the sign. I thought it said “Get High School” cause boy, did I take off when I got there.

Sally: Did you think you had a problem?

John: No, I was too busy having fun. My whole high school time was off the chain.

Sally: Where did you get sober?

John: I got sober on Long Island. Freeport was the party--till- you- puke t-shirt place. Three guys rented a house. Animal house had nothing on us. It was crazy. There was a party for every occasion, even National Pig Day. Every day of the year. My sister gave me a birthday card which said “To the Man Who Only Drinks on Holidays.” Inside was a calendar and every day of the year was some kind of national holiday. National Pig Day or Tulip Day, something. I think she was trying to send me a message.

Sally: When did you see the light about drinking?

John: After my second daughter was born, there was a DUI. It was not my first DUI but the ones in Massachusetts didn’t count because they were out of state. They took my license. I had to go to a drunk driver’s program for 10 weeks to get my license back. We were required to go to three AA meetings. After these meetings we would go to a bar and talk about the stupid drunk driver’s program. The day came where they were calling everybody up and giving them their license back, they called me up, and they told me I needed further evaluation.

 I hit my bottom on a Sunday. I woke up that morning and had my usual which was 80 milligrams of valium, a grain of codeine, one or two hits of yellow microdot, a case and half of Budweiser. Later I was in the Dutch Inn drinking white Russians on somebody’s American Express card. I have no clue whose it was. I was there until I passed out in my French onion soup, and they threw me out. I had a bunch of coke and I went back home and went to bed.

It is Monday morning and I am late for work. I woke up and when I went to breathe, I couldn’t breathe. I was like somebody was choking me. If I breathed really slowly, real shallow, I could get air into my lungs but I couldn’t take a regular breath. I rolled over and I shook my wife and I told her “I can’t breathe. Get me to the hospital.” She looked at me and said “I hope you die Mother Fucker” and she rolled over and pulled the blankets over her head. I twisted up a joint. I got in my old beat-up station wagon, drove past the deli, got a quart of Budweiser and headed for the emergency room.

 I walked into the emergency room, a joint smoking, a beer in my hand and I said, “I can’t breathe”. And a guy with a white smock came over. He took my stuff away. Sat me in a chair and pulled out a little pen light and told me to open wide. His jaw dropped and he looked at this guy and said, “Joe, look at the size of this”. I went into freak mode. They sent me to a throat specialist. That guy lanced it and sent me back for observation in the hospital. The end of that day, my wife appeared out of the fog. I asked her to call Mike, he was the guy who ran the drunk driver’s program. She called Mike. Mike said “When they let him go, he is going to want to stop for coffee, and the answer is no. He is going to want to stop for cigarettes and the answer is no. He is going to want to go home and shower and change his clothes and the answer is no. You pick him up from the hospital and you bring him to me”. And sure enough, I got in the car. I said, “I need a coffee”. “I need cigarettes”. “Can I take a shower”? She brought me there and I met another counselor there who had just started. Years later when I went in, I sat in his green chair, and he told me that either the program works or that green chair works. I thought you were dead.

Mike got me into a Catholic hospital for detox. I did my detox. I went home for a weekend and when I got home, I could not put a sentence together. I sat in the middle of my living room, shaking, crying, and afraid that if someone knocked on that door, and wanted to go party, I would be out the door. That’s when I realized that I didn’t get beat up. I did this to myself.

My first meeting was in Elmont, New York. It was that weekend. I got out of the hospital, and I was crying. I was a basket case. I went to a meeting and I felt safe. They weren’t going to get me there. They didn’t want to catch what I had. I went home. I fell apart again. I went back to a meeting. It was okay. I ended up frequenting the hospital that I detoxed in.

Eve of Sobriety was my first home group in Rockville Center, New York. I lived right by the Belmont Racetrack. There were some neat meetings in the back of the stables. That weekend I found AA.

After that week, I went to a rehab, and one day, my wife was there with my kids. This sticks in my mind when they had to leave. My oldest daughter wanted her Daddy, and I had to stay behind the gate. That sticks in my mind today. That hurt because I wanted to be there for my kids. So, I did the rehab thing which my job had sent me to. I got out, and I jumped into meetings. I jumped in head first because I felt safe there.

I got very involved in AA. A lot of twelve step work. In the beginning I did it all wrong. I would walk with somebody, sponsor them, whatever you want to call it and take them to a meeting every day. It got me doing 90 and 90 again. Early on, there was a guy. I didn’t pick him up on the 90th day. I was going to let him get there on his own. He didn’t show. I felt that I had failed. I had to learn that I can’t make anybody drunk. I can’t make anybody sober. I can carry the message. But just doing that kind of stuff keeps me focused on my recovery. So, there was a lot of twelve step, a lot of friends.

Sally: When is your sobriety date?

John: June 10, 1985. I cleaned up. I started at work. Somebody told me that I would be highly competitive in the white-collar world, if I had an education. It is a long story about how I got my high school diploma. They withheld it because I didn’t take gym class. So, I played chess for a couple of months, and they gave me my diploma. I started taking business courses. I went to SUNY. I went to Nassau Community College. I went to Farmingdale. I took mostly business courses. I got myself into a job where I no longer had to wear jeans and t-shirt. I was wearing three-piece suits with a leather attaché case, and I went into Manhattan. I went out and bought a 98 Oldsmobile with the pillow top cushions. I was a businessman. When I was in stores, I noticed how differently I was treated. I went in there thinking that I was something hot to being quite humble and looking different. People treated me different. I liked that.

Sally: How did you end up in St. Augustine?

John: I followed my career and it led me here in 1988. It was April 7th. It was my daughter’s seventh birthday. I left on a Thursday night and headed for Florida. I remember looking at my wife. Neither one of us could believe we were doing it. I made a comment. “This seems like something we would have done when I was drinking. Pack up and leave late at night and not pay the rent.” So, we packed up and left and there was a sense of comfort. This was my higher power of my understanding. Too many people, in my opinion, adapt to their grandmother’s belief of their religion. Spirituality and religion are two different things. They can be combined but I believe that they are two different things. It took me awhile to realize that. I can’t define it for you. I can’t draw a picture of it, but it started working.

 I was three years sober when I moved here. I just knew I was going in the right direction. It was really weird but I was confident as heck.

Sally: Where was your first meeting here?

John: 144 King Street. The Oldest City Group, Perry and Alice. We ended up calling it the “Perry and Alice Show”. They much pretty much hosted it and kept that meeting going. It was right next to Carmela’s Pizza down on King Street. It was jam packed and smoke filled. We had the homeless wandering in. It was a smorgasbord of people of all classes.

Sally: Do you remember the Shamrock Group?

John: I was in the Shamrock Group. That was at St. Joseph’s Academy. I went to the Shamrock Group. I started at 144 King Street, and I had it in my mind that I would give it one week. I would get a sponsor. Temporary or not, I would have a sponsor. Perry was my first sponsor. I ended up hanging around with Big George, and he had a following.

 We would go up to Penman Road. I had a van so everybody piled into my van. We would have a meeting in the van. We would go to the Homestead Restaurant where they served family style, fried chicken and all. We would have a meeting at dinner. We would go to the meeting and have a meeting. Then we would have a meeting on the way home. George K kept us on track. It was good. It was very good for my recovery. I was three years sober.

Later Mike C became my sponsor. He was one of George K’s, I hate the word, pigeons. I was standing outside 144 King Street. and I asked him to be my sponsor. We jumped into the 4th step and we used the Hazelton’s version with the 3 parts – Childhood, Adolescent and Adult. I was to do one question a night or one question a week. I was grateful for that because the Big Book 4th step study was too general. I needed more direction. I didn’t know where to start, and it didn’t have substance for me. I needed a lead and, so for me, that thing worked.

My 1st, 2nd and 3rd steps I did not spend much time on. I always believed in something bigger than me all my life. I was raised with it too. So, 1, 2 and 3 were fairly easy. That is why I ended up in a rehab. If those steps weren’t already done in my world, I wouldn’t have gone. People today seem to be so anxious and a lot of sponsors bring their people through the steps right away. There is no right or wrong of how anybody does it. I didn’t do my 4th step until I was four years in the program, and it took me a year to do it.

I hear now that some people do the steps pretty quickly early in recovery, and then they go back and do another 4th step. I was told that if I did my 4th step correctly, I would never have to do it again if I do 10, 11 and 12. I did a very thorough 4th step. It was very eye-opening when I did my 5th step because I had some things on there that I was going to take to the grave that would embarrass me if I shared them. And I did share with my sponsor.

 I enjoyed the heck out of making amends. The first amends I made was to my mom but for her, I didn’t have to do anything but be sober and honest which I started doing right away. A lot of the people I wanted to make amends to happened to be girls through my high school years before I got married. I had to research and find out where they were. That was a very rewarding step to do.

Later Big John was my sponsor. It was very surprising to me. Big John was a gay guy. I had a wife and three daughters and the cat and the dog. Everybody was female. I was the only male in the house. It got to the point that it was not about putting the plug in the jug. It was about living life on life’s terms. I would go to a sponsor, or to somebody in my support group for issues with my family. You can’t live with them and you can’t live without them. All this macho male ego stuff wasn’t doing anything for me. Big John lived an alternate lifestyle. One time, he explained to me that everyone has a feminine and masculine side to them. Macho, egotistical men, they aren’t in touch with their feminine side. I wanted to be in touch with my feminine side, not for sexuality but to deal with my wife and daughters.

 In the beginning, I had to work the steps real hard. It wasn’t easy. Or it was easy but it was hard. So, you work them. Then you practice them. And then, all of a sudden, you realize, wow, I just practiced such and such a step. This is just happening automatically.

 I started to trust my gut. I have learned that it is all right to want things. It is all right to pursue things. The difference in recovery is when I go after something now, if the door opens, I keep going. If I want to buy a motorcycle or a boat or something like that, buy a house, do something big, I pursue it. If it flows smoothly, I keep pursuing it until I wind up with it. When I have to start kicking the doors down and knocking hard or going around the back end, I have learned to stop. When I was out there, If I wanted something and I latched on it, I was getting it one way or the other. It didn’t matter. A lot of people don’t look at material things in recovery. I do. Somebody once told me that you can tell the duration and quality of a man’s sobriety on his credit card balance.

I will give you an example. I never owned a motorcycle till I got sober. I stole them or borrowed them. I own a motorcycle now. I used to go to beach parties, get drunk and steal your boat. I own a boat now. Fear of financial insecurity has left, miraculously. I got a tattoo my first year. “Live and Let Live”. Living the steps and principles are quite easy for me out in the real world. At home, it is very, very difficult. I have to watch it. I am the dad. I was the bread winner. My youngest child is 31 years old, and I still want to tell her how to do things. “Live and Let Live”. “Let Go and Let God”. Those are the two most important slogans that I carry with me.

Do that which will prevent you from picking up! Keep the fire from igniting. Don’t wait and be ready to put the fire out. Don’t let the fire begin.

Sally: Thank you