

Sue G. has been sober in AA for 44 years. She has been very active in AA, She is one of AA's old timers. Sue taped her story for the Intergroup archives and the following has been excerpted from that tape. (interviewed by Kevin Jr. and Christopher G. and edited by Charlie M.)

Kevin Jr.: Sue, tell us a little bit about your life before you came into AA. Where you were born, and where did you grow up?

Sue G.: I was born in Virginia City, Montana on March 27, 1937. I had an absolute perfect life. I had no reason in the world to be an alcoholic. My parents loved me and thought I was wonderful. I was the third of six children, and I was spoiled. I didn't have that poor self-esteem everyone's supposed to have to be an alcoholic. I had any ideal childhood and there is no reason I should be an alcoholic. This convinces me that alcoholism is a disease. You either have it or you don't. I didn't drink myself into alcoholism. They say three out of ten people will be alcoholic. I was one of the lucky three.

We moved to Florida when I was seven years old. I went to grammar school, I think Jacksonville Beach or Neptune Beach, but we moved around a lot as my mother was trying to find a decent place to live with six children and there were few decent places. I enjoyed the moving because I was a good student and each new group gave me a chance to show off. I was the third of six children and I was spoiled.

K.: When did you start drinking?

S.: I was probably 12 or 13 years old. It started with cheap wine with the boys in the woods. I loved it from the very beginning. It made me taller, slimmer and smarter. I just loved the effect and I loved the taste. I was a beer drinker and I always wanted more. That was the nature of it. It was the phenomenon of craving that showed up very early in my life.

K: When did you meet your husband?

S: We met in high school. He was a football player and very handsome. He drank very moderately. He just didn't know how to have a good time. I'm the one throwing up on the side of the car, and he doesn't know how to have a good time. We got married in high school and had five children.

K: When do you think you hit your bottom?

S.: I tried hard to quit on my own resources. Alcoholics almost never stop drinking on their own. I tried seriously to stop drinking for four or five years, because I was embarrassed and ashamed to stumble around this house in front of my husband and children. I realized that I couldn't stop no matter how many prayers I said.

I didn't become an out-of-control drinker till I was about 35 years old. I was a controlled drinker for a long time. My husband was very unhappy about my drinking, so I had to sneak, hide, and lie. I was a champion at sneaking, hiding and lying. It just got to be too much work.

If when drinking you have little control over the amount you drink, you're probably an alcoholic. I was probably alcoholic.

I was 42 when I came in and my sobriety date is December 3, 1979. I called the Intergroup office and Margarete P called me back and told me where a meeting was on Arlington Road, and I went to AA that night. It was a little old smoky, grubby room, the Arlington Group, on Cesery Terrace. I believe I heard exactly what I was supposed to hear. It was a very mixed bag. There was long-term sobriety and

newcomers like me. There were low-bottom drunks who had been drunk in the Bowery in New York and had been places I couldn't imagine. One of the most wonderful things that happened to me was that there was a lady there who I had gone to church with. She was three months sober and I could relate to her more than I could to people who were 25 years sober. I think it was God's grace that she was there. If it was okay for her to be an alcoholic, it was okay for me to be an alcoholic.

The Arlington Group was only five minutes from my house, so it was easy to get to. They were a very tradition minded group, and they stuck together. There were women there that were very much like me being housewife drinkers. They convinced me that they knew exactly how I felt. It was wonderful. It was exactly what I had been looking for. My husband was not happy about me going to AA. He thought I was probably going to be talking about him and he was right. It took him a couple of years but he got over it. He looked at the clock as soon I hit the door, and if I was not back by about five minutes after nine, he had something to say about it. He didn't like the way I drank, and he didn't like me going to AA either. Damned if you do and damned if you don't. I needed to go.

K.: Did you get a sponsor?

S.: I found a sponsor. She was only six months sober. She drank again and got hooked on pills. Every man is my teacher. Some teach us what to do, and some teach us what not to do. Back then they didn't stress sponsorship like they do now. I got sober on the big book, the group, and the God of my understanding. I did get another sponsor. She played the cello in the Jacksonville Symphony Orchestra, and she had never been married. It was an odd matchup, but she was very good for me. She played the devil's advocate. When I wanted to complain about my horrible husband she would say, "He's a good man. He supports you. He loves your children. What do you want out of the man?" I wanted a Prince Charming, but he wasn't one. He was just human.

K.: Did she take you through the steps?

S.: I never went through the steps formally with anybody. I went through the steps at meetings and talking to people. I just worked on my own, because I knew I had to if I wanted to be part of this thing. I had been looking for a way out and a solution to my problem. I knew that the 12 steps were a solution.

K.: Did you go to other groups?

S.: Yes. I went to a women's meeting at San Marco. It was at the Central Group. It was one of the first all-women's meetings. I also went to a group called "The Group" which was a small meeting on Merrill Road. There was good sobriety there. We had three members that had been delegates to General Service Office in New York and they knew what they were talking about. I was a pink cloud alcoholic. I had a smile on my face. I was thrilled to be sober and I still am. I've been saved from a fate worse than death.

K.: Did you relapse at all?

S.: No, but I take no credit for that. I'd had all my slips before I got here.

K.: Did you do service work? What did you do?

S.: My first service work was I gave rides to meetings. It was in the very start of the crack epidemic. I went to some of the worst old apartment complexes and gave people rides. When my children found out

what I was doing they were very unhappy, "Do you know how dangerous that is for you to be in that neighborhood?" I said, "Well no". I just wasn't afraid. I got active into service work at the level of GSR and DCM. I was Accessibility Chairmen for a while. My husband was not happy with all this service work with me going out of town. He didn't like it.

The biggest and hardest job I had in AA was Intergroup Chair. I got elected when I was seven years sober. Janis J. had preceded me as the first woman chairman of Intergroup. I was the second. The Arlington Group, where I had gotten sober, gave me the hardest time. They didn't like the way things were going at Intergroup. They wanted to fire the secretary and change the by-laws, or they were going to pull out and not give any money. Every meeting they sent a wanna-be lawyer to argue their point. The brightest points of my term there were when we organized the first Intergroup Banquet at a big hotel downtown with a country band and dancing, which was a great success, and when we got tax-exempt status for Intergroup,

K.: What other service work have you been involved with?

S.: When I started getting sober the old-fashioned kinds of 12-step work were few and far between. I've been active in taking meetings to the prisons, which I've found to be very satisfying service work. I was active at the 4th Street Service Center, and I was on the board there. They did a lot of good work. I have a friend John K. who was a terrible drunk. One day many years ago his son on Father's Day called AA and called the police. He said that he didn't care who got there first, but John K. was leaving that house. Happy Father's Day. Three guys came to his house, beat the police, there and took his sorry drunken butt to the 4th Street Service Center. He spent five days there and never drank again. John got sober about six months before I did. In those days there was no place for the alcoholic to go. The hospitals didn't want use and there were no detoxes or treatment centers. The 4th Street Service Center played a big part in a lot of people's sobriety in Jacksonville.

K.: How many meetings a week did you go to meeting?

S.: In the beginning I went to two meetings a week. I'm living proof that you can get sober on two meetings a week without family cooperation. My husband didn't like it, and my children didn't care. They were busy drinking and drugging on their own. Three of my five children, the middle three, are alcoholics and drug addicts. One of them died from this disease. I went to a lot of Al-Anon meetings, too, because I thought if I'm not going to drink, those little bastards are going to quit drinking too. They had other ideas on that one.

Al-Anon was a wonderful program for me. I went to Al Anon the same way. I went to AA on my knees. I went because of my children's drinking because of my experience in the stories and because I knew they were going to die if they didn't get sober. I really was quite frantic about the whole thing about their drinking, and the Al Anon have the three C's. I didn't cause it. I can't cure it, but by God, I can control it. I was more than happy to find I didn't cause it, and I knew I couldn't cure it, but if I could just get them to the right meetings to hear the right people get the right literature to them they would get sober. They had other ideas.

My second son is about 35 years sober. In AA, my third son committed suicide. He shot himself in the head behind the counter at the hardware store, where my husband and I spend our lives. It was sad and terrible thing. His brother came home from his funeral and he said, "Mom, I have a terrible problem with

drugs and alcohol.” He started going to meetings with me that very week. Later he got into treatment at Gateway. He was one of the first people to go through their program. At that time, Gateway was located in an old motel on Phillips Highway, where the Avenues Mall is today. He’s been sober for a long time.

Our daughter got sober in her own way. She was a hopeless, helpless alcoholic, and drug addict. She seems to have outgrown it if you can figure that out. She's somehow seems to have come to terms with it. She doesn't go to meetings, but she doesn't drink or drug around me. I may be naïve but as far as I can see, she's doing fine.

I also had a grandson. He was a helpless hopeless alcoholic, and he got himself shot and killed by the police during a shootout. Of my grandchildren, he was the only one who was truly alcoholic. It's a family disease. There's no doubt about it.

K: What were meetings like when you first came in?

S: It was discussion meetings and speaker meetings mostly. I always loved speaker meetings. At open discussion meetings you hear a lot foolishness. I prefer big book studies and speaker meetings. Any kind of book study is good for me. There was good recovery everywhere. You can find anything you're looking for, in an AA meeting. I was looking for sobriety. Later on, I found I was looking for God. I've heard people in AA talk about God like they went to high school with him. I found a relationship with God because I realized it was the only way I was going to stay sober. I tried so hard on my own resources and failed so miserably.

K: How has AA changed compared to when you came in?

S.: Today I can see more emphasis on dual addiction. Many members introduce themselves as alcoholics and drug addicts. There was a time that I felt like I didn't fit in AA because of all the talk about drugs. I know nothing about drugs. The only drugs I took were birth control pills and I had five children. There was so much talk about drugs that I thought I'm not sure I fit in here. Once in a while, I'll raise my hand and say, “outside issue, please.” This is an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting. I've also been roundly criticized for that. That's just my own personal opinion. I think AA meetings should be about alcohol.

K.: How many meetings do you go to today and what type of meetings do you go to?

S.: I go to all types of meetings. I probably I go more now than I ever did when I was first sober because I'm free to go. My husband passed away, my children are grown and gone so I can go whenever I want to. I probably go to four or five meetings a week. If I sponsor someone, they have to go to at least two meetings a week.

K.: You’ve given some workshops. What type of workshops have you been involved in?

S.: I’ve given the steps at a number clubs in the area. That’s a 10- week commitment. Whenever anyone asks me to speak, I try to do it. I get a big kick out of doing it.

Sometimes they would take me out to dinner. I'm telling you I was a celebrity in my own right. So anyway, I asked my sponsor, “How long do you think I'd have to do this?” I got a terrific big ego about this whole thing. She said, “Don’t worry about it Sue, they'll stop asking you.” And that's what's happened.

K,: Do you have a sponsor?

S.: I don't have a sponsor now. I have sober women my age, and we bounce stuff off each other. I have a group of sober women that I talk to on a continuing basis. I use them to tell on myself. I'm accountable to them.

I talk to on the phone to some young women who consider me their sponsor. I talk to them on an ongoing basis. I tell them I'm available. I will give you all the time you need. I don't do the ongoing sponsorship anymore.

Christopher G.: Do you have any highlights or words of wisdom you can share with us?

S.: I've been to several international conventions and they were absolutely phenomenal experiences. It was amazing. I still get goose bumps remembering a coliseum full of alcoholics reciting the Lord's Prayer together.

I love the slogan "But for the Grace of God," because I've been so fortunate. God gives His grace to everybody. Everybody that walks in that door has the same chance of hearing it. It's for free, and it's for fun. Come and join us. It's a God of our understanding. So, regardless of what you think about religion, you can still get sober.

The steps keep us from killing ourselves, and the traditions keep us from killing each other. The traditions are very important, and I love talking about them. I want AA to be here for my grandchildren who need it. I don't want anything to get in the way of that. We have to preserve AA for future generations.

K.: Thank you very much Sue, this has been an incredible interview.