

INTERVIEW WITH BEN W.

March 14, 2012

Ben W. is a pioneer of AA in Jacksonville. He got sober in Jacksonville and has been sober for 55 years. Ben was a co-founder of Alco House as well as a number of other halfway houses in Jacksonville. For many years he has helped carry the AA message into the Florida state prison system. Ben taped his story for the Intergruop Archives in 2012. The following has been excerpted from that tape with his permission.

Interviewer: We are interviewing Ben W. today for his experience, strength and hope in Alcoholics Anonymous. Ben, why don't you start out and tell us your sobriety date and how long you've been sober.

Ben: My name is Ben W. and I am a recovering alcoholic. My first meeting was March 21, 1958 at 111 East Bay Street in Jacksonville, Florida and I've been sober ever since. I was 26 years old and that makes me 80 at present with 54 years continuous sobriety.

I: Tell us a little about your life before AA and how you started drinking, how it got out of control and how you hit bottom?

Ben: I grew up in Pack and Lamar Counties, Georgia during the Great Depression and we were very poor. My father was alcoholic and abusive. There were 9 children, 8 of us survived. My mother managed to get me through high school. At that time you only needed 11 years to get a diploma. I graduated in late 1948; got my diploma Friday night and my mother got me out of there Saturday morning. She brought me to Jacksonville to live with her youngest sister and her husband and I never went back to Georgia to live permanently, but I did go back to visit.

I joined the Air Force a year later when I was 17 and graduated from Air Traffic Control School in Biloxi, Mississippi. I was shipped from there directly overseas and they sent me to Berlin the day the Korean War started. I'll never forget it, I got drunk on the train going up and they took my luggage off the train and I had nothing but the clothes on my back when I reported to my new assignment. I became a ground controller operator right away because that is what I wanted to do and at that time they were the elite people in air traffic control in the Air Force. We had our own little clique and everyone drank. I got drunk and blacked out every day. I was a blackout drinker immediately when I was 17 years old. The most traumatic experience I ever had, and I had some bad ones, happened New Year's Eve of 1952. I got off duty at 6 a.m. in the morning and had a 72 hour break. I slept a few hours then ate lunch and started drinking. I drank heavily for the next three days. On New Year's Eve of 1952 I was drinking in the Non-Commissioned Officers' Club all afternoon and about 5:00 p.m. I went out on the streets of Berlin. I had a friend with me and I flagged down a white vehicle which we thought was a German taxi that would take military payment certificates but it was the military police and they said we were too drunk to be on the street and took us back to the base. As soon as they left, of course, we left again. It was raining and then it was snowing and very cold, I was in full dress blue uniform with an overcoat. The last thing I remember was about 9:00 at night and at 3:00 in the morning I woke up in an open Jeep, riding through the streets of Berlin with a guy from the Air Force base in a pair of coveralls. My full

dress blues and shoes and everything were gone. Evidently I had ended up in the eastern zone and the Russians found me and pulled me out of a canal and took me to the Russian authorities. At that time if you disappeared into East Berlin you didn't come back. Why they brought me back I don't know. They called the American authorities and turned me over to them at the Brandenburg Gate, which was the entrance in and out of the East and West sectors. I don't know how I got in the canal because I was in a blackout but I vaguely remember scaling the Wall and falling into the water and thinking I was dead. Other than that I don't remember anything about it. I was pickled in alcohol which was the only reason I didn't die in the cold or drown. Why I didn't drown I do not know. God.

I came back to the States and was an instructor at Keesler Air Force Base where I had gone to Air Traffic Control School. The blackout drinking continued every night and I couldn't get away with the things I could get away with overseas and eventually got into too much trouble and ended back in Jacksonville having blackouts every night. Ended up in the jailhouse every week or so, at 711 Liberty Street, that was where the jail was at that time, this was in '56 and '57 and I had a blackout practically every night for those 2 years. I worked in the ship yards, then concrete companies but it was always in a blackout and eventually I ended up in the new Duval County jail in the fall of 1957. This time they had charges against me for assault and battery and drunk and disorderly so the judge gave me 90 days in February 1958. After 3 days the judge called me down and said, "I'm suspending the 90 day sentence and you are free to go." Of course I had made my plans to stay the 90 days and I told the judge, "Your Honor, if you don't mind, I'd rather serve the 90 days." He went off on a tangent, started yelling at me and the bailiff and told the bailiff to put me on the street; he wanted me on the street in the next 5 minutes. Then he said, "I tell you what, if you want to spend 90 days here, go out tonight, get drunk and get in another fight and you'll serve the 90 days and every day after!" I walked all the way from downtown to where my two sisters were living on the Trout River. They were both working for the phone company so they certainly had a little money. But I had embarrassed them since I'd been in town so they wouldn't even let me in. I wanted to sleep on the couch but they said no. I said, at least let me have \$5.00 and they said, no. That was my bottom. That was in March 1958. The Russians won't have me, the jail won't have me and my sisters were ashamed of me. I knew about the Clubhouse at 111 East Bay Street and I had been halfway up there several times when I was half drunk but always went back to the bars.

This time I made it in and Scotty made me welcome and became my sponsor but I always called him my mentor all those years. And the sister who wouldn't give me five dollars or let me sleep on her couch, I know usually you can't help family members, but 17 years later I get a squeaky phone call. She didn't identify herself, she just said, "I'm going to die if I don't get out of here. I'm staying drunk on beer and vodka" I said, "how much money do you need?" And she said, "I can get there if you'll just take me in". Needless to say, I took her in and it has now been at least 37 years and she has been straight ever since. She married a guy working behind the counter at the San Marco Clubhouse, had a daughter who is now 36 and married and doing well.

From March 1958 I started my recovery at 111 East Bay Street, The Friendship Group. There was a man out at the beach who moved a house onto a lot and that's where the San Pablo Club is now. That was a short time after I got into the program, I don't remember the dates but they were already having meetings there. The Arlington group was active. Curly L. was in that group. I knew Tom S. very well and was friends with him and Dr. Bedell who was not an alcoholic but treated alcoholics. One of my wives was his patient.

When they split up at Bay Street, Tom S. and some others came over to San Marco to get a central group started over here and left the Friendship Group at 111 E Bay St, which was my original group.

In 1962 there was an attorney named Porter I. and his brother, Bill I., who was a psychiatrist at Dr. Bedell's recovery house out near Trout River. Porter's wife's name was Marie, she worked with the courts and they were both alcoholics and they had connections with a judge. They joined up with a couple other people and started a place called the Alcoholic Service Center on 2nd Street near Market Street and started letting alcoholics detox there for three days. It was many years before they changed detox to five days. I remember taking food there, my wife's family had a farm near Palatka and we'd bring greens, cabbage, potatoes and peas for them to cook. Nobody had much money in those days but I did take a lot of food down there. They moved the Service Center over to 20 West 4th Street in the fall of 1963 and it remains there to this day. I served on the board of the Service Center off and on for at least 40 years.

In 1965 Paul L. came to the Friendship Group from the City Pea Farm. He stayed sober. He was a great asset to AA in Jacksonville. He and I and some others started the first half-way house in Jacksonville. In June of 1967, we called it Alco House and rented a three story house on the corner of 1st and Hubbard. We got the thing started, there are a lot of details but Paul did most of the work. Paul passed away December of 2005. I was personally privileged and honored to give Paul his 40 year chip in August 2005. We worked together in this program with half way houses and other things for 40 years. It was my privilege to be his friend that long.

In 1969 we bought the house at 1120 Hubbard Street which is still functioning as Alco House today. We bought other houses all around there and Paul bought the Clubhouse which was formerly Rudy's Bar. I served on the board of Alco house all these years.

I remember when they started the Westside group; they built the building they still have. I was running B & H Construction and doing work for Dr. W. He owned property where the Westside club is now and he gave them the property. They raised the money to construct the building. They offered me a chance to bid on it but I had so much going on at the time I knew I couldn't get it built as fast as they wanted it so I declined to even bid on it. But I knew all the people when they opened. I see a note in this paperwork, there is an old retired Army sergeant named Charlie F. and he had the Murray Hill Group in a Presbyterian Church on Edgewood and he kept it going for many years and was active everywhere. My step-son Chris S. is trying to keep the thing going, he only has a few people there every Thursday night but it is the second oldest group in town and he wants to keep it going if he can. Charlie's daughter still goes there a lot, she's in her 60's by now but I've known her since she was a child. Charlie used to bring her to meetings.

Pappy N. took me to Florida State Prison to speak in my first year or two in the program. At that time they had meetings for medium security way deep in the compound in an auditorium. A few years later they were meeting in the courtyard. I remember that first meeting. I couldn't have said anything important because I hadn't been in the program long enough. There must have been 200 people in there and I got one of the few standing ovations I've ever gotten. That was exciting for me. Fred B. and I along with our wives took meetings to the Florida State Prison at Raiford for many of years.

Speaking of Pappy, when I came into the program he was on the Governor's Council on Alcoholism. There were no halfway houses, no detoxes, no nothing. If you wanted treatment, Pappy was the guy to talk to. He had connections with a treatment center in Avon Park where you could get treatment for 28 days and probably get it paid for by some charity. Pappy did one hell of a lot for AA in Jacksonville, including the San Marco Club and opening the JABA Club. I was in the program. I loved Pappy almost as much as I loved Scotty. Pappy, Scotty and Harry G. were my heroes in my early years in the program. None of us forget those people who did all that for us in the early days.

Joe H. was our contact at the Florida State Prison. He was a great supporter of AA and used his connections to help us. In 1970 the International Convention was in Miami. Joe H. got the State of Florida to pay for him and 3 prisoners out of the Medium Security group to go to the International Convention in Miami and stay Wednesday night through Saturday - the state paid for the whole thing. We were all privileged to see Bill W.'s last public appearance. It only lasted about 5 minutes and they had to hold him up but we were there and we saw it.

I have another great memory from my experiences at the Florida State Prison. In 1971 I was the only person allowed to take meetings into maximum security. But for Christmas 1971 we were allowed to take other members in for a Christmas party. I was there with my wife Christine and my daughter Sherry. Paul and his wife Maggie were there as well as Lorain, another lady in the fellowship. What a privilege it was to participate in this event and I still feel a sense of serenity when I remember that party.

A friend of mine told me a few months back that I don't give God credit for anything. Maybe I don't talk enough about God, but I do give God credit for me being alive and for my sobriety. I deal with God every day; I talk to God every day. Morning, noon and night and sometimes in between. I hear people say they had a spiritual experience. Anita Bryant was the entertainment that Saturday night at the Miami Convention. We were sitting very high in the convention center and I remember in closing she was singing, it was the only time in my life even until now, that I have really felt the presence of God. She was singing, "How Great Thou Art," and when she hit that high note that she always put in at the end, and she could really hit it - I heard the loudest clap of thunder I have ever heard just as she hit that high note. You could actually hear the rain start in the convention center. I had cold chills all up and down my spine. We were in the presence of God - that is the only time that has ever happened to me. I will never forget that.

We are always hearing about people having traumatic experiences and then run out and get back on whatever they are addicted to. Whether it was alcohol or not. We all have traumatic experiences in the program as a part of living. I've had traumatic experiences during my sobriety. My first marriage lasted 6 years; I never married until I was sober. Course I got sober at 26 and got married right away. That only lasted 6 years and I was broken up about that because I had a 5 year old son and had to take care of him and it was difficult. I had a job but finances weren't all that great. But I survived that and married the lady I met the first night in the program. For a time I was in paradise. Then another son was born within a year, but that only lasted 10 years and I got another divorce and that was really a traumatic experience but you don't have to drink. I didn't, I leaned on my mentors and then I married my last wife who passed away July a year ago. We were together 35 years. If she lived to December she would have had 47 years and I had 53 - we would have had 100 years of sobriety between us.

I: What did AA do for you?

Ben: I am alive. God has seen fit to let me survive for 54 years one day at a time. I know without the AA program I never would have been here and my big thing is that I hope what you have heard is that I have always tried to be of service, I still sponsor people to this day and I have one in St. Pete who has 30 years. Dan calls me his grand-sponsor and I am sponsoring 2 other men. I am retired but I still have many things going on, I have to care for my sister now. But God has been good to me, I had 35 years with my last wife Dee, she was my soul mate. Her sponsors were Harry and Mildred G. so she had good solid sobriety. Two of her children are in the program, one has 10 years, and the other has 9. They treat me like I'm their father. Their father has been gone for many years. And I have a girl from my second wife, Christine's daughter, her name is Sherry. Chris S. is her brother who is trying to keep the little group at Murray Hill Presbyterian going. He is trying to do a couple of meetings at the old Willis Building right now. He has 10 or 11 years of sobriety, I never thought he'd make it, but he did. My youngest son was a doctor with a family practice in Fort Lauderdale. I finally had to go down there and get him 12 years ago. This is my son. Right now he has about 5 years sobriety and he is working as a server at a Café out on Beach Boulevard. I talked to him yesterday afternoon. He's hanging on and he's doing well now. Being a doctor was overwhelming and he had too many patients and too much responsibility. He got into crack and it did him in. My son from my first marriage is a body man at a local car agency and has been there for years. I've had a great life. I and old Paul did a lot of things together especially building that halfway house. I gave him his 40 year medallion just before he died and was there the first time he walked in on August 1965.

I: Ben, what a wonderful story, thank you. And thank you for all the work you put into carrying the message of Alcoholics Anonymous all these years. You are one of our pioneers. We'll see you at the Fish fry in April.

(Interviewed and edited by Charlie M.)