

Maggie R. is one of our AA pioneers. She has been very active in AA and has been sober for 45 years (DOS November 17, 1979). Maggie taped her story for the Intergroup archives and the following has been excerpted from that tape with her permission. (interviewed by Kevin G. and edited by Charlie M.)

Kevin G.: Maggie, where were you born and what was your early life like before you got to AA?

Maggie: I grew up in a steel town in northeast Ohio. I went to Denison University in Ohio and wound up down here in Jacksonville because I married a friend from college who was in the Navy. That was in 1979.

The first time I drank I was 17. It was senior year in high school, and I drank alone because I didn't want anyone to see what my reaction to it might be. Alcoholism is on both sides of my family. The second time I drank, I was up at a place called Nelson's Ledges, and it's a fun place to go hiking. All of my high school friends were sitting in a circle, and we were singing campfire songs. Somebody had brought some Schlitz malt liquor and they were passing it around. I took two big chugs, one moment I was sitting there and the next I fell over. I don't remember being carried down from Nelson's ledges by the linebacker of our football team and put into a car as they drove me home. One might think that that would be a strong signal, but I had already gotten the sense of the feeling of elation, that cunning, baffling and powerful feeling. So, I went on to college, and that was a true free pass to drink card. My first blackout in college was after my roommate and I had a Toga party. Once again I lost a chunk of time. And I don't remember how I got home. I woke up and said, hmm, I remember I was over here, and now I'm awake over there. And so it went.

When we first got to Florida, we didn't know anyone. A couple moved in next door. They were just getting back after being separated because of his drinking. I had been to Al Anon with my mother because of my dad's drinking so I ended up going to Al Anon with the neighbor. The meeting was at the old West Side Club and we walked in and went very quickly past the alcoholics into the Al Anon room. A few months later it was my 26th birthday. My husband was in Pensacola and he said, "I can't come home for your birthday; I got stuff I got to do here." I had a snit and said, "I don't think so." He reluctantly drove all the way home and we went out to eat and drink for my birthday. That was my last blackout.

I remember hearing about those questions from Ann Landers. I went back to those twelve questions and self-diagnosed myself and that's really the only way to be diagnosed as an alcoholic. Lots of people can tell you, I had pointed my finger at my dad for years. It wasn't till he saw two of his children get sober before he came in very late in life and died without having a drink from then on. My young brother came in at 19 and he's been sober ever since.

K.: Tell us about your first AA meeting.

M.: My neighbor took me to my first AA meeting at St Mark's Church. It was a very large meeting. They divided us into groups and they asked people who were newcomers to go into a beginner's room. Someone was talking about alcoholism, and that it's a disease and it's progressive. And I thought, Whoa! I probably have a disease that's probably inheritable. I had done some graduate work in biochemistry and I knew that there were things like enzymes that break down food and other things, and not every metabolic pathway is the same. Maybe there is a biological trigger which makes some of us more prone to be alcoholic. I didn't drink a whole lot so maybe there was something in me waiting to be activated. That made sense to me. At that St Mark's meeting they offered a white chip for anyone who wanted to join or rejoin this way of life. I walked up and picked up that white chip and started sobbing because I'd become the one thing in life I hated the most, and now I don't hate my father and his alcoholism at any level whatsoever. He is no different from me, and he came from a long line of alcoholism. What he didn't have was Ann Landers.

K.: What happened when you got here? Did you get a sponsor right away?

M.: Oh no! No one else was going to tell me what to do. I just accepted I was an alcoholic and went to meetings.

We moved to Virginia and bought our first house. There was a 10am 12 and 12 AA meeting that was an hour and a half long. I was taking my first child with me to the meeting. They would go get the rocking chair so that I could sit in with my son in the meeting. What a gift

of love that was. That meant to me “we want you there. We need you here”. One of the members in that meeting knew an older woman that would be willing to babysit at my house while I went to this meeting. It even gave me time to go out to lunch with the ladies, and that's where, after about five years, I got my first sponsor, Barbara.

Because we were in the Navy I decided to do my fifth step with a Navy chaplain. Barbara babysat my son while I went to do my fifth step with the chaplain. He was fairly familiar with drugs and alcohol and he listened a lot and asked me a few questions.

We moved back down here and bought a house in Avondale. My husband was going out to sea. I'd had a second child by then and I found the “Mother's Morning Out” nursery. I could leave my kids there and I didn't have to pick them up till one or 1:30 I could hit my meeting at the CSX building and maybe go out to lunch afterwards. That's where I met Mary S. and she was my next sponsor. To me a sponsor was someone I called infrequently when I was in a tizzy. I would make an effort to be at the meetings where I would see them so after the meeting or before, we could have a weekly chat. That's what I tell my gals, “I don't expect you to call me every day but it's important to see each other at meetings.”

Generally, I don't take newcomers. I'm usually sponsoring somebody who's about five years sober, and they've got that look in their eye like,” if this is all this is going to be, I'm done”, and I catch them going out the door, and I say, “Let's have a little chat and see how it's going.” Just because we've stopped drinking and we think we are going to live happily ever after. There's nothing else wrong with us except this metabolic disorder. Well, that's not usually true, especially if you grew up in an alcoholic family. The women I sponsor have read the first 164 pages, know the steps and may have a clue what the traditions are. I do very poorly with those who are not married and don't have children because they haven't had their rough edges knocked off by someone that can disappoint them, scare them or hurt them.

We did go back to Norfolk and I did continue to go to meetings. I didn't do much service work. I was the treasurer of several meetings and had taken the notes for business meetings. I had the key for several meetings. We came back to Jacksonville for the third time. By this time, I'd had my third child who was a girl.

I got involved with the Timuquana Ladies group which met on Thursdays at 11 o'clock. That's where I met my next sponsor Phyllis D. The church let us use their baby sitters and we passed the basket twice to help pay the baby sitters. It was a good meeting and it was safe. It was my home group for many years. Unfortunately, we had to shut it down during the Covid pandemic.

It's very rare to meet a woman who got sober before her kids were born and stay sober. I was a unicorn in some ways with the age I came in and the fact that I didn't go back out. I was fully convinced I saw enough of what it had done to my aunts and uncles, my own family. I was not going to inflict that on my children. My kids may have felt a bit of abandonment because of all of the meetings I went to but they have no idea what abandonment would have looked like if I had kept drinking.

Phyllis had me volunteer as Intergroup rep. Later I became the GSR for Timuquana Ladies group and I went to area assembly. I really found my people there. They knew Robert's Rules. They made decisions without quarreling. They were completely dedicated to the committees they were on. I would go to the committee meetings, and they do these presentations and was it so informed. Later I became the DCM for my district and became even more involved with the Area and with service. The people in Area were very involved in service, and that's where I really understood that service could keep me sober.

When the pandemic happened, I went to a Zoom meeting for four years. I'm the GSR of that meeting. That means that I meet with a whole group of people up in New York State, Western New York. That's where our Area is, Area 48 it happens to be the new Area for online meetings.

K.: How are you feeling about the state of AA today? Are we getting our message across?

M.: I think AA is doing great. However, the problem of alcoholism is daunting. Today a greater proportion of the population has this disease. A Harvard study estimates that in the US 140,000 people die each year of alcoholism. I don't think there is any person on the planet who hasn't been adversely affected by alcoholism. An active alcoholic doesn't want to admit their problem and it takes a long time to get even used to the idea of going to a

meeting. In that time a lot of pain and harm can be done. AA does a great job of carrying the message through its literature. The message can't be received until there is a willingness to receive it.

I always donate my grapevines to take into prisons. It is estimated that each Grapevine is read by seven inmates in prison. AA will be publishing a simplified version of the big book so it can be better understood by young people who weren't around in the thirties and don't know what the Belladonna Treatment was. AA was very proactive in reaching out with Zoom meetings during the pandemic.

K.: How do you sponsor?

M.: I probably have two sponsees at a time. I don't hire and fire, they ask me. I say yes, and then I say that I want you to remember my phone number. That's important. I remember getting a phone call from one of my sponsees. She was on her way home from work, she was a mess, and she had to stop and call me from a pay phone. We didn't have cell phones. I like them to memorize the third step prayer. Once they've done that, I like them to memorize the seventh step prayer. Something usually happened between those two things. I tell them when they're ready to sponsor somebody else that I think that's pretty important. Anniversaries are very important and I make a big deal out of them and always give a token to celebrate. Alcoholism is cunning, baffling and powerful and is always there in some new form. We just have to keep on our toes.

I sometimes wonder if they'll ever develop a test to be given at birth to see if they have the enzyme that will cause them to be blackout drinkers. We do that with Hemophilia. I guess it would be useful to know that you're probably a carrier and you probably shouldn't ever drink. It didn't stop me or my poor dad. I have mixed feelings about having such a test.

K.: Thank you for a wonderful interview and thank you for all the service work you do.

M.: You're welcome

Here is a list of the twelve questions that convinced Maggie that she was an alcoholic.
Answer yes or no. (copyright AA World Services) (answers on p.)

1. Have you ever decided to stop drinking for a week or so, but only lasted for a couple of days?
2. Do you wish people would mind their own business about your drinking – stop telling you what to do?
3. Have you ever switched from one kind of drink to another in the hope that this will keep you from getting drunk?
4. Have you had to have an eye-opener upon awakening during the past year?
5. Do you envy people who can drink without getting into trouble?
6. Have you had problems connected with drinking during the last year?
7. Has your drinking caused problems at home?
8. Do you ever try to get “extra” drinks at a party because you do not get enough?
9. Do you tell yourself you can stop drinking any time you want to, even when you keep getting drunk when you don’t mean to?
10. Have you missed days of work or school because of drinking?
11. Do you have “blackouts”?
12. Have you ever felt that your life would be better if you did not drink?

Answer page

If you answered yes four or more times you are probably in trouble with alcohol.