

**Gary R.** is one of our AA old-timers. He has 41 years of sobriety (DOS 4/21/1982). He was interviewed by Kevin G. and Christopher G. and the following is taken from that interview with his permission (edited by Charlie M.)

Kevin: Could you tell us a little bit about your yourself. Where you were born and what was your childhood like.

Gary: I was born in 1944 in a small town called Nitro, West Virginia. Nitro got its name from World War One. The country had a need for gunpowder to support the war and a factory was built there to manufacture gunpowder. I went to Nitro High School, but quit in my senior year. Later, I completed my GED and even took some college courses.

K.: How was your childhood growing up with your siblings?

G.: I had three sisters, two older and one younger sister and one older brother. My older sister was a little bit mentally and physically handicapped. She got to near the burner on an old gas hot water heater and her dress caught fire. She died a few days later in the hospital. Since that time, I've lost all my other siblings to various diseases and heart failures. My younger sister was about 10 years younger than me. We didn't have the same father and she resented me a lot for that. We tried to have a good relationship while we were younger, but finally she wouldn't have anything to do with me. My older brother and sister were about 10 and 11 years older than me so I didn't really grow up with them.

G.: When I was in first grade, my mom opened up a beer joint in Nitro, West Virginia. We lived upstairs on the second floor. She ran the joint and my dad just drank. It wasn't too bad until other kids I played with found out that my mom owned a bar. Mom running a bar was looked down upon. For a lot of my childhood, I always considered myself less than. My family never went to church and Sunday school. The only exception might have been for somebody's funeral or a wedding or something like that. That's the only time we went. I can never remember being in the same car with my mom and dad at the same time. You know, they were just different.

K.: When did you start drinking?

G.: I was probably 15 or 16 years old when I really started drinking. I remember I went to the junior-senior prom. I was a junior. I was kicked out of the prom by the principal because I was drunk. I went to some other parties, continuing to drink. I woke up the next morning in the gym where the prom has been held. How I got there, I have no idea. I had to walk home about six blocks that morning. My white sport coat was covered with blood and puke. I felt so ashamed. I really didn't want to go to school Monday. When I got to school, everyone was talking about how much fun I was and what a great party guy. That made it all okay.

I was mainly a beer drinker but would drink whatever I could get my hands on. I drank for 21 years until I stopped in 1982.

K.: What was your bottom like?

G.: It was 1982 and my life had come completely apart. My wife divorced me and I came close to losing my job. My daughter stayed with my wife. I lived in little rat and roach infested apartment. My 15-year-old son stayed with me. I was drinking in the apartment as usual; my son came in, walked to the kitchen, opened the refrigerator and slammed the door and said, "Damn there is nothing to eat here!" That was my aha moment.

Within a couple of days, I was reaching out for help at work. Between the Master Chief who was trying to help me and a Lieutenant who was trying to fire me I got into Navy's treatment program (ARC) at the Alcohol Rehab Center at NAS Jacksonville. I think I was the first civilian to receive treatment there.

K.: What did you think of that program?

G.: Well, they probably saved my life. Yeah. I found out that I was an alcoholic that I had a disease and was not a bad person. I was a sick person that needed to get well. I went for six weeks. One of my counselors Bill L. a Navy Chief told me after I completed treatment that I needed to get my ass into the middle of AA.

I was living in Glen St. Mary at the time which didn't have any meeting so I had to go to MacClenny which had only one meeting a week. I had to drive to Lake City or Jacksonville for other meetings.

K.: When did you find a sponsor??

G.: My first sponsor was from MacClenny. I liked him because he laughed and joked and cut up. I needed that because I hadn't had a good belly laugh in a long, long time. He was great. With a lot of help he and I worked the steps together and shared a lot.

K.: Did you have a home group?

G.: MacClenny was my home group for a while. I did help start a meeting at NAS Cecil Field. We met in the Chapel. There were a few guys pretty regularly. We met in the afternoon after I got off work. The base Chaplain was very supportive.

There used to be a place out on US 90 between Baldwin and Jax, Brandy Branch. It was more or less a place for sober people to go and dance and hang out, it was run by Wally M, and his wife. Open daily meetings several evenings a week. Wally took in guys trying to get sober and who no place to go. Brandy Branch was an important part of my recovery. It taught me you can dance, socialize and have fun sober.

K.: How do you deal with new people in the program?

G.: I just try to give back what was so freely given to me. I try to listen and identify what their stories. Sometimes I make mistakes. One time this guy come around and I tried my best to help him. He told me to leave him alone. I talked to somebody else about this guy and it got back to his boss. They didn't fire him or anything but he was all bent out of shape about it. That was the last time I did anything like that! I did not mean for any of that to happen. I was young and wanted to help. Anonymity is very important.

K.: I know you have done 12 Step work and go into people's home. I was with you and another AA guy on a 12 Step call. When we arrived, the police were there. The drunk had a gun. After the police allowed us in, we did our 12 Step work. Some of that tough stuff work can be dangerous.

G.: It can be because you never know what you're walking into. You have to be careful. Just like me when I was drunk. I had an old pistol. I might have shot you too. Who knows what a drunk under the influence will do.

K.: What sort of literature do you read besides the Big Book?

G.: A Day at a Time, 24 Hours a Day, Daily Reflections and one Ed C. gave me several years ago The Eye Opener. The last book really taught me a lot. It's good. Daily stuff. Talks more about daily life than drinking or AA. It helps me keep an open mind. It helps me take it one day at a time.

My oldest son was drinking very heavily and I thought he was following in my footsteps. Tried getting him to meetings with me. He wouldn't go and said to just get over it. Well, here is the end of that story. His wife, she's a very, very lovely girl. I love her to death. But her things are her things. They went out one afternoon to go someplace and my son had been drinking and he got sick in her car. Last time he's had a drink. Now he has a son that graduated college.

My mother was more or less drinking when she passed away. I went to her funeral and some folks at the funeral talked about her drinking and her way of life. My Dad walked into a church in West Virginia and gave his drinking problem over to God, didn't take that drink till he died. My Dad was sober. But he did not enjoy his sobriety. He couldn't watch a beer commercial on TV. He would turn his head

K.: Your first wife divorced you. Tell us about your second wife.

G.: I've been married to Joyce for 39 years. It's a funny story about how we met. Joyce had left her husband in Maryland because of his drinking. She moved down here with her two boys. She took a job in the Purchasing Department at NAS Cecil Field. I was working for the Navy at NAS Cecil Field in charge of the two main warehouses. All the forklifts around there were breaking down and I couldn't get them fixed. I told the bosses that if I didn't get some forklifts fixed, I am going to have to shut the doors. They told me you can't shut the doors on the receiving department on a Navy base. They contacted the people to get the forklifts fixed or rent me a forklift. Joyce had just started working for the Purchasing Dept. at Cecil field.

They sent a request up there to get a forklift as soon as possible. I got a phone call the next day and the woman said, "I'm Joyce, I need some information about the forklift requirement." We had several phone calls back and forth with questions. Early the next morning, a big orange forklift shows up at the warehouse. All the Navy material handling equipment was painted industrial yellow. Being the gentleman I am, I walked up to the Purchase Department. I hadn't met Joyce yet. I walked in I said "who's Joyce", and they pointed her out to me. I asked "are you Joyce" and she said "yes". I said it's the wrong color and left. She turned around to one of her coworkers Mary (who was a very religious lady) and she said "who the F... was that". This started the best relationship I have ever had. A few months later we got married.

K.: So, a forklift a technical issue resulted in a lifelong marriage of happiness. God has a way of laughing.

G.: Absolutely! He put us together without us knowing. I wasn't looking for her she wasn't looking for me.

Heck look at me, God has to have a sense of humor.

K.: What do you enjoy most about today?

G.: Staying sober and enjoying life. Best thing that ever happened to me and my wife. Regrets are pretty much behind me. By working the steps, I have cleaned up my past as best I can. If I screw up today, I try my best to make amends as soon as possible. I'm just trying to focus on today and what's important today

If you want to change your life, if you want to get better and you want to stop drinking, join AA. Find people that you can relate to and look up to as I did in an early meeting. They spoke the language that I liked. They were having a good time and enjoying life. That's what I wanted.

When I moved to Jacksonville, I made a lot of meetings at the West Side Club. I don't know how many there were in Jacksonville at the time but I know there were enough to help me stay sober. I first lived in a house on 103<sup>rd</sup> Street and moved to Mandarin later. prefer open meetings with good sobriety

There isn't a really right or wrong way to stay sober. The best method for me was finding a God of my understanding, a group I felt comfortable with and a group of honest, sincere friends. There are a lot of different meetings around some might say this one is wrong and another says this one is right. I know times and society is changing but AA is here to stay. If we stick together for the same purpose, sobriety.

Christopher G.: What about conventions, round ups and stuff like that

G.: I have been to several. My wife and I went to San Antonio, Texas for the International Convention in 2005. What a blessing. We had a great time. There were a lot of speakers who had many, many years of sobriety but the one that touched our hearts was a young blonde woman with a bunch of tattoos and less than 2 years sobriety. The polished speakers sent a good message but that young woman spoke from her heart. She was my kind of speaker.

K.: Are there any changes you would make in AA as you see it today?

G.: AA and God have kept me sober for 41 years. If it ain't broke don't fix it.

K.: Thank you for sharing your story with us.

G.: You're welcome.