

## INTERVIEW WITH MARY LOU H

My name is Sally F, and I am interviewing Mary Lou H. on July 20, 2020 via the Zoom platform. Mary Lou has 37 years sobriety. We are not doing an in person interview due to the Covid 19 Pandemic. Interviewed, transcribed and edited by Sally F.)

S First of all Mary Lou. What is your sobriety date?

ML My sobriety date is June 15, 1983.

S Let's just start talking about your childhood.

ML: I grew up in Somerville, New Jersey in a lovely, stable, middle class family. I went to Catholic school all my life, right up through my graduate programs, and it was New Jersey in the 50s. It was quite a lovely place to be. On the flip side of that, there was a whole lot of drinking going on in my neighborhood. Wherever I have lived with my parents, there always seems to be an alcoholic next door. My mom, being a very open and neighborly person, would often take that person under her wing, and they would proceed to have escapades together. They would just find fun. I remember that they would go the Flemington Furs, and there would be a fashion show. And my mother would lose her friend in the process, and her friend would be found passed out on the furs.

Because she was having so much difficulty, we also kind of adopted her daughter into our family, and Nancy became my best, dearest friend as a child. And she suffered from the fact that her mother was an alcoholic. Nancy and I, as very little children, were watching Red Skelton on tv one day. and he was pretending to be drunk. I sure he wasn't in real life. We decided we would follow suit, and I knew where some cough medicine was kept and we proceeded to finish a bottle between us. Nancy then

toddled home. and I apparently ran around the house on my tricycle until I passed out which was my pattern to come for the next many years. Drink too much and pass out.

Fast forward now to I am probably 13 or 14, and there is a young man in the neighborhood. He was the first of the hippies. He had long hair and bare feet and a guitar. He came round. New Jersey was beautiful then. and it still is in parts. We went to a local river and sat by the river bank. He proceeded to give me a tall Colt 45 malt liquor. Being the good alcoholic that I am, I pretty much drank that quickly and in one sitting. The world was all right, and everything clicked. Everything was wonderful. Everything was especially beautiful. I could describe to you in great detail the beauty of river and the sandy bank we were on and the sun and the green of the summer, And of course, he was serenading me on his guitar, All was right with the world.

And for the next 15-20 years, I chased that feeling of the first drink which was exceptional and wonderful and brought nothing but wrack and ruin into my life.

I did very well in high school. I excelled but wanted to get away from my hometown. I had a very strong feeling that I needed a geographic. even at that young age. At 17, I wanted to leave the boyfriend behind, get away from my parents and strike out on my own. I did, and I had a wonderful time in Boston. But I felt that there was no one watching over me, and I went full blown into the 60s. I graduated high school in 1969 and so it was free love and free drugs and free rock n' roll. It was a glorious time and if anything, it just accelerated my addiction.

I met a lovely man very early on in college, and we married at 19 when I was a junior and he was a junior as well. That marriage lasted five years, and the reason it ended was because he was "no fun" and didn't drink like me. I basically left the love of my life, a wonderful man, and I left

behind the life that I had envisioned for myself in the Northeast. I very much loved that area of the country and pictured myself being a successful Boston attorney's wife. My drinking cost me that.

I was always able to work and go to school despite my alcoholism but when it got so bad in Boston and I had nowhere to turn, emotionally, spiritually, morally, I decided to move to Florida because my parents had moved here. I was looking for that stability. I needed someone to say, "What's wrong with you?" "Why are you drinking the way you are drinking?". "Why are you acting the way you're acting". Of course, that didn't work. It didn't last. I had a degree in special education and a masters in teaching deaf, blind and multi-handicapped children. My mother lived in Ocala, and she said that she had heard that there is this school for the deaf and blind out in St. Augustine. Why don't we check that out?

So thanks to her, I came out here. I had worked at the Perkins School for the Blind in Boston so I had a good resume. I came out to St. Augustine in 1981, and I was hired immediately. I spent the next 35 years there. It was a wonderful career!

S: What place did you go to? What meeting did you go to?

ML: My first meeting was the Oldest City Group at 144 King Street. It was a wonderful event. I can tell you many of the people who were there because one of them was my second husband who I met almost immediately. I met my first husband the first week of college, and I met my second husband the first week I went to AA.

Now the interesting part of that is my first sponsor was Kathy Kidd, and I will use her whole name because, God love her, she has gone to her reward. And her husband was Frank Kidd, She told me that it is not wise or prudent to have a serious relationship until you have been in the

program for a year. So Tom and I started date almost immediately and we dated for a year. We promptly got married, and I had two beautiful children. I love to say this. Those two children are now 34 and 32 and they have never seen me drunk and they have never seen their Dad drunk. Tom S, who is my ex-husband now, has 44 years of sobriety and I have 37 as of this writing in 2020.

In my early days in the program, I was on such a pink cloud. It was the first time I was ever completely sure that that everything was going to be ok. I had such a feeling of peace and hope and camaraderie with the people. There was mostly older men and older couples that were in the program at that time. The couples tended to each have their own meeting and kind of be the “elder statesmen” of meetings. Alice and Perry had the Oldest City Group. My sponsor and her husband, Kathy Kidd and Frank Kidd, had the Shamrock Group which was in the Methodist Church down the street from Scarlett O’Hara’s. That was one of the meetings I went to the most.

I jumped right into service work and became the secretary of the Shamrock Group but I always considered Oldest City to be my home group. I don’t remember hearing that much about home groups back in those days. One of the reasons might be that there weren’t that many meetings. Because I was working, even though not that summer, I do remember very clearly that in all of St. Augustine when I first came in, there was really only one meeting a night.

There might have been daytime meetings at the Serenity Club but I didn’t go. My ex-husband, Tom, was a counselor with alcoholics here in town at Twin Oaks and Stuart Marchman and he also worked up in Jacksonville at the detox up there, Gateway. He would tell me that it would be best if I didn’t go to the Serenity Club alone in those days because it was known to be a place where newcomers came in, where often street

people would hang out. and he didn't feel that it was all that safe for me to go there alone. There were probably daytime meetings on the weekends that I could have gone to there but he told me I shouldn't go.

What I remember, that I kind of miss, were the speaker meetings where the speaker would speak for a whole hour. When I first came in, I didn't feel like I had all that much to say, and we were also very clearly told "take the cotton out of your ears and put it in your mouth", and "sit on your hands and listen". We were not really encouraged to say anything which was a blessing because I didn't have a whole lot to say. I would really love those long hour long speaker meetings where people would tell their whole experience, strength and hope, and I could identify with everyone, male, female, young, old. It was so beautiful and that to be me seemed like the beginning of where I could love everyone in the program based on their story, not based on how they looked or their educational background. I was raised to be quite a snob, I guess.

S: It is a New England Thing. Where did you go to school?

M: Or what do you do? How high have you gotten on the pecking order?

Here is my biggest memory of walking into that Oldest City Group was I felt like I was home. I really felt like I was at home. It was very akin to that very first drink where I felt like "Oh. Everything is going to be ok." I found my place.

I didn't get much acceptance from my Mom. She was the Matriarch and my Dad was the Saint and everything I did was ok. But my mother was keeping score. She did not at all like the fact that I was... I remember she came to a meeting one time. I think it was in Central Florida where they lived. I had gone to a meeting over there. and I think I had invited her to come to a meeting. I am sure I did now so she would see what it was all about and hopefully be more understanding. She would come right out

and say “You are not an alcoholic. No, No!” I was emptying the ashtrays at this meeting, and I didn’t even smoke. She was appalled. Now, she was almost a chain smoker, and I had emptied her ashtrays many a time but for her to see me in that kind of service was most distressing to her.

But that is my plug for getting into service early because that really did make a difference. Being the secretary at Shamrock and making coffee and doing those kinds of things really...I needed humility. I had gone to a prestigious college, Boston College. And I was a teacher. That is what I was supposed to be. But I lost all of that, not physically but emotionally, to my disease. I never lost my job. When I got down here and got another Masters and worked at the school for 20 years. Then I became the Principal after I got the Leadership degree. I couldn’t have done any of that if I hadn’t not been sober. I owe every rung that I climbed in this world, for the last 37 years, I owe that to the program of Alcoholics Anonymous.

I think one of the most wonderful things is that my kids grew up in what I like to think of as an AA household. My kids will actually say things like “You are going to be amazed before you are halfway through”. My ex will often, we are still very close, he will say things to me like “Get grateful, you bum”. We have the jargon. The kids were raised with the program. And that is a wonderful thing. They were both raised Catholic and my son’s religion is surfing and my daughter has joined this very wonderful Bible based church down in Tampa. But they are both really good kids. I am so grateful for that. I am so blessed to have that.

S: So you knew Perry and Alice G.

ML: And Frank and Kathy.

S: And your service work. Did you ever start a group?

ML: No I never have.

S: Can you physically describe the interior of the Oldest City Group location at 144 King St. Now it's an Art Gallery so it is hard to envision.

ML: I can. I will tell you a story related to it. It was a long, dark room, almost like a wide hallway. On top of the Oldest City Group was a men's treatment center. Like a halfway house where men lived. My ex worked for that for awhile. When you went in, there would be two or three rows...it was almost remind you of where Saturday Night Live is now out at the Outlet Mall because it was a store, I guess. It was very dark and there were seats with the backs to the wall, and I remember George K always sat over on that side, and he would kind of hold court.

The coffee was way in the back. There was a podium on the right. I can remember sitting in front of the podium and someone had handwritten a whole list of our assets and our liabilities. I would look at that every week and it would have fear, anger, resentment and on the other side faith, hope, trust. It was quite extraordinary. Someone had taken a lot time, and it was a really big poster. It was a long list on both sides. I remember thinking of that when I was doing my fourth step and thinking I have no idea what strengths and weaknesses are now. It took me a lot of work with my sponsor to narrow that list down because I could say yes to everything or no to everything which didn't make any sense.

But the podium was there, and I was sitting in the front row and my ex-husband was speaking. He has a wonderful way of speaking. He has a beautiful, deep voice and is very well spoken. And he has a beautiful Southern accent. He was raised Baptist and I was raised Catholic. He is from Alabama and Florida and I am from New Jersey and Boston. We were kind of an interesting couple. He was speaking one of the first nights I was there. He said, "Good Evening. My name is Tom. I am an alcoholic and I am from Montgomery, Alabama." And a homeless person would come crashing in through the day, and he was just look and look

back and patiently resume, "Hi, I am Tom and I am an alcoholic and I am from Montgomery, Alabama". And another guy would roll in off the street. I think he did that three or four times. He just has a funny way about him. That was my introduction to his sense of humor.

So it was a very modest, modest room. It was not a great part of town then. I lived over on Cincinnati Avenue at the time, and I couldn't drive. So I would ride my bike over.

I really had reluctantly moved to Florida against my better judge

ment but I had to get out of Boston. I was running away from my divorce. I can remember riding my bike over and parking outside the Oldest City and chaining it to a probably some kind of speed limit sign or something and looking up through a palm tree and seeing the full moon and thinking "that was beautiful". I was seeing the whole world through a new set of eyes.

S: So you went to the Shamrock Group. Did you do the ladies group too because I know Oldest City and the Shamrock Group had a women's groups

ML: You know what. I was not into women at that time. I didn't learn to love women until I learned to love myself. So I don't remember any of those women's meetings. The other meeting I do remember is but this is quite a few years later. This was after the kids were a little bit older, and we would take turns going to meetings. Tom would go to a night meeting and I would watch the kids and vice versa. And during those years, I would go to the Way Out Group which has always been at the Lutheran Church. Helen and Peter were kind of the leads.

Sally, when were those two women's groups?

S: The Oldest City Ladies started in 1975. The Shamrock Ladies was in 1980, and it was at Grace Methodist Church.



ML: Those were probably daytime meetings. Isn't it funny. Now my favorite meetings are women's meetings.

S: What kinds of fun events did you guys have?

ML: What we did because the community was smaller, we partied at people's houses. We had sober parties. I can remember going to Ned P's house. We were young people with young children who would hang out together. The one big, big event was the Gratitude Dinner.

S: That was at the Rod and Gun for a while, right?

ML: Yes, but before that it was held at the Way Out spot, that Lutheran Church. It was there for several years. I can't remember where else it has been held. Those were fantastic. I spoke at one of those early on and shared way too much. That is how you learn.

S: You have had an incredible journey, and it is great.

ML: I have.

S; Thank you so much!