

Sam G. is another of our AA pioneers. He has 42 years sobriety (DOS 3/18/1973). He taped his story earlier this year and the following has been excerpted from that tape with his permission. (Interviewed and edited by Charlie M. and transcribed by Rhonda B.)

Sam: I am Sam G. I was born in Evansville, Indiana, in 1940 just a year before Pearl Harbor. I had what might be called a normal childhood. I didn't have a happy childhood. My parents didn't like each other and fought a lot and it was kind of a war zone in my house. I was always very depressed as a child and I would try to tell my mother how I was feeling and she would tell me I really didn't have any reason to feel that way. One of the things that worried me all of the time when I was little is that I didn't know what I wanted to be when I grew up and I sometimes cried myself to sleep at night because I was afraid that I would never be able to choose anything that I wanted to be. In a way I still don't know what I want to be when I grow up and I'm 74 years old.

I had a lot of trouble with my father and we were always at odds; we really had a cordial hatred for one another. When I was 15 years old I worked out a plan to get out of there. My dad's main threat to me was if I didn't straighten up he was going to send me to a military school where I would really find out what discipline was all about. I started to think that wasn't too bad an idea. The next time he hollered that at me I said, "You know I think that might be a good idea Dad." It was like we hit a wall. He said, "You really mean that don't you?" I said, "Oh yea!" He made a few phone calls and got me into Culver Military Academy in the middle of my sophomore year in high school and in 3-4 weeks I was out of there. I had just turned 16 and I never really went back. It was hard. It was hard discipline and also because if you came in the middle of the year they were bound and determined that you were going to get your share of hazing and abuse. I became friends with this Mexican kid who came in at the same time as I did and we looked out for each other. We have been friends for close to 60 years. I just talked to him last month. It worked out.

I didn't really want to go to college. What happened was I only applied to 2 colleges. I applied to this little parochial school in Indiana where my sisters had gone and as a joke I applied to Yale and I got in. I had absolutely no expectations that that would happen. I had no desires to go to a school like that but when you get into something like that and papa is going to pay for it you almost have to go. So I did and that is where I got really badly drug addicted and it took me almost 11 years to get an undergraduate degree. I would get kicked out and then I would get accepted back and then I would take a psychiatric leave of absence and then I would get accepted back. It just went back and forth. They have a lot of stake in graduating all of the applicants that they accept so the statistics would look good. Anyway, I was all over the place. I remember by the time I was a junior I was pretty heavily addicted to drugs and alcohol. I left school for a girl and when that didn't work out I found myself in New Orleans and out of money. I was living in the French Quarters and there was an American Merchant Seaman living upstairs from me. I tried to borrow some money from him, and he said, "Get a job." I said, "There aren't any jobs." He said, "If I am able to get you a job, would you take it?" I said, "OK." He gave me \$5 and an address. It turned out the job was on

a tramp steamer that was going to South America. When I got to the ship I saw these tough-looking guys covered with tattoos hanging over the bow looking down and I thought what in the hell have I gotten myself into. In Panama I got in a fight with one of the crew members, a drunken brawl, and all the way across the Atlantic we were circling around each other. He was making threats and I was making counter threats, and so on. When we got to northern Germany, I decided to get off the ship. I hitchhiked down to Hamburg and finally found a place to stay. I was only asleep about 3 hours and all hell broke loose outside. I looked out the window and there were police cars all over the place and people running this way and that way. It turned out that was the night that the Russians rolled out their tanks and cut the country in half and started the Berlin Wall. I was right in the middle of it. I felt like Forrest Gump. That kind of thing happened to me a lot. I got to Mexico in time for the earthquake and I got to Germany in time for that. I don't know how I always seemed to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

I had a sister living in England and so eventually I got across the channel to her house. My brother-in-law wanted to get rid of me so he loaned me the money to fly back to the states and he got me a job in the oil fields in Mississippi. It's really dangerous work on those platforms and I wasn't big enough. I hurt my back and so after about 2 weeks I washed out of that.

Nobody liked to see me coming anymore. I went back to school, back and forth. My father was always ready to supply the money if I wanted to go back to school and Yale kept accepting me back. By this time I was married, I guess twice. I have been married 5 times; twice in sobriety, so, the first 3 don't count.

I got busted for drugs in New Haven and stayed in jail a little while and then the lawyer thought I would be better off being in the hospital when my docket came up and the judge actually did sentence me to a year in prison that he suspended because I was in a mental hospital and he said that if I left against medical advice I would do the year. It was kind of a cushy place and I got in a lot of trouble there.

Yet, it was another 3 years before I got sober because I didn't know how. I didn't know what to do. I didn't know anything about AA. I didn't even really think I was an alcoholic. I was just crazy. I moved to Colorado with my third wife and by that time I had finally got my degree and had a job in a medical laboratory. One morning I got out of bed at 3:00 or 4:00 in the morning with the horrors and found about a quarter of a bottle of vodka which I drank. As the alcohol calmed my nerves I felt my liver, which was swollen and painful, and I realized I was dying. I was 31-years-old and I was dying. I couldn't quit and I couldn't keep going. I don't know what prompted me to do this but I looked up AA in the phonebook and I called the number and this sleepy guy answered. I said, "I can't stop drinking and I need help and I don't know what to do." He said, "OK, give me your address." He didn't sound very concerned. I gave him my address and he said, "We'll get somebody out there in the morning, probably about 9:00." I said, "Mister, I need help now. I don't know what's going happen to me by 9:00. I don't have anything left to drink." He said, "Buddy, this guy that we're sending out doesn't take any calls until 8:00 in the morning, and I'm sorry you're just going to have to tough it out until around 9:00." He hung up. He didn't even say goodbye. The walls were closing in. I was about to go into DTs. I just hung on. It was a really wild ride until morning.

This guy showed up. His name was Ralph. He came screeching up in front of my house in a red stingray and I thought: what this is? He came walking up the walk just like he owned the place and he walked right in. He didn't knock or anything. He walked in and he looked at me and he said, "Whew, you really look like shit." I just sat there and looked at him and thought what am I getting myself into? I stood up and stuck my hand out and he shook hands with me but the knees were all busted out of my jeans. I was really pretty ragged. He said, "Well, looks like you've been praying a lot?" You know I couldn't imagine anybody being that cruel. He said, "Well, come on get in the car. We're going to go down to the club." I said, "Mister, I'm trying to stay away from the clubs." He said, "It's not that kind of a club. Come on and get in the car." I said, "I can't. I'm too sick." He said, "You know, let me tell you what's going to happen. You're not going to come with me and as soon as I'm gone you're going to find yourself a drink." I said, "I don't have any money." He said, "Did that ever stop you?" You know, I really felt like he knew who I was. I went with him and I have never been so scared in my life. The way he drove. He had a corvette and he was like probably in his 50s. He was an airline pilot and he had 9 years of sobriety. I kept thinking the police were going to stop him but he just drove like hell and we got down to the club. He took me in and I was shaking and I was crying and he said, "You guys look after him I got to make a phone call." He went upstairs to make a phone call and they thought I was about to have a seizure and so they took me to the hospital. I found out later that when he came down he absolutely blew his stack. He was so angry. He said, "They're going to take him down nice and easy on tranquilizers and he's going to end up going home and not going to AA and he's going to have to go through this all over again and I don't even know if he'll make it and it will be your fault." He was right.

When I got home I stayed sober for a week. The longest I have been sober in my life. After a week, I had a panic attack, and I ended up in bed with my clothes and shoes on with the covers over my head crying. My wife knew exactly what to do. She brought me 2 of those 20 mg Valium tablets and a triple shot of Southern Comfort. Fixed me right up. I didn't want to start drinking again. So, I called my last psychiatrist and told him that I didn't want to start drinking again and he wrote me a prescription for a bottle of pills. I went through the Valium in about 3 days and then started drinking again 6 weeks later and I was sicker than I had ever been.

I finally went back to AA. I had my wife drive me. I couldn't drive. She drove me to a speaker meeting clear across town as far away from Ralph as possible. It was a double-header speaker meeting and two guys told their stories. I still didn't think I was an alcoholic. I thought I was just mentally ill. I finally realized that night that whatever else might be wrong with me I was definitely an alcoholic and these people knew how to get sober.

I then noticed the second step on the wall and for a minute I was afraid that that disqualified me because it said restored us to sanity. I felt I don't have anything to be restored to. I got up and this little old lady said, "Where you going darling?" I said, "I don't think this will work." She said, "Why not?" I told her, "I got nothing to be restored to." She said, "Hun, you just haven't looked up this word." She said, "It doesn't just mean to make like it used to be. It means to make like it's supposed to be. Now sit your ass back down and listen." I have always been so grateful to that lady. I figured I had a chance. When I got home that night, I was sitting on the couch and my wife

walked in and said, "Are you an alcoholic?" I said, "Yea, I am." She burst into tears and went into the bedroom and locked the door. I think she had the idea, which was true, that she had lost her playmate. She had lost her drinking buddy. Five years later she divorced me. I was no fun anymore.

Charlie: When did you start drinking?

Sam: When I was 6 or 7 years old, I had an asthma attack. That was when doctors made house calls. The doctor came and he gave me a pill and I took the pill and in a little while I started to feel really good. I heard my mother put the bottle of pills in the medicine cabinet. The next afternoon, I pulled a chair up to the washbasin and I got that bottle and I took a pill out of it and it worked again. Every afternoon at the same time I would go take another one of those pills and get high until they were all gone; I think I did that for 30 consecutive days. My drinking and using drugs started then. After the pills ran out I would take whiskey out of my father's liquor cabinet at every opportunity. I kept trying to change the way I felt and by the time I was halfway through college, I knew how to do that.

Charlie: What happened after that speaker meeting?

Sam: The next day I went to the club that Ralph had taken me to but I went at noon to try to avoid him. I thought maybe he was a night meeting person. I went into that meeting and I sat down and I was shaking really badly and I looked up and he was sitting right across the table grinning at me. I hated that guy. When they said Amen, I headed for the door and I stumbled and when I got my balance I looked up and he was already standing there in the door facing me, blocking the way, and I stopped. He said, "You obviously don't have any problem with the first step. Look at you. You're a train wreck. As far as the second step is concerned, I'm really not interested in what you believe because it obviously hasn't been working for you and so we'll just put that one on the shelf. Okay. We'll go upstairs and close the door and get on our knees and do a third step." So, before I knew it, we were upstairs, I read it out of the book and it was very embarrassing, I didn't feel good about it, and he showed me in the book how to do the 4th step and he said, "You got 2 weeks and if you don't have this written down in 2 weeks, we will meet anyway and I will pull it out of you. So, do the best you can and call me, and if you call me before 2 weeks, that's fine. Then we'll do 5, 6, and 7." I said, "All in the same day?" He said, "That's what it says in the book." So, I called him. He picked me up and took me to his apartment and he lay on the floor with his eyes closed and I started talking and I told him my story. It took hours. He took me home and he said, "OK, you know what to do when you get inside. The book says, returning home we found a place where we could be quiet for an hour, carefully reviewing what we have done. We ask ourselves have we left anything out and when ready after the end of the hour, you say the 7th Step prayer and then you make your 8th step list and get busy and start making amends." Then he said, "OK, between you and God buddy, we're done." I said, "What?" He said, "You heard me." I said you mean you're not my sponsor anymore." He said, "I've done all I can do." I said, "Well, can I call you?" He said, "If you want to." I didn't know what to make of it. You know, I guess that is what

he did. He got people through the first 7 steps and then just turned them loose. So, I had to find somebody else if I needed to talk and I did.

Charlie: Did you keep contact with him?

Sam: Yes, I did continue to call him when I hit a rough spot. We didn't get together or anything. He would answer questions and talk to me. He helped me on my ninth step. I called him and told him I didn't think I could ever pay off all that money I owed. He said, "You save a dime out of every dollar and put it aside in an account that you're not going to touch, and let it build up. I did that. I sent the last \$100 check off on my 5th AA birthday and I was done.

When I was about a year sober I reconciled with my Father and went to work for him. I had to move from Denver to a little town in Illinois and to my dismay the only AA meeting they had was a little coffee clutch of 5 old farmers sitting around talking about politics and the weather and their wives without a Big Book in sight. I ran into another guy, Bill, who had also just arrived from Chicago and the two of us decided to start our own AA meeting.

Charlie: You were 9 months sober when you started this?

Sam: Yes

Charlie: Were you sponsoring each other at the time?

Sam: Yes and I was calling Ralph in Denver every so often. Five years later there were 14 meetings a week and about 70 members and it was just marvelous. The only trouble was Bill and I were everybody's Daddy and we really didn't have anybody but each other to be accountable to. Then, he got drunk and I ended up being everybody's Daddy. When I hit 9 years sober I ended up going into treatment for active alcoholism 9 years stark, raving sober. It was one of the most painful things that ever happened to me. I went through the whole 28-day program and when I got out I was able to start seeing my way again.

I lived in that little town for about 10 years and then my Dad lost his business. I moved to Jacksonville and stayed unemployed for about 48 hours because there were jobs everywhere. My son Sam was with me, he was born in Denver 10 months after I got sober and I was raising him. He and I grew up together. It was just one of the most wonderful things that ever happened to me. He was easy. He never cried. I would take him to AA meetings, he grew up in AA.

We moved to Jacksonville in 1982 when he was about 9 and it was kind of traumatic for him because he left his home and friends. I was making about 4 AA meetings a week, a couple at Penman Road and then as I remember I found the JABA Club when the meetings were held in the old Fiesta Lounge over on Phillips Highway. Often on a Saturday I would go to the 11:00am meeting at San Marco and then the noon meeting at the JABA Club.

I had been raising Sam in church and so when we got down here we started looking for a church to attend. We would go to a different one every Sunday. We went

to one church called St. David's Episcopal out in Fort Caroline. During the service this old assistant pastor stood up and said, "Anybody interested in helping me with the substance abuse ministry, see me after the service." Sam was poking me in the ribs and saying, "I think this is where we belong." Afterwards I went up and I stuck my hand out and I said, "I'm Sam and I'm an alcoholic." He broke out laughing and said, "SAM - Substance Abuse Ministry, we call it SAM. I'm praying for help with this thing because I can't get it off the ground and you walk to me and say, I'm Sam and I'm an alcoholic and I'm sober 9 years." We started an AA meeting called the Reborn Group, which is still in existence. Its 28 years old. We went down to a little church in Ecuador and helped them set up a SAM program. It was really setting up an AA program and explaining how the 12 steps of AA meshed with the beliefs of Christianity. What a thrill that was.

I went out to the prison farm one night, I think in about 1986, with a guy named, Harry, who was a Christian evangelist and he was taking a church meeting out there. One of the inmates came up to me and asked if we could start an AA meeting out there. I talked to the warden and he agreed and was very helpful. We went out there for about 8 years on Friday nights.

Charlie: Do you still sponsor people?

Sam: Yea, I sponsor a bunch of guys with over 15 years sobriety and obviously they are not high maintenance and are really just my friends. They sponsor me as much as I sponsor them. I usually have about 5 or 6 guys who are under a year.

A lot of the people come from treatment centers now and you hardly ever sit up all night with anybody who is coming off a bad drunk. That used to happen all the time. There are a half of dozen places in town that can take people like that now and since they are medically staffed it's safer.

When I was in my fifties, I met and married Janice who has been my partner in raising two daughters, Jessica (22) and Marybeth (19); and what a blessing they have been in our lives.

Charlie: What do you think about AA today?

Sam: Some people complain about the way the 12th step has changed. But as far as I'm concerned, people are still getting sober. Of all the people who come to AA really needing it and wanting it, just as many of them get sober now as they ever did. I think that Alcoholics Anonymous is just fine.

Charlie: Thank you Sam.

