

OLDTIMER INTERVIEW WITH TOM K

Kevin Jr

Today is December 18, 2020. My name is Kevin Jr. I'm a grateful alcoholic and today Ken S and I will interview Tom K, who has over 42 years of sobriety. (DOS 6/15/1978)

Kevin Jr: Tom, could you tell us about your life before AA.

Tom K: My name is Tom K; I am an alcoholic. My sobriety date is September 15, 1978. And for that, I continue to be grateful. I was born and raised in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, which was in those days a steel mill town. My father and his brothers worked for Bethlehem Steel. When I went to college, I also worked in the steel mill to help pay for college. We were a normal blue collar, family. I was a musician in high school, and I played in a little trio. Before I could drive, we had a job at the Elks every Friday night. I started to get a taste of beer there but really did not care for it that much.

I left Bethlehem after senior year of high school and attended and graduated from the University of Dayton. I was on my own and really started drinking heavy in college there in Ohio. Beer. And I like the effect. Just like in the big book, I was never comfortable in my own skin. Alcohol allowed me a sense of ease and comfort. It made me comfortable in my own skin.

I started missing classes due to my drinking. Drinking became more important to me than anything else. I met my wife to be in college and I hid my drinking from her. She thought that I could handle the booze. We got married in our senior year. We moved to Cincinnati, Ohio. Then she started to realize who she had really married. I was in sales and started meeting with the guys after work and drank. We moved drinking up to early afternoon and then we moved it up to lunch. And then once we started at lunch, it took off quickly. I was an alcoholic within two years.

In 1969 I started to realize that my drinking was becoming a problem, but I enjoyed it. I enjoyed the effect. I didn't realize what it was doing and how it affected others and me. I got sober in 1978 but fortunately Sue had started going to Al Anon in 1972.

I had read some books on drinking, and I thought self-knowledge. It was just like Bill went through those various stages, self-knowledge, self-control, self-discipline. I tried all those things, as well as, attempting moderation.

Kevin Jr: Did any of it work for you?

Tom K: No, I kept going from one thing to another. I would quit a job just before I got fired., I got into trouble with my jobs right away. But I was swift enough on my feet to kind of dodge and get away from some of those things and just keep a jump ahead.

Kevin Jr: Do you have children?

Tom K: I have two wonderful adult children. Thanks to my wife Sue, they continue to be in my life.

Kevin Jr: Did your drinking affect them?

Tom K: I did really love my family, but I put my family through chaos and turmoil. The children would see her cry and be sad because of my behavior. They didn't know when I walked through the door if it was mad dad, glad dad, drunk dad, angry dad, or sad dad.

Kevin Jr: Were you a traveling salesperson or did you stay in one place?

Tom K: I started in sales management, and rose through the ranks so I traveled a lot. In my last year of drinking, I was a Vice President of a company based in California and was on a plane traveling around the country almost every week. It was great from a drinking standpoint. Expense account and no accountability I did a good enough job to get by, but my family was back in Ohio at that time, and I was not paying the bills. I was getting deeper in debt and my drinking took on more serious proportions. Unfortunately, when it came to drinking or paying bills, drinking came first.

Kevin Jr: When did you get sober?

Tom K: I got sober when I was 34. I had gone to a few AA at a few speaker meetings and in my arrogance and ignorance, I thought I'd be a great AA speaker. I didn't realize you had to give up drinking to really be successful. But anyhow, I got to meet some people who would eventually be my early sponsors.

Kevin Jr: Sounds like that for a while, you were around AA?

Tom K: Yes, but it was as little as possible. I would go to a Friday and Saturday night meetings in Portsmouth, I'd hear some speakers and it started to plant some seeds, but I didn't even realize it at the time. Chuck H was over 30 years sober. He was originally sponsored by Dr. Bob. He sponsored the guy who was my sponsor, Red. I related to Red more, because Red only was sober about five years they were nice people and kind. They would help with money and made sure there was food They took care of my family when I couldn't. And that's always impressed me to this day, I believe what the Big Book says even though a man doesn't respond, we don't ignore his family. With all the guys I sponsor, I make sure that their family member has my phone number. And I try to talk to them at least once and introduce myself. Not that I'm worried about them. I just want them to know how much we appreciate the turmoil and struggle the family members go through.

Kevin Jr: You're around AA. Why did you come in?

Tom K: Because I had nowhere else to go. I lost that big fancy job. My drinking had gotten so bad by that time, I was out of work and out of hope. I was desperate for relief. It was either get help or suicide. And I couldn't commit suicide. So, there was no place else for me to go but AA.

Kevin Jr: And you knew the people there?

Tom K: Yes, I walked in the door and Chuck and Red were there. I remember saying to Red "I need help". He asked me the same question I ask my guys today, he said "what are you willing to do to stay sober?". The answer I gave him that night hasn't changed in over 42 years. The answer was "absolutely anything, I had enough". And we started on the journey of recovery.

Before I was a year sober, I was lucky enough to get a job with a company that I had worked for previously and fortunately left on good terms. They hired me back and moved us moved to Strongsville, Ohio between Akron and Cleveland.

Kevin Jr: What did you do in the first couple years of sobriety?

Tom K: Chuck and Red took me on 12 step calls. We got calls out in the county, and I'd drive because I was young and could see at night. When I was five months sober Red took me to the maximum-security prison in southern Ohio at Lucasville. I had never been in jail. I'd never been arrested. Should have been, but never was. It was scary going in there these were hardened criminals. I asked one old man, "what are you in here for?". He said, "they tell me that I killed somebody in a blackout". It hit me between the eyes because I was a blackout drinker. There was a lot of times I got drunk, didn't remember what I did and when I woke up later.

Kevin Jr: You could have been him?

Tom K: Absolutely, without question, because I don't remember a lot of things I did in blackouts. Once I got into AA, they got me into service right away. Coffee maker, setup, cleanup, chairing, the whole ball game.

Kevin Jr: What kind of meetings did you attend?

Tom K: In those days, pretty much discussion or speaker meetings, if you chaired, and they taught me to chair, you had to have topics. They taught me to get topics out of "As Bill Sees It" that's broken down by index. If you wanted a topic on anger, you had a couple different readings you could do. And that's how we prepared for meetings. I was taught that the person who chaired the meeting, was responsible for guiding and keeping it on track.

Kevin Jr: Were you a coffee maker?

Tom K: Coffee maker, ashtray cleaner. We even had coffee mugs early on, we would wash out. Setting up the meetings, cleaning up afterwards. Chairing the meeting, even sponsoring. They got me into activity pretty quick. I was asked to speak after about five months sober. So, I said to Red "I've been asked to speak at a meeting Is it okay?" He said, "you had better finish up the steps first". We went through the steps in the Big Book. We didn't study the Big Book in those days, like we do today. It was more out of the 12 and 12.

Kevin Jr: How many meetings a week did you go to?

Tom K: Five. There were only 4 meetings in town at that time. The two groups in town had a total of four meetings. And then we pick up one other in the area or in a nearby little town

Kevin Jr: What was the reputation of AA at that time?

Tom K: It was excellent and respected. The AA people were just wonderful. They would do anything to help. They would help families. They saw the devastation alcoholics created, even in those days. You could see the family trauma I can recognize the damage and the harm I did to my family. And the heartbreak, more than anything, it's the heartbreak we cause. I think the cruelest

thing we can do is get sober, give hope to the people that love us, then go back out and destroy their trust and hope yet again. If we've been given this gift, and you are an alcoholic, there's no reason to go back out. You stay here, grow up, and do what you need to.

Kevin Jr: You mentioned that there were two groups in town?

Tom K: It wasn't unusual for a group to have two meetings a week, a discussion meeting and a speaker meeting.

Kevin Jr: You had a dress code. Did it change over the years?

Tom K: You didn't see people dressing like they do today, people dressed nice for a speaker meeting on a Saturday or Friday night. Friday night was kind of what you'd call business casual. Saturday night, a lot of times, men wore jackets and ties and women wore nice attire. There was a lot more respect for the program and its results. My sponsor would tell me that we want to show people that we are in recovery.

Kevin Jr: What about service?

Tom K: Right away they got me into sponsorship by shaking hands. They said, when a new man came in the meeting "go over and shake his hand". And I'd say, "I don't know what to say". And they said, "Say hello". And that is what they taught me to do, is just go over, say hello, and tell them a little bit about myself. I started doing that, and, you know, that taught me to get out of myself.

Kevin Jr: When did you get into service work outside of the group?

Tom K: We did not really do much with the general service structure in Cleveland, it was Intergroup. One of the experienced members brought me along to the Intergroup Business meetings. Soon I ended up as an Intergroup rep and then district rep. I eventually got elected to the Central Committee that oversaw the Cleveland intergroup office. Dr Bob had a hand in the early Cleveland office. In Cleveland I met some of the very early members many of whom knew Dr Bob and Bill W personally. At the dedication of Dr Bob's house on Ardmore Street as a State Historical site my wife and I visited with Sue Smith, Dr Bob's daughter. Because my wife Sue was an Al Anon Delegate, I was able to meet and visit with Lois Wilson, Bill's wife shortly before she passed.

Kevin Jr: When did you go to Area? You did service work at Intergroup for a long time.

Tom K: We didn't have Area work in Cleveland, it was all Intergroup. Cleveland Intergroup is the third oldest in the country and predated the Service Structure. Cleveland hosted the first International Conference in 1950. Our Intergroup fundraiser goals were \$150,000 a year, and we usually exceeded that. I didn't learn about the service structure and get active in it until we moved to New England in 1987.

Kevin Jr: That's a lot of money back then!

Tom K: Yes. because we had Cleveland Intergroup office number and everybody in that area that got sober, basically called that number. We weren't in competition with rehabs and detoxes as much back then. It was the Cleveland AA office that they called. And that's why we had a large paid staff. They would answer the phone at night and then they pass out those contacts to the rest of us during the day.

Kevin Jr: Was it as early as 24 hour a day answering service?

Tom K: Yes. We had no problem getting funds, raising money, we had strong support and very strong loyalty to Cleveland intergroup. So, they didn't really didn't get involved in the general service structure. Because it was Dr. Bob's territory, and they kind of saw Bill W. as an interloper back then. it was it was kind of what I was brought up with Dr. Bob's way. He kept Bill straight.

Kevin Jr: What do you think about sponsoring a person long distance?

Tom K: On long distance I can sound good for an hour a week. But that doesn't mean I am. That's me. If it works for somebody else fine, I don't agree with it. I sponsor face to face.

Kevin Jr: You were the delegate from New Hampshire area. How did that happen?

Tom K: I was very active. I learned about Area service work by watching my wife who was a delegate and very active in Al Anon. I got very involved and held many other positions in Area 43. Among them was Area Chair, which I enjoyed and when the election came up for delegate in 2001, I decided to stand. I thought that I could help. During the election, I kept getting about 65% of the vote. And I just could not seem to get over 67% so, it eventually "went to the hat". And when it went to the hat, I felt a calm come over me. Because regardless of what happened, I know it was going to be God's decision and I was okay with it. My name got drawn out of hat. I served as delegate, which was a very humbling experience. I continue to learn as a result. I wish everybody could experience it.

Kevin Jr: You were a NERD?

Tom K: I was a Northeast Regional Delegate, Panel 52, yes, that's what we were known as. Now as a past delegate. I've been very blessed. I am aware of the importance of Area Service and encourage everyone to be involved. I am certainly nothing special. I haven't done anything special. I just had the benefit of wonderful people who are guiding me and showing me how to do things and still do.

Kevin Jr: Is there anything you regret?

Tom K: I wish I had paid more attention to the moment. I was always looking to what's the next thing coming, and not paying enough attention to the present., I wish I could go back and ask some questions of the people like Red, Chuck, and all those people over the years. Learn a little bit more about them and remember more about their journey. As time goes on, I forget about the details of the journeys I have heard.

Kevin Jr: Looking back when you came. how's it changed over the years in your opinion?

Tom K: I think in the early days, I saw families taking care of families more. I see some of that today in a circle of people I'm lucky enough to be involved with. How it's changed? I think today many people are really focused heavily on the Big Book and studying the steps out of the Book. We weren't in the early days. We used the 12 and 12 more, which I always found more confusing. They didn't really get into the Big Book study, until Joe and Charlie started doing that and that's what revealed it to me. When we lived in the Cleveland area, my wife and I would go to Founders Day every year at Akron University. That's where my wife bought me my first Joe and Charlie tapes. I promptly put them on the shelf for a year or so (because I thought again that I already knew so much). Then one day, when I was struggling, I took them down and what a revelation and I started studying the book from the tapes. I started to realize how much I needed to learn. Today I think we have a lot more students of the Big Book, and there are still many that need to be.

I hope that people will stop trying to change the Big Book by dumbing it down.

Kevin Jr: is anything else you tell us about AA from your perspective, that you would like to share.

Tom K: When we first moved to Jacksonville, I would talk about the Big Book study meetings that we had up north, you know, Joe and Charlie, read a few paragraphs and then discussion. And they thought that was a good idea. We ought to start a meeting like that down here. And I said, "that's a good idea". And they said "when are you going to start it". So, we started the Mandarin Big Book Study which still meets on Monday nights.

One of the men I sponsor gave me the nickname of "Big Daddy". At first, I didn't care for it because I saw as a possible ego problem in me due to notoriety. However today I see it rather as term of affection. It reminds me to continue to work on honesty, humility, and open mindedness as directed by the Big Book. It reminds me that I am very blessed.

I am truly honored when I am allowed to work with people and in some cases even sponsor them. It is they who lift and carry me.

I wish to credit my wife Suzanne who was kind, loving and always supportive of my bumpy journey of recovery. I never appreciated her enough while she was here. She passed away ten years ago in April, 2011. Sue was very active in AL Anon joining 7 years before I Got sober. She raised our family, suffered through my disease and finally succumbed to cancer after a long and valiant struggle. She never complained and was always grateful. I am so appreciative and grateful that God lent her to us. Again, I am very blessed.

Kevin Jr: Thank you for sharing your experience, strength and hope today.