

Jean D. is a long-time member of Alcoholics Anonymous. She has 46 years of sobriety and is a member of the "Women Enjoying Sobriety" group. She has a sponsor and sponsors other women. Her story was recorded earlier this year, and the following has been edited from that interview with her permission. (Interviewed by Tom W.)

Tom: Tell me a little bit about what your life was like before you found AA. -where were you born and what your childhood was like.

Jean: My name is Jean and I'm an alcoholic. My sobriety date is June 7, 1974. I was born and raised in N.Y. into a big old Irish Catholic family. Both parents were alcoholics. I have 1 older brother, 5 younger brothers and 4 younger sisters. Being the oldest girl, a lot of responsibility fell on me such as helping with babies, chores, meals and the unending ironing of school uniforms ! Parties and family gatherings of all sorts revolved around alcohol and I associated drinking with fun in my early years. However, I've learned in Alcoholics Anonymous that alcoholism is a progressive, fatal family illness and I experienced that in mine- what started out as partying fun, turned into fighting and feuds, and eventually into fatalities. Parental drinking became habitual, memory lapses became common, and family life became a battleground, despite strict attendance at church and rote prayers to a God I didn't know. It was years later when I joined AA. that I learned about blackouts, "geographic cures" and other red flags for this disease, as I too became an alcoholic. At the time, however, I began to drink around age 11-12 years old - my father would come home on paydays with beer and pizza, when the "little kids" were in bed, and reward my big brother and I with all the beer we wanted for all the chores we did at home, for the responsibility we took on, for the covering -up of all kinds of alcoholic behavior. I loved the effect immediately ! As the feeling of ease and comfort washed over me, the stress and anxiety melted away. I was able to laugh and sing and stay up late with the grown-ups! I got a lot of attention and drinking was fun....for a while.

T: When did drinking get out of control for you ?

J: By the time I was in high school, I was drinking regularly on weekends. I variously had older boyfriends, fake ID's, or both. While the consequences of my drinking were getting progressively worse, I couldn't see it. I was comparing my drinking self to my drinking parents-an abusive father and a neglectful mother who both drank to oblivion. Thus I felt vindicated. A few fender-benders, some hangovers, rebellion over the whole church thing, a few brushes with the law, poor choices in relationships, brief blackouts. I rationalized a lot, and flat-out denied even more alcoholic insanity. I decided that a college degree was my ticket out of this madhouse. I studied hard, did homework conscientiously, and got a full Regents Scholarship. I moved to New Paltz State University and truly thought the worst was behind me. I've since learned about the futility of the "geographic cure"- that is believing that a change of location would solve my problem. But my problem was alcoholism.

Physically, Mentally, and Spiritually my disease progressed rapidly. By the time I started senior year at college, physical consequences became dire-for example, I went from fender-benders to total wrecks as my reflexes were slowed down and judgment was impaired,-thus broken

bones, concussions, and more. I went from awful hangovers to having hepatitis, spending 6 weeks in the hospital, badly jaundiced. Mentally, I went from diligent attendance and high grades to barely passing my classes. I missed the early ones entirely, unable to rouse myself from hangovers. I unwittingly missed critical final exams while in blackouts. I made poor choices in relationships, then found myself with people I didn't even remember choosing at all. I went from feeling mildly remorseful when stopped by police when drinking to frenzied resistance when arrested for grand theft auto and possession of stolen goods. And as for Spiritually-I had long since given up church as meaningless. I had no God, no Higher Power, and my self-reliance could not stop the progression of alcoholism.

So once again, I tried the old "Geographic Cure"! I withdrew from college and came down to Florida feeling totally beaten. But the sunshine, salt air, and sea breezes were serene and restorative. I regained some health, mental capacity, and a glimmer of hope and decided to return to NY and finish college, get a professional job in the arts and live happily ever after. Bachelor's Degree- check ! Job as Art Teacher- check ! But the "happily ever after" was flushed down the toilet with the bile and vomit since I returned to drinking as well as to NY. I remember having a big drunken fight with a boyfriend on the way home from a date and abruptly jumped out of the moving car, causing yet another accident (and I wasn't even driving !) At work, my mood swings were chalked up to my "artistic temperament" and my frequent tardiness to "transportation issues"-in reality, I could never seem to have a license and a car and insurance all at the same time! I was smart and talented and hard-working, yet my life was totally unmanageable physically, mentally, and spiritually due to the disease of alcoholism. Yes, my drinking had progressed out of control !

T. When did you come into the program and what brought you in ?

J. it was towards the end of the school year in 1974 and I was heading up a fundraiser for scholarships for kids in need. It was a Masquerade Ball and I dressed up as the Big Bad Wolf, hairy feet and all (half measures avail us nothing !). I was in charge of the party and someone else was in charge of the money, thank goodness. From what I was told, it all went well despite my drinking, and several students received decent scholarships from the proceeds. After the event however, when all my colleagues went home, I went out drinking some more, costume and all. I woke up with no idea how or with whom I got home, ashamed and humiliated yet again. I was truly baffled ! Another professional event soon followed- I was dressed to the nines and despite my specific intention not to drink, I ended up in yet another bar afterwards, drinking by myself, uncontrollably. Only this time, I knew it- I now knew that I couldn't stop drinking no matter how I tried, no matter how much trouble I was in, no matter what the consequences my drinking caused. I remember driving home in tears feeling utterly hopeless. I couldn't control what alcohol did to my memory, my liver, my spirit, my driving, my relationships, my finances, my reasoning, my family, my morals- you name it ! By the grace of God, I finally knew I was powerless over alcohol. I hit bottom at last. In the wee hours of June 7th, 1974, I called NY Intergroup Alcoholics Anonymous. God bless all of you who volunteer on the phone service- it saved my life that night ! The woman who answered the phone quickly

determined that I was an alcoholic and said she'd send someone over in the morning to talk to me and bring me a meeting list. I told her never mind, don't bother. She asked me why not ? I told her she wouldn't understand but she said Try Me ! So I told her that I knew I wouldn't remember calling her by morning. Little did I know that she already understood me far far better than I understood myself ! She laughed a gentle laugh, put her hand over the phone (old school- no mute button!) and said" We've got a live one here- we have to send somebody tonight !" While I waited outside, I polished off a bottle of wine. A member of AA showed up shortly, literally picked me up and carried me inside- since I couldn't even walk by then. He told me he used to drink like I did. He described his blackouts. He told me about his drunk driving. He told me he tried to stop drinking but always went back to it worse than before until he joined AA. Then he borrowed my phone to call Pat C, a woman in the program who later became my sponsor. I remember him telling her something about a 12-step call and asked her if she "could take this girl off his hands"! Well, Pat agreed to pick me up for my first meeting that evening and by the grace of God and the 12 Steps of AA, I haven't had a drink since that day.

T: How did she have you do the steps ?

J: First, she had me do 90 meetings in 90 days and I joined the "Willow Grove Road" group. Since my driving situation was sketchy , I had to call women for rides, which was hard for me to do. We went to all kinds of meetings near and far. I was amazed that people were sharing such embarrassing things from the podium and around the tables, and that they seemed okay with it. Pat said that by working the 12 steps, we come to terms with our alcoholic selves. She took me through them, one step at a time. The Big Book says "we must concede to our innermost selves that we are alcoholic". I honestly admitted that I never could control what alcohol did to me including liver disease, blackouts, car wrecks, broken engagement, impeded judgment, piercing loneliness, denial, & dishonesty...I owned up to plenty of my experiences per unmanageability- lost licenses, credit card debt, stacks of court issues, volatility at work, hospitalizations...Then Step 2- came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity. Whoa ! God had not been part of my life for years ! But as I witnessed that the group members had the power to stay sober and I didn't, despite the similarities in how we drank, I used the group as my higher power in the beginning. I easily identified with the insanity of both my thinking and my behavior, and I stopped comparing. Then Step 3- commitment time! I was dating a guy then who drank (against my sponsor's suggestion) and he thought I was certainly Not an alcoholic. He went so far as to say that if I was an alcoholic then so was he ! (Quite a telling comment !) My sponsor was meanwhile encouraging me to take step 3. At that time, I ended up in the hospital with residual issues from my hepatitis. As I lay there, all by myself, I had to make a decision, one way or another. I stood at the turning point. The obsession to drink had been relieved. I was regaining some semblance of sanity. I had seen God's power work miracles in the rooms of AA. And so, just between me and God, I made the decision to turn my life and my will over to His care. While I barely understood Him, I committed to work the rest of the steps to the best of my ability, trusting Him for the outcome. The most peaceful sleep came over me. The next morning when my sponsor came to the

hospital to visit me, I told her what happened and we prayed the 3rd Step prayer together. We stayed on Steps 1, 2 and 3 while I learned to recognize my own denial, rationalization, and self-centeredness. Pat and others taught me how to “identify rather than compare”, that is acknowledging the similarities between sober members’ drinking experiences and my own. They also described their own progressive journey in sobriety -for example managing to get a car, license, and insurance all at the same time and repairing fractured family relationships. Their experience, strength, and hope gave me what I needed to move forward with Steps 4 and 5. I had never been able to stay sober before and became willing to “go to any lengths” to get what they had. Because the group members were so open and honest about themselves, I finally felt safe enough to move on. My sponsor had me read all the steps in both the Big Book and the 12 & 12. I wrote out my 4th step inventory, as completely and honestly as I could, from as far back as I could remember. Then my sponsor had me do something which I still do today, so many years later: she pointed out the list of character defects on pages 48-49 of the 12&12 and suggested that I go back and write which ones apply to what behaviors I had written about- for example, I had punched a girl in the face for locking me in the ladies room at the bar we were in. I had no lingering resentment since I had gotten even, but Pat said that perhaps Anger was the prompting character defect for punching her in the first place. Other scenarios involved lying, and Pride was the culprit character defect as I was often embarrassed by my own behavior and tried to cover it up. And so I learned that my sobriety was, and is to this day, contingent upon my spiritual condition. I still use the PAGGLES acronym for “spot-check” inventories: Pride, Anger, Greed, Gluttony, Lust, Envy(jealousy), and Sloth. Then I finished up Step 5 with my sponsor, having gained some important humbling insight into my own inner self and spent some time afterwards with the God of my understanding. Then I moved up to Step 6. “Became entirely ready” -Garbage Day analogy: my defects(garbage) were mixed in with my assets (not garbage) and things that could be useful if used as God intended (recyclables). So it was up to me to do the necessary separating before I asked God to remove anything. The garbage man does not burst into my house and separate recyclables from garbage or from the good stuff I should keep. Neither does he take it upon himself to bag it all up and drag it out to the curb for me. I have to be entirely ready for God to take away my defects by doing the upfront footwork first. For example, if I want Him to remove my Anger (a personal favorite) I need to practice forgiveness. If I want him to remove my Pride, then I need to develop humility, etc. Then I can ask God to remove all the bagged-up character defects, learn how to use my God-given instincts for their intended purpose, and be mindful of my spiritual condition on a daily basis, and Voila ! I’m at Step 7 ! Humbly asked Him...no demands, just a humble request to take my garbage away. God’s ready when we are. Step 8- Made a list...by this time, I had grown in the program. My sobriety was progressing now, as had my alcoholism prior to the program. And I had an understanding of God that worked for me. I made a pretty complete list of people I thought I hurt. Upon reviewing it with my sponsor, I actually needed to remove someone- my father. He was very angry at me for “embarrassing” him in front of his boss and also in front of his girlfriend. He yelled and berated me, saying that I had no right to call the police on him. I had come home and found my little sister crumpled up in front of the fireplace, crying uncontrollably. He had hit her repeatedly and left her in a heap. Also, it was freezing in the

house, so I called the Health Department as well, to resolve the family's lack of heat. This was his repeated pattern of abuse and I "hit bottom" with it that day. With the courage and self-esteem I was developing by staying sober, I did what was right. My sponsor assured me that yes I acted appropriately, and no, I was not responsible for his anger and embarrassment- his own character defects had flared up when he was finally held accountable and faced consequences for his own choices. Step 9 : Making amends to the people I had hurt took many forms- direct apologies, repaid debts, willingness to repair relationships, willingness to let go of some, asking forgiveness. Most were face-to-face, some letters, some phone calls. Occasionally, direct amends would cause more damage than good (romantic situations) so I asked for God's forgiveness and for the spiritual guts to do better in the future.

By this time, the promises were slowly but surely becoming fulfilled in my life. Freedom from alcohol through AA's 12 Steps revolutionized my whole "attitude and outlook upon life". I've learned to pause and ask God for inspiration. I often "intuitively know how to handle situations which used to baffle" me, especially at work and now with my 3 adult children and extended families.

I continue to work steps 10, 11, and 12 on a regular basis. I'm not one to "rest on my laurels". I'm more the "Stay on the firing line of life and God will keep you unharmed" kind of alcoholic ! I also do another in-depth inventory at periodic intervals, whether with a new sponsor, on an AA retreat or conference.

T: Can you give us an idea of how the steps work in your life ?

J: One example of how the steps work in my life: Early on, I had again been hospitalized, but having gone through the 12 steps I was in a better place than before. I knew that an AA group in the area was scheduled to bring in a meeting to the hospital so I got my doctor's permission to be brought downstairs for the meeting that evening. I was really looking forward to it, but they never showed up. Meanwhile, a new patient had become my roommate. She was recovering from surgery on her foot- turns out she had walked into a running lawnmower and cut off her big toe ! "Was she drunk?" I asked her nurses, and I knew it was "yes" as their amazed reaction confirmed it. (Who else would walk into a running lawnmower besides one of "us"?) I immediately knew that I was there to "carry the message" of hope to a fellow sufferer ! So I wrote my name and phone number (old school land line !) in my own 24 hour book, willing to pass it on if she wanted it. When she woke up, we chatted a bit, then I shared what it was like for me "when I drank, what happened, and what it's like now". She wasn't "ready" yet but she thanked me for the little book as I checked out of the hospital the next morning. I knew enough to just carry the message and leave the results to God. I eventually moved to Florida from NY when I got married, but my best sober friend still lived in the house we had shared. Then she called me one day to ask if I ever knew anyone who had cut off her toe with a lawnmower ? I laughed and cried at the same time as I told her what I just told you. It had been 3 years since that "coincidental" hospital stay, yet she had saved that little book with my phone number in it, 'til finally she was ready !

Another example occurred much later along in my AA journey- I mentioned that it's been my experience that alcoholism is a family disease- my father sadly committed suicide and my mother developed biliary cirrhosis, both consequences of their alcoholism, though mom was blessed with sobriety long before she died. It had taken me a long time to forgive my father for years of abuse. But with the steps and "availing myself of outside help" I was able to let go of years of resentment. I'm so grateful that I had long since "cleared away the wreckage of my past" with each of my parents, and was able to lay them to rest with a peaceful heart when the time came. That, my friends, is how the steps continue to work in my life.

T: How did you end up in Florida ?

J: What began as an attempt at a "geographic cure" as I ran away From my alcoholic problems in NY, it later ended up being the place I was drawn To in sobriety- for its warmth, beauty, serene beaches, relaxed lifestyle and friendly AA. On one such vacation, I met a wonderful man- we dated exclusively, he asked me to marry him, I said Yes! So I moved to Florida and I joined the "Indian Rocks Beach" group. We had 3 beautiful children together. We stayed married for over 11 years, then we needed to divorce. I continued to make meetings, stayed sober, raised the kids myself, and added our "sister program" to my support system. My kids were all out on their own when my mother in NY developed cirrhosis and needed care, so I went back up to NY, got a job teaching Art, and committed to see mom through to the end. I was approaching retirement age by then and was planning to return to my family in Florida when I hit that milestone. Meanwhile, my oldest daughter had married in Jacksonville and was expecting their first baby ! I trusted God for His perfect timing and as it unfolded, my mom passed, then I hit retirement age, then my first grandchild was born here in Jacksonville . Had things occurred in any other order, I'd have missed both my mother's death and my grandson's birth. God's timing was perfect as always, and after the funeral and my retirement party, I came back to Florida in time for my grandson's birth ! I bought a house in Jacksonville and have lived here ever since. I joined the "Women Enjoying Sobriety" group of AA, and got a local sponsor. I'm grateful to be sponsoring a few women as well, here in Jacksonville.

T: How has AA changed since you got sober 46 years ago ?

J: AA has mushroomed into the most successful recovery program for alcoholism today by practicing the same sound spiritual principles embodied in the 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous that it started with, 80 plus years ago. The 12 Traditions of AA further united all AA's by establishing guidelines for all the various groups to follow, also based on sound spiritual principles, so no matter where we may wander, we'll always find the same 12 & 12 to help keep all of us in sober fellowship.

What Has changed, however, is not AA, but our culture. It is very important to continue to apply all our Traditions to our current cultural use of technology, as we communicate on Facebook, Instagram and other media platforms, particularly Tradition 11. It's long form states "'Our relations with the general public ought to be characterized by personal anonymity...Our names and pictures as AA members ought not be broadcast, filmed ,or publicly printed...guided by the

principle of attraction rather than promotion...There is never need to praise ourselves.” Tradition 12 states that “Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our traditions, ever reminding us to put principles before personalities”.

T: Any final comments ?

J: Thanks so much, Tom, for asking me to share my experience, strength, and hope today. I'll finish with one of my favorite Big Book quotes: “We shall be with you in the Fellowship of the Spirit, and you will surely meet some of us as you trudge the Road of Happy Destiny. May God bless you and keep you- until then.” Thanks again for my sobriety !