

Long-Timer:	Marie B.
Sobriety Date	February 6, 1983
Introduction:	Marie B. shares the story of a shy military kid who grew up moving from place to place, always looking for a way to fit in. From her first taste of beer at age five to a career in marine science, to finding her place in the fellowship of AA, Marie's journey is one of honesty, resilience, and service. Her story reminds us of the power of belonging, the discipline of the steps, and the strength that comes from the fellowship.

I was born in June 1954 on Long Island, New York, to an American dad and a Filipino mom. We were a military family, so I grew up moving around—Kentucky, Alaska, the Philippines and eventually here in Florida. Moving that often meant I was always the new kid, shy and unsure if I would fit in. I learned to watch what people wanted to hear and then say it, just so I wouldn't stand out too much. That habit carried right into my drinking years.

There were good things, too. I had a multicultural childhood and a love of science that started early. By sixth grade, when we lived in the Philippines, I already wanted to be a marine biologist and dreamed of working with dolphins. I never got to dolphins, but I did build a career in environmental and marine sciences.

I trace my drinking back to when I was five. We were living in Kentucky and my mom often had the Filipino community over for parties. There was always a keg of beer. I wanted what the grown-ups had, so my dad said, "Give her some so she won't want it later." What it did was the opposite—it lit the fuse. I loved the taste, but more than that, I loved how it made me feel. Suddenly I felt comfortable, like I belonged. That feeling—fitting in—was what I was always chasing.

Even so, I didn't drink through grade school or high school. I was a loner with little socializing. The real drinking started in college when I moved into a dorm my junior year. For the first time, I was away from home, surrounded by people who partied. I discovered that same old feeling of wanting to fit in which, for me meant drinking. From then on, drinking was how I had fun or so I thought.

Alcoholism ran in my family. My Chinese grandfather drank heavily and well as my American Grandfather who eventually died in a half-way house.

In my mid- twenties I was starting to move into a rental apartment in Pensacola when unknown to me the gas was not yet hooked up to the stove. As my neighbor and I tried to light the hot water heater the gas ignited and I spent some time in a nearby hospital. We took the case all the way to the Florida Supreme Court and changed a law allowing tenants to sue their landlords. Thanks to AA and working the steps I can see where I had a part in what happened to me and could also see how Higher Power brings good out of a tragic situation. But during that period, I noticed something I couldn't ignore. I'd meet with my attorney in the morning, and when he ordered a drink, I said, "Me too." I knew then what I was. I'd read the AA Big Book in another 12-step program and it is true what they say, "Reading the Big Book will ruin your drinking". That was certainly true for me.. Once I saw myself in those pages, I couldn't pretend anymore.

By then I was living in Ft. Myers, Florida, when I admitted I might have a problem. I still questioned whether or not I was an alcoholic since in comparing myself to others in the meeting “I was not that bad”. I told myself others drank more, or worse. I’d never been to jail, never even had a DUI, though I probably should have. I was a “follow the rules” kid—my dad was a cop—so I always found a way to stop just short. I ended up going back out and trying some more controlled drinking which I never achieved. The messages I heard while in the rooms especially the progression of the disease and the precious fellowship fully convinced me that yes I am an alcoholic and my life will only get worse, following in the steps of my grandfathers. I have not had a drink since that moment of realization. I went back to meetings and immersed myself into the fellowship. I was still not working the steps but in the beginning meetings and fellowship were enough to keep me sober. Step work came when I moved to Jacksonville. I scared myself as I had put off going to meetings and after one night out partying with fellow workers, not drinking, I knew it was a matter of time before I picked up a drink and back to meetings I went.

In those first sober years in Fort Myers, my roommate Shari was in the program and our friend Mary along with a few other women became my “mini group”. Without their support and guidance, I don’t think I would have stayed sober. I cannot emphasize enough how important those women were and are to my early sobriety. Most of us are still sober and I will actually be seeing them soon for a mini-reunion. That sense of fellowship saved me and continues to this day.

My first sponsor that I actually used was Johnnye I here in Jacksonville. She was a no-nonsense, loving sponsor who gave me a firm foundation in AA. By this time, I had met and married Bill B. I thought marrying someone in AA would make marriage easier. I was wrong. Like everything worthwhile it took us working the steps and heavy involvement for both of us in AA; a couple of marriage counselors didn’t hurt. Thank God for the steps and recovery which helped us make it to 37 years before he passed in 2021. He is still the best friend I ever had and we both attribute our marriage to a loving God which we had as the third part in the triangle of our marriage. At one particularly difficult time, after screaming quite loud at HP I heard the message of “How you feel is not Bill’s fault and you are only married one day at a time”. I never forgot that message.

Service was a big part of our recovery, especially Bills. In the early days they didn’t let me make coffee because I brewed it like motor oil, but I could get the cake. I’ll never forget my first anniversary cake—what a miracle to have people celebrate me for staying sober a year. I was taught that AA meetings and the service structure don’t happen by themselves and if I want AA to stick around for me and those to come, I needed to get involved. I didn’t always want to do it even to this day but I did it anyway. That’s just what we do.

My service deepened when I got involved in archives. At the time, there was no local archive, so I started interviewing old-timers and collecting their stories. I met Duke and Katie P., who are mentioned in *Dr. Bob and the Good Oldtimers*. Katie taught me a lot about early AA history and how the wives had to sponsor the women in the beginning since they were not allowed at meetings. We’ve come a long way by God’s grace.

One of my projects was to come up with an exhibit for a Florida State Convention here in Jacksonville. I suggested we build a history tree of AA groups in Florida. I wrote to the General Service Office and got their records, then with a friend began charting when groups had registered. I was not too good at drawing a tree, and then one day I came across a tree someone in my office drew on a piece of poster board. I never found out who drew it but it was more evidence that God will provide what we need. I just had to be willing. We listed all the meetings provided by GSO on that tree. That “borrowed tree” ended up displayed in the San Marco Club, much to my surprise and later became part of Florida AA history. It reminded me that you never know where your service work will end up.

I was sponsored with an “old-school” approach and thus it’s the only way I know how to sponsor: Big Book, steps as written, meetings, and service. No shortcuts. Sometimes sponsees or others want to call and just talk about their problem. I find doing that too long is harmful to them in the long run. I ask if they’ve done their tenth step or if they have been doing their meditation as taught in Step 11. If not, I ask them to do the work and then we will talk about it. . It sounds tough, but I have found that living in and rehashing the problem helps no one and can be harmful. It was not how I was sponsored. In the early days I was a manipulative crier when I wanted sympathy but not really a solution and it was always someone else’s’ fault. Johnny would hand me a paper bag to breathe into and when I settled down, we would talk about how I was causing my own problem. I thought she was mean back then but I see the wisdom in it today. My current sponsor has told me “to get over it” if I want to live in the problem more that I want to live in the solution. And sometimes I do just need to get over it.

Over the years I have watched AA grow here in Jacksonville. In the early days, assemblies were small affairs in modest hotel conference rooms. Bill became a GSR and later a DCM, faithfully going to area meetings. I saw treatment centers begin to send busloads of people to meetings. I don’t see that so much today but it was very interesting in the early days. I also saw the culture shift. There’s still enthusiasm in AA, but less of the camaraderie I knew back then—less of the parties, the after-meeting gatherings that gave me a sense of family. Of course that may also mean I need to get out more.

The hardest chapter of my life was losing Bill. We were best friends, partners in service, and daily companions. When he died, I was devastated. But AA saved me again. My sponsor, Bill’s sponsor and others were at our house the day he died when I returned from the hospital. A fellow was with me when the Doctor said he had passed. It was and is a rough time but I never feel alone. I knew I couldn’t let grief take my sobriety. Sobriety isn’t just not drinking—it’s living in the program. The fellowship held me up until I could stand again.

What I’ve learned is this: the Big Book is right. If I have a problem, the problem is me. When I do the work, I get the results. When I don’t, I cause my own suffering. Service, unity, and recovery aren’t abstract ideas—they’re practical tools. Service keeps me useful. Unity keeps the groups alive. Recovery keeps me alive.

While AA has changed since I came in, the heart of it is still here. We each carry the responsibility to keep it alive, just as someone did for all of us. For me, that’s the only way I’ve made it this far—and the only way I’ll keep going. Thank God for Alcoholics Anonymous.

