

Long-Timer:	Chuck B.
Interviewed by:	Kevin Jr.
Sobriety Date	10/30/1973
Introduction:	Chuck B. tells a fascinating story of small-town roots, professional success, and a long journey from social drinking into full-blown alcoholism — and ultimately, to more than fifty years of sobriety in Alcoholics Anonymous! His story is honest, humorous at times, and deeply human, offering hope to anyone who struggles.

I was born in Warren, Pennsylvania, a small town tucked in the Allegheny Mountains, not far from Erie and just eighteen miles from the New York border. The town had about fifteen thousand people, and the sign at the edge of town proudly said, “15,000 Friendly People.” I used to joke it was 14,999 after I left. It was a good place to grow up, quiet, close-knit, and surrounded by family.

Our family was small—just my mother, father, my younger brother, and me. My father was a weekend drinker, a hardworking man who would get drunk on Saturdays and be fine by Monday morning. Looking back, I think he was an alcoholic, though he never admitted it or sought help. My mother was the heart of our household. My younger brother and I both went through Warren High School. He was the athlete, played football; I wasn’t. Years later, both of my parents would pass from colon cancer, and my brother died in 2012 of a brain tumor. That left just me.

Alcohol was always around our home. My great uncle Charlie made what we called “dago red,” his homemade Italian wine, and every Christmas he brought down two gallons for us to keep in the cellar. My mother stored canned goods down there, and she was always sending me down to fetch something. Every time I did, I’d sneak a swig of Uncle Charlie’s wine. By fifteen, I was getting drunk on those little “errands.” Between that, the liquor my father kept in the house, and the general acceptance of drinking in our Italian family, it was woven into life from the start.

After high school I worked six months delivering furniture for Montgomery Ward. My cousin Nicky got me the job, and he became both a mentor and a drinking buddy. But after half a year I decided I’d better go to college. I enrolled at Gannon College in Erie in 1959, a Catholic boys’ college. Two years later, life caught up with me: I got a girl pregnant, so we married, and I left school. That’s just what you did in those days.

I found a job in the pathology department at the state hospital, working for a research pathologist studying what we now know as Alzheimer’s. My work was heavy stuff: assisting with autopsies, removing and slicing brains, staining slides, and preparing samples for study. I was barely in my twenties, married, with a child, and working long hours. Drinking then was still mostly on weekends—social, manageable, or so I told myself.

An opportunity came when Warren General Hospital sponsored me for a new specialty at Temple University Hospital in Philadelphia: cytotechnology, the study of cells. Pap smears were just coming into use, and I was trained to read slides for abnormal cells. It was a brand-new field. In Philadelphia I lived at the YMCA in Center City, ran laps in the evenings with the “Kennedy

fitness craze,” and drank beers after dinner with classmates. Nothing seemed out of control yet. When I returned home after six months, I set up the hospital’s cytology lab from scratch.

By then my wife and I had two children. We were living the good life: decent income, nights out dancing at the Town and Country Club, social drinking on Saturdays. Eventually we had a third child, a daughter. But I grew restless. I left the hospital and tried factory work where my dad had worked. The foreman finally pulled me aside and said, “Chuck, you don’t belong here. Go back to your field.” He was right, though I was angry at the time. I couldn’t get my old job back, so I reached out to contacts and landed at a hospital in Salem, Ohio. That’s when my drinking shifted from weekend fun into something more dangerous.

In Salem I joined the Jaycees, whose motto was “work hard, play hard.” That meant working long hours, then drinking long nights. I picked up a part-time job selling fire alarms and spent more and more time out in bars, drinking, and carousing. My marriage suffered badly. My wife left me more than once, and eventually she left for good, taking the kids with her.

I moved back to Warren and soon found work in Jamestown, New York, under Dr. Bill Tracy at WCA Hospital. Dr. Tracy was a visionary, eager to modernize laboratories through automation. We traveled to Boston and Chicago looking at equipment, and I even presented a paper at a national convention. My wife and I reconciled, had a fourth child, and for a while it looked like life was stabilizing.

Then tragedy struck. One night, after working late at the lab, I went to bed only to be woken at four in the morning with the news that Dr. Tracy had dropped dead of a heart attack. That moment changed everything. My mentor, my career path, the whole laboratory modernization plan—it all collapsed. The hospital hired a new pathologist, ironically a man I had worked under years earlier. His first act was to fire me. I was devastated: career gone, mentor gone, direction gone. And my drinking exploded.

I landed in Buffalo as a management engineer for the Western New York Hospital Association. The job looked promising, but the culture was drinking. We worked hard and drank harder. I kept a full bar in my car. Nights ended at Fitzgerald’s, drinking until eleven or later, stumbling home, then back at work in the morning. My wife and I divorced, and I poured myself into booze and career.

Eventually I was recruited to Richmond, Virginia, for similar management work. There, too, the pattern repeated: long days, heavy drinking, broken marriage. A project at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville turned into a job offer, and in 1973 I moved there thinking I’d start fresh. Instead, I drank myself into a seven-day blackout in a motel.

At the end of that drunk, in desperation, I called a Catholic church and mumbled that I needed help before passing out. When I woke up, two men stood over me—Dave and Vaughn—on a 12-step call. They got me to a doctor, kept me on Librium, and then babysat me for days. They didn’t even know me, yet they sat with me, brought me soda and cigarettes, and kept me company until I was sober enough to move. People in the program helped me. One was a wealthy beer distributor, another a poor church caretaker, another a retired magazine editor, and

still another a farmhand who had once been a lawyer. Different as they were, they shared one thing: they were alcoholics, and they cared enough to help me.

My sobriety date is October 30, 1973. That week I went to my first AA meeting in Gordonsville, Virginia. A man was celebrating fifteen years sober. I was sick, shaky, and could hardly eat, but I saw in that room what was possible. I was their “premier pigeon,” as they called me, and I had more sponsors than I knew what to do with. They started new meetings so we’d have more places to go, and on weekends we’d gather at each other’s homes. That closeness kept me sober.

Over the years I threw myself into AA. I answered 12-step calls at two in the morning, dragging drunks to treatment if they were willing. I once faced a shotgun when a furious wife tried to keep me from taking her husband. Another time I worked for years with a man named Clarkey, who never seemed to “get it.” I finally gave up, feeling like a failure. Years later, his widow called to tell me Clarkey had gotten sober and died sober. That phone call reminded me that the seeds we plant sometimes grow long after we’ve left the field.

Life didn’t stop, of course. I remarried, divorced again, raised kids, moved for jobs. At one point I took a job managing a cemetery in Delaware and built it back from ruin into a reputable place. That career came from a chance phone call from a colleague selling cemetery plots. I laughed at first—thought he was crazy—but it became my livelihood for years.

In Delaware, I also deepened my church involvement, serving as an usher for more than twenty years. It was there I met Father Dan, a priest who told his story one evening. I recognized it immediately as the story of an alcoholic. I asked him to sponsor me. He had just one year more sobriety than I did. Later he became pastor of my parish, and every year we exchanged AA chips—me buying his, him returning mine. That relationship was one of the great blessings of my sobriety.

Now, more than fifty years later, I still go to meetings. I started the Mount Carmel Group where I live, and we meet every Tuesday. But I’ll tell you honestly, AA isn’t what it was when I came in. Back then, we lived together, checked on each other, gave rides, and made sure no one slipped through the cracks. Today too many people rush in late, leave early, and skip the ‘meeting after the meeting’. The sense of family isn’t always there. If it hadn’t been for the love and care I got from those first sponsors—men who are all gone now—I wouldn’t be alive today.

They did their job. They carried me when I couldn’t walk. And because of them, I’ve been able to carry the message to others. I hope somewhere along the way I’ve helped a few people get sober too. That’s the miracle of AA, and that’s why I’m still here.