

What's New at G.S.O.

Celebrating Over Half a Millennium of Service

On September 29, there was a party at the General Service Office unlike any that had been held there before. To begin with, the festivities took place via videoconference, with dozens of G.S.O. and Grapevine employees as well as members of the General Service Board attending. As they ate lunches delivered to their respective homes through an online ordering service, they listened to music provided by “DJ” Irene D., staff member on the Accessibilities assignment.

Everyone was present at the Virtual Retirement Party to celebrate the careers of 20 G.S.O./Grapevine employees whose combined service to Alcoholics Anonymous amounted to an extraordinary 531 years of experience, strength and hope. Despite the light-hearted atmo-

sphere, it was a bittersweet moment, made all the more so because the pandemic kept these long-time colleagues and friends physically apart.

The retiring employees had taken advantage of the Voluntary Retirement Incentive Program (VRIP) offered by the General Service Board earlier in the summer. According to Stephanie L., Senior Director of Administration and Strategy, “We wanted to offer an attractive retirement package to employees who might consider retiring early. We thought perhaps 50 percent of eligible employees might take advantage of the VRIP; we were surprised when 20 out of 25 accepted. Surprised but glad to have made the opportunity available.”



The VRIP offered by the General Service Board was implemented in two phases, with the first group retiring at the end of August and the second at the end of September. The employees (and number of years served) in the first group were: Susan Donnor (35), Julio E. (19), Karen Hale (15), Ayleen Martinez (19), Jeff Monasch (28) and Bob Slotterback (28). In the second group were: Daniel Brown (25), Mary C. (10), John DeStefano (34), Evelyn Gonzalez (24), Rose Hendricks (12), Noela Jordan (30), Liz Ramdarass (35), Awilda Rivera (32), Ivelisse Rivera (36), Linda Samuels (30), Eva S. (24), Frank Segui (37), Darlene Smith (38) and Rick W. (20).

■ The party:

“The memories and hard work we shared together.”

With Jeff W., staff member on the Group Services desk, acting as master of ceremonies, the September 29 celebration combined laughter and tears. As each of the retirees spoke a few words, Jeff provided a slide show that was comical at times, touching at others. Meanwhile, the chat screen filled up with kudos, messages of love, and promises to keep in touch.

“We’ll miss you.”

“Best supervisor anywhere!”

“Happy travels!”

“Wishing you a new chapter in life!”

General Manager Greg T. suggested that attendees take “a brief moment of silence to reflect on our wonderful colleagues and the memories and hard work we shared together.” Grapevine Publisher Albin Z. spoke for numerous employees when he said, “Sometimes our lives are so rushed we don’t take the extra moment to realize who is next to us. When we finally get back into the office and see how many people are missing, it’s going to hit us.” General Service Board Chair Michele Grinberg thanked those retiring for “all your hard work, creative thinking and dedication to A.A.”

Perhaps staff member Mary C., retiring after ten years of service, summed it up best in her remarks to her colleagues. Quoting Nell Wing, G.S.O.’s first archivist, she said, “I am just grateful to have been here.”

■ Two “typical” stories:

“The most honest and caring people.”

A collective 63 years of that half-millennium of service belong to retiring employees Daniel Brown and Darlene Smith. Their stories are typical of those leaving, in that they have loved and valued their time at G.S.O. and have been loved and valued in return, while of course following their own unique paths. And both are nonalcoholics — two of the many nonalcoholic G.S.O. employees who selflessly serve the Fellowship.

Daniel Brown retired as Digital Media Manager after 25 years as a full-time employee. Trained as a designer and typesetter, he started freelancing for the office in 1993, after a chance meeting with Ernie S., who’d gone to work at G.S.O. as a production man-



ager and hired Daniel. Initially, Daniel did production work on both Spanish- and English-language print publications. Later, as a full-timer, Daniel worked for 22 years for Eleanor W., the now-retired A.A.W.S. managing editor, from whom he learned a lot. “She was like a mother figure to me,” Daniel says. “During my time with Eleanor, we worked on so many different things — *Box 4-5-9*, Conference reports, books, pamphlets — in English, French and Spanish. I used to do all the production work, all the pre-press and press checks — from design to implementation, essentially.”

As the Internet era dawned, Daniel became involved with the technical and design aspects of aa.org. He wasn’t involved in A.A.’s very first website, which launched in 1996, but he later redesigned the home page and developed a Big Book animation. After that, Daniel worked on the next three redesigns. Most recently, he served as liaison to the web development company overseeing the current aa.org redesign, which will launch in 2021.

The day-to-day duties of his job aside, what Daniel loves most at G.S.O. are the people.

“I can honestly say that for the last 27 years I’ve been blessed with the opportunity to work for and with the most honest and caring people at the General Service Office of Alcoholics Anonymous,” he says. “The staff members who go out there in the field always let us know how important our job is. General Manager Greg T., International Coordinator Eva S., Publishing Director David R. and International Convention Coordinator Julio E. were always really good about sharing with us the gratitude they received at the different A.A. events they attended around the world.”

Speaking of world events, Daniel’s most profound A.A. experience occurred when he attended the 2005 International Convention in Toronto. He was in charge of broadcasting the Flag Ceremony on aa.org and needed to go to the stadium early to do the prep work. “While I was there, I saw lines of people checking in hours before the Big Meeting — people of all kinds,



people with disabilities, people from all over. And I said to myself, ‘Wow! These are the people that we at the General Service Office touch with the work we all do.’”

This experience led Daniel to conceive of the Blue People, the design of silhouetted individuals representing the diversity and breadth of the A.A. experience, which graces the home page of aa.org and is justifiably famous within the Fellowship. While Daniel is at home, where he plans to “enjoy life and enjoy my grandson,” do some salsa dancing, and listen to his 5,000-strong vinyl record collection, the Blue People will live on as his legacy.

Darlene Smith retired as Senior Intellectual Property Manager after a G.S.O. career spanning 38 years, which began, she jokes, “when I was 12.” In truth, Darlene was 23 when she was hired as a clerk in the Records department in 1982. She was a recent college graduate with a B.A. in Public Affairs, and her goal was to work for a social services organization.

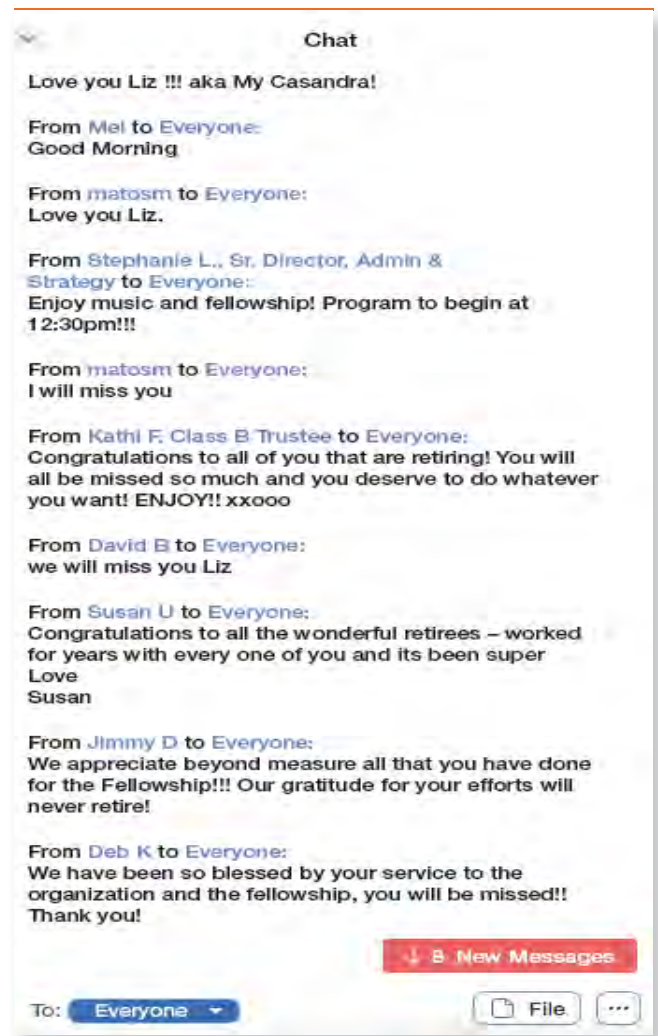
“One thing that inspired me to work at Alcoholics Anonymous was the idea of helping to provide information about the A.A. program of recovery to the Black community.”

She spent her time at G.S.O., as she says, “quietly redeveloping” herself. The broad array of positions she held testify to this. Darlene served as Records clerk, Public Information clerk, Treatment Facilities assistant, Support Services assistant, and assistant to Tom J. (who was Services Director, Interim General Manager and Senior Advisor to the General Manager). Darlene went on to serve in the roles of Intellectual Property (IP) paralegal, IP Administrator and finally Senior IP Administrator. She was inspired in particular, she says, by Tom — “the first Black administrator to work at G.S.O.” — who encouraged her to go back to school. She earned a paralegal degree from NYU, which helped her develop knowledge on the use of Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc. copyrights, reprint permissions and trademarks. “Career-wise, I enjoyed attending the annual Trademark Administrators Conference — three days of informa-

tive seminars held in various states concerning current practices for IP administrators.”

Aside from gaining expertise in her chosen field, Darlene appreciated her time at G.S.O. and enjoyed the camaraderie with her co-workers. “I met lots of people who lifted me up and strengthened me,” she says. If she has one suggestion for G.S.O., it would be to “reinstate the Suggestion Box, which gives employees a chance to freely express their opinions.” Finally, even though she is not an alcoholic, she says, “I was determined to follow the mission of the A.A. Fellowship in my position by providing information regarding the use of A.A.W.S. intellectual property.”

On a personal note, Darlene met her husband Frank, who worked in G.S.O.’s Mail and Shipping department, and she is looking forward to retirement with him, their cat (Frisky), and her 41 houseplants. She plans to continue the service to others that began when she was that 23-year-old stepping into G.S.O. for the first time, now turning her attention to providing African-American children’s books to low-income families and to volunteering at food pantries.



■ General Manager Greg T.: “Truly an incredible journey.”

One staff change in the office looms large. Greg T. will be stepping away from his term of service as General Manager on February 1, 2021. He has worked for the General Service Office for eight years, arriving as A.A.W.S. Publishing Director in 2013 and assuming the role of General Manager in October of 2015.

“I have been happy to have spent the last five years in what is both a challenging and exhilarating assignment in service of A.A.,” Greg says. “It has truly been an incredible journey lived one day at a time, like sobriety.”

Sober since 1986, Greg has spent 28 years in service to the office and the boards of A.A. Initially a volunteer member of the Grapevine Editorial Advisory Board from 1992 to 1995, Greg served on the Grapevine corporate board as a nontrustee director from 1996 to 1999, and subsequently on the General Service Board as a Class B general service trustee from April 1999 to May 2003. From 2003 to 2013, he served his home group in South Orange, New Jersey, as well as his district and Area 44 in various jobs and assignments.

“I’m truly blessed in that I have been able to have such a lengthy career as a volunteer, trusted servant and paid worker for Alcoholics Anonymous,” Greg says. His plans after February? Prior to working for the General Service Office, Greg had a career in publishing as a senior editor and a writer of numerous books, both fiction and nonfiction. “I’m looking forward to re-engaging with the publishing world,” Greg says, “both editorially and creatively.”

“It has truly been an incredible journey lived one day at a time, like sobriety.”

“Greg has been an incredible change agent,” Beau B., Class B (alcoholic) trustee and current chair of the A.A.W.S. board, says. “He has driven needed change at G.S.O. in terms of the culture and bringing in the right people so that we can better serve the needs of our membership as they carry the message to the alcoholic who still suffers. We are holding true to that picture, and to the goals that Greg has met and the direction he has set in motion as we make the transition to the next General Manager.”



■ Changes at G.S.O.: “The year when the walls are coming down.”

Stephanie L. notes, “With the full implementation of the Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) system bringing together different operating systems into one fluid system, resulting in a streamlining of G.S.O. operations, part of our thinking and planning for 2021 and beyond is that G.S.O. will be a more efficient and more responsive organization that delivers maximum service to the Fellowship.”

A significant component in all of this — the staff changes, the ERP system, the streamlining of work processes — is managing the changes that have transpired. A pool of candidates is currently being interviewed for open staff positions. G.S.O. has also promoted a new Director of Staff Services, Sandra W., and hired a new CFO, Paul Konigstein (nonalcoholic), who has deep experience in the nonprofit sector. Finally, General Service Board Chair Michele Grinberg (nonalcoholic) has asked Southwest Regional trustee Jimmy D. to chair the search committee for a new General Manager (see announcement on page 8).

Additionally, the office has organized a change management team whose role, Stephanie says, “is to look at every department within the organization. We want to look at how they are affected by the ERP system and the staff exits; how their roles and responsibilities are affected; and how we may be able to redistribute duties. We are digging in and looking at everything that is impacted by the change: we want to review business processes and member needs at the same time as we make sure to prepare and support each member of our teams.”

The result of all this will be what Stephanie describes as “an improvement in best practices. We know we are not responding to the Fellowship with

the speed they would like us to. We want to make interactions with G.S.O. a much more user-friendly process. We really believe that G.S.O. now has a historic opportunity to leapfrog ahead in terms of providing best-in-class service to our members.”

Beau B. reiterates this. “If I’m thinking of a G.S.O. a year from now, I’m seeing a place that is much more integrated in the way we serve our members. A member who wants to do several things at once — make a contribution, buy literature — can call the office or get online and not jump around to different departments. The person they talk to will be able to say, ‘Yes, here’s where to send your group contributions and, by the way, it looks like you haven’t updated your group address information. Would you like to do that?’ This is what members get in every other interaction they have with the world; there’s no reason they shouldn’t receive that service from the General Service Office.

“So much of this starts with the people at G.S.O. It requires everyone to think about the members holistically. If our employees are set up for success and cross-trained, the way they view and serve the membership will evolve. It’s about unifying. I see this as the year when the walls are coming down.”

■ Sandra W., Director of Staff Services: “Don’t pray for an elephant.”

Sandra W., who last served on the Regional Forums and Nominating assignments, has been named G.S.O.’s Director of Staff Services, a new title in the department. “It’s the first time staff, Support Services and staff assistants are working under one umbrella,” she says. Her mission is to have all of the 21 people she’s managing to work as one team, in order to better serve the primary purpose of Staff Services — “to

make resources available to the Fellowship, to the sick and suffering alcoholic.”

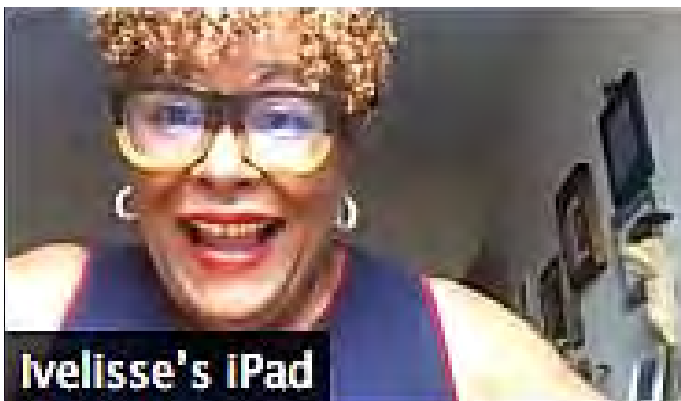
Sandra is aware that there is a lot of change happening at G.S.O. — that transitions are tough, and that the pandemic doesn’t help any. “My motto is, ‘Where I can bring light, I will,’” she says. “I hope to infuse the department with that philosophy.” She has

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already had individual meetings with all 21 employees in her group. “One thing I am implementing is a monthly meeting where everyone will be together as a team, and each of them can report on what’s going on in their particular assignment — what’s new and exciting.” Part of the meeting will focus on what Sandra calls “Each One, Teach One.” “This will be an opportunity for people to demonstrate how to do a particular task they do, or to show how to use a new app or tool. Exercises like this help improve unity and highlight the talents of those who have been working quietly in the background. It lets us shine a light on their accomplishments.”

In terms of staff, the current plan is to streamline the team by reorganizing the service desks from 12 to 10 positions, combining CPC with Public Information and Regional Forums with Nominating. Sandra is also actively interviewing candidates for two staff positions and hopes to have new hires in place by the end of November.

Sandra, who lives in New Jersey and has been sober since 1990, adds, “In my personal life, I believe that I lead where I am needed. Yes, this is a big venture, but I believe that you do end up in the right place.” She laughs. “My sponsor told me a long time ago, ‘Don’t pray for an elephant unless you have a big back yard.’ I think I’m ready for it.”



■ Paul Konigstein:

“My primary responsibility is stewardship of A.A.’s assets.”

We caught up with G.S.O.’s newly hired Chief Financial Officer, Paul Konigstein (nonalcoholic), the other day and asked him a few questions to learn more about his 30 years of experience working with nonprofit organizations and what he hopes to accomplish in his new position.

Box 4-5-9: Welcome to G.S.O. and Alcoholics Anonymous.

Paul: Thank you. It’s good to be here. I feel a little bit as if I’m coming full circle in my career.

Box 4-5-9: How is that?

Paul: My first nonprofit experience, beginning back in 1991, was with the American Montessori Society, a trade association for Montessori schools and professional society for Montessori educators. I was Director of Finance and Administration. Unlike some of the nonprofits I’ve worked for, which are run by boards, the American Montessori Society is run by its members themselves, much like Alcoholics Anonymous.

Box 4-5-9: When we spoke with [General Manager] Greg T., he mentioned the fact he felt you were strongly drawn to A.A.’s “life-saving mission and primary purpose.”

Paul: There’s so much here that matches my own interests and passions. I spent four years as Controller at Helen Keller International, an organization that focuses on the visually impaired, especially with respect to their nutrition — its mission is to focus on the intersection of health and education and to assist people in need, as does A.A., obviously. I’m also attracted to the Twelve Steps and the spiritual aspects of the program, in particular the idea of a Higher Power, which I believe in. I’m active in my synagogue and often help our rabbi conduct services.

Box 4-5-9: As CFO, how do you hope to further A.A.’s mission to help the suffering alcoholics?

Paul: I know there have been some challenges in terms of updating our processes and the implementation of the ERP system. I’m hoping to help the team by removing communication roadblocks that get in the way — for instance, by producing reporting that is clear and meaningful, both to the boards and various committees and to the members. The CFO also plays a role in the annual budget process, helping different departments coordinate with each other during that period. I can assist department heads with developing budgeting skills, and help them discover how a budget can be a useful tool in day-to-day operations. But my primary responsibility is stewardship of A.A.’s assets and making sure our resources are used responsibly. That’s the end game; that’s scoring the touchdown, when it comes to A.A.’s mission to help alcoholics.

Box 4-5-9: What do you like to do when you’re not working?

Paul: I live in Long Island, and I’m married, with two adult children and three cats. I’m an avid reader who is always devouring novels. Since the pandemic hit, I’ve been devouring them on my smartphone. I like to bike and take long walks. I love crossword puzzles and the quiz show Jeopardy. In fact, I’ve tried numerous times to become a contestant on the show, without success. My son tells me that’s because I am not interesting enough. “How sharper than a serpent’s tooth,” as they say! But my life’s mission is to prove to the world that accountants are interesting and have a sense of humor.

■ Return to the office: “There are a lot of pieces to this.”

A question of great interest to G.S.O. employees and the Fellowship beyond is when a return to the physical offices at 475 Riverside Drive in Manhattan might take place. According to Stephanie L., General Manager Greg T. created a Return to Work task force that includes nine employees from G.S.O. and Grapevine. Their first meeting took place in June, and they have been meeting weekly or biweekly since, using information from local health and federal authorities to provide a tentative playbook for returning to the office.

Says Stephanie L., “It’s just been announced that we are not returning to work before January 1, 2021. We are not sure when, but certainly not prior to January 1. Work on our new eighth floor office space has been completed [in addition to the 11th floor office space G.S.O. currently inhabits] so that will help us make our plans for physical distancing. Each of our department heads is being kept apprised of plans. When we do go back, it will be a modified voluntary return — no one will be mandated to return — and certainly the employees who do come back will be appropriately physically distanced.”

G.S.O. Archivist Michelle Mirza (nonalcoholic) is a member of the Return to Work task force. “Our main goal,” she says, “is to keep our workforce safe and healthy. We are making a strong effort to keep fully informed in a shifting environment.” Michelle notes that they have been attending webinars and pulling in information from HR groups and from transportation agencies including the MTA, New Jersey Transit and Long Island Railroad.

When it comes to G.S.O. employees, a lot of the playbook focuses on clear communication, Michelle says. “We will communicate about wearing masks in common areas and social distancing. Once we reopen, the thought is that it should be 100 percent voluntary, with flexible work schedules — staggered hours, block schedules. We want to ensure that employees remain six feet apart, even in the bullpen areas. We are also completing a health screening questionnaire for employees. Our plans include the method by which we will inform employees should a colleague have been exposed to the virus or is sick with the virus. It’s important to remind people not to use other’s desks or workspaces. And we will make sure that employees have access to current information, including HR policies for time off and leave-of-absence policies, as well as a mechanism for confidentially reporting any concerns they may have.”

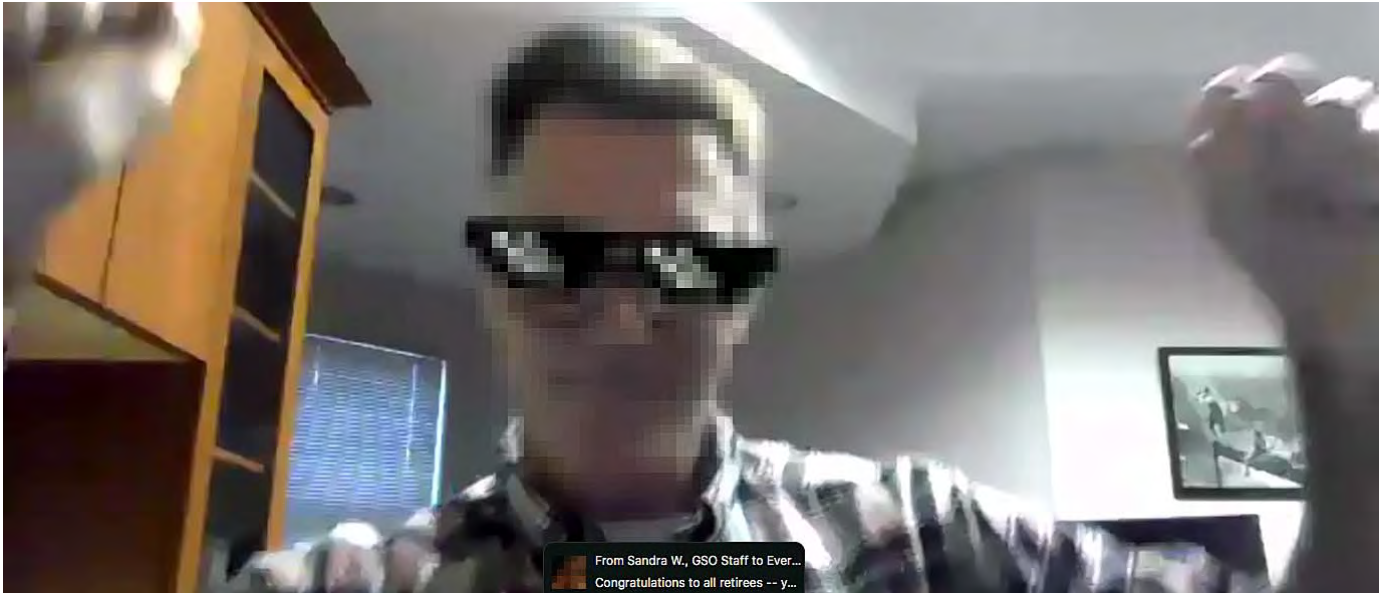
Another point of communication, Michelle says, is around health and well-being, at a time when employees may be feeling uncertainty, apprehension and even grief. “It’s really important to normalize the conversation around seeking help in regard to mental health — to provide information about employee assistance plans and have a workplace where employees feel safe and respected.”

In addition to social distancing protocols, certain physical changes in the office will need to take place. “There will be plexiglass barriers around the reception desk. Hand-sanitizing stations are already installed, as are no-contact soap dispensers in the bathrooms. A big concern is air quality. We are researching ionizing air purifiers for the office. We are also spelling out cleaning and sanitation procedures for high-contact surfaces like copy machines, and we will be providing employees with wipes and cleaners effective for that purpose. The building has already taken proactive measures — no water fountains, designated exits and entries, a temperature check station as you enter.”

There is no word on when outside visitors will be allowed to tour the office once again, Michelle says. The focus is on staff return. “Right now we are just taking it one step at a time. There are a lot of pieces to this, and we’re trying to be careful and proactive in examining them.”



Michele Grinberg, Class A (nonalcoholic) trustee and chair of the General Service Board.



■ Opening for General Manager of G.S.O.

The General Service Board has begun the search for a general manager of the General Service Office to replace Greg T., who will step down as of February 1, 2021

The qualifications for the position are:

- Ten years minimum sobriety.
- Proven leadership ability and demonstrated track record of building interpersonal relationships to advance and inspire organizational culture.
- Demonstrated executive and strategic level experience to drive the organization's mission, including leveraging technology to accomplish those aims; experience in managing organizations of comparable size and kind.
- A.A. service experience; knowledge of General Service structure and A.A. history.
- Effective communicator, both verbal and written, to work with the appropriate boards, the General Service Conference and the Fellowship at large; command of organizational details and the ability to respond effectively to multiple constituencies.
- Demonstrated understanding of the unique nature of A.A., the structure and balances of authority in A.A. services, and the ability to work with and resolve conflicting viewpoints.

In seeking applications for all vacancies in Alcoholics Anonymous, the Fellowship is committed to creating a large applicant file of qualified persons, which reflects the inclusiveness and diversity of A.A. itself. All applicants will be considered by the Search Committee of the General Service Board. Applications will be treated with the utmost confidence.

To apply, both business/professional and A.A. résumés are required. To request an A.A. résumé form, please email Michelle Mirza, mirzam@aa.org. Both résumés should be sent to the attention of GM Search Committee Secretary at mirzam@aa.org, no later than December 15, 2020.

■ With an Eye to the Future: G.S.O. Staff Positions

We are continuing to update our file of applications from A.A. members who are interested in being considered for possible future openings for the position of G.S.O. staff member. The basic criteria include a minimum of six years continuous sobriety; a background in service at the group and possibly district and area levels; business or professional experience; and excellent communication skills. Another consideration is a willingness to relocate to New York, if necessary. G.S.O. staff people are A.A.s who carry out rotating assignments and correspond with A.A.s throughout the world on all aspects of recovery and service. Additionally, they represent G.S.O. at A.A. functions throughout the U.S. and Canada and provide staff support for the General Service Board. Staff members cover a variety of assignments including the following: Accessibilities/Remote Communities, Public Information, Literature, Cooperation with the Professional Community, Corrections, International and the General Service Conference. If you are interested or would like more information, please write to: Staff Coordinator, Box 459, Grand Central Station, New York, NY 10163 or email staffcoord@aa.org.