

# A.A. FOR THE NATIVE NORTH AMERICAN

This is A.A. General Service Conference-approved literature.



**recovery**



*ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS*<sup>®</sup> is a fellowship of men and women who share their experience, strength and hope with each other that they may solve their common problem and help others to recover from alcoholism.

- The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking. There are no dues or fees for A.A. membership; we are self-supporting through our own contributions.
- A.A. is not allied with any sect, denomination, politics, organization or institution; does not wish to engage in any controversy; neither endorses nor opposes any causes.
- Our primary purpose is to stay sober and help other alcoholics to achieve sobriety.

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Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc.  
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New York, NY 10115  
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**A.A. for the  
Native North American**



## **If you have a drinking problem you are not alone**

There are approximately 4,000,000 Native people in the United States and Canada, many still living on reservations and many who have moved to big cities.

Wherever they are, alcoholism is a major health problem. It is not unusual for Native North Americans to feel torn between their native culture and the dominant culture. Many turn to alcohol for escape from their problems. Many want to stop drinking and yet cannot—whether by trying to do so in the white man's world or by employing their ancient healing practices.

Both the American Medical Association and the British Medical Association term alcoholism a disease. Like people everywhere, many Natives have allowed alcohol to overshadow their lives. When they got drunk, they were violating their native spiritual teachings. But there is hope, and it lies in Alcoholics Anonymous. A.A. exists in more than 180 countries, and today more than two million people are sober in the Fellowship and are living new lives free from alcohol.

In this pamphlet, men and women, all Native people, share how they gave up drinking. They have found it possible to be A.A. members and still be proud of their rich Native heritage and spiritual teaching.

A.A. has a spiritual foundation and respects the spiritual beliefs of each of its members. The primary purpose of Alcoholics Anonymous is to help the suffering alcoholic; it avoids opinions on outside issues and is not connected to any other organization. A.A. understands that alcoholism is a disease that can afflict anyone, anywhere—no matter what

a person's race, creed, sex or religion. It exists to help all alcoholics. In A.A. there are no forms to sign, no census takers, no admission fees. There are no attendance records and no formal courses of treatment. Nothing is forbidden in A.A., not even drinking. There are choices.

You will find that Native Americans use various terms when referring to their heritage. Although American Indian remains the most widely used and recognized term, some may use Native, Aborigine, or First Nation People.

One woman, a Sioux/Blackfoot with many years of sobriety in A.A., says: "Most of us believe in a Great Spirit... Well, I didn't have to give up any part of my beliefs when I joined A.A. It was a great relief to find out I could believe in a Higher Power of my choice. I could live in the white man's world, but also retain all of my people's Native traditions, customs, and ceremonies. In fact, A.A. made my beliefs stronger. My joining A.A. didn't restrict me, it gave me more freedom."

The greatest spiritual law of Native people upholds community over individual effort. A spirit of community is at the heart of Alcoholics Anonymous, too. The stories that follow tell what it was like, how it is now, and how many North American Natives found the "road to happy destiny," or, as it is often referred to, the "red road of recovery."

**Fran**  
**“Dancing Feather”**

***“Being Indian did not make me unique. I was an alcoholic...”***

Sobriety is traditional! I never knew that until I got sober. I watched my uncle die from toxic alcohol poisoning. This was how my people often died. Other times their bodies would be found after the spring thaw, where they had been dumped in the snow at the edge of the reservation after passing out drunk in town. I was eleven when Grandma died and we moved from Los Angeles to the reservation. The bitter, strong taste of the whisky and the sting as it settled into my stomach would disappear as the effects soothed the chill of winter or softened the summer heat of the painted desert. My least favorite time was standing in line with my sister-in-law, waiting for our government food commodities.

Most Indians were poor back then. Few tribes had gaming and most people were not educated beyond grade school. I liked riding horses bareback, but when I was drunk I fell off many times and sometimes lost my horse. I ran around with other rez kids; we ditched school and got drunk out in the mesas. When I was fourteen I fell in love with an Indian cowboy who had won the belt buckle at the rodeo in Santa Fe. He was my hero when he taught me how to hotwire a Ford truck and drive it very fast back to the reservation, laughing all the way. Just when I thought life had finally gotten bearable, the relocation people took him away to school and I was alone again in the unforgiving desert, just me and the lizards and the whisky. I couldn't wait to leave, lest I be the next to be kidnapped and taken to boarding school.

I had seen a picture of the Golden Gate Bridge on the cover of a magazine, so my brother paid my way and I rode the train to San Francisco. I had thirty dollars. I was a sixteen-year-old illiterate girl who could barely speak English. It was my first time away from my family. The money was gone by

the second day. I had no job or place to live and it was raining on the cold gray streets. I curled up in a doorway shivering under a pile of newspapers. I felt a hand on my shoulder and an older white man was speaking gently. He offered to get me out of the rain and find me something to eat. That was the first night, beginning a twenty-one-year career as a prostitute. The money was good and the booze even better.

Two years later I was incarcerated and spent twenty-four months locked up. After my release I became pregnant with my first child and returned to the streets. The drug habit came back, accompanied by more than a pint of tequila each day. Over the next eleven years I was repeatedly jailed for alcohol- and drug-related crimes, including three drunk driving tickets and frequent trips to hospitals and nut houses. In the end I was drinking more than a quart of tequila a day. My son was taken from me and I found myself in an A.A. meeting, barely able to hold the cup of coffee with both hands. I had to sober up if I wanted my son back. I had finally reached a point where I was willing to try "white man's A.A.," although I was sure it wouldn't work for someone like me. Another Native woman, who grew up on a reservation, was able to communicate to me that being Indian did not make me unique. I was an alcoholic and I had no other recourse but to try it someone else's way. By the time I was a year sober, my son was home, but he was drinking and drugging just like I had. I am happy to report that now he is approaching five years sober and this month I will celebrate twenty-three years sober. The Twelve Steps changed everything for me.

Today I am married with four grown children and eight grandchildren. The people in A.A. encouraged me as I reentered school, sober. A few years later I graduated from college with my Bachelor of Science degree. I live in a beautiful home in the mountains and enjoy a successful writing career. I pray in the sweat lodge and in the Catholic Church and do Twelfth Step work on Indian reservations. The Twelve Steps, the Big Book and my sponsor taught me how to live happy, joyous and free in sobriety. Things look different today. I feel the loving caress of my Creator when I sit in the forest and give thanks for all that has come to pass for me because of A.A. Our old



Indian stories are still alive and today I love to share with others about recovery and the spirituality of the First Native Nations.

**Kevin**  
**“Little Feather”**

*“The hate became love,  
the fear now faith.”*

I have been a member of the Fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous for 13 years. Over those years I have done what was suggested, like joining a group, finding a sponsor, relying on a Higher Power, getting active, and living the Steps. These were taught to me by a man who was armed with the facts of A.A. and was also part Native American. I too am of mixed blood; my mother an Irish woman, my father a proud man of Blackfeet and Cheyenne River Sioux blood. He carried himself in a manner of the white man, for he needed to support his family in a racially driven era. He was also an alcoholic for most of his life until he found the rooms of Alcoholics Anonymous. He was one I would never be like, one who lived for the drink, and I would turn out like him in many ways.

Resentment grew over the years; it was a love-hate relationship. When he was drunk he was different. When I was drunk I was different. He gave me this allergy, this malady, this disease, I thought. It caused hatred, resentment, silence. Then something happened—he got sober, and he began to act different, a better man, a loving man, a spiritual man, a believer in the Creator and in the program of Alcoholics Anonymous. He didn’t drink anymore; but I couldn’t stop no matter what, and I became angrier every single day, both at him and booze.

Over the years to come my father began to grow and his love of Wankan Tankan grew with him. He trusted the Great Mystery, never questioning its existence; he knew it was there for him to rely upon. For me, how could there be a Great Spirit, and if so, how could he do this to me? I hated myself, the seen and the unseen. There was no hope in sight. I wanted to die just to end the madness.

My father’s journey was one I couldn’t help but notice. I saw the change in him and that made me

even more resentful at times. Why him and not me? Then I found myself one day on the floor asking the Great Spirit for help and he sent me to that man. For a brief moment the pride and hate left me, and then clarity entered, and I asked for help.

My father came and saved me that day, and the times to follow were filled with the learning and loving of a designed program of Alcoholics Anonymous. I began my journey of change and slowly began to see what he was saying. The hate became love, the fear now faith—I was becoming the Creator's instrument of peace and I started to believe in what you believed.

Over the years to come my father began to find his Native side and to practice and live the red road, but for me, even after all A.A. had done for me, all of what had happened, everything I had seen, I still had my reservations of this Great Mystery, this Great Spirit, this Wankan Tankan. It would take many more years for me to find the true meaning of the Creator.

My father, who became my closest friend, crossed over 6 years ago. His ashes sat on a dresser in my room; I would talk to him daily and just keep believing because he believed. Days melted into years in the Fellowship, and I was still questioning the existence of a Higher Power. I was just existing and not truly living. If I couldn't see it, touch it, taste it, then how could it exist? I continued to question.

After many conversations with my adopted father, Johnny Paleface, who was 46 years sober at the time, with my spiritual Native advisor Dale, and my elders, a suggestion was made that I go home to the reservation to help me find out who I was; and make a journey to lay my father to rest. So, I made a fearful journey with another Native, John S., to the Blackfeet reservation in Montana. The train ride was one remarkable journey, seeing first hand the creations made by the Great Spirit. I witnessed the beauty of the mountainous lands, the wildlife, the streams, and the people. This was what my father talked about, this was the land of our people. Long before the houses, the factories, the malls and cars; there was just the land and our people.

After three days the train stopped and when I got off I could see the reservation in the distance. I took my father's ashes and John and I made the journey to the reservation. We met some people

who helped us locate the proper authorities at the Tribal Council and we checked in with the Bureau of Indian Affairs office, letting both of them know what we were planning on doing. The next day we were to make the walk that would change my life.

My friend John and I began our journey to lay my father's ashes to Mother Earth. We walked for a long time and found a small lake not far from the Rocky Mountains. John and I then spread the ashes to the earth, water, and sky, while praying to the Great Spirit to watch over him. I began to feel a sense of serenity, gratitude and love. Those walls that were between us all those years crumbled that day, and I saw my father for who and what he was. The blame was gone, the resentments that lingered left, and the bond, even in death, became one of father and son. There was final peace between us, and I knew this was where he belonged.

As we finished the prayers my Native brother John said, "Look to your right." Through tear-filled eyes I saw this huge black wolf sitting on its hind legs watching us. He was not aggressive to us, he just watched what we were doing, almost overseeing. We, of course, feared this creature, it was instinct, it was fear of the unknown. As we slowly made our way from the area the wolf continued to follow us with his eyes. I said to John, "Take some pictures," and he began to take snapshots of this wolf, as did I.

As we continued to walk away from the area where the ashes were laid, a remarkable thing happened. The wolf got up, walked over to where the ashes were laid, and laid in them. Chills went up our skin and John and I knew we just witnessed something very special. I immediately called home and talked to my adopted father, Johnny Paleface, a full blood Navajo, and Dale, a Native friend. Both said that we witnessed a spirit guide, or my father in his totem form. Part of me wanted to believe this was true; another side was still questioning the validity of such an assumption—a coincidence I said. I would find the answers in the weeks to come.

I returned to Massachusetts and brought the film to be developed. I picked up the pictures, brought them home, and began looking at them with my wife. My friend John stopped by—a coincidence, I think not. We found the pictures we took of the wolf, but to our surprise there was just a picture

of the land. There was no wolf. Once again, I felt that shiver and I knew that what all have said was true. That day, in my living room, I had a spiritual awakening I will never forget. I pray to the Creator every day, I believe in Him, and I know someday I will meet my maker, my family, in the after-life. A.A. gave me the ability to battle my fears, to face them head on, and to follow the Grace of the Creator so I could find peace with my father.

I owe my life to Alcoholics Anonymous. May all who question the Great Spirit be able to witness His beauty, and find him and rely upon him in your daily life. May you hear the Creator's voice in the wind, and may you gain strength from Him and walk in His beauty.

*Aweho.*

## **Ramona**

### ***“When we surrendered we lived.”***

I felt I deserved to drink, that it was my birth right. I felt being alcoholic was being Indian and being Indian was being alcoholic. With so many sad stories who wouldn't drink?

I was born in 1952 in Wichita, Kansas. I am Tohono O'odham on my father's side and Cherokee on my mother's. Until I was ten I lived in a small town. There was me, my sister and my mom, and one other Indian family—everyone else was white. I don't know about the members of the other Indian family, but I was tormented by the people of that town. My earliest memories are of being beaten, kicked, run over, and sexually assaulted. That is all I can remember of those days living in Kansas. This was before the Civil Rights movement, before being “In”dian was “in.”

When I was about four years old I was run down by three or four men on bicycles. These were big guys, maybe 18 or 19 years old. I tried to run, but one hit me, knocked me down and ran over me, and the other ones ran over me too. I went into shock and was taken to the hospital. In those days nothing happened to white men who tormented little Indian girls, and of course this was just one incident. There were many more, and I still have the physical, emotional, and psychological scars to prove it. A lot

of times just walking down the street, riding my bike, or playing on the playground would bring on an assault.

As a result I always felt hunted—I always felt like fair game and that I had to be ready to run, or fight, or kill. I felt like an animal, always on the lookout for a predator. Now days they call that PTSD [Post-traumatic Stress Disorder], much like what vets go through. So I learned to be cunning, manipulative, destructive, seductive, vicious, and violent. Somewhere along the way I stopped being the hunted and became the hunter, the predator.

I was drinking at 14, fighting, stealing, and doing everything else that no one that age should be doing. I was expelled from school, was in trouble with the law, arrested and confined. I ingested, inhaled and imbibed anything I could get my hands on. If I couldn't pick up a drink, I'd pick up a man—anything to stop the pain.

When I was 18 I captured a military man. We were married for 20-some years. I drank the whole time. I drank when I was happy, I drank when I was sad, I drank because it rained and I drank when it didn't rain. When I was about 42 I captured another military man, but I was still holding the first one hostage.

By the time I got to the rooms of A.A., I was defeated, demoralized, depressed, distracted and destroyed. I was beaten down and crushed. I had done everything I said I wouldn't, and hadn't done anything I said I would. I had lost my identity, my worth, my value.

In and out of the program for 10 years, I had trouble with “surrendering.” For me to understand what it meant to “surrender” I had to look to the stories and lessons of my ancestors. Here is what they told me: “When our backs were against the rifles and we were going to die, we chose to surrender. Had we not, all the generations to come would have died. Our language would have died, our dances would have died, our stories would have died, you would have died. But when we surrendered we lived, our songs lived, our drums lived, our dances lived. You lived.”

Then I understood the legacy in their surrender, and I understood that in surrendering to the program of A.A. and my Higher Power, I would

be alive and present to pass on the hopes and dreams of all those who came before me. I understood that through me, my people and our traditions would live.

I also learned that alcohol is a spirit and a formidable opponent. If I compete with it—thinking I can beat it—it will beat me every time. But when I see alcohol for the cunning, baffling, powerful opponent in it, then I honor it and respect it as a worthy adversary. Kind of like when my ancestors realized that they could not beat the rifles.

What A.A. teaches me is in direct alignment with my traditions. And that is the beauty and freedom of the program.

## **Jacquie**

***“Never in my life did anyone tell me to ‘keep coming back.’”***

I live in the village of New Aiyansh, in northern British Columbia, a community in the traditional territories of the Nisga’a Nation. There were no active A.A. meetings in the village when my lifestyle forced me to get sober. I started drinking when I was fourteen years old. At first it was only on weekends. I had to lie to my parents as to where I was going or what I was doing, which became a pattern of deceitfulness that I perfected with time. I was a blackout drunk from the get-go; I came to puking from the whiskey that I had been sharing with a circle of friends who had no idea I was only fourteen. Drinking was like a right-of-passage; after that first drunk, I was accepted by other teens who seemed cool and had an attitude I only dreamed of having. Without alcohol, I was painfully shy, a shrinking violet.

I was a functional drunk and I managed to graduate from high school and achieved college certificates, which made it possible for me to stay employed over most of my drinking career. When it looked like I was going to lose a job because of my drinking, I’d move on to another job. A time came when I didn’t want to live anymore and couldn’t see how life could get any better. I had gone through a lot of failed relationships and blamed my misery on people, places and things. I tried suicide, wrote

suicide notes and found I couldn't even do that right. I'd be so angry when I came to in hospitals after having had my stomach pumped of whatever I had taken to get me out of my miserable life. I did several geographic cures, my last was from Prince Rupert to New Aiyansh. If I could just get away from all those people who drank and all those bars, maybe my life would get better. I tried drinking beer or wine coolers instead of whiskey or vodka in an attempt to control my blackouts, but when I moved "home" I found my drinking got worse. I was now buying out the bootleggers. I was back to drinking hard stuff and getting painfully sick. The job I got in the village was at a health center where they had a visiting psychologist who sent me to an A & D counselor who would get me to a treatment center.

I didn't know what the treatment center was for; I didn't think I had a drinking problem. All I knew was I needed a break from life. So off I went to a treatment center for, in my mind, a much needed vacation and to learn how to sober "him" up—"my higher power" who drove a red truck).

I was reintroduced to A.A. and listened closely for ways to help my current partner, all the time thinking "I'm not that bad...." I still had a job, still paid bills and still had food in the cupboards. I found out in Step Four that juggling bills and having a case of whiskey on my grocery list was being unmanageable. To me that was normal behavior. Ten years prior to going to the treatment center, I did attend one A.A. meeting, with a past live-in boyfriend who was non-Native, and my conclusion was A.A. was for "white people"; everyone was all dressed up and they all knew each other. I felt left out and different, so I didn't go there again. It was suggested when I got out of treatment that I attend A.A. meetings. I didn't own a car, so I'd hitchhike to the nearest meeting, which was 1½ hours away on unpaved highway. Because I didn't feel I had anything to offer anyone I'd attend beginners meetings. I was amazed at how I was welcomed into any meeting I got to, and they kept telling me to keep coming back. *Never* in my life did anyone tell me to keep coming back.

As I began to accept that I could be an alcoholic, I wanted to know how to start an A.A. group. I was invited to a district meeting. I felt so honored that I would be invited to something so exceptional, to be

rubbing elbows with “professional” A.A.s who had permanent smiles and glowing faces. I was given everything I needed to start a group, with lots of suggestions and phone numbers if I needed any help or had any questions. They also included Grapevine magazines and speaker tapes, which helped to get me through the night. Wow, I was in the big league now. I became G.S.R. when I didn’t know what a G.S.R. was, which eventually led to service work as secretary, treasurer, alternate D.C.M. and D.C.M. for my district. While serving at the district level, I missed only 20 minutes of one district meeting—to meet my very young grandson at the airport. I broke a glass ceiling; I was the first First Nation person/woman to serve as D.C.M. in our district. I thought our membership must be crazy to vote me in, a drunken Indian woman from the hinterlands who came through the doors feeling I was a waste of skin and going nowhere fast.

I learned to express my opinion at area assemblies. With the Twelve Steps I found a design for living. My family could count on me to be there in times of crises. I became a good daughter, a good sister, a good mother, a good grandmother and a respectable human being. Prior to A.A., I had lost three brothers and a sister-in-law in a single car crash; I lost my faith in God. With a restored faith in my Higher Power and sobriety I have survived a lot of family deaths without picking up a drink. A.A. reacted with understanding and concern. When my father passed, A.A. was there to hold me and comfort me. A.A. kept me going, reminding me that I may not need general service to ensure my own recovery: *“We do need it to ensure the recovery of the alcoholic who still stumbles in the darkness one short block from this room. We need it to ensure the recovery of a child being born tonight, destined for alcoholism.”*

I have several family members who found sobriety after I joined A.A. Today, I want to give back what was freely given to me. Staying sober opens up the way to life and happiness. I owe my wonder-filled life to Alcoholics Anonymous, and I am truly grateful.

My name is Jacquie and I am an alcoholic, and proud to be a Nisga’a woman.



***“The scream of alcoholism  
was louder than the cry of love.”***

It isn't easy growing up without a father, or even a mother for that matter. I came from an alcoholic family; although I had my mother around, I grew up as alone as I could get. I never thought I was equal to my peers. The name calling, the blatant racism, was all around me. “Stupid little Indian” was my nickname. When I was at home, “get me a beer!” was what I was called; I didn't know that what my family was doing I would do as well. My alcoholism can be traced as far back as my great-grandmother, making me a fourth generation alcoholic. In my case, it was not a matter of *if*, it was a matter of *when* I was to become that “drunken Indian.” My emotions shut down when I was six years of age, due to the combination of multiple abuse and neglect. My mother spent every last cent on booze, which brought on the childhood motto of “I'm hungry.”

When I went to live with my aunt I was introduced to A.A. I was the kid running around the room while my aunt attended the meeting. I soon was returned to my mom because I was “too much to handle.” I never had any friends as I never stayed in one school long enough to make any. I was still a stupid little Indian; my family were still the drunken Indians. I was ashamed of my family. It was my mother who woke up the monster inside of me, she invited me to “come have a toke with us” at a party one night. That's when it all started; for 12 years I ran away from the “drunken Indian” label by *becoming* a drunken Indian. I never even attempted to control my drinking; oblivion was my goal every time I drank.

I moved from my mother's home to live with my uncle, and things started to look up. I helped him with his catering service and we traveled all over cooking for various functions. We even took trips back home to the Queen Charlotte Islands on a constant basis. Life was good. On the outside everything was fine, on the inside there was hurt, shame, guilt, all the familiar traits of an angry young man. My uncle had tried everything under the sun to get that out of me. I went to therapy, art therapy, anger management (which they kicked me out of—I got too angry), counseling. Nothing helped.

The day came when I had to go into a foster home because there was no other place. I had been in other foster homes, but none came close to this one. It was the other foster children that I had to worry about. I had to be like them, they wouldn't accept me if I wasn't. If they smoked, so did I, if they drank, I did too. I was a falling-down drunk at the age of thirteen. I went from stupid little Indian to becoming a member of the family. I stumbled the streets of Victoria with all the other street punks; "doing the dew," is what we called it. There were times when I would be alone, but I would be happy with my bottle, it didn't call me names. I soon progressed to the hopeless stage of alcoholism, drinking for the sake of drinking. Panhandling was my only way of feeding my addiction. It never occurred to me that I shouldn't be where I was at that age—I was only eighteen.

I eventually got my own place, through the help of the government, and my own phone. This was merely a place to drink safely. My uncle had heard of my self-destruction and invited me to stay with him again in Edmonton. I declined; the scream of alcoholism was louder than the cry of love. I eventually lost it all; I called my uncle and took him up on his offer. I moved to Edmonton with the intention of running away from my "friend." I moved in with my uncle, and life was good again. I started a job installing hardwood floors and had my own place. I went on with the dry drunk for a year and a half, then I finally invited my "friend" back and continued on hopelessly until I came to that fork in the road—to either go on to the bitter end or seek help.

I woke up from a week-long bender, crying and telling myself "I don't want to be like this anymore!" I had hit the bottom of my emotions. I checked into detox where I was introduced to A.A. I didn't take to the program right away; I was scared of Step Four. I finally went into treatment, where I had to face my past and put it behind me. I came out of treatment and I was free, somewhere in there the obsession to drink was lifted. As I worked the program of Alcoholics Anonymous, life became more and more clear. I had a purpose—I had a life. I had to get some outside help; I worked on my character defects, putting out my major fires. I now have been restored to my previous self; I have a second chance, given to me by my Higher Power. I think

of my “friend” every now and then, I see him right outside of my place. I have worked too hard to invite him back in.

**Jennifer**

***“As long as I remember the first word of the First Step I can stay sober.”***

I am a thirty-four year old Ojibwe woman who has been sober for eight years. I live in a medium-sized city in Northern Ontario, a short drive from the reservation my family is from. I am the fortunate single mother of three wonderful daughters and am grateful to be an active member of Alcoholics Anonymous.

My parents worked hard to give my younger sister and me a good life and opportunities that they didn't have. We were raised off-reserve in a non-drinking environment, and I was totally comfortable and happy in my surroundings. I did very well in school and had many friends until we moved in the middle of fifth grade. My parents had finished post-secondary education and were in pursuit of the better job. Of course, I developed a huge resentment and wrote in my diary that I hated everyone in the world except for two friends. I didn't adjust very well to the change and became very sullen and self-absorbed. I didn't need alcohol to act like an alcoholic.

I had my first experience with alcohol at my grandfather's house on the reserve where we went every weekend. A family member kept a stash of liquor there and one day, out of curiosity, I had a drink. I remember lying in the field that afternoon and relishing the sight of the clear, blue sky, the bobbing daisies, and the feeling of utter contentment. I ended up stealing the bottle and hiding it along a fence for some future use, which never materialized.

In the middle of grade seven there was another move and this time it was back “home.” I had never thought of myself as being any different from my classmates, but when we moved back to the reserve I ran straight into culture shock. I took pride in my academic ability and had absolutely no idea how to deal with bullies who ostracized me as an “apple” (red on the outside and white on the inside) and as

someone who was too much of a goody two shoes to drink or smoke. I did not make any friends and the next year and a half were very hard. At the age of twelve I already had a list of resentments and an attitude of superiority over almost everyone I met.

Grade nine meant moving to a boarding school about four hours from home. It could have been a wonderful experience as there were girls there from all over the continent. What I came out of there with, however, was a disdain for my own people. I don't really know how this happened, but I know that I was ashamed of being Native. My academic fortitude and isolated family life kept me from joining my classmates in the party life, but I honed my attitude of thinking I was above all of them.

University brought me far from home where I met my future husband. We were the poster kids for the upwardly mobile, sober Native couple. From the outside everything looked good, but I started to drink alcoholically while pregnant with our second baby. I hid my bottles and managed, by some miracle, to deliver a healthy child, stay in school, and stay involved in the community. The vodka I kept under my dresser was my little secret and helped me to cope with the feelings of being trapped and powerless. It helped me remember that feeling of contentment I once had.

Eventually, my little secret became the concern of everyone around me. I drank myself out of law school and out of the community. I became a recluse and only my partner knew the full extent of my drinking. I was a drunken housewife, while my partner worked and became a productive member of society. We had another child and by God's grace she is a healthy and happy ten-year-old who has no recollection of her mother ever being drunk. The older two have been involved with Alateen for the past four years and have their own program. God has placed some really special people in our lives.

After I left school I don't think I drew a sober breath for two years. I functioned in blackouts, drove my children around drunk until my keys and access to the bank accounts were taken away. I started to drink Listerine after hocking jewelry. It came to an end when my husband, at his wit's end, brought the girls home to my parents. Coming to in an empty house, with no idea where my children were, got my attention. I attended three treatment

centers, never staying sober. It did get me in contact with A.A., however, and I saw that there was an alternative. It was possible to be happy. I eventually ended up leaving my husband and moving closer to home and family.

I didn't get continuous sobriety until I got a sponsor, a home group, and a new attitude, which continuously needs adjusting. I have finally realized that I am an alcoholic, no worse and no better than anyone else. I have a disease that I am responsible for treating. There is no shame in that. As long as I remember the first word in the First Step and do what I am taught I can laugh at myself and stay sober. I have been shown how to be active in service work and have recently taken on a sponsee, another young Native woman. I clean houses to pay the rent, but have finally finished my degree (ten years later) and am bringing up my girls to be proud young Native women. The future has many possibilities, but I have to remember that I owe it all to Alcoholics Anonymous and my Higher Power.

**Karen**

***“Alcohol... was medicine for my confused mind, heart and spirit.”***

I was reared by a very traditional Gramma who believed in the power and necessity of prayer. Gramma had a prayer for the dawn of a new day, for her life, Mother Earth, all of her children and their children, her sheep, her home, the fire she used to cook her food, the water she used to boil her coffee, the rugs she wove. She had a prayer for everything—a way of life she practiced all of her 102 years. She never took one sip of alcohol in her entire life, and she was a warrior against alcohol and alcoholism. Many of her siblings, children, and grandchildren drank alcoholically or were alcoholic.

I don't know why I became an alcoholic, but I do know that my alcoholism began long before I took my first drink of alcohol. Gramma raised me, and I spent my first 4 to 5 years mostly alone with her. I watched her and witnessed her prayers every day, everywhere, all the time. She believed in traditional ceremonies and their powers and had the utmost respect and regard for traditional medicine and prayers. I had absolutely no connection whatsoever

to Gramma's prayers and practices. I felt nothing except numbness to it all. I felt awkward and out of place. In the back of my mind I thought Gramma was just a crazy old lady because I saw her lips moving all the time. Now I know she was deep in prayer.

Then, at the age of six or seven, I had to leave the only home and way of life I knew, even though I didn't understand it, to go somewhere even more alien—boarding school, to be educated by the Christians. For nearly ten years, I became even more confused and distorted, living and breathing in this boarding school. I was told time after time that Gramma's ancient and pagan ways were false and would not save my soul. I did not know my soul needed saving, but it sounded intriguing, especially since I felt awkward and disconnected. I missed my Gram with every fiber of my being and all I had to comfort me were the memories of those early years with her, and I grew to have a deep respect for her.

At 15 or 16 I took my first drink of alcohol and it was medicine; medicine for my confused mind, heart and spirit. I felt the ease and comfort that comes at once, and that the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous describes clearly and succinctly. I did inappropriate and unattractive acts, blacked out and was physically sickened, but that didn't really seem to bother me all that much because the magic of the medicine was more powerful. With alcohol in my belly and in my blood, I no longer felt awkward, distorted or disconnected. Everything in my life became crystal clear and colorful, as if from monotone to stereo. I drank alcohol for its medicinal effects until the clarity and color became awkward, distorted and disconnected. Booze's magic no longer worked. I was even more confused and had the added pain of shame and remorse.

The first time I heard about A.A. was in the rooms of Al-Anon. The speaker described the disease of alcoholism in such a way that my confused and hurting heart, mind and spirit heard the hope of recovery. The speaker said if you think you have a problem with alcohol, A.A. may help. I started going to A.A. meetings, not because I believed I was an alcoholic, but because the message of hope was so attractive and sounded so much better than where I was. I was in the pits of despair, loneliness, confusion, shame and hopelessness, and I was only 24 years of age.

When I heard the words in *How it Works*, I really waited and anticipated the moment I would get to know how it works. I kept going back for that moment. I didn't get it that the directions were being read at every meeting. I did everything wrong those first years of sobriety—except I did not drink. I heard that I was a success, even if all I did was not drink, one day at a time. I did not get a sponsor and I did not work the Steps. I did not get phone numbers and talk to others. I did not even get a Big Book. All I did was not drink. Staying dry solves a lot of problems, but not every problem. I did not know how to live sober. I needed help, but I was too proud to ask for it. I began to realize that A.A. was full of white people and that they sounded just like the Christians who told me time and time again that Gramma's ways were ancient and pagan and wouldn't save my soul.

I went to lots of Indian A.A. campouts. There I was able to hear the part in the Third Step about a God of our understanding, because it was in those Indian A.A. campouts that my heart started hearing words like Grandfather and Creator instead of God. I learned they meant the same thing and that it was O.K. to call God any name I felt comfortable with. That opened the doors to an exploration of a relationship with a God of my understanding. Today, I call my God "Creator." I have come to have a most precious relationship with my Creator. My understanding of Creator has allowed me to ask for help from a number of sponsors. I have worked the Steps and am working them again. My first time through the Steps I learned that all the angst I had with the outside world, which was white, was about all the hatred I had for myself. I have been able to release much of that self-hate and let my heart be filled with light and love—most of the time. That Gramma who I thought was just a crazy old lady is who I am today. I am my Gram. I get to carry myself with dignity and self-respect and walk in prayer every day. I am connected to Creator, others and myself. My heart has softened for myself and others. I am a sober Dine woman who upholds the meaning of my clan, Todiicheeni (Bitterwater), as one of the first four clan creations of Changing Woman from time immemorial. Thank you, Alcoholics Anonymous and Creator, for this precious gift.

***“People showed me kindness  
and I learned to trust the white man.”***

I am a Micmac from Red Bank First Nation in New Brunswick, Canada, and I am an alcoholic. I saw at an early age the destruction that alcohol could cause. I saw battered wives, social workers taking my friends away, violent fights, people going with-out, and police officers arresting people on my reserve. I told myself I would never turn out like that. I turned out like that and worse.

I came from a big family—six girls and four boys. My parents were strict, but looking back I realize they were trying to shield us from everything going on in the reserve. My dad was an alcoholic, so alcohol affected me before I took a drink.

As a child I grew up with a lot of insecurities. I had low self-esteem and was bullied a lot. I was a teacher’s pet and very smart. Maybe that’s why I got picked on so much. I was isolated from my friends because my dad was so strict. We were always working in the yard while the other kids played hide-and-go-seek. I felt like the square peg in the round hole.

I had my first drunk at around fifteen years old. I just remember it was harsh going down, but the feeling that came afterward—I fell in love with that feeling! My shyness, low self-esteem, and insecurities disappeared. I started getting in trouble with the law and getting arrested for underage drinking. I went right into a criminal lifestyle with break-ins and fighting. I was trying to gain the reputation as a tough guy because I was bullied when I was young. All my rage from my childhood came out when I drank. For the first time I felt like I belonged in the partying lifestyle.

I graduated high school and took a university course. Partying had such a hold on me then that I didn’t apply myself—nothing mattered except my partying. I decided I was going to travel and see the different reserves around me. I did lots of things I wasn’t proud of in those reserves—like fighting, insulting, stealing, and disrespecting people. For somebody with such low self-esteem, I seemed to be filled with ego and pride. The morals and standards I was raised with went right out the window when I drank. I treated my alcoholic thug friends



better than I treated my own family.

I was arrested by the police and have been in front of a judge a few times. I even went to jail, but not for long. I hit my rock bottom many times and chose to ignore the road signs the Creator gave me.

My sober date is July 11, 1999, and that date keeps me sober today. That is the day my life became so unmanageable that I did not feel like living any more. I was 25 years old and had had ten years of hard partying; I couldn't handle it any more. I cried in front of the mirror that morning, looking at what I had become. I was ashamed, lonely, scared, and drained. I looked myself in the eye and, with tears rolling down my cheeks, I said, "You gotta change, you can't keep doing this to yourself." That's when I let the Creator into my life. I surrendered and knew I was beaten. He kept me alive through all the violent confrontations and accidents. I asked for help and my dad, sober for 11 years then, directed me to a detox. I went to a treatment center and found out that I was an alcoholic. It wasn't that I was a bad person, I was a sick person.

We attended A.A. meetings in the center and when I got out I started going to meetings everywhere. I used to hike to the meetings in the rain, snow, hot and cold weather. I didn't have a car, wife, kids, or a house. I didn't even have a license. People showed me kindness and I learned to trust the white man. I hung out with members who had good sobriety and worked their program. We went to roundups, on Twelfth Step calls, and to anniversaries. I went through breakups, deaths, and financial troubles without having to pick up a drink or a drug. That's because of the A.A. program. If I were to count the blessings I received, I'd be here until tomorrow. I still go to 3 to 5 meetings a week.

I got married this year to a beautiful, inside and out, Micmac woman. I am a stepfather to her son and take that as an honor. Family is important to me. I love my family today and don't turn my back on them anymore. This is all because of A.A. in my life. All the oil fields in Texas can't buy sobriety, it has to be earned through hard work. I will never be able to repay A.A. for everything it has given me. I hope I don't ever forget where I came from and where I got the help.

*Wellalin* (thank you in Micmac).

***“Not for the rest of my life,  
but simply one day at a time.”***

*“Ndaw aptozhi,”* is often how I describe myself to others from my tribe. Those words are often translated in a negative sense as “half-breed,” to designate someone who has one Indian parent and one non-Indian parent. But it really means “I walk two paths,” one white and one Indian.

It also means that I never live fully in one world or the other, and for a long time I used it as an excuse to drink. Most of my Indian and white relatives drank, and I don’t remember much time passing without a funeral of someone who “drank themselves to death.” It wasn’t until I got into A.A. that I thought about those words, which were too often whispered at Indian funerals, “he or she drank themselves to death.”

I was four years old when we went to Oklahoma to the funeral of my uncle, dead at 36 with seven kids left at home. My dad had to help dig the grave on a cold and rainy spring morning. I knew about blood since I had cut myself on a coffee can lid not long before my uncle died, and I somehow connected that event with my uncle’s death, although the finality of death was beyond my young mind. When my dad came through the door of my grandma’s house after digging the grave it seemed like he was covered in blood. My mom told me later that I started screaming because I thought my dad would die as well. But it was just my dad covered in dark red mud from the grave-digging chore.

Drinking and the death of loved ones were imprinted early on in my mind, but it still did not stop me from following the drinking road. It did not matter that by the time I was eighteen we had buried two uncles, several cousins and an uncounted number of friends.

“Drank themselves to death” are words that lurk behind suicide, car accidents, increased diabetes and heart attacks. But somehow along the road I managed to be the first one in my family to finish high school and go on to college. Years went by when I did not drink at all and there was hope I would escape the fate of so many friends and relatives in Indian Country. By the time I started graduate school with a dream of teaching, I was on

a detour from the spiritual path and I lost my way. I knew it was wrong for me to drink, but after nearly eight years of sobriety I stopped on my way home to an empty house and bought a bottle. Sitting in the dark, drinking, I felt as though someone was watching me, and when I turned on the light, there he was: a white rat.

My neighbor in the apartment next door kept a rat as a pet and he somehow got loose and found his way through the wall heater and into the apartment. I knew that it was a sign of alcoholism to drink alone, so the white rat and I got drunk. At least I was not drinking alone, and such is the insanity of an alcoholic.

Over the next eighteen years I went through three marriages, checked into rehab twice, had drunk driving charges, and was in and out of A.A. without making a commitment to follow the Twelve Steps. I must have quit drinking “for the rest of my life” a dozen times, and not once did it work for me. Along the way, I had many experiences but was in no condition to see those events for what they were, signs telling me that the Indian road does not include alcohol.

Finally, I was alone one day in an apartment in the city, estranged from my third wife, when I went out barefoot and staggered around the parking lot. All I recall of that last arrest is the cop asking me, “Do you speak English?” For someone with brown skin those words also mean, “Put your hands behind your back, you are going to jail.” When I got out the next day from a public intoxication charge, my wife checked me into a halfway house and, within a few weeks, I made a commitment to stay sober, one day at a time. Not for the rest of my life, but simply one day at a time.

I was lucky enough to find a fellow Indian with many years sobriety to act as my A.A. sponsor and to act, in an Indian way, as the uncle I lost to alcoholism so many years ago. For Indians, I think, sober relatives are the key to getting and staying sober.

Across the country, Indians are standing up to alcoholism and pledging dry reservations and dry communities and they are having amazing success with long-term sobriety. For me, I want to leave a legacy of sobriety and not have my family whispering those awful words I heard too many times when I was a child. I will not drink myself to death.

I still walk two roads, but the Indian road is marked by Twelve Steps to a spiritual life through the community of Alcoholics Anonymous.

## **Elizabeth**

### ***“No more shame and hate.”***

I am Ojibwa and was born in Red Lake, Ontario, Canada, near a small reservation. I truly know my parents did the best they could with what they had, but because of their lack of coping skills, the booze took over their lives. We ended up living far away from the reservation, in a little town in another province. Eventually more babies came, so I have four sisters and one brother. All of us eventually ended up in foster homes. I went through several homes in that little town.

No one around me ever understood what it was like to be Indian or what it meant to me. They ridiculed me, which made me feel ashamed of who I was. They said: “You are a dirty savage.” “Indians should not drink because they just go crazy when they do.” “You don’t belong here! Let’s just send her back to her kind!” I could go on and on. I remember what it felt like to be spit on by the older kids and have things thrown at me just because of the color of my skin. I thought it was a curse and there was no adult in my life to tell me any different.

But in my heart and in my dreams I heard my mother and the elders singing our songs and telling our stories. I could imagine the reservation and the freedom I had there. I kept it all in my heart and mind. I never shared it with anyone.

As an adult in my thirties, my life had become unmanageable. I followed in my parents’ footsteps. The only difference was that I did not have children. I’ve always wanted to belong somewhere and to someone. I was still keeping my heritage buried deep down in my soul because of the booze. I was going through life with no passion, no joy and no love. I was keeping everyone at a distance, but at the same time I was screaming on the inside for someone or something. I did not want to be ashamed. I wanted to get rid of it. But how? How do I do this?

One more round, bartender, and another and

another.... The bar is now closing, but it's O.K. I already stocked up at home earlier. I can go home and drink all night until I feel nothing. Maybe someone or something will come and save me tonight.

I pass out again, so alone. I come to, still alone. I'm now ashamed of myself. I cannot look in the mirror anymore. I begin to hate myself and what I've become. I hate the world and everyone in it. Yet I still long for a connection with someone, somewhere or something.

I need a drink to get going. There it is. I can feel it going through my veins. Finally I feel numb again. I get dressed, go through my routine of setting myself up for tonight, and go to work. Work is hell because I've managed to alienate everyone there. I don't care. The end of the day is coming and I can drink again. That is what the last eight months of my drinking was like. I never want to forget how alone and ashamed I felt.

Finally, January 4, 1997, I had my last drink. That night was the drunk of all drunks. I blacked out partially and started hitting everyone in sight. I became that crazy Indian they said I would become. I don't recall it, but apparently I was yelling in my native tongue. I managed to call a cab and when I got home I remember looking in the mirror. The horror I saw in my face was unbelievable. I also saw myself as a child crying. Then I saw how ugly I had become. I smashed the mirror. I wanted to die, but I wanted to live. But how could I?

The torment of contemplating suicide almost drove me mad, but I kept drinking and finally passed out. A few hours later I dragged myself to bed, took another drink and fell asleep. I dreamed of the elders dancing around me. It was beautiful. They embraced me. My body felt healed. I felt love and peace like I had never felt before. I heard music that to this day I have not heard anywhere. I felt lifted of the shame and hate. The white buffalo appeared and said: "You must go back and tell your story." I cried, "No! I want to stay here." The elders said: "We will be with you on your path." I woke up and cried like I never had before. I did not want to come back to my hell.

I managed to get up, shower, get dressed, and then something bigger than me poured out all the booze. I cried so much I made myself sick and fell asleep. I slept for ten hours. I had not done that in a

very long time. I woke up, showered, and ate a meal for the first time in months. I don't know how I ever did it; some driving force was doing all that.

I realized I could not do this alone. I called the A.A. hotline and got to a meeting that night. That was January 6, 1997. It was a small Big Book meeting with about ten people. They each read a paragraph out of the Big Book and talked about it. When it came time for me to read, I did, and then I said "My name is Elizabeth and I am an alcoholic and I feel like I'm going to throw up." A man said to me, "Isn't it also liberating to just know?" I felt for the first time in my life that I belonged and everything was going to be O.K.

This was to be my tribe. I've been coming here ever since and have just begun to retrace my roots. I understand what the elders want of me. I hope to continue honoring my people, through my tribe, on the good red road of recovery.

## **Black Squirrel**

*"...I have flown on the back of the eagle  
and have been carried to the sacred fire,  
where I have learned the new way of life."*

I am Anishnabae (Ojibwa), and I was born in California but raised on my Dad's rez in Northern Ontario, Canada. I can remember my first drink; my cousin was up the road hanging out and he was drinking that cheap wine that we got on the rez. He offered me a drink, and I thought, "Wow, I have arrived," because my cousin was about 20 and I was just 12 and here he was offering me a drink. It felt so good going down, that nice warm feeling that I have come to learn was the trickster, the coyote, and it would not be my first meeting with him, in fact, we became instant buddies.

As my drinking continued so did my friendship with the coyote, he had me lying and stealing and blaming others—it was to become my way of life. I continued down this dark path, roaming with the pack. It wasn't until I met back up with my sister that I heard of the red road of recovery. But again the trickster (coyote) would convince me that I was different from those who were walking the red road. I knew I was better than those people in the

meetings. I did not once see any similarities, just all the differences.

I did not have to seek out help, that was for the weak. Although I did keep going to meetings, I didn't change. Powerful is what you learn as you walk down the lonely road of life, only seeing what is in front of you, unaware of what is all around you. I walked on the sidelines of the red road for about 18 months, and once again was pulled in by the trickster (coyote) and started drinking again. I stayed out again for a while, but knew that the taste of the red road that was given me could once again be mine if I would just have faith in the Creator (*nanabush*), Grandfathers of the four directions and also gain strength from the Mother Earth. I offered my tobacco and offered my prayers through sweetgrass and sage and began building a foundation, which would begin to grow in my new life—but again the coyote would show his ugly face and again I would run with the pack.

Once again, all alone, living on a park bench, convinced I could not get what the red road had to offer and that I would always be a part of the trickster pack, I called out to the Creator and spoke to the Grandfathers of the four directions. As swift as the eagle flies, my prayers were answered and I was directed to a recovery center in downtown Toronto. It was there that I learned to believe in myself; it was there that I confronted the trickster and let him know that I am not traveling in that pack anymore. I have embraced the red road, I have flown on the back of the eagle and have been carried to the sacred fire, where I have learned the new way of living. I can walk strong like the bear, swim sharply like the salmon. I have been able to see the error of my ways and have been given the strength to admit my wrongs, and for this I am very grateful. Everyday is a battle with the coyote, but because I have worked the Twelve Steps of A.A. with my sponsor and am willing to share with another member that which gets stuck in the valley of my mind, I can walk and hold my head up with pride. Today I do not live my life through your eyes but through my eyes, which lets me see the whole road and not just what is in front of me.

*Chi meegwetch.*

***“My thirst can always be quenched if I strive for a state of surrender and gratitude.”***

It was late afternoon, on the third day in August, when I heard the whistle signaling that my Vision Quest was about to come to an end. The group of friends that had taken me into the woods were about to come and lead me back to the sweat lodge where the events of the past three days would be shared. The Quest was a time of great remembering and communion with nature. It was a time of opening, where the connection with Great Spirit served to help clarify what many Native American tribes refer to as the great “red road” or path of destiny in one’s life.

I came to Vision Questing and to sobriety later in life. Born and raised in Western New York in a fundamentally Baptist home, I had no knowledge of my Native American ancestry or any opportunity to explore these traditions as a child. My great-grandmother was full-blooded Tuscarora and settled in Pennsylvania as the tribe made its way from the Carolinas to Western New York and Southern Ontario, where she married, raised a family and began exploring my Native connections as a result of another family member who had similar interests. The search for greater knowledge of these relationships continues to this day. As a child, I was fascinated with anything Indian, spending many hours engaged in fantasy surrounding Native ways. The first time that I heard Native American flute music as a young adult I was instantly transported to a distant place and felt an overwhelmingly peaceful connection with ancient times.

Unfortunately, I also felt an instant connection with alcohol the first time I consumed it with friends around the age of twelve. From that moment on an intimacy with alcohol developed that can only be described as obsessive. I used alcohol to celebrate, grieve, bolster confidence, justify decisions, deaden pain, escape reality, enhance relationships and for any other reason that a solid grounding in delusional thinking would allow. Of course, now I understand that this delusion served the psychological purpose of rewriting a reality I could not accept and provided justification to feed



the physical addiction to which my body had grown accustomed. Either way, alcohol was a death warrant waiting to be served. Drinking heavily through college and past my late twenties and early thirties I did not begin trying to recover until the impending birth of my daughter. There were periods of dryness over the next twenty years but no real sobriety. Whatever dignity was left in my life had been lost and any personal honor was buried in guilt fortified by remorse. Then there came a moment of great personal despair where the seeds of change were planted, and I began to believe that a “power greater than myself could restore me to sanity.” For me, Great Spirit offered to fill a void that no other belief system could provide. I accepted the offer and since that initial Vision Quest the well to which I can return for support and guidance has grown deeper. My thirst can always be quenched if I strive to stay in a state of surrender and gratitude.

The Second and Third Steps of the A.A. program have been the cornerstones on which the foundation of my sobriety continues to be built. The presence of the winged one, a Red Hawk totem in my life, signals that times of spiritual change are coming and that those changes are matched with intention. I trust now that Great Spirit will provide all of the signs necessary to continue my journey down the great red road. May Great Spirit guide your journey as well.

*Mitakuye Oyasin* (we are all related),

**Angela**

***“My first drunk was much like my last drunk, full of pitiful, incomprehensible demoralization.”***

I am an alcoholic, I am a woman, and I am Native American. That is the order given to me by my sponsor. When I got sober 19 years ago I wanted to be an Indian woman who was a sober alcoholic. My sponsor, who was given the gift of sobriety in 1955, taught me that I was to place my alcoholism first, the fact I was female second and then maybe I could identify myself as Native American last. Thank God she taught me to put my priorities in order. Because of her love and knowledge about the A.A. program of recovery, I have been able to stay in the rooms of

Alcoholics Anonymous when I knew I was different from all the rest of A.A.s.

I was raised on an Indian reservation and I rarely, if ever, saw anyone who was not Indian. My childhood held wonder and sunshine and lots of family. My first drink was heavenly. I felt happy, warm, invincible. I laughed. That was in the morning, as the day progressed, the feelings left and I became less drunk, I needed to find those feelings again—and so I did. I went into several bars and got kicked out, too young to be served alcohol. But in the last bar there were several men who welcomed me and bought me beer—I was 12 years old. Several hours, or days, later I woke up, hung over and sick, many miles from where I started. I had lost time, my shoes and my soul. My first drunk was much like my last drunk, full of pitiful, incomprehensible demoralization. That first bender was the peak of my drinking career—the downward slide lasted 26 years and it never got any better. I never could recapture that feeling of happy, warm invincibility again.

Several times during those 26 years, professional people—judges, lawyers, probation officers, drug and alcohol counselors—begged, pleaded, threatened me. They would tell me I had a terrible problem with alcohol but I couldn't and wouldn't see it. I thought they should mind their own business and leave me alone. My family was heartbroken. They did not understand why I could not hold down a job, raise a family, pay my bills, obtain a driver's license, stay off the streets or out of jail.

After all, I was reasonably smart, rather pretty and didn't really drink every day. So much for self-delusion. By the time I wanted to sober up, most of my options for a happy life had passed me by, or so I thought. I had bounced along a bottom for so many years the idea that my life could change if I surrendered to a simple program that promised me a relationship with a Higher Power seemed weak and pathetic.

I met my sponsor after I had been sober for one year. She never mentioned the fact I was Indian, didn't even care if I was a homeless, jobless, hopeless drunk. She had me read and write and pray. She made me sponsor other women; she made me talk about myself, the good and the bad. She wanted me to go to as many meetings as I could, sharing as honestly as I could what a miracle had occurred

in my life due to Alcoholics Anonymous. She taught me to be grateful by showing other women what the Steps could do in their lives—make them better mothers, wives and daughters. She taught me to dress up in my best clothes and put a smile on my face so that I could give hope to other women who needed cheering up. She told me I could be sad or mad or in the dumps, as long as I knew there was a God to heal and help me.

She loved me into a life beyond my wildest dreams. I have learned how to live through the heartbreak of my brother's alcoholic death and the passing of my mother and father. I have had the glorious task of raising six foster boys in my home. I have gone to college and earned degrees that have enabled me to return to my reservation and become an asset rather than a liability.

My sponsor passed away a few years ago with 46 years of sobriety, but her legacy to me and the countless other men and women she sponsored lives on. I am so thankful for her kindness and patience. Eventually she acknowledged I was Native American, but in a very offhand way. By that time it didn't matter to her or to me, what mattered was that I was just another fellow alcoholic who would go to any lengths to stay sober. The beauty of Alcoholics Anonymous is that it works for everybody, no matter what your race, your sexual orientation, the size of your pocketbook, whether you've been in jail or live in a mansion. God's grace is available to all of us.

**Douglas**

***“I am living one day at a time  
and I keep coming back.”***

My life began on the Round Valley rez where my father helped deliver me. At the age of seven I was introduced to alcohol by my dad and his friends. They liked to give my brothers and me beer to watch us stagger around. My mother and I and my eight brothers and sisters would sit outside the drinking place on Friday nights waiting for my dad to come out, but mostly he would sneak out the back and we wouldn't see him until Sunday night when his pay check was gone.

I attended the Sherman Indian School in

Riverside until the government brought Native Americans from Arizona and New Mexico, then I had to go back home to finish my high school education. At this time I was drinking only on weekends. We had to have white people (runners) buy our booze because at that time Indians were not allowed to buy liquor.

I got a football scholarship and attended a local college until I got 86'd out of town twice for being drunk on the Indian rez. I joined the US Marine Corps and my drinking escalated. Now I was able to buy booze every day since I was a serviceman. The MPs would pick me up in town drunk and take me back to the base so I could stand my post. I was sent to Korea and watched my whole platoon die. I turned away from my God and continued drinking as much as I could find. I had given up on life and wanted to die. My drinking career lasted 44 years.

The strong hand of the law forced me into A.A. I had a choice—go to prison for five years or take a five-year probation and find a program to help me. I hated being without my freedom. The police could check on me anytime they felt like it, even to smell my breath. If there was a hint of booze—then off to prison for years. I could not be in the company of drinking people and my drivers license was suspended. So, being hemmed in like that what could I do?

I came to A.A. with more reservations in my head than most Indians visit in a lifetime. I heard from white people that I wasn't different. That we were all the same. That really got my attention. Of course I was different. White people could buy booze and I was not allowed in bars. On my reservation the only Indians who worked did so for white people. White people were better off financially and in control. How my thinking changed was a big part of my probation.

When a white guy came up to me and said, "You need a sponsor, my Indian friend, and I am it," I said O.K. He took me to a meeting three times a day for a year and taught me all about the program of Alcoholics Anonymous. We spent many hours in his living room going over the first 164 pages of the Big Book. The first thing I had to do was surrender. The courts had helped with that. The sharing I heard at meetings and reading the Big Book showed me I wasn't different. I was sick, and the

reality was I got a chance to hear this because I surrendered and came to and my Higher Power worked through the 252 meetings I attended in my first 90 days.

Finally I realized I didn't just want to go to meetings to get my court card signed, I wanted what they had. They were called winners. These A.A.s were actually happy without drinking. I used to be happy only when I was drinking and carrying on. What I learned is that drinking is only a symptom of my disease. The Steps are what saved me from myself. The rooms triggered the insight into myself.

A.A. has shown me a new life. I celebrated 33 years of continuous sobriety this year. I carry the message to our Indian people on their reservations, sponsor people and have spent many years in general service. I enjoy going to meetings even more today, but I must say if it was not for my Higher Power, which I turned my will and my life over to, I would not have the life of gratitude that I have today. I am living one day at a time and I keep coming back.

## **Caron**

***“I consider myself truly blessed...to bring the message of recovery to many Native Americans.”***

I'm an “Army brat,” and the youngest of eight children, born in Arizona but raised in Oklahoma. My father was a full-blooded Comanche and my mother was Otoe and French. They met at Haskell Institute in Kansas where they married and had us “Haskell rascals.” They were both full-blown alcoholics when I was born.

I started sipping my father's beer, liquor and wine when I was four years old. Liquor was always available in the house. I lived in a violent, hostile, alcoholic environment, which became normal to my siblings and me. We were traumatized at an early age from parents who were traumatized themselves. My father suffered from PTSD [Post-traumatic Stress Disorder] from the war and my mother suffered historical trauma from growing up in boarding schools since first grade. I was full of emotional pain.

I started drinking liquor when I was six years old. I couldn't read, write or spell so I don't know what

kind of alcohol I was drinking. I filled the bottles back up with water so nobody suspected anything. I was a full blown alcoholic at the age of twelve. I didn't have much of a childhood. I was too embarrassed to bring anyone home. After we moved back to the states I started dancing in regalia, trying to find my "Indian identity." I was drinking daily. I had no clue who I was, where I was heading or what I was doing. School came easy for me as I made good grades and passed my classes. I discovered "snagging and 49s" when I started going to powwows. I was going to "over 21" bars when I was sixteen. My drinking progressed at an alarming rate!

I got my first DUI when I was eighteen. I married at twenty-one to escape the hell at home. My husband was an emcee at powwows and I got sick of dances. I met my second husband in the Crazy Horse Bar. My second marriage was exactly like my parents' marriage: drunk and toxic. My second DUI occurred when I was twenty-nine. My third DUI happened when I was thirty-four, when my mother died. She held my family together, so naturally the family split up after her death. My dad died ten months later. I became a binge drinker and "beer wolf." I developed a pattern of noncommitted relationships. I had my first real date at thirty-six. We became drinking buddies and I became both my mother and father at the same time. I was hurting so bad that I hurt everyone around me. He finally dumped me for "my drinking."

When I was thirty-eight, I hit my emotional bottom. I woke up at the county hospital with a blood alcohol level of 0.38! My first spiritual experience was my last foxhole prayer. I was praying on my knees on the jail cot. I said, "Oh God, please get me out of jail. I promise to go to treatment, A.A. and counseling." My attorney appeared and said he would bond me out of jail if I would submit to treatment, A.A. and counseling.

I attended my first A.A. meeting three days after I got out of jail. I realized when I was introducing myself that I was an alcoholic. Right then I felt a magnetic-type charge going through my body. When they asked me to share, I started crying. I was ashamed. At treatment, I started handling the core of my emotions that led me to fight with boyfriends and husbands. My childhood was so horrific that I blocked everything out and chose not to handle it. I was emotionally paralyzed with vis-

ible scars of emotional, physical and sexual abuse. I have relived my parents' lives through my failed marriages and relationships.

I learned in treatment that I would either drink until I died, drink until I became insane, or drink until I recovered. I know now that the pain will go away when I deal with it. At first, I could not relate to Alcoholics Anonymous because I never saw any Indians at any meetings. I used to see one every now and then. Now when I go to A.A. the room is filled with at least five to ten Indians. I am the director of the only Native American Halfway House in Oklahoma.

I was a trusted servant for six years at my first home group. I have started my two-year G.S.R. commitment for district work and am district chair for the Grapevine. Working the Twelve Steps keeps me sober. I consider myself truly blessed to have been the vessel to bring the message of recovery to many Native Americans. I hope you enjoy the Indigenous Journey as I have.

## **Esther**

### ***Friends everywhere.***

I was born in a small village in the Ungalik region of Alaska, about 450 miles northwest of Anchorage. I am an Athabaskan woman who is a successful executive today. But a few years ago, I was unable to cope with everyday living.

In my early years I was raised by my grandmother, who instilled in me a lot of the Athabaskan tradition. I knew that I was different. When I was growing up and going to school in Anchorage, I was hit with racial remarks from other kids. There were not many Alaska Native activities so I had to survive in the best way I knew how. I decided that the easiest way would be to identify myself with white society. This was foolish because I have brown skin, black hair and features that are not Caucasian. I was only fooling myself. Deep down inside I knew this, but I went for the image.

In my teens, I found out that alcohol made me feel better about myself. It made me more confident and better able to communicate with others.

I worked in Anchorage with social and educational programs for Alaskans and American Natives. I felt “at home” among the mostly Native staff. I took a great deal of pride in helping other Native people obtain food, shelter and jobs. Seeing others worse off than myself took the focus off my drinking, which was getting worse. When my alcoholism was becoming more public I feared that it would threaten my job. So fear was important in my ending up on A.A.’s doorstep.

One day, I sat in my living room knowing that I couldn’t live with alcohol or without it. I had been arrested for driving while intoxicated but I honestly believed that I needed to give up driving rather than drinking. My caring, patient husband finally said, “Go to A.A. or get out.”

After praying to a God that I thought long ago gave up on me, I was given the courage to pick up the phone. I called Alcoholics Anonymous and was introduced to a white woman who had about two years’ sobriety. This lady looked great. I could hardly believe she ever had a drinking problem. Her story was a lot like mine — she was always in trouble at home, at work or with the law.

My first A.A. meeting seemed so strange. People were so happy and looked so well, which was totally opposite of where I was. It helped to be told that I was loved, to keep coming back, and to get telephone numbers.

In my first year I got a sponsor and began working the Twelve Steps. After two years of sobriety, I visited my mother, who lives in a northwest coastal state. I realized the terror I must have caused in her life. I always telephoned her from Alaska when I was drunk, in the wee hours of the morning. Of course, I couldn’t remember what I said, but I knew it was usually a crying jag. One morning at breakfast I told my mother I was in A.A. Since she is a Native woman who stayed close to her cultural ways, I wasn’t sure of her reaction. Amazingly, she was glad. She knew about A.A. because her best friends were in the program and had told her about it. She said now she didn’t have to worry about me when I traveled because I would have friends wherever I went.

I have seen many Alaska Natives come into Alcoholics Anonymous either through treatment centers or on their own. Alaska Natives are taking



more leadership roles in the A.A. program, and are staying sober using A.A. principles.

I don't hear the statement "I can't stay sober in A.A. because it's a white man's program" so often anymore because A.A. works for any color, nationality, or gender.

I try to talk to Native newcomers and introduce them to others. I am called on from time to time to contact a Native needing help. I also sponsor Native women because cultural issues come up that can better be understood by talking with another sober Native.



## **How do I find A.A.?**

Almost anywhere in the United States or Canada, you will find an A.A. telephone number in the local phone book. If you decide to call, you will be put in touch with another alcoholic. And your call will be private — you don't even have to give your name. Just ask where the A.A. meetings are.

Wherever an A.A. group meets, it has one purpose: to help alcoholics stay sober. A.A. groups meet in all kinds of places. Some meetings are held in schools or churches; some A.A. groups meet in hospitals or even office buildings. But it's important to keep in mind that an A.A. group is not connected with the church, school or government office where it happens to meet.

Some of us attended our first A.A. meetings in a hospital, jail or treatment center. Before we left, we found out how to contact A.A. in the place where we would be living. Some of us found our way to A.A. through school or job counseling programs. Many hear about us through their doctors or friends.

If there is no A.A. group nearby, help is still available. G.S.O.'s A.A. Web-site is [www.aa.org](http://www.aa.org). You may also write to Box 459, Grand Central Station, New York, NY 10163. That is the mailing address of the A.A. General Service Office. The A.A. members who work there will share their experience with you. And, they will be glad to offer suggestions for getting an A.A. group started.

THE TWELVE STEPS  
OF ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.

2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.

3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God *as we understood Him*.

4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.

5. Admitted to God, to ourselves and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.

6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.

7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.

8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.

9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.

10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.

11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God, *as we understood Him*, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.

12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

## THE TWELVE TRADITIONS OF ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS

1. Our common welfare should come first; personal recovery depends upon A.A. unity.

2. For our group purpose there is but one ultimate authority—a loving God as He may express Himself in our group conscience. Our leaders are but trusted servants; they do not govern.

3. The only requirement for A.A. membership is a desire to stop drinking.

4. Each group should be autonomous except in matters affecting other groups or A.A. as a whole.

5. Each group has but one primary purpose—to carry its message to the alcoholic who still suffers.

6. An A.A. group ought never endorse, finance, or lend the A.A. name to any related facility or outside enterprise, lest problems of money, property, and prestige divert us from our primary purpose.

7. Every A.A. group ought to be fully self-supporting, declining outside contributions.

8. Alcoholics Anonymous should remain forever non-professional, but our service centers may employ special workers.

9. A.A., as such, ought never be organized; but we may create service boards or committees directly responsible to those they serve.

10. Alcoholics Anonymous has no opinion on outside issues; hence the A.A. name ought never be drawn into public controversy.

11. Our public relations policy is based on attraction rather than promotion; we need always maintain personal anonymity at the level of press, radio, and films.

12. Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our traditions, ever reminding us to place principles before personalities.



## **A Declaration of Unity**

This we owe to A.A.'s future:  
To place our common welfare first;  
To keep our fellowship united.  
For on A.A. unity depend our lives,  
And the lives of those to come.

## **I am responsible...**

When anyone, anywhere,  
reaches out for help, I want  
the hand of A.A. always to be there.  
And for that: I am responsible.