

About AA

A.A. and Professionals

Many thousands of alcoholics owe their lives to a nonalcoholic professional — a medical doctor, psychiatrist, counselor, law enforcement official, member of the clergy — who was knowledgeable enough about alcoholism to recognize the illness and take the actions that would cut through the alcoholic's denial and start him or her on the road to recovery. Often, nonalcoholics are able to help drunks long before they might have reached Alcoholics Anonymous. For example, in the 2001 A.A. Membership Survey, 27% of those surveyed identified courts, counseling agencies, and health care providers as a factor "most responsible for members coming to A.A."

A.A. members cooperate with the professional community as individuals and through committees on Cooperation With the Professional Community (C.P.C.). Sober alcoholics make themselves available to take people to meetings, serve as temporary or long-term sponsors, speak at informational events, and provide a variety of other services to carry the message.

Professionals who get involved with the A.A. Fellowship sometimes find not only that their work has been made easier, but also that their lives have been enhanced by A.A. principles. In this issue of *About A.A.*, four professionals who have become familiar with A.A. by working with alcoholics share their experience.

"The same people turned up in my courtroom again and again."

"When I went on the bench, I knew nothing about alcoholism except that intoxication is not a legal defense," says Linda Chezem, a past Class A (nonalcoholic) trustee of A.A.'s General Service Board. A trial judge for twelve years, she is currently a professor at Perdue University and is working on a project at the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA).

Linda's introduction to alcoholism came with one of her first cases, a husband and wife who were arrested on New Year's Eve for public intoxication and disorderly conduct. She fined them a dollar plus court costs, sent them on their way — and 30 days later they were back. As time went on, Linda says, "I saw that the same people turned up in my courtroom again and again, in different dockets — DWI, divorce, and then later with their kids in juvenile court." She realized that it wasn't because they wanted to, nor was it because of poverty or social conditions. So she began asking about alcoholism, but got help from mental health or other agencies. She applied for and received a grant to start an alcoholism program, and someone suggested Alcoholics Anonymous.

Linda knew very little about the Fellowship, but began encouraging people to go — "it doesn't cost anything." The turning point came when she received a letter of amends from someone she had sentenced, who had found A.A. in prison. She was struck by the fact that this man had nothing to gain by writing the letter; he was doing it to stay sober. "That," she says, "is the miracle." She became more seriously interested in A.A., attended open meetings, made some A.A. friends and became familiar with the Twelve Steps. She also got involved with addiction services on the state level; when she joined the board of a treatment hospital that supported A.A. principles, she met some recovering alcoholics whom she calls her "tutors."

Soon afterward, some A.A.s asked to put her name forward as a prospective nonalcoholic A.A. trustee, and she was introduced to the A.A. service structure. "I was a slow learner," Linda says. "I didn't really understand A.A.; I just knew it worked." Since rotating off the board (where she served from 1997 to

2003) Linda has stayed in touch with A.A. friends and continues to inform others about Alcoholics Anonymous.

Judges particularly need to hear about A.A., says Linda, "because they don't see the success cases. They see the failures, the repeat offenders." As part of her work in judicial education, she encourages judges to work with A.A., and believes that most professionals want to cooperate with A.A. but need to know more about what to do, and what is available. Linda is a firm believer in the value of working through C.P.C. committees. "No one person can do it alone, and committees are important to make sure that A.A. is always there for the person who needs it."

"Touching someone at the right moment."

Dr. Kenneth Hoffman, a psychiatrist in Rockville, Maryland, has known about A.A. since he was introduced to the Fellowship as a resident. In his private practice, as a psychiatrist at a drug and alcohol clinic, and as an alcohol and drug consultant for his county advisory board on alcoholism, he has developed an appreciation for what the Fellowship can do. He has been particularly impressed with the genuineness of A.A.'s desire to help and with its community of support.

Ken's practice is in a geographic area where local A.A. members do very effective C.P.C. work and where other professionals and medical schools have programs that cooperate with the Fellowship. Most health care workers are aware of A.A., and doctors are usually required to go to at least one A.A. meeting during their residency. There are about 3,000 weekly meetings in the area, and Ken encourages patients with a drinking problem to attend and provides them with literature and a meeting list. He has also developed contacts with local A.A.s who take his patients to meetings and serve as temporary or long-term contacts.

"For those who get involved," he says, "the success rate is good. Touching someone at the right moment can bring them back to what they need to be doing." Ken notes that people who get sober and stay sober are generally those who accept the help of a sponsor, become active in the program, and make A.A. a part of their lives. Ken also has found that specialized meetings

can be helpful for patients who resist A.A. involvement because they think they are special. Sending pilots to Birds of a Feather meetings, and medical workers to their own meetings, has helped them break through the resistance and then make the transition to regular A.A. groups.

Ken says that some of his colleagues who work with sick alcoholics “don’t want to ask the questions because they don’t know what to do. They have to address a problem that will make the patient angry.” He shares his own knowledge, trying especially to convey the nature of spirituality in A.A., and he brings speakers from A.A. to talk to other providers as well as to his patients.

“The single most important spiritual experience of my life.”

The Very Rev. Ward Ewing is the dean of General Theological Seminary in New York City. An Episcopal parish priest for 30 years in Louisville, Kentucky, and Buffalo, New York, he first became aware in the mid-1970s that there were suffering alcoholics in his congregation. Until then, he admits, “I had been nothing but an enabler.” Once he recognized the problem, he took action. Some members of his congregation were A.A. members, and he began to attend open meetings, got to know people, made contact with the central office, and started calling on members of the Fellowship for help with alcoholics in the congregation. He also participated in a three-day program on alcoholism for the clergy sponsored by the University of Louisville and took a course on alcoholism at the university. When he moved to a parish in Buffalo, he continued to attend open meetings, participated in conferences, and helped start two twelve-step groups.

He believes it is very important to set a tone in the congregation that alcoholism is nothing to be ashamed of, and that there is a solution. He has consistently made information on alcoholism a part of adult education in his parishes — “there are always people standing at the door,” he says, “not yet ready to come in.” He is very open about his involvement with Alcoholics Anonymous and makes himself available to work with students who need help.

Ward’s profound personal involvement with the Fellowship began around 1980, when a sober alcoholic member of his congregation came to him and said, “I’m out of touch with my higher power, and if I stay out of touch I could drink, and I could die.” Ward says that “I didn’t have enough information to be a good counselor to him, so I sought out some other A.A. members in the congregation.” He and five A.A. members met regularly for several years to talk about religious issues and their relationship to God. “A.A.’s Twelve Steps came alive and became part of my life. This was the single most important spiritual experience of my life,” he says.

A.A. and its principles have become an integral part of Ward’s life. He still carries a ten-year token that a member of one of his parishes gave him. And if you walk into his office when the computer is on, you can’t help but notice the screen savers: “Easy Does It,” “One Day at a Time,” and “Let Go and Let God.”

“A.A. is the most important thing a person can do to stay sober.”

Lynn Phillips is the director of the lawyer assistance program of the Washington, D.C. Bar, which started as an alcohol and substance abuse program and now deals with a broad range of problems. The program got involved with A.A. because the people who started it were in Alcoholics Anonymous. Nationally, she says,

many lawyer assistance programs’ first volunteers were members of International Lawyers in Alcoholics Anonymous.

Lynn first heard of A.A. in graduate school at a talk about the Fellowship. Her first opportunity came in the early 1970s when she was working at a drug abuse program and had very few resources available. “I used to hope my clients would say they had a drinking problem,” she says, “because then I could send them to A.A. for help.” She has learned over the years that there is an important difference between having “a desire to stop drinking” (according to A.A.’s Traditions, the only requirement for A.A. membership) and saying “I am an alcoholic.” Asking someone to admit to being an alcoholic can set up a barrier, but recognizing a desire to stop drinking is much easier and is often the first step into recovery.

“The rate of alcoholism is high in the legal profession,” according to Lynn. Clients come to her either on their own or by referral from the Bar, and at the intake stage she tries to decide whether the person needs treatment or can go directly into A.A. Some people have more than one problem and need to deal with them concurrently, and Lynn is knowledgeable about other programs for drugs, eating disorders, and so on. When she sends alcoholics into a treatment program, she also recommends A.A. as “the best relapse prevention program in the world,” pointing out that it is both free and available 24 hours a day. “A.A. is *the* most important thing a person can do to stay sober,” she states. “If I had to choose between a client’s seeing me or going to meetings, I would always choose A.A. I could get run over by a truck, but A.A. never will.”

Lynn recommends that clients attend at least six meetings, recognizing that they may not like their first meeting and that it can take time to get comfortable in Alcoholics Anonymous. Lynn has made contact with local A.A.s who make themselves available to take people to meetings, serve as temporary sponsors, or provide information and speakers. When people are put off by “all the God talk” or by other difficulties with the Steps, she suggests using the A.A. group as a higher power, and advises them to take what works and forget the rest. She is grateful for the availability of specialized groups as a bridge into A.A. — for women, for men, and for professional people who hesitate at first to walk into regular groups because they are afraid of meeting their own clients.

Lynn uses A.A. principles, both personally and professionally, and jokes that when there are problems at work, she often startles colleagues by suggesting that they should put “principles before personalities.”

A.A. to Celebrate 70 Years in 2005

A.A.’s International Convention will be held in Toronto, Ontario, June 30 to July 3, 2005, marking 70 years of sobriety around the world.

Beginning with the first, held in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1950, A.A.’s International Conventions have been milestones in the growth of the Fellowship. Held every five years to celebrate the anniversary of A.A.’s founding, International Conventions have grown to be some of the largest events of their kind in the world. They are a joyous time: to celebrate sobriety, to greet friends old and new, to renew the miracle and wonder of the Fellowship. They also offer an opportunity to inform professionals that A.A. is available as a community resource, both locally and internationally.

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