

The A.A. Message Knows No Borders at World Service Meeting

Oviedo, the capital of the Asturias region of Spain, was a particularly appropriate setting for the 17th World Service Meeting (WSM). In the Middle Ages, Asturias had served as the boundary or border between the Moorish and Christian portions of the Iberian Peninsula. It was now hosting the biennial gathering of representatives of Alcoholics Anonymous under the theme “The A.A. Message — A Message Without Borders.” The beauty and tranquility of the centuries-old hotel, set against the rugged mountains in Northern Spain in a city that was named the cleanest city in Europe for four years in a row afforded the delegates a wonderful venue to share their experience, strength and hope on a global level.

Paul McC., second-term delegate from Ireland, gave the Keynote Address and was eloquent in describing how the Fellowship in his country had been able to transcend what might, at times, have seemed like insurmountable challenges. “Where I come from, we are well-used to the word *borders*. Ireland has a border dividing north from south. We have two governments, two legal systems, two health-care systems.... My hometown of Belfast has borders dividing people of different religions and politics — but what we do have in Ireland is one single A.A. and a message without borders.”

Later in the week Paul shared the exciting news that the General Service Board of Ireland, due to increased contributions from the groups in their country, had been able to send an additional 50,000 euros (approximately \$50,000) to support the WSM’s International Literature Fund, which is managed by A.A. World Services, Inc., and is used to help offset a portion of the cost of the literature assistance that A.A.W.S. provides to the worldwide Fellowship. This assistance takes the form of providing translations and furnishing complimentary literature to those countries who are not yet able to support their own publishing or literature distribution centers.

Paul was one of the 41 delegates representing 34 countries or zones who participated in this gathering of representatives of A.A. national or zonal structures from around the world. This year delegates from Cuba, Denmark and Peru attended for the first time. The 17th WSM, October 6-10, was hosted by the

General Service Board of Spain and coordinated by the General Service Office in New York. Bill A., who currently serves on the International desk, remarked that he was grateful to have been blessed with outstanding support from fellow G.S.O. staff members Adrienne B., Valerie O’N. and Doug R., and logistical support from Mardia Vidal-Harrell and Frank Sequi, (nonalcoholic) staff assistants at the office, who worked with meeting consultant John Kirwin on assuring that the delegates had all that they needed to complete their important work. The four committees of the WSM are: Agenda; Literature and Publishing; Policy, Admission and Finance; and Working With Others. Simultaneous translation in English and Spanish was available for all general sessions and where required in workshop and committee meetings. Committee and workshop reports were produced in both English and Spanish using the services of the Spanish editors at G.S.O. in New York and e-mail technology.

Greg M., G.S.O.’s general manager, and Gabriel Rodriguez Martinez-Sierra (nonalcoholic), chair of Spain’s General Service Board, acted as co-chairs of the meeting. Remarking on the theme of this year’s meeting in his opening address Gabriel told the delegates, “It could not be more opportune in terms of dealing with the kinds of problems that arise in this fast-changing world. The essence of the A.A. message, the idea of one alcoholic sharing with another, must never change. I am convinced that this conference will constitute a practical way to develop even more effective ways to meet the needs of alcoholics in countries everywhere.”

The U.S./Canada structure was represented by trustees-at-large for the U.S. and Canada: Charlie B. of New Orleans, Louisiana and Alex P. of Abbotsford, British Columbia. Each country or zone may send two delegates to the meeting. There are first term and second term delegates, making it possible for both the country/zone and the WSM to retain some continuity.

In addition to the Committee Reports, the productive five-day WSM was filled with presentations and workshops in which delegates from the participating countries discussed literature distribution, communication and service structures. They also shared problems and solutions, renewed old friendships and found new ones. At a workshop on Communication Between Countries, it was noted that “sponsorship has been important to both the sponsoring countries and those that are sponsored.... The goal of intercountry sponsorship is

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self-support, independence and unity.” It was further observed that “sponsorship is usually based on request — one country asking another for help. Experience indicates that it is helpful to find out exactly what the requesting country needs in the way of sponsorship. In some countries, sponsorship began with individuals carrying the message and, after a while as A.A. grew, service entities in those countries assumed responsibility.”

Some of the challenges noted in the workshop: transcending differences in the language, culture and stage of development of a particular A.A. service structure. Several delegates indicated they were in the dark about “who’s sponsoring whom.” One A.A. observed that this is a real problem “since we could be duplicating our efforts in one country while neglecting to help another in need of sponsorship.” All present agreed that the opportunity to sponsor and be part of the growth of A.A. “is a privilege and a priceless gift,” in the words of one delegate.

Delegates were also able to take advantage of the intimacy of the Hotel de la Reconquista and found time each night after the official sessions were over to take part in the age-old and seemingly international A.A. custom of the “meeting after the meeting.” Each of the delegates was grateful to have the opportunity to take part in what has become an important step in continuing the growth of A.A. internationally and also seems to solidify the commitment and service in those countries who are able to attend.

Ernesto P., first-time delegate from Cuba, expressed deep gratitude for the opportunity to represent his country at this international meeting and was making contacts and gathering information that would be invaluable in improving the manner in which the Fellowship in Cuba is able to carry the message. Ernesto was also gracious enough to act as ad-hoc translator for many of the delegates after the official sessions were completed. He was able to act as a bridge between the unilingual

Spanish and English delegates in the informal gatherings over coffee and ice cream.

The first WSM was held in New York in 1969. In a Statement of Purpose, A.A. co-founder Bill W. explained that the primary purpose of the WSM was “to assure that the A.A. message of recovery is carried to the alcoholic who still suffers, wherever in the world he may be and whatever the language he speaks. The World Service Meeting seeks ways and means of accomplishing this goal by serving as a forum for sharing the experience, strength and hope of delegates who come together every two years from all parts of the world. It can also represent an expression of the group conscience worldwide.”

Doug R., secretary of the Working With Others Committee, recalls that he was profoundly touched during one of the Sharing Sessions when Hiroyuki N., the delegate from Japan, stood at the microphone and, with deep emotion said “A.A. is the shining star of hope.” It was a statement that resonated throughout the five-day meeting.

The Eighteenth WSM will be in New York City, October 24-28, 2004, under the theme: “One Message—Many Languages—One Fellowship.”

A.A. Is Alive and Well in the Mideast

Bahrain is a small Middle Eastern country roughly three-and-a-half times the size of Washington, D.C., and sits in the Persian Gulf, just east of Saudi Arabia. Recently the General Service Office received a joyous e-mail from the A.A. central office in Bahrain. Titled “A.A. Primary Purpose in Full Throttle in Arabian Gulf,” the message reported that “October 10 witnessed a miracle for us; we experienced A.A.’s altruistic movement ripple its way through the atmosphere, deep into our souls. The second Gulf Conference started at 4:30 p.m. with a recovery meeting in Bahrain’s American Mission Hospital and ended past midnight with everyone boogying in a member’s home.

“There was mingling, sharing and bonding. There was fellowship from Oman, Riyadh, Kuwait, Daharan, Dammam and even Bournemouth. Attendance was quite overwhelming. To be honest, the organizing committee had expected 35-45 people, but almost double that number came. Some were in A.A., while others were from the medical body. Overall the message of recovery was carried effectively.”

The e-mail ended on a note of gratitude: “No committee, no human power, absolutely nothing but God can take credit for such success. God bless your trudge along the Road of Happy Destiny.”

G.S.O. Publications Department Welcomes Its New Director

Chris C. joined the General Service Office on October 28, 2002 as publications director — a job he started “preparing for” (so to speak) with his first service job 14 years ago as group literature chairperson (no one else wanted the job). Chris brings a strong professional background to the job, with a master of arts in journalism and 18 years of experience in all facets of the publishing industry at companies in New York and Iowa. For the past five years, he has served as vice president and editor in chief of general books at Reader’s Digest, managing product development, finances, and creative direction for the company’s varied list.

Sober since May 21, 1989 and a member of the Ossining Scarborough Group, Chris says that when he heard about the opening at G.S.O., he had to find out about it, for he saw it as an opportunity to combine his professional and spiritual lives into one. The job of publications director, he believes, is to help make A.A. publications as relevant and appealing as possible, in order to attract more people to the essential spiritual message of Alcoholics Anonymous. An admirer of the cover design of the Big Book’s fourth edition, he is interested in working with the design of all G.S.O.’s material.

Chris is thoroughly knowledgeable about the Twelve Traditions and the principles of A.A. service, but because his A.A. service was mainly at the group level — chairing meetings, starting groups, and filling various group offices, including a term as general service representative — he is now learning much more about how the service structure works beyond the group level. He says that the process of seeking approval from the Fellowship through the General Service Conference is in many ways similar to the way he worked at the Reader’s Digest, where he often needed to obtain approval, even internationally, in order to implement projects.”

Chris’s drinking followed a pattern that will be familiar to many. He grew up in an Irish Catholic home, where there was lots of alcohol, and always wanted to drink. At age 12, he stole beer from his father, and soon progressed to blackout drinking and trouble with family, school, and the police, even as a teenager. At 20, he had what he describes as a “limited spiritual experience,” falling asleep on the beach and being so badly burned that he lay in bed for three days, reevaluating his life. He didn’t drink alcohol for the next eight years, and during that time earned a bachelors degree in communications from Syracuse University, married, began his publishing career, and started graduate school at the New York University

School of Journalism. Eventually, though, he “went back to drinking full force, and lost everything.” He had hit a spiritual bottom.

The N.Y.U. newspaper ran a public information ad about A.A. in every issue, and Chris kept seeing it. He knew he ought to go, and after putting it off for some time, he reluctantly put one foot in front of the other and got to a meeting at the student center. “It was the perfect meeting for me. They were a liberal and very open group of people, and no one told me I had to do anything. The speaker had been in an Irish street gang, I was home.” For the first time, he asked for help. He got a sponsor and a Big Book, and “my life turned around.”

Sober life has not been easy, though. He has experienced a lot of challenges, including the deaths of his father and brother, and a great deal of distress. “Through all this, the love of the Fellowship, the Steps, my higher power, and asking for help have enabled me to stay sober, even when I was half crazy.”

Today, Chris lives with his wife Gail, an active member of Al-Anon, in Ossining, New York, a short commute to the office. His eight-year-old daughter Maggie, who is hearing impaired, is doing very well and enjoys dancing and theater, and he describes his five-year-old son Cooper, named after an A.A. friend, as a “chip off the old block.” Chris serves as a volunteer firefighter in Ossining, and is certified as Firefighter II. He also enjoys skiing and road running, and participates in races. “But mostly,” he says, “I like playing with my kids.”

Singleness of Purpose

George E. Vaillant, M. D.
Class A (nonalcoholic) trustee
A.A. General Service Board

“Singleness of purpose” is essential to the effective treatment of alcoholism. The reason for such exaggerated focus is to overcome denial. The denial associated with alcoholism is cunning, baffling, and powerful and affects the patient, helper, and the community. Unless alcoholism is kept relentlessly in the foreground, other issues will usurp everybody’s attention.

Mental health workers, however, have great difficulty with A.A.’s Fifth Tradition: “Each group has but one primary purpose—to carry its message to the alcoholic who still suffers.” Since mental health workers often admire the success and geographic availability of Alcoholics Anonymous, they understandably wish to broaden its membership to include other substance abusers. They also note that pure alcohol abuse is becoming less frequent, and polydrug abuse more common. In addition, mental health workers sometimes view singleness of

purpose as outmoded and exclusionary. They worry that the Tradition is a holdover from the early days of A.A. and that the young, the poor and the minority with a criminal record will be barred. Besides, when there is no professional drug treatment center or Narcotics Anonymous (NA) group easily available, mental health workers find it hard to understand why A.A., with its tradition of Twelfth Step work, won't step in and fill the breach.

As both a mental health worker and a researcher, it seems to me that there are two arguments that trump these concerns. First, the Third Tradition of A.A., "The only requirement for A.A. membership is a desire to stop drinking," renders A.A. nonexclusionary. Each year A.A. welcomes many thousands of minorities, many thousands of poor, many thousands of alcoholics with coexistent drug problems and tens of thousands of convicts into its membership. Nobody with a desire to stop drinking is excluded.

The second argument, that "Singleness of Purpose" is necessary to overcome denial, is even more compelling. Given a choice, nobody wants to talk about alcoholism. In contrast, drug addiction commands newspaper headlines, research funding and the attention of clinical audiences. After two years of work at the Lexington, Kentucky Federal Narcotics Treatment Center, I, a mere assistant professor, was invited around the world to lecture on heroin addiction. In the late 1990s, as a full professor and after 25 years of research on alcoholism and its enormous morbidity, I was finally asked to give a medical grand rounds on alcohol in my home city. My assigned topic, "Why alcohol is good for your health." In short, the greatest single obstacle to the proper treatment of alcoholism is denial.

I first began my psychiatric career at a deeply dedicated community health center. The community had voted alcohol abuse as their biggest problem. After its first ten years of operation the center was still confining itself to addressing the community's most pressing second, third, and fourth problems. No resources at all were devoted to alcohol treatment.

I moved to another community mental health center that had listened to its citizens and had opened an alcohol treatment center. In being asked to fill the position of co-director of the clinic I was the last staff psychiatrist hired by the mental health center. Significantly, I had had no experience with alcoholism, but no one else wanted the job.

Put differently, the experimentally documented success of A.A. in the treatment of alcoholism is in part because A.A. groups are the only place in the world where the focus is on alcoholism and nothing but alcoholism. There is simply no other way to overcome the denial.

Reprinted from About A.A., Fall/Winter 2002.

G.S.O. Welcomes New Staff Member

Gayle S. R. was well into her second year as Central New York delegate when she learned that she had been selected to fill the staff position left vacant by Susan U., who retired January 10. Until rotation — something that happens every two years — occurs in mid-2003, Gayle will handle the staff assignment of Cooperation With the Professional Community.

Says Gayle, who started work on Oct. 15: "The C.P.C. assignment is fascinating in its breadth and challenges, and everyone at G.S.O. has gone out of their way to welcome this newcomer and point me in the right directions. I am overwhelmed by the infinite experience that surrounds me everywhere I turn — in the files, in the archives, and in the people — and can't believe I have immediate access to it all." Every time she talks to someone or answers a letter, she adds, "I learn more. Every morning I leap out of bed and can't wait to get to work."

Born in St. Paul, Minnesota, Gayle says she and her two brothers "were part of a military family, and we moved around a lot." She started drinking in her early twenties "after the legal age," she remembers. "First I drank socially, but not many years passed before I crossed over the invisible line to alcoholism." Still, she managed to collect a B.A. and an M.S. in psychology from the State University of New York at Cortland. She then spent several years studying toward a doctorate in psychology at SUNY, Binghamton. "It was a degree I didn't get," Gayle says, "thanks to the fact that my drinking was escalating so. Even with two degrees, all I could get after college were part-time jobs. I told myself it was the state of the economy at the time. I couldn't admit it was more likely the 'state of Gayle.'"

One boss sent Gayle to a psychiatrist whom she refers to as "well meaning, but one of the professionals I think about in doing C.P.C. work. He diagnosed me as self-medicating with alcohol and prescribed medication to help me 'manage my feelings.' The best thing he did was send me to A.A. I don't remember much about my first — and brief — A.A. experience, but they gave me a white chip, which kept reappearing during the next several years of my drinking, no matter how many times I threw it away." The seeds of sobriety had been planted, and on April 13, 1988, Gayle — who had just been twelfth stepped by a co-worker in Cortland, New York — planted her feet on what A.A. co-founder Bill W. refers to as the Road of Happy Destiny.

When she was little more than a year sober in A.A., Gayle's sponsor, Elaine W., took her to her first area assembly. "It was great theater, great atmosphere," she remembers, "with all those A.A.s full of gratitude and

eager to help other alcoholics in every way they could. I then came through the service structure, and as delegate I was so impressed with G.S.O. and what the staff was doing to support service work all over the world. But it didn't occur to me that I would ever be one of them."

Until a week before she started work at G.S.O., Gayle was program supervisor at Berkshire Farm Center and Services for Youth, in Syracuse, New York. "My program was a family preservation service. I was there more than 12 years and happy in my work, but when the opportunity to join the staff at G.S.O. materialized, I knew it was time to move on."

Gayle, who presently lives in Sparkill, New York, is quick to point out that the support of her husband, Ralph, has made her move to G.S.O. possible. "He has helped me all the way," she says, "and is in the process of selling his business and our house in Cortland—in short, turning his life upside down—so we can be closer to G.S.O. Our cat, Patches, has reluctantly agreed to join us."

Braille Meeting Book Helps Blind A.A.s to Carry the Message

It is a brainchild of the Los Angeles Central Office—a meeting book in Braille—that puts recovery and service in A.A. within closer reach for those who are blind or sight-impaired.

Says Bob K., treasurer of the L.A. Central Office: "Some five years ago, while I was serving as office trustee, a blind A.A. member named Steve H. wanted to get into service and asked to work the phones. But how could he refer callers to meetings when he couldn't read a meeting book? Suddenly it hit me: We had a TDY (teletypewriter) machine for the hearing-impaired—but other than some great A.A. literature in Braille, such as the Big Book and Twelve and Twelve, we had no special equipment or paraphernalia for sightless people. 'Why,' I asked myself, 'shouldn't Steve and others like him have the same opportunity to recover through service as sighted members do?'"

Putting thought into action, Bob formed an ad hoc committee with several other A.A.s. "Together," he relates, "we installed our 160-page meeting directory in the appropriate disk format and forwarded it to the local Braille office for printing." Bigger and heavier than the Big Book, the white-covered Braille directory lists more than 3,000 meetings in the greater Los Angeles area and is continually updated. "The book costs about \$25 a copy to produce," Bob says, "but we give it free of

charge to anyone who has a sight problem." Like Steve, one of the best things to come out of this is that the Braille book made it possible for him to start answering the phones at Central Office. Several years later he's still doing it, still sober and glad to be carrying the message of A.A. to alcoholics who are still out there."

Susan U. Looks to A.A.'s Future as She Retires from G.S.O.

"The future of A.A. remains positive, I believe, as long as we continue to realize we do not have the answers for everybody, don't get set in our ways and keep doing what we're doing. It works! Importantly, each individual member needs a good sponsor, a strong group, love and spiritual strength."

Speaking at a general sharing session of the General Service Board in November, two months before her retirement after 28 years as a member of the General Service Office staff, Susan noted, "I am thrilled that the 2003 General Service Conference theme is 'Living A.A.'s Principles Through Sponsorship.' My feeling is, if sponsorship continues, the years to come look rosy."

Describing her personal experience in recovery, Susan recalls, "I had one sponsor when I got sober in 1969. She drank again, so I found another sponsor and have had the same one ever since. These women, including the one who carried the message to me, each in her way, gave me A.A. tools I have used to get through just about everything in my 34 years of sobriety." It concerns Susan that "many of the newer A.A.s aren't familiar with sponsorship tools. We used to emphasize the basics: 'Call your sponsor before you pick up a drink' and 'Make your life an open book to one or two people'—or use the slogans, such as Easy Does It, First Things First, Keep It Simple, or Live and Let Live."

Susan's final assignment at G.S.O. was on the Cooperation With the Professional Community desk. "Working with professionals is a challenge and a labor of love," she says. "To reach thousands of alcoholics we rely on our professional friends in many fields, including medicine, religion, the courts, treatment facilities; and we need more than ever to keep our channels of communication with them open, informative and cooperative." Looking back she can think of no "favorite" assignment: "Over the years, though, I've loved it all, the newness and excitement of rotating assignments every two years—and I've felt good about G.S.O. being a correspondence office, about being able to treat each contact as the most important person in the world."

Susan has lived in New York State most of her life. Born in Manhattan, she was raised in Bronxville along with her sister Joan, who is in Al-Anon, and her brother, Eric, who today is also a member of A.A. After earning an M.A. in guidance and personnel administration from Columbia University, Teachers College, she worked as an elementary school teacher, served as chair of a county teachers' association and also was a personnel director for a large educational corporation. But, "drinking brought everything to a standstill," she says. "In January 1969 I found A.A., and it saved my life as it has those of so many other alcoholics. But I never dreamed that five years later I would be a member of the G.S.O. staff."

In 1984, while coordinating a World Service Meeting in New York, Susan met fellow A.A. Erik U., of Kristiansand on the Norwegian Sea. Their marriage, in 1987, with Susan's son Paz in attendance, was cut short by Erik's death in 1994. Afterward Susan stepped up her service activities, particularly in the area of sponsorship, and doing so, she maintains, "helped me to get out of myself and my grief."

Today, she observes, "living one day at a time has allowed me to refrain from planning the outcome of retirement from G.S.O. I'll probably stay in New York and in my home group, the 79th Street Workshop, as well as the Hope Group [a small meeting held in the home of a housebound A.A.]. I plan to answer phones at Intergroup. I'd like to take some classes, sample some of the wonderful theater and museums New York offers and do some traveling. Otherwise I'm content to let it all unfold.

Returning to one of her favorite subjects, sponsorship, Susan suggests "the paradox of sponsorship is that invariably we receive more help than we ever might have given. What A.A. does is transform lives. And, at some point, what is anticipated from us is that we will carry the message of A.A. and will become effective citizens of the community."

Updated Program Links Groups to All A.A. Better than Ever

Imagine A.A. today in the U.S./Canada the way co-founder Bill W. did—as a great heart kept beating by numerous arteries, its 93 areas representing 56,000-plus groups. "The unity of Alcoholics Anonymous" he wrote at the beginning of Tradition One, "is the most cherished quality our Society has. . . . Without unity the heart of A.A. would cease to beat. . . ." (Twelve and Twelve, p. 129)

Then imagine the mind-boggling job of keeping vital information flowing through these arteries, or areas—constantly updating news from all area groups, feeding them through the districts to the areas, and transmitting all changes to the General Service Office, where they are used to produce A.A. Directories—Eastern U.S., Western U.S. and Canadian. These confidential directories, which are updated annually, list groups and contacts; delegates and trustees; central offices/intergroups/answering services; and special international contacts. Over the years they have proved pivotal in helping lone or traveling A.A.s to find a meeting and often give members the information they need to carry the message to still-sick alcoholics. G.S.O. has long served as the repository for this wealth of information; it becomes part of the collective experience of A.A. that is available nowhere else.

Finally, imagine a fine-tuned computer application that takes most of the headaches—and mounds of paper—out of record keeping, is fast, user-friendly, cuts down postage drastically, and is adaptable to other area needs. But let's backtrack. . . .

For years the updating and sharing of all group information was a lengthy, drawn-out process committed

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painstakingly to paper. By the time G.S.O. received and recorded the material, chances were it was already old news and inaccurate. Meantime the unwieldy stacks of paper climbed higher and higher even as mailing costs mounted. Then, in 1995, G.S.O. made available a "DeArea" computer program that was written simply to replace the massive paper reports. "It worked to an extent," says Lillianna Murphy, (nonalcoholic) director, information services, "but there was kind of a catch-22: It soon became apparent that for some areas it was the only database application they were using. The program was written in software called dBaseIV because the company allowed us to distribute it without paying a licensing fee for each area. However, as dBaseIV developed into later versions, the software could not be updated because the next version was too large for most of the area computers to handle."

Increasingly, Lillianna notes, "the areas were acquiring much better equipment, there were far more record keepers conversant with PCs, and many users had taken the DeArea data and imported it into programs they'd written themselves — frequently in Microsoft (MS) Access. The major drawback has been that as each set of data is distributed, it overlays all the other data in the application."

To address the problems, G.S.O. investigated new software on the market and sent a questionnaire to each area requesting information on what kind of hardware was in use and whether MS Access would be an acceptable database platform for their purposes. Returns showed that more than 90 percent of respondents used MS Windows and were comfortable with it.

During the weekend of August 4-5, 2001 an ad hoc Roundtable meeting met in Manhattan to problem-solve and chart future directions. On hand were some very computer-savvy, and some not so savvy, A.A.s : then North Carolina delegate Donna B.; Ric D., Western Canada trustee; and area representatives including Mary M., registrar, San Diego/Imperial; Frank P., registrar, Eastern Missouri; and Pete W., registrar, Eastern Pennsylvania. Also present were three G.S.O. representatives: Lillianna, staff member Valerie O'N. and Elaine Soroka, (nonalcoholic) manager of support services. Comments Donna: "We were fortunate in having a cross-section of service experience and computer capabilities."

There was general agreement at the Roundtable meeting to go with the MS platform favored by the areas. Participants also discussed the original purpose and future of DeArea programming: a joint development venture between G.S.O. and the areas regarding data, update timing and record-editing rights. The new program, Donna points out, "will encourage the frequent exchange of information and, consequently, the timely receipt of G.S.R. (general service representatives)

Kits for incoming G.S.R.s." It was further determined to develop the application with an eye toward those areas that have earlier versions of MS Access. Ultimately, however, it was stressed that G.S.O. will continue to accept paper updates from the areas.

When testing of the new program is complete, the final version will be distributed to the areas. The package will consist of the application and data, along with a user's manual. All subsequent distributions will be of G.S.O. data only (no application) — the data exchange will update only G.S.O.'s data, thus leaving the area's data intact. These subsequent distributions will occur on a reciprocal basis: When an area sends changes to G.S.O., it will record them, then forward a fresh set of updated data back to the area.

Comments Donna: "The new program promises to be extremely cost-effective. Instead of having to post thick sheaves of paper to each other, the area and G.S.O. will simply mail a light floppy disc back and forth — the turnaround time is approximately three days. Actually, it's just a step away from e-mailing." Herself a computer programmer, Donna, who joined A.A. in March 1981, says she is "very aware that I have my job because of my sobriety. If I can use the work I do and love to benefit A.A., I am grateful."

Deadline for Directory Information—May 2, 2003

A reminder for area registrars/group record keepers: If you haven't already returned your group information printouts or discs, please remember that the final deadline for inclusion in the directories is May 2, 2003.

Printouts, or discs, corrected to show up-to-date group information and returned to G.S.O. by the areas, will be used to produce the 2003-2004 A.A. Directories: Eastern U.S., Western U.S., and Canadian. These confidential directories list groups and contacts; delegates and trustees; central offices/intergroups/answering services; and special international contacts.

The Hearing-Impaired Group In Sarasota

Every Monday evening in Sarasota, Florida, a silent meeting especially for the hearing-impaired is held at 7 o'clock in St. Wilfred's Church. Says committed chairman George: "It's the kind of meeting I could only dream about long ago, where I get to hear and understand everything, missing nothing."

The American Sign Language (ASL) Big Book Group, as it is called, “was a brainchild of the area’s Special Needs Committee. It grew from a need to provide the hearing-impaired alcoholic community with a means to group-study the Big Book and actually work the Steps with group support,” explains Robin McG., who chairs the Sarasota/Manatee District (4) in Southwest Florida. Robin notes that many hands were responsible for making the group possible: “The Friday Night Beginners and Basics Group contributed ASL video tapes of the Big Book and Twelve and Twelve [available from the General Service Office]. The tapes are accompanied by voiceovers, close-captioned along with ASL signing.”

Robin reports that, according to one member of the ASL Big Book Group, “using the tapes at meetings can attract a wide range of people, from the deaf and hard-of-hearing to the late-deafening (chronologically older members who are losing their hearing but are unfamiliar with ASL). Each member is given a copy of the A.A. Preamble, “How It Works” (Big Book, p. 58) and “The Promises” (*ibid.*, pp. 83-84). This ensures that if people can’t hear the reader, they at least can read for themselves. The meeting itself opens with a voice-plus-ASL format; after a viewing of the night’s video—say, Chapter Five of the Big Book—discussion follows either via voice or ASL signing with the help of an interpreter.

Members of the new group also turn for help to a variety of service material published by G.S.O. There are “Twelve Steps for Signing Purposes,” ASL translations of the Twelve Steps in short and long form developed by several hearing-impaired A.A. members and interpreters. For many people who use ASL, English is a foreign language. ASL has its own grammar and way of expressing concepts. The short form, for instance, notes that “‘God’ can mean anything, group of things, anyone or group of people.” It translates Step Two as “Believe ‘God,’ which is stronger than alcohol and us, can make our minds well again.”

Other service pieces include ASL translations of the Twelve Traditions, both in long and short forms; the A.A. pamphlet “Is A.A. For You?”; “A Brief Guide to Alcoholics Anonymous”; and “A Newcomer Asks.”

“Through this new meeting,” Robin says, “it is our hope that more hearing-impaired alcoholics can comfortably join our A.A. way of life.”

How to Spot Sobriety? It’s a Shined Shoe-In

Recently Hitoshi Tanabe, Class A (nonalcoholic) trustee on Japan’s General Service Board, visited the General Service Office in New York with his wife, Hiroko. After a

tour of the G.S.O. and Grapevine offices, the Tanabes attended the open A.A. meeting held every Friday at G.S.O. During the round-robin sharing that followed the speaker’s qualification, Hitoshi recalled his first encounter with A.A. 20 years ago.

In Japan, he explained, it is often customary to remove one’s shoes before entering a meeting room. As he took off his own shoes, Hitoshi noticed that many of the shoes already there appeared to be scruffy, dirty and run-down at the heels. Then he sat in on the meeting and saw there were many newcomers in the room. Eight months later, when he returned to the same meeting place, he related, there had been a significant improvement in the appearance of the shoes outside the door. “Most of them were clean and shiny,” he said, nodding his head. “Sobriety showed in the shoes.”

Taking a Spiritual Journey a Mile and A Meeting at a Time

“Back in 1990 I’d sit by myself in a dark closet on a little stool, drinking and listening to sad songs on the stereo and dreaming the ‘impossible dream.’ Two years later I sobered up in A.A. but did nothing about any of my dreams.” Then, continues Kris W. of Kensington, California, “after I’d been working the Steps and going to meetings for five years, God reached down and strongly ‘suggested’ that I follow up on my dream of going back to school. With much encouragement from my sponsors, friends and family, I was accepted into graduate school in Washington, D.C., took a leave of absence from my high-flying—and toxic—job, and started driving east.”

On Kris’s first night out, he remembers, he ended up in Elko, Nevada, “scared to death. What had I done? I had just left the only people I really *knew* in sobriety, taken a nonprotected leave from my job, and for what? I seriously considered turning around and heading for home, but then, in considerable fear, I did what I had learned to do: I went to a meeting at the Elko Fellowship and told the A.A.s there what I was doing and how I felt. A young man with about two weeks’ sobriety came up to me after the meeting and said he had a Western U.S. Directory at home that he would give to me. I gratefully accepted what turned out to be a lifeline.

The next day Kris arrived in Rawlins, Wyoming, and “immediately checked for meetings,” he recalls. “Nothing was listed in the phone book or at the motel, so I looked in the A.A. Directory. Two numbers were listed; at the first there was no answer, but when I tried the

second, a kindly woman answered and directed me to a meeting that night. I went, and was welcomed and encouraged to keep going. I did, and in Davenport, Iowa, I passed along my Directory to a group there in the hope that it would help other A.A.s as it had me.”

Once in D.C., Kris reports, “I went to meetings, sponsored and was sponsored, did service and graduated from school ‘with distinction.’ Before returning home to California, I called the General Service Office and was sent copies of the Eastern and Western U.S. Directories. These guided me to some really neat meetings in small towns—my favorite—and I made a point of stopping again in Rawlins and Elko to thank the folks and let them know I’d made it. At the meeting in Elko there was a woman who, together with her mother and little daughter, was traveling a distance and wanted to avoid large cities. I gave them the Directories that had been given to me with my best wishes and prayers, making a difficult situation a little easier. Thank God for the Steps and for the Fellowship of A.A. that makes it possible for us to help ourselves and each other.”

C.P.C./P.I.

Working with Professionals Is a Labor of Love

Putting on an informational meeting with professionals can entail a lot of work. But as Linda H., who chairs the Mid-Southern California area’s committee on Cooperation With the Professional Community discovered, it’s a lot easier to round up A.A. speakers than professional ones.

One such event was to be co-hosted by the area Public Information and C.P.C. committees and held in October at the Redlands (Calif.) Senior Community Center. Arrangements were made with a caterer to serve sandwiches, cookies and beverages, and there was no shortage of A.A. volunteers. “The next step,” Linda relates, “was to get three professional speakers and an A.A. trustee to be the closing speaker. First I asked Larry N., past trustee-at-large/U.S. who has a pharmaceutical background, and he said, ‘It would be a privilege.’ Now on to the other professionals: A dozen or so phone calls and e-mails later, I was referred to a family physician specializing in alcoholism and drug addiction at a local hospital. When I spoke to him, he said he would do whatever he could do to help A.A., but to please understand he was a doctor and not a drinker. That, I replied, was exactly what we were looking for and sent him a flyer. Now I had two speakers and needed only one more.”

The labor of love that Linda thought was nearing an end had barely begun: “After numerous calls and letters to the judiciary, clergy, treatment facilities—and getting many ‘I can’t do it on that date’ responses—I got a little discouraged. Then I turned for help to Class A (nonalcoholic) trustee Linda Chezem, who suggested a contact in San Jose—too far away. I also spoke to Susan U., then on the C.P.C. assignment at G.S.O., who assured me everything would work out wonderfully because my higher power was in charge. She was right—I went back to the C.P.C. committee, humbly asked for help, and got it.”

Her experience in contacting Class A trustees and other professionals, Linda says, “made me feel that I knew what our co-founders had gone through—except that I was fortunate in having their experience to draw upon.” After the information meeting, which “was absolutely above all expectations and attracted more than 40 people,” she reports, “I wondered, are we interacting with the professional community like they did with A.A. when it first began? In an article I wrote for the *Mid-Southern California Newsletter*, I said, ‘I cannot stress how important it is for A.A.s and professionals to work together. Our history tells us how those in the professional community were indeed A.A.’s friends when we were a fledgling society.’”

Correctional Facilities

Exploring New Ways to Help Young Alcoholics

Alcoholics under age 20 almost invariably feel they are too young for A.A. Resisting help, some point out they don’t drink “hard liquor”; others, that they’d never had memory blackouts or been falling-down drunk. And many in jails and prisons struggle at A.A. meetings to identify with the stories told by older alcoholics who have seized the A.A. lifeline. Newly released juveniles may have even a harder time settling into an “outside” group and finding new friends and activities to support their fledgling steps toward recovery.

John D. of New York City, a district committee member, says he has “been involved with Correctional Facilities service for four years—the last year I’ve had a special commitment to Y.P.A.A. [Young People in A.A.]” Much of his effort has been centered on the Bridging the Gap program, in which outside A.A.s help to smooth inmates’ transition from A.A. in prison to regular meetings. One way to go about this initially, he feels, is to

stress “comparable identification”—in other words, let a young person in A.A. carry the message to dispel the feeling of being “too young” for the A.A. program.

Once young alcoholics have been sober a while, A.A.’s collective experience shows, many of them feel like Joyce, who came to the Fellowship when she was 20. After five years of continuous sobriety, she says, “many of my A.A. friends now are a generation or two older, but there is no barrier. A.A. is big enough for all. Each generation contributes its own gifts, talents and thinking to A.A. . . . We each bring our common disease of alcoholism, our free will, and the right to work the A.A. principles as we understand them.”

One young person who came to the Fellowship at age 18 and stayed is Canadian Anita T. “In my second year of sobriety,” she relates, “I wanted to get involved in service outside my group, to give back what was given to me, and Tony H., who chaired our C.F. committee, suggested I accompany him to a meeting at an open-custody facility for young male offenders 16 to 18 years old. I had to undergo my first police check in sobriety and was afraid my previous conviction might count against me.”

It did not. “Thankfully,” Anita recalls, “I was given clearance, and we climbed the stairs to the meeting room. The boys filed in, boisterous and full of bravado. I shared my story, they each shared theirs, and we closed the meeting. Afterward I felt as if I were walking five feet off the ground.”

During the ensuing months, she says, “I would attend a meeting or two a month. But every time I made a commitment to chair a meeting, I’d look for a thousand excuses not to go. As I walked to the facility, the closer I got the sicker I felt. I wanted to run away but didn’t. And as the weeks passed, I found that after the meetings I experienced a gratitude that came from serving. It was amazing.”

Over time Anita saw many of the young offenders gradually change: “At their first or second meeting they would sit in their chairs, arms folded and emotional walls up, their eyes challenging me to impress them. Slowly the walls came down.” Without exception, she notes, “the young residents were under the influence of either drugs or alcohol when they committed their crimes. Some spoke of going to A.A. outside once they were released, and I did see a few of them at various meetings. Others, true to their word, got drunk and ended up back in the facility.”

Three years ago Anita moved to Hamilton, Ontario, to work and go to school. “Ten years have flown by since my experience at that juvenile center,” she says, “yet I’ll never forget the joy of seeing the transformation in some of those boys as they realized how much destruction alcohol had caused in their lives. I also remember being disheartened when I saw them back at the center for having committed still another crime. But Tony would

tell me the one thing we could do was plant the seed of sobriety in A.A. That was good enough for me.”

The basics of carrying the A.A. message into youth-detention and short-term center are about the same as in any other correctional facility, yet there are some differences. A marked one, as the Correctional Facilities Workbook, published by the General Service Office, points out, is that “in youth-detention centers there is often a marked age difference between the juveniles and most A.A.s.” (According to the latest A.A. Membership Survey, conducted in 2001, the typical member is 46 years old.)

Moreover, many alcoholics under age 18 have a brief drinking history and may have difficulty identifying with the sometimes long and winding stories of older A.A.s. They may fear appearing “weak” to their peers, something that might affect their showing up or participating in A.A. meetings; and, at the same time, there may be peer pressure to appear “tough,” which could lead to behavioral problems during meetings. Experience further shows that the attention span of many young people during meetings is short. For these reasons and more, some areas have encouraged young A.A. members on the outside to share their stories and sponsor meetings at their local youth detention centers.

The turnover is rapid in most youth detention centers, which “often have stricter rules governing access and confidentiality,” the Correctional Facilities Workbook notes, adding that “the required presence of staff at A.A. meetings is generally the rule.” Here it suggests that common sense and full cooperation with the youth facilities’ staff are essential to the success of this kind of Twelfth Step work.

The Workbook also suggests some practical guidelines for conducting A.A. meetings in youth-detention centers and short-term facilities: (1) Use a beginners meeting format, focusing on the first three Steps and providing information about the basic tools an A.A. could use to stay away from the first drink. (2) Give an informational presentation that includes a Q&A session. A free one-page service piece available from G.S.O. — “Information on Alcoholics Anonymous” — is useful in spelling out to newcomers what A.A. does and does not do. (3) Explain and emphasize the importance of sponsorship. (4) Lead a meeting on a topic such as, “What are you going to do differently this time?” (5) Where sharing is limited, an anonymous Ask-It-Basket session — in which questions are written down and placed in a basket or a hat — worked well. (6) The use of cassettes, videos and illustrated pamphlets can be especially helpful to younger inmates.

“It is important to remember,” the Workbook stresses, “that A.A. is [in the youth-detention facilities] to offer a message of hope.” And, as Anita found out, “you may not be able to see immediate results, but a seed may be planted.”

BOX 4|5|9 BULLETIN BOARD

Calendar of Events

Events listed here are presented solely as a service to readers, not as an endorsement by the General Service Office. For any additional information, please use the addresses provided.

February

- 1-2-Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada. 16th Annual "Fun in Sobriety" Round Up. Write: Ch., Box 742, Fredericton, NB, E3B 1G8; e-mail: funinsobriety@hotmail.com
- 6-9-Melbourne, Florida. Spacecoast Round Up. Write: Ch., 720 E. New Haven Avenue, Suite 3, Melbourne, FL 32901; e-mail: aaspacecoast@bellsouth.net
- 7-9-Largo, Florida. Largo's Step N Ahead. Write: Ch., Box 1273, Inidan Rocks Beach, FL 33785; www.soberaction.com
- 7-9-Liverpool, New York. 16th Annual Salt City Mid-Winter Roundup. Write: Ch., Box 3588, Syracuse, NY 13220-3588
- 13-16-Seattle, Washington. 39th International Women's Conf. Write: Ch., Box 50493, Bellevue, WA 98015; www.iwc2003.org
- 14-16-North Little Rock, Arkansas. 21st Annual Winter Holiday Conv. Write: Ch., Box 26135, Little Rock, AR 72221
- 14-16-Champaign, Illinois. ISCYPAA. Write: Ch., Box 6236, Champaign, IL 61826
- 14-16-Corpus Christi, Texas. 49th Coastal Bend Jamboree. Write: Ch., PMB 482, 1220 Airline, Suite 130, Corpus Christi, TX 78412
- 15-16-Beardstown, Illinois. Dist. 15 Alkathon at Merritt Hall. Write: Ch., 1301 Monroe, Beardstown, IL 62618
- 21-22-Sikeston, Missouri. 22nd Annual Five Corners Conv. Write: Ch., Box 158, Sikeston, MO 63801
- 21-23-Gulf Shores, Alabama. 19th Annual District 19 Jubilee. Write: Ch., Box 1183, Foley, AL 36536
- 21-23-Burlington, Iowa. 13th Southeast Iowa Roundup. Write: Ch., Box 85, Keosauqua, IA 52565
- 21-23-Louisville, Kentucky. State Conv. Write: Ch., 2616 Main Street, Louisville, KY 402120
- 27-March 1st-Kansas City, Kansas. 21st Annual Sun Flower Roundup. Write: Ch., 10604 Blue Jacket, Overland Park, KS 66214
- 28-March 1st-Lawton, Oklahoma. Sunlight of the Spirit. Write: Ch., Box 3464, Lawton, OK 73502-3464

March

- 6-9-Pasadena, California. ACYPAA. Write: Ch., Box 70795, Pasadena, CA 91117
- 7-9-Jekyll Island, Georgia. 16th Unity Weekend. Write: Ch., 34 Glen Falls Drive, Ormond Beach, FL 32174; FWB743@aol.com
- 7-9-Findlay, Illinois. 22nd Annual Southern Illinois Area Spring Conf. Write: Ch., Box 6201, Decatur, IL 62524-6201
- 7-9-Troy, Michigan. March Roundup. Write: Ch., Box 172, Clawson, MI 48017
- 7-9-Rochester, New York. The Flower City Fellowship Conv. Write: Ch., 287 Galahad Drive, Rochester, N.Y. 14623-5507; e-mail: raacog@rpa.net

- 14-16-Victorville, California. 19th Annual High Desert Conv. Write: Ch., Box 1894, Apple Valley, CA 92307
- 14-16-Adelanto, California. 19th Annual High Desert Conv. Write: Ch., 14459 Clemson Ct., Adelanto, CA 92301
- 14-16-Portland, Maine. Northeast Fellowship of the Spirit. Write: Ch., 71 Winter Street, Lewiston, ME 04240
- 14-16-Sioux Falls, South Dakota. 14th Annual Sioux Empire Roundup. Write: Ch., Box 76, Sioux Falls, SD 57101
- 14-16-Georgetown, Texas. Chisholm Trail Conv. Write: Ch., Box 2187, Cedar Park, TX 78630
- 14-16-Toronto, Ontario, Canada. Ontario Regional Conf. Write: Ch., Box 60010, 1032 Pape Avenue, Toronto, ON, M4K 3V0
- 20-23-Ruston, Louisiana. 12th Annual Ruston Upstate Conv. Write: Ch., Box 505, Ruston, LA 71273-0505; www.rustonaa.org
- 21-23-Arlington Heights, Illinois. NIA Spring Conf. Write: Ch., Box 637, Round Lake Beach, IL 60073; www.AA-NIA.org
- 21-23-Wichita, Kansas. 28th Annual Spring Roundup. Write: Ch., Box 1804, Wichita, KS 67201
- 21-23-North Falmouth, Massachusetts. Cape Cod Pockets of Enthusiasm. Write: Ch., Box 773, Mashpee, MA 02649
- 21-23-Eveleth, Minnesota. Winter Rap Up. Write: Ch., 22 6th Street N.E., Cook, MN 55723
- 21-23-Lincoln, Nebraska. Spring Fling 2003. Write: Ch., Box 30691, Lincoln, NE 68503
- 21-23-Cherry Hill, New Jersey. 39th Annual Area 45 General Service Conv. Write: Ch., Box 663, Pleasantville, NJ 08232
- 21-23-Hood River, Oregon. HOW-L Conv. Write: Ch., Box 6757, The Dalles, OR 97058
- 21-23-Salt Lake City, Utah. Area 69 Pre-Conf. Assembly. Write: Ch., Box 1955, Salt Lake City, UT 84110-1955
- 28-30-Ames, Iowa. Aim for Ames Roundup. Write: Ch., Box 2522, Ames, Iowa 50010
- 28-30-DuBois, Pennsylvania. 11th Annual Get Away Weekend. Write: Ch., 611 Water Street, Warren, PA 16365
- 28-30-Parkersburg, West Virginia. Area 73 Spring Assembly. Write: Ch., Box 4471, Parkersburg, WV 26104
- 28-30-Portland, Oregon- Convención Hispana del Estado de Oregon. Write Ch. 3905 S.W 170th Avenue, Aloha, OR 97007

April

- 4-6-Montgomery, Alabama. Alabama/NW Florida Area 1 Assembly. Write: Ch., 8121 Lillian Hwy., Lot 45, Pensacola, FL 32506-3771
- 4-6-Kailua-Kona, Hawaii. 15th Annual Big Island Bash. Write: Ch., Box 390727, Kailua-Kona, HI 96739; www.bigislandbash.com
- 4-6-Columbus, OH. Tenth Annual Spring Roundup. Write: Ch., Box 819, Reynoldsburg, OH 43068
- 10-13-Cambridge, Massachusetts. EACY-PAA 1. Write: Ch., Box 35280, Brighton, MA 02135
- 11-13-Easton, Maryland. Area 29 2003 Mini Conf. Write: Ch., 1660 Thetford Road, Towson, MD 21286
- 11-13-Ocean City, New Jersey. Southeastern Pennsylvania Intergroup Roundup. Write: Ch., 444 N. 3rd Street, Suite #3E, Philadelphia, PA 19123
- 11-13-Victoria, British Columbia, Canada. 52nd Annual Miracles Rally. Write: Ch., 8-2020 Douglas Street, Victoria, BC, V8T 4L1
- 17-20-San Diego, California. San Diego Spring Round Up. Write: Ch., 4619 Huggins Way, San Diego, CA 92122
- 17-21-Adelaide, South Australia. 38th South Australia National Conv. Write: Ch., Box 346, Hindmarsh, SA 5007, ABN 55 253 253 603

May

- 2-4-Oliver, British Columbia, Canada. Annual South Okanagan-Oliver River Round-up. Write: Ch., Box 392, Oliver, British Columbia V0H 1T0
- 9-11-Jackson, Mississippi. MSCYPAA. Write: Ch., Box 4797, Jackson, MS 39296
- 16-18-Dayton, Ohio. Dayton Women's Workshop XXV. Write: Ch., Box 1527, Dayton, OH 45401-1527
- 17-18-Smithers, British Columbia Canada. Special Regional Forum. Write: Forum Coordinator, Box 459, Grand Central Station, New York, NY 10163
- 29-31, June 1st-Daytona Beach, Florida. 13th Spring Conf. Write: Ch, 34 Glen Falls Drive, Ormond Beach, FL 32174

Planning a Future Event?

To be included in the Box 4-5-9 Calendar, information must be received at G.S.O. three months prior to the event. We list events of two or more days. For your convenience and ours — please type or print the information to be listed on the Bulletin Board page, and mail to us:

Date of event: from _____ to _____, 19 _____

Name of event: _____

Place (city, state or prov.): _____

For information, write: (exact mailing address) _____

Contact phone # (for office use only): _____

Cut along dotted line, and post this page on your group's bulletin board