

About AA

The A.A. Grapevine: A.A.'s Meeting in Print

In the spring of 1944, just nine years after the founding of A.A., a small group of A.A. members living in and around New York City came up with an idea for an A.A. magazine. Their goal was to provide news to members hungry for more information about the A.A. Fellowship and program of recovery. The first issue was published in June 1944 as a large-format newsletter, eight pages long and costing \$187.10 to design, print, and mail. The name on the masthead—meant to suggest an informal but powerful way to communicate—was simply *The Grapevine*, written against a tableau of grapes, leaves, and tendrils. Those early issues covered the creation of new meetings (at a time when each new group was a major victory), discussed meeting formats and twelfth stepping strategies, and letters from A.A.s in the armed services. In the fourth issue, the magazine printed this description of itself under the masthead: "A Monthly Journal devoted to those seeking further knowledge on the problem of alcoholism, in the hope that it may prove a unifying bond to all alcoholics everywhere. Individual opinions expressed here are not, necessarily, those of A.A. as a whole."

The Grapevine did in fact appeal to "alcoholics everywhere," and the magazine found an immediate and enthusiastic readership—not just in New York but around the country and around the world. Within a year, the subscription base had jumped from 165 to 2,000; by September 1945, the magazine had 3,500 subscribers. In 1948, the magazine converted to a portable size and introduced color on the covers. Today the magazine offers four-color covers and a minimum of 64 pages of text and photographs printed on glossy stock. Every month it reaches 130,000 readers in the U.S. and Canada and in 80 countries around the world.

The Grapevine is incorporated as one of the two independent arms of A.A.'s General Service Board and is entirely self-supporting through the sale of its magazine and related materials; by charter, none of the contributions sent to A.A.'s General Service Office can contribute to the Grapevine's coffers. Now called *The A.A. Grapevine*, the magazine is known as the international monthly journal of Alcoholics Anonymous and has been continuously published for over fifty years. It currently has a paid staff of over 20 people, including an executive editor, art director, and circulation manager.

A.A.'s co-founder, Bill W., set forth some of the guiding principles of the magazine in a 1945 letter to the lawyer working on the Grapevine's incorporation papers. Bill stressed the Grapevine's independence and suggested the following: that the Grapevine should be the voice of A.A. as a whole; that the trustees of the Grapevine should be able to suggest and advise—but not command; that no individual or single group should ever dominate the magazine; and that the Grapevine should print articles expressing the widest differences of opinion on all A.A. topics. The principles that Bill saw as the guiding spirit of the Grapevine—autonomy, diversity, and singleness of purpose—continue to be central to the magazine to this day.

From the beginning, the Grapevine's history ran parallel to A.A. as a whole. The Fellowship changed, struggled, and grew—and the magazine talked about the changes, the struggles, and the growth. The magazine's reporting allowed A.A.s to see how individuals and groups were staying sober and solving problems in other parts of the country, and this perspective strengthened them in their search for solutions.

Today, the Grapevine reaches an A.A. population which is dramatically different from the population of the early 1940s. There are many more young people today; the number of women has increased dramatically to 35 percent of the total A.A. population; the percentage of members who've experi-



enced drug addiction in addition to their alcoholism has increased; more minority groups and language groups are represented throughout A.A.; and the number of newcomers coming to A.A. through rehabs and treatment centers has increased. These changes point to an ongoing need for increased communication between different segments of the A.A. community, and that's just what readers find in the Grapevine.

An Open Meeting, Always in Session

The Grapevine is many things to its readers: a source of inspiration and insight, a resource of solutions to practical problems, and a library of principles filtered through individual perspectives. For professionals, the Grapevine is an open A.A. meeting and it's always in session. Its heart and soul is the sharing of A.A. members on "what it was like, what happened, and what it is like now." Most articles cover the same range of topics found in an A.A. meeting—"war stories" of those drinking days; the struggle with, and acceptance of, alcoholism; the importance of meetings, sponsorship, and service; staying sober through bad times and good; gratitude; and insight into working A.A.'s Twelve Steps and understanding the Twelve Traditions. The magazine also offers some things that aren't found at every meeting: for example, discussions of A.A. history. As one reader put it, "I understand that 'Grapevine' is an acronym for Great Reading About Positive Experience, Valuable in New Existence."

The editors try to make every issue a solid A.A. resource, one that will be of practical help and inspiration. Some of the features to be found in current issues include individual experience every month on one of the Twelve Steps or Twelve Traditions; departments like Old-Timers Corner, Youth Enjoying Sobriety, Along Spiritual Lines, and Beginners Meeting; articles on A.A. history (for example, the early beginnings of meetings here and abroad); coverage of many aspects of service, from making coffee to being a delegate; reprints of significant historical articles, like ones written by Bill W., Dr. Bob, and Dr. William Silkworth; news of current A.A. events; short takes from readers in a letters section; and humor.

How Professionals Use the Grapevine

Professionals have found the Grapevine to be helpful to them in several ways. First of all, through first-person stories the professional can get a clearer picture of the A.A. program in action. Here are practical problems—wanting to drink, going through a divorce, losing a job, dealing with the death of a child—and practical solutions: meetings, sponsorship, slogans, Steps, and Traditions. Here also are plenty of stories in which gratitude and the joy of life predominates—stories of going back to school, finding a spiritual path (however unconventional), traveling to Istanbul or Switzerland or the Antarctic, making an amend to a parent, partner, or child, starting A.A. meetings in a new place, or conquering an old fear. The Grapevine shows how the A.A. program works—not in theory but in practice—and that makes the magazine a practical tool for working with recovering alcoholics who find themselves confronted with choices concerning romance and family life, friendship, career and money, health, and just plain old day-to-day existence.

As one counselor explained, "Reading the Grapevine enables me to participate vicariously in the A.A. experience. As a result, I'm better able to help my clients." Another professional put it this way: "By exposing myself to the stories of well alcoholics—knowing what it was like, what happened, and what it is like with them now—I'm far more understanding and

knowledgeable when it comes to providing guidance."

Second, the Grapevine connects the professionals with A.A. worldwide, offering a window onto the diversity of the Fellowship. The magazine isn't the product of one voice or one point of view; it's a collection of individual voices, each one speaking out of his or her personal A.A. experience. This means that sometimes articles are published that appear to contradict each other; as in an A.A. meeting, Grapevine writers are free to express what they have found to be true in their own lives.

Grapevine writers are old and young, newcomers and old-timers, men and women of all backgrounds, from around the country and around the world. Seeking to embody the widest possible view of the A.A. Fellowship, the magazine has published articles by a Native American who wrote about his Higher Power, a chef who started an A.A. meeting in a nudist colony, a man who made a daylong bus trip through the African veldt to get to a meeting, a woman who arrived at a morning meeting in the Blue Ridge Mountains and ended up making 300 pancakes, and the skipper of a fishing vessel in the Gulf of Alaska who heard a radio message at three in the morning which kept him from taking a drink. The Grapevine offers a way to experience A.A. beyond the horizon of hometown locales and regional perceptions. As one A.A. put it, "I live in a small town, and for me the Grapevine is a terrific way to find out about the larger A.A. world."

Third, professionals use the Grapevine to keep current on happenings in the Fellowship or get insight into how A.A. works. A recent issue, for example, offered an in-depth article on the phenomenon of online A.A. meetings; this special feature included a "roundtable discussion" with a dozen A.A. members, conducted via e-mail. Other special features published in the last several years include an ongoing response to the question "Is A.A. changing?"; a description of how intergroups and central offices work, the early history of anonymity in the Fellowship, an inside look at the operation of the General Service Office, a delegate's-eye-view of the annual General Service Conference, and a report on the 60th Anniversary International Convention in San Diego. History articles include a department called "What We Were Like," which looks back to A.A.'s early and sometimes bumpy path, as well as a series of interviews with A.A. members whose stories are or were in the three editions of the basic text of A.A., *Alcoholics Anonymous*, popularly known as the Big Book.

Finally, professionals find that the Grapevine examines, through special sections of personal stories, such important topics as alcoholism and the family, A.A. and treatment centers, women in A.A., alcoholism and mental illness, A.A. in prison, what young A.A. members think about A.A.'s singleness of purpose, and how oldtimers can reach out to a new generation of members.

An Unexpected Dividend

For some professionals, the benefits aren't only job related. An unexpected dividend for one physician has been "the ability to get in touch with my feelings about alcoholics and also to stimulate my personal growth. I've discovered that there is a lot to be gained by trying to incorporate the Twelve Steps of A.A. into my own life. Recently I've realized that by reading the stories of alcoholics who have literally gotten their lives back in AA, I've been able to make contact with my spiritual self."

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