

About AA

More Young People Come to A.A. and Stay

The Fellowship Looks to Its Future

The days of thinking that the 23-year-old newcomer to A.A. is an occasional phenomenon — “too young to be an alcoholic” — are long gone. According to results of the 1983 survey of A.A. members in the U.S. and Canada, the percentage of young people (under age 31) entering the Fellowship has reached a new high of 20%. This is a marked increase over the 15% noted in the 1980 survey results. Moreover, 3% are under 21.

The influx of the young into A.A. has not occurred gradually. From 1968, when the survey was initiated on a triannual basis, until 1977, the percentage of young people remained constant at 7%. Since then, it has nearly tripled.

The survey further revealed that, among members under 31, the incidence of addiction to other drugs as well as alcohol was 58% for men and 64% for women in 1983 (as compared to the overall figure of 31% for the general membership). Statistics for those under 21 — examined separately for the first time — showed 74% of men and 78% of women to be dually addicted.

Meeting the special needs of its young people is important to A.A. Some of the many ways in which the Fellowship is responding:

- Three public service announcements completed by the trustees' Public Information Committee are presently airing over 1,500 preselected radio stations. No prepared script was used for these announcements, which record young A.A.s talking about what the program has meant to them. The sign-off for each message was coined by an A.A. young person: “Alcoholism is a disease, not an age.”

An earlier PSA that has aired for some time now features a teenaged A.A. saying: “Now here's a message from Alcoholics Anonymous. I grew up in a normal home, in a normal town. All of a sudden, everything got crazy. So many things changed. I did not talk to anybody about the way I was feeling. I was scared and I was alone. I started drinking and taking pills. I just did not want to deal with what was happening in my life. I knew about A.A., but I thought I was too young. I found out I was wrong. If you are having a problem with your drinking, why don't you give us a call? A.A. — it works. Look us up in the phone book.”

- The Literature Committee is examining the effectiveness of existent A.A. information materials and pamphlets for young people — including “A Message to Teenagers,” “Young

People and A.A.” and the comics-styled “Too Young?” — and determining the need for new ones.

- The Correctional Facilities Committee has begun to develop a video based on the thoughts contained in the pamphlet “It Sure Beats Sitting in a Cell.”
- A news feature story about young people was released to the media in June 1985. It encapsulates the drinking histories of four young men and women in their early to mid-20s and describes how they have found hope, support and comfortable sobriety in A.A. The release repeats the theme, “Alcoholism is a disease, not an age,” and notes that “A.A. is people . . . people who share a common problem, and want to listen to and help each other.”

These projects are only the beginning. Our task is clear: to make sure that the hand of A.A. is out to young alcoholics, in ways they can identify with and grasp, when they come to the program seeking a sober way of life — and, frequently, life itself. We welcome help and feedback from all corners of the professional community.

Closing the Commitment Gap

“I now realize that I spent 32 years of my adult life working the wrong end of the spectrum,” Class A (nonalcoholic) trustee Jim Estelle Jr., former longtime director of the Texas Department of Corrections, told a November sharing session of the A.A. General Service Board. “The problem of alcoholism needs to be addressed prior to incarceration, not after the prison gates close.”

Just as it is in A.A., the mounting population in our jails is getting ever younger, Estelle said. Calling the situation a “national shame,” he pointed to a recent U.S. Department of Justice report stating that the percentage of alcoholism-related imprisonments in this country is between 75-80%, with most crimes being committed by males aged 17 to 27.

“The fact is,” Estelle told the assembled A.A.s, “we must address alcoholics who are younger than anyone is willing to admit. The sooner we do, the less tax money we'll have to spend on jailing these young people, and the less suffering there will be.”

Last spring, at the 35th General Service Conference, Estelle delivered a stern warning: “Today there are 450,000 adults in U.S. prisons, plus 25,000 in Canadian facilities. Now, if we relate these figures to five years ago when 300,000 adults were locked up, what is the prediction for the next five years? The

next 50 years? For those of us in the Fellowship, the next 50 years can be a mission in which, if we accept the challenge, the most severely suffering alcoholics in North America can be reached."

Stressing that there is no quick solution to the escalating problem, Estelle suggested, among other things, that A.A.s go into our jails and detox centers in greater numbers; establish a cooperative relationship with overworked probation officers who need our support; and respond positively to referrals from treatment centers and the lower courts. Finally, he urged a renewal of A.A. commitment to "that part of the Fellowship's future which is right now locked up in jails, prisons and juvenile detention centers."

Young People Speak Out . . .

"At 22, I'm older than I used to be. I'm no longer a teenaged alcoholic. I grew up in a small midwestern town and began to drink and drug when I was 12. I took a geographic to Nevada at 13. When I got sober, in Madison, Wisconsin, I was 15 and the oldtimers told me, 'You're too young — go to Alateen.' So I made sure I stayed right where I was."

The speaker was Dara, and she was one of three members invited to discuss the topic, "Young People in A.A.," at the sharing session of the General Service Board in November at the Hotel Roosevelt, New York City.

"At first I felt a sense of separation because of my age," Dara continued, "but now I can identify wherever I go in A.A. Still, I'm the first to admit denial. Recently, a 15-year-old newcomer came to my group and I said to myself, 'How can this person be an alcoholic?'"

For Dara, her young people's group represents "the first time in my sobriety that I've been part of a peer group. I keep hearing my own story, and it helps me to stay sober."

Another young A.A., Larry Y., said that he has been active in young people's groups since 1976. "We're different from other special interest groups," he observed. "Women tend to remain women, doctors to remain doctors, and so on. But young people have a peculiar habit: they grow up and become regular A.A.s, oldtimers even. What makes young people special is that they're the future of A.A."

The third speaker, Jim, emphasized that the young people's groups work wholly within the framework of A.A., hewing closely to its singularity of purpose. In response to a query about the efficacy of A.A. literature in serving young people's needs, he commented that "We have to get clearer about alcoholics using other drugs. We have not kept pace with what doctors have learned about addiction."

A questioner then asked if there were any complaints about noise and littering from hotels where young people's conferences were held. "Some may think we were loud," Jim conceded, "but we prefer to think of it as unbridled spirituality."

. . . And Define Their Aims and Purposes

In their statement of "Facts, Aims and Purposes," the young people's groups and International Conference of Young People in A.A. (ICYPAA) report that the first young people's groups

in A.A. appeared in 1945 in Los Angeles and Philadelphia. In 1957, ICYPAA came into being.

More than 2,000 members are expected to attend the May 1986 annual conference in Miami. A.A. Larry Y. reports that "no city has been awarded the conference if their committee did not have lots of young General Service Representatives. We want young people to become part of the A.A. service structure."

Young A.A.s are involved in Twelfth Step work, hospital and institution facilities, public information, General Service, and every other facet of A.A. service. Newcomers are shown by people their own age that using A.A. principles in their daily lives and being committed to A.A. service "can lead to a lasting and comfortable society."

A.A.'s Singleness of Purpose

As many young people come into the program with chemical dependencies in addition to alcohol, the pros and cons concerning "dual addiction" and "cross-addiction" and their relationship to the A.A. way of life are frequently debated by both members and those in the professional community.

A.A.'s posture remains clear. We do not diagnose anyone's alcoholism; we leave that to the individual and to the professionals. Most A.A. members eventually choose to call themselves alcoholics, but this is not a condition for belonging to the Fellowship.

At the 35th General Service Conference, it was recommended that the following be inserted in the pamphlets "If You Are a Professional" and "How A.A. Members Cooperate": "The only requirement for membership in A.A. is a desire to stop drinking. If the person is not sure about this point, then he or she is most welcome to attend an open A.A. meeting. If the person is sure that drinking is not his or her problem, then he or she may wish to seek help elsewhere."

In view of the thorny issues surrounding the definition of alcoholism and the proliferation of self-help groups patterned on A.A., the following words written by A.A. co-founder Bill W. (*A.A. Comes of Age*) some 30 years ago seem prophetic today:

"There are those who predict that Alcoholics Anonymous may well become a new spearhead for a spiritual awakening throughout the world. When our friends say these things, they are both generous and sincere. But we of A.A. must reflect that such a tribute and such a prophecy could well prove to be a heady drink for most of us — that is, if we really came to believe this to be the real purpose of A.A., and if we commenced to behave accordingly. Our society, therefore, will prudently cleave to its single purpose: the carrying of the message to the alcoholic who still suffers. Let us resist the proud assumption that since God has enabled us to do well in one area, we are destined to be a channel of saving grace for everybody.

"On the other hand, let us never be a closed corporation; let us never deny our experience for whatever it may be worth to the world around us. Let our individual members heed the call to every field of human endeavor. Let them carry the experience and spirit of A.A. into all these affairs, for whatever good they may accomplish."