

March 2021

Beyond the Bars

Carrying the AA message of recovery in British prisons



Welcome to the spring edition of *Beyond the Bars*, a quarterly newsletter aimed at Regional PLOs and anyone interested in this vital aspect of service. Here you'll find articles, news and stories from AA members that reflect over 60-years of hands-on experience.

Drink, Prison and Despair

Drink, prison, despair. Fear, loneliness, turmoil and more prison. This was my life for the best part of 29 years. My first experience of blackout and prison was waking in a police cell with a police issue white boiler suit on and no idea why I was there. A policeman told me we had to wait to see if it was murder or attempted murder, as the man was critical in hospital.

I remember being absolutely terrified. I put a blanket over my head and sobbed like a baby but, looking back, I never thought, 'I'm not drinking ever again.' Thank God, the man lived, and I went to prison for the first time. I was 16. I was still a boy really but remember being in turmoil, and when I was alone in the prison cell, being in despair, crying, but soon as the door was open laughing and joking.

Believe me, things got a whole lot worse over 29 years. I ended up in prisons all over the country and experienced everything from padded cells to prison hospitals with people next to me howling all night and hanging themselves. I wasted years of my life in prisons and went to any lengths inside to get drink (prison hooch) or anything else to make me feel better.

Forget super strong lager, there is nothing more disgusting than prison hooch, yeast, sugar and fruit. I remember going on prison visits and my family would say to me, 'God, Ian, you are looking worse,' and I would blame the prison food. I lost hope, and my constant companion was loneliness and shame.

My drinking and behaviour got worse and I ended up alone, suicidal and in despair. These feelings are bad enough but when also locked in a prison cell it is absolute hell.

My last prison sentence was about 22 years ago and was a time that will stay with me forever. I put pressure on someone to bring drugs into prison for me. They were caught, and the worst part of this was seeing them getting put in the police van, this was someone who had never been in trouble.

I've recently celebrated 20 years sobriety and am so grateful to AA for the life I've been given. I ended up totally alone full of shame drinking on park benches and feeling the loneliest person on the planet. The past 20 years have been mainly incredible. I've always

had a sponsor and been in service, also always had a home group and been doing Step work.

I've tried my best. I think my first sponsor saved my life. A saying I've heard lately in AA is wait until your head clears then look for a sponsor. No, sorry, you may be dead. I was doing the First Step within days of joining AA.

Anyway, with my family I've spent the last 20 years growing up. We went to marriage guidance for a long time. Repaired a lot of the damage, then got married. We've had more children, bought our first house and have been on great holidays. We've also recently had our first granddaughter, the joys of recovery eh!

I work, I drive, I can even look at scenery, countryside, etc, and think how beautiful these sights are over my years in AA. I've been obsessively into fitness and do lots of marathons, crossing the line of the London marathon with all my family there.

Incredible, the joys of living and being in recovery, not bad for a man who ended up totally alone, drinking on a park bench.

You'll never walk alone.

Ian, Portsmouth

(First published in *Share* magazine, July 2019)

Personal Story: 'Geneva'

When I first went to prison, I had no feelings left except one - anger! It was like a raging fire that was burning my brain. Why? - they locked me up for five to 15 years, away from my best friend - alcohol. For the next two years my every thought was of my next drink. Even when sleeping, I dreamed about the bars, my drinking friends and, yes, even the hangovers.

My parole officer told me it was mandatory I attend weekly AA meetings. So I went; I know the anger that surrounded me made people uncomfortable, but that was fine with me. I was a one-woman blowtorch. I didn't want anyone to speak to me or touch me, and when those AA people smiled I wanted to strike out at them. So, for almost two years, once a

week I sat in an AA meeting, not speaking and not listening. I saw absolutely nothing wrong with my life, and couldn't wait to get back to it.

Much to my dismay, these AAs were the most persistent people I had ever met. They were slowly chipping away at my anger, and I didn't even know it. One night, in my cell after an AA meeting, I experienced another feeling mixing with the anger. I didn't know what it was, but I knew that I felt like I was going to explode and I couldn't trust myself around anyone.

I went to sit on my bed, but instead found myself on the floor on my knees, with big hot tears flowing down my cheeks. The only words that came pouring from my mouth were, 'God help me. I can't take it anymore.'

The next morning some of the anger was still there, but there was also fear and confusion. My walls were coming down and I didn't know what to do. All of a sudden I couldn't wait for the next AA meeting.

That Friday I went down the hill actually looking forward to the meeting. When I walked in, there was a stranger standing in the hall, looking very scared and nervous. I found myself walking over to her and shaking her hand, thanking her for coming. We became good friends.

Something else happened. I was hungry for knowledge and the love that was shown to us in those meetings, but there was only *one hour* a week that I had to look forward to.

Before I left that prison we had five meetings a week and numerous other activities involving the women and families. The day I walked out of prison, a wonderful AA person met me at the door and, for three or four months, led me through life.

It was not easy adjusting to life on the 'outside' without alcohol. But I had a lot of support. No one cared where I had been or what I had done - they were only interested in where I was going, and they were there every time I stubbed my toe.

That was almost seven years ago. I still go to AA and continue to help and support other men and women who are alcoholics. None of it has been easy. But it gets easier each passing day that I don't drink. A lot of good things have happened to me. And none of it could have happened if it weren't for those persistent, loving people in Alcoholics Anonymous.

Once I was willing to listen and to accept that I was not a bad person, that I was capable of loving and being loved, that I could hold my head up and respect myself, then I knew it would be all right. The people who gave me back my life are numerous, and 'thank you' is so very little to give back.

So, for myself first, and for all those who reached out a hand, I will try to remain sober one day at a time and reach out to those who follow.

From the AAWS pamphlet 'Memo to an Inmate Who May Be an Alcoholic'

News Roundup

Prison Sponsor Pack

The Prison Subcommittee has put together an information pack that provides guidance on the running of prison meetings. This will include suggestions from the *AA Service Handbook for Great Britain 2018* and articles that can be accessed from the AA website www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk

Free leaflets are available, and can be accessed by phoning and asking for the Literature Department at GSO. Only AA approved literature should be used.

Stories from inmates and Prison Sponsors are always needed for *Beyond the Bars*. Submissions can be sent to GSO by email and will be passed on to the editor.

Current Restrictions

While the current situation regarding restrictions in UK prisons remains uncertain, AA continues to seek the best way forward. This and other items were discussed at the Prisons and Probation Joint Subcommittee Meeting in February.

Many inmates have mental health issues as well as problems with alcohol, and may find it hard to access treatment in the community due to lockdown restrictions. The internet may offer inmates new ways of communicating with AA, and these are currently being looked into.

Vacancies for Prison Subcommittee

There are several vacancies for the Prison Subcommittee due to rotations. These will be advertised in the *AA Service News* and mentioned at Conference. Guidelines for application are five years sobriety and a working knowledge of the Steps, Traditions and Concepts.



**DO YOU HAVE A DRINKING PROBLEM?
DO YOU WANT HELP?
RING ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS**

020 3916 00 97

Polish-speaking Alcoholics Anonymous Helpline
Monday - Friday 19.00 - 21.00
Saturday, Sunday 17.00 - 21.00

www.aa-pik-wielkabrytania.org.pl
e-mail: pik.aa.london@gmail.com

Editor's Note: We would welcome any stories or articles from AA members willing to share their experience of life behind bars and how they found recovery. Also, the experiences of RPLOs within the prison system. Please email material to Adam: beyondthebars@aamail.org