

June 2019

Beyond the Bars

Carrying the AA message of recovery in British prisons



Welcome to the summer 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.

An Inside Job

Drink and trouble are two small words that have followed me around all my life; one I could not stay out of, the other I could not get enough of.

Family and friends could never understand why I just couldn't give myself a good shake and go in a different direction; I always seemed to go in for a repeat performance. I remember, many years after my first drunken episode, sharing in a prison group, how the prison sentences, the bars on the windows and all that stuff were nothing compared to the daily prison of my alcoholism. I now believed that the programme of AA can set a prisoner free long before he or she is physically released.

I wondered at the time whether the inmates I was sharing with believed me. After all, I did not attend AA in prison, although it was the fear of being sent down again that forced me along to my first meeting. I heard it shared at meetings that if you don't change the man that brought you to your first meeting the same man would take you back out. I knew they were talking about me because anytime in the past when I had tried to turn over a new leaf it was always doomed to failure. I was deluded. Think the same thoughts enough and you begin to believe your own lies.

All my life I believed it was people, places and things that were to blame for my troubles. I could always point the finger and justify my own actions. If she had not said this or if he had not done that, then I would not have responded negatively. "It's all your fault." Teachers, social workers and counsellors were always probing for explanations, but a well-established 'code of silence' was in operation where I did not reveal the secrets of my background.

I often think back to my early meetings in AA and how I would cringe at the revelations of these poor chumps. "You will not catch me telling nobody nothing", was my war cry, until the penny started to drop that these men and women knew what they were talking about because they had clearly been there themselves. As I identified similarities and learned to stop looking for the differences, I began to understand an old saying I first heard in AA, that a man was only as 'sick as his secrets'.

I was most impressed with these men and women. It suited me that they did not demand or order me around. They made suggestions and shared their experiences, and gradually I found myself admitting and accepting my alcoholism. After all, if you walk like a duck and you quack like a duck there's a pretty good chance you're a duck. The suggested Twelve Step programme of Alcoholics Anonymous encourages you to take your eyes off the world

and put them on yourself. It's an inside job; to search within ourselves for answers using simple tried and tested principles of love and tolerance has been the key to freedom for many.

All my life it seemed as if I was swimming against the tide but, drip by drip and through good example and direction, my AA friends have encouraged me to go with the flow.

Marc

Prison Liaison

Scotia Region

Working with Others

Last October, for the first time, I took part in an AA workshop. It had been organized for one purpose - to carry the AA message to prisons and educational centers for young offenders. I work as a psychologist in Educational Care Facility for boys, and had been sent to observe the workshop by my employer.

Just after the official opening of the workshop we had to introduce ourselves. To my surprise, the vast majority of people in the venue were individuals who had experienced destruction of their lives by losing control over alcohol or other substances. They regained control of their lives by admitting their powerlessness.

A few wished to go into prisons to share their experience and asked how to do this. Looking at their faces, I realized that this illness doesn't choose: men and women, loners, and those with families. The willingness of these people to work with others made a huge impression on me. They said things like, 'It gives strength to my own recovery', or, 'If I don't work with others everything disintegrates'.

The next part of the workshop was titled, '*What I can give and what I get from carrying the message for young people*'. I have to say this part shook me to the core; I have been listening to stories of human tragedies and dramas for a long time. These were about broken families, the suffering of individuals and their relatives, and how difficult it was to admit being alcoholic. In recovery, people talked about how they felt and how they learned to take responsibility for their lives.

It was important for me to observe the humility of these people. They knew they had to work for their sobriety at each moment. Someone told me there that people can go back to drinking even after twenty years of recovery. That humility, as one of many things at the workshop, impressed me massively.

The next part concerned the influence of AA on young people. When youngsters introduced themselves, adding 'I am an alcoholic' after their names, it amazed me. I have met many people in my professional life who never faced their problems. They had the same experiences of ruined families and lives but they didn't have that courage to surrender and start the work. But here young people, many now in detention centres, have that courage, humility and great strength to fight the illness. It is brilliant to see!

As a psychologist in an educational facility, I feel that AA Fellowship can fill that space we still struggle with and help young people to have better lives. They need proof that there is a solution and helpful hands outside the walls. They need to know that there are people willing to help them without any other motive. Our boys have a huge problem admitting their faults and learning to trust, but they are 14 -21 years old and don't know any other way. The AA Fellowship can take them under its wing and show the way in difficult moments, when they cannot see hope for themselves.

The things I have heard have changed the way I look at my life in many aspects. I felt trusted by AA. In Fellowship, everyone has a story to tell, and sooner or later everyone will share theirs. I can only express my feelings after what I have heard and say thank you for this. Now I can describe the atmosphere of trust, respect, good word and support to others. I can say I have met many people like me or you - this illness doesn't choose. It is possible to get better. It is very encouraging.

Magda Krol

Psychologist in Educational Care Facility in Sadowice, Poland

News Roundup

Changes in sentencing that could impact AA

With short prison sentences under review and non-custodial alternatives being proposed, AA may well be called upon more often in the future. A sentence deferral system is already in place in Scotland, where judges can recommend AA to those they feel may benefit.

The chit system enables those required to attend AA meetings to produce evidence of their attendance to the courts. Many AA groups have already voted to take part and can readily adopt the system as and when the need arises.

Prison Twelve-Step list

A Twelve-Step list for prisons could be adopted by the Telephone Service to provide information and contacts for newly-released prisoners. Such lists would be held by regions, and when requested, contact details passed on to the relevant liaison officers.

Some areas use stickers with helpline numbers that can be attached inside Big Books and other AA literature. All such efforts help carry the message to those who might otherwise struggle to find meetings upon their release.

Drug and Alcohol Strategy Meetings

All prisons have regular meetings to discuss addiction issues among inmates and staff policies used to deal with them. Various Mutual Aid groups are invited to attend, to share their experience as service providers.

This is a great opportunity for AA to take part, as the meetings are a forum for many voices and can help initiate positive changes.

Wandsworth Prison Convention

The inaugural 'Behind the Bars' convention took place at Wandsworth Prison on March 6th. Among the speakers were those who had found recovery within the prison system, who carried a powerful message to the 70 men in attendance. Governor, Jeanne Bryant, was so impressed that she asked whether it would be possible to have a weekly meeting on every wing.

The event was a collaborative effort, made possible by the men themselves, the officers, and the team. Radio Wannu recorded interviews with a number of people and sent out a huge thank you to everyone who'd made it possible.

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