

September 2019

Beyond the Bars

Carrying the AA message of recovery in British prisons



Welcome to the autumn 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.

The Seed of Hope

My name is Heather, I am an alcoholic in recovery for twelve years. I did not drink alcoholically until I was in my late forties and hit my rock bottom when 52. I owe my life to the fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous and my Higher Power.

Once in recovery I found a sponsor who took me through the twelve step programme and she encouraged sponsees to undertake service. I was invited to attend an AA Meeting at Askham Grange women's open prison. My heart went out to these women who had committed crimes when under the influence of drink. I knew that I could so easily have been one of these women. Driving home that night a journey had begun that would take me to Full Sutton prison where for the last ten years I have attended weekly AA meetings with inmates including Category A prisoners.

The meetings take place within the prison and we have no warden in the room, as we want the prisoners to experience an AA meeting exactly the same as they would on the outside. On my first few visits to Full Sutton I was challenged, as I found the prison to be a very different environment to anything I had ever experienced. Personally I had to be prepared spiritually to enable me to be calm and free of fear. We read AA approved literature; we share our experience strength and hope. I have witnessed that sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly, men realise (like I did) that they have a disease and there is a solution. The most important aspect of the programme is that we pass on the message of hope.

As an alcoholic I lived in Fear and I am able to pass on a message that Courage with Faith will cast out Fear. We bring hope not hopelessness, the seed of hope can show the men that there is another way of living. I have seen men learn tolerance and acceptance towards others, to live with people as they are and not as they want them to be and above all to receive the gift of serenity.

AA is not a religious organisation and is not affiliated with any denomination. However, it is a spiritual programme as Step Three states, "Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God *as we understood Him*" and this step is the springboard to working the rest of the 12 Steps.

A quote from a prisoner: “ By using the 12 steps we found a new way of doing things and discovered a kind of stability we had never had.” My main mission is to carry the message of recovery to all in Full Sutton and that the hand of AA is always there so that prisoners do not need to feel the pain, frustration, loneliness and Fear that always accompanies the active alcoholic.

Heather N

Prison Visitor

The Amazing Journey

For me, all the horrors of chronic alcoholism have led me to a place of surrender, and within that, the ability to embrace gratitude and help others. I'm 43 years old and incredibly grateful to be alive.

For me and those who loved me, the progression of alcoholism was petrifying; the revolving door of prison, psychiatric hospitals and rehab. I often used razor blades to punish myself or control my emotions because I despised myself and my inability to function as a normal human-being. I was also battling drug/gambling addictions which were also exacerbated by my growing dependency on alcohol.

Over time I began experiencing seizures and horrific hallucinations involving the devil. I needed more and more alcohol just to function on a primitive level. Just over three years ago I got myself sent to prison on purpose because I was drinking myself to death and felt helpless.

Ironically, this was the start of an amazing journey. I did my detox and managed to get onto a recovery wing. Every week, AA came onto the wing and we had a meeting. This ignited a light in me. I looked forward to the meetings and eventually became a mentor on the wing. I'm extremely grateful to those people who came in every week. The AA material they brought in also enabled us to read in our cells.

Slowly, I began to realise that helping other lads on the wing as well as running groups helped build my self-esteem and my desire for recovery grew.

On my release from prison I joined a local AA group - the same group I recently celebrated my 3-years sobriety with. I was welcomed with genuine care and this meant a lot to me as I was used to people pushing me away because of my behaviour.

Alongside this, I joined a group called MAP (Members after Prison). We go into schools, youth centres and colleges to talk about prison, mental health and addictions. This has been such a rewarding experience; I tell my life story and discuss how drinking affected me and those I love. So far I have talked to over 2000 young people. On the back of the success of these talks I have been asked to go to the House of Lords in July to present a talk to relevant ministers and lords about my journey since leaving prison.

Fundamental to my three-years sobriety has been my acceptance that I need help. Eventually, I got a sponsor and now work the 12-Steps in my life - something I was reluctant to do prior to prison. Something very special and important to me is my connection to my higher power, which I truly believe is an angel called 'Harmony'. She was always there when I thought I was alone and I'm learning that she's guiding me through the journey of life.

For two years now I have been studying towards qualifying for university and I'm so excited that in September I start a Criminology and Psychology degree. With the help of others, my life has transformed. I believe that enough pain brought me to a place of surrender and shattered the arrogance that made me think I could manage my own life successfully.

My mother, who suffered terribly as a result of my alcoholism, joined Alanon five years ago, which helped her immensely. Today, our bond is incredible. I have always thought I was past the point of help, however, paradoxically, that was just where I needed to be. I am utterly grateful to AA, especially those who come into the prison every week. I love this sober life, which can be challenging at times. I'm finding that under all the scars and the tattoos is a caring, loving boy who got trapped all those years ago.

Today, I embrace this boy and introduce him to the world.

Alex F.

Preston Region

News Roundup

Prison and Probation Seminar

On Saturday 28th June, Alcoholics Anonymous hosted a seminar on Prison and Probation at the Park Inn, York. This was attended by around fifty Regional Prison and Probation Liaison Officers, and featured guest speakers from the government and the prison service. Members of AA shared their experience, strength and hope, from an inmate's point of view and those of a prison visitor in Britain's highest security prison.

Tom Fox, from the Scottish Prison Service, talked with humour and insight of his twelve years working alongside AA within the prison system. His belief that the right environment and a supportive regime would enable prisoners to transcend the past and create hope. One of his many observations was that, as AA members we may never know the impact we have on someone's life when we carry the message.

In the afternoon, Keith Gardner, from Community Justice Scotland gave a talk on his experience in the prison system, and stressed the need for organisations like AA. Some of the statistics he quoted were eye-opening: for example, 60-% of young offenders in prison reported being under the influence of alcohol. The problem of addiction in prison wasn't getting any better, leading to a greater need for structured intervention.

A Ministry of Justice presentation was given by Sarah Hancock (Approvals and Compliance Team) and Robert Stanbury (Social Care and Substance Misuse Team). Sarah and Robert shared their experience working in different areas, each equally committed to establishing a more efficient clearance system for outside agencies like AA.

Neil C. and Bob McD. gave a report on their service with Probation; Bob briefly described the history of Probation service in England and Wales, beginning in 1907 when it took over from churches. AA presentations have been made at police custody suites, probation bail hostels and to magistrates. Gaining the support of prison staff is vital for ongoing communication and opening doors in the future.

Probation is integral to rehabilitation, a process that often directly involves AA. The chance of somebody being saved from relapse by the intervention of AA members - ie through the gate - is greatly enhanced.

AA in UK Prisons

A statistic from Criminal Justice and Probation states that AA meetings currently take place in 64% of UK prisons. Bill W was well aware of the alcoholic inmate's isolation and often desperate need to hear the message of AA within the prison walls, and made this need a fundamental priority for AA's service structure.

The continuing enthusiasm of AA members doing service in prisons, and the support of various government bodies, helps us carry the message to those who need it. The 36% of prisons that don't currently hold meetings represents something of a challenge for AA to meet in the near future.

'It is recommended that AA groups should be established in all prisons and young offenders' establishments.'

(The AA Service Handbook for Great Britain)



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**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