

December 2019

Beyond the Bars

Carrying the AA message of recovery in British prisons



Welcome to the winter 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 Jumping Off Place

My name is Cathy and I am an alcoholic.

I never thought I had a problem with drink and drugs, I thought it was my mental health that was the problem.

I was crying out for help and constantly pressing the self-destruct button.

Then I ended up in prison. I got 3 years, and did 18 months.

I was so scared it was going to be like *Bad Girls* off the TV, but it was nothing like that. I liked it in there because it was routine and structure. For the first time I was doing courses and getting qualifications.

I tried an AA meeting in prison. I'd never heard of it before but it wasn't for me.

I got released on my birthday to a probation hostel. I still didn't think I had a problem, mainly because I did not drink everyday and I wasn't a tramp sleeping on a park bench.

It was only when I got recalled that I thought, what am I doing with my life?

I wanted to kill myself again, but I didn't have the guts to do it. Getting clean and sober scared me - and it would be boring.

I was at the jumping off place.

I got released again after a month and stayed off the drink and drugs for two years. I tried again to go to AA, but didn't think I was as bad as them.

Now I was obsessed with trying not to drink. I was like a dry drunk because all my behaviours were still there, self harming, bingeing and making myself sick.

One christmas it got too much and I nearly picked up, so I reached out for help and went to an AA meeting.

It felt strange that people looked happy, were laughing and talking about how they felt.

I could never voice what was going on for me, but I kept going to the meetings.

Eventually, I found myself a sponsor and worked through the Twelve Steps. I had 5 years of sobriety, but still didn't think I was a real alcoholic. It was niggling away at the back of my mind.

One day, I just wanted to shut the noise up in my head. I relapsed, drank a whole bottle of whisky, took some tablets and ended up in A and E.

I knew I had to go back to AA, and went to a meeting on the Saturday morning. I felt awful. I wanted people to shout at me because I felt so bad, but people welcomed me back and showed me love. I shared straight away what had happened.

This time I feel different. I know I'm an alcoholic and I'm now 11 months clean and sober. I've done the Steps again with the same sponsor - I missed something out on my first Step Four.

This time round I have completely surrendered. I did some prison service as well, and was really upset when I couldn't do it anymore, but I prayed on it.

As one door closes another one opens. Now I'm doing Prison Postal Service, which I'm getting so much from.

In a strange way, helping others helps me more.

I'm grateful to be alive today and have a roof over my head, and to be clean and sober and to have the love of the fellowship of AA.

It could have been so much worse for me.

I believe God and my higher power have kept me alive for a reason.

Cathy R

North West Region

Letter from Lancashire Police

Dear Sir/Madam

I am the Licensing Sergeant for East Division in Lancashire Constabulary. I am writing to express my gratitude for the partnership we have with Alcoholics Anonymous and the positive relationship we have made.

For some context my area comprises the whole of East Lancashire, incorporating six local authorities in a deprived part of the country where alcohol abuse is amongst the highest in England and Wales.

Since starting in the role in August 2018, I have been in regular contact with the Public Liaison Officer, Daniel, from the group who established good links with the force under my predecessor, Sgt James Middleton. Daniel is a fantastic contact who is a credit to AA with his enthusiasm in promoting the work that they do.

The group have been instrumental in assisting with the REFLECT programme over the last two years. This is a scheme supported by many agencies and supported by the Criminal Justice system where people who are processed for drunk and disorderly offences are given the chance to raise awareness on the effects of alcohol to themselves and wider society.

The organisation has also been eager to attend local Pubwatch meetings and, over the last three months, have presented to licensees at Burnley and Darwen to promote activity and raise awareness amongst people in the trade to consider AA for anybody they recognise as perhaps needing help. In addition, posters in premises have also been put up in various establishments.

AA has also made inroads into the custody system. This is crucial to me as we are likely to see the same faces being arrested for alcohol-related offences. We have a duty to signpost individuals where necessary to seek help. For me, AA is one of these organisations who may be able to provide help to people in need. Work is ongoing to ensure AA is added to our list of key agencies and to provide information on local meetings where appropriate.

I was also privileged to attend an Open Meeting in Rishton last month to see how a meeting is run and to understand more about the AA process. I found this to be a humbling experience where I could see the benefits of the support that members provide to each other.

Sgt Middleton also attended some of these meetings, as well as local neighbourhood officers, and I have already discussed attending another meeting in the New Year to pass

on my own personal experience of attending to colleagues and partners to promote the work and help dispel any myths or preconceptions of AA.

The work being done is extremely positive and, even if we only helped one person going forwards, to me that is good news. I see AA as another key part of the system we are involved in as being there to provide that help to individuals as we strive to help people who need it and, from my perspective, reduce alcohol-related crime and disorder.

Regards

Sgt 3707 Gary Hennigham

Licensing Sergeant - East Division

News Roundup

The Chit System

There is still some misunderstanding among AA members as to how the chit system works at group level. Concerns relate to anonymity, possible affiliation with government agencies and any other issues that might break Traditions.

The use of chits was endorsed by Conference in 1987 and 2009 to provide 'confirmation of attendance' to those sentenced by the courts to attend meetings. Quite simply, the chit is handed to the person making the request by the designated officer of the group he or she is attending. The chit is inside a sealed envelope and contains basic details, including the attendee's name, date and time of the meeting, the meeting's address and the group registration number registered at GSO.

Some intergroups and regions already produce their own chits, which can be designed and produced online at relatively low cost. To avoid confusion and the possibility of forgeries, the system is currently being refined, with the likelihood that in future, chits will be available from GSO.

AA at the Public Level

The letter from Sgt Gary Hennigham of Lancashire Constabulary proves the value of maintaining good public relations wherever possible and upholding the AA principle 'attraction rather than promotion'. The positive feedback then has a ripple effect and encourages other organisations to engage our help.

Clearance Forms

Prison meetings across the UK rely on a steady influx of AA members to make up the weekly rotas. Due to the high levels of security at British prisons, clearance can be a lengthy and sometimes complicated process. Thanks to the continuing efforts of AA, and the cooperation of prison staff, much is being done to make this easier.

Sometimes, online clearance forms aren't filled in, leading to a lapse in the application. To counter this, some intergroups and regions offer technical support to those experiencing difficulties. This helps to speed the process along and removes any concerns over the form-filling itself.

Prisoners rely on what is often their one weekly meeting and are always grateful for the AA members who come in to share their recovery. A full rota takes pressure away from the PLO and ensures that the prison meetings continue uninterrupted.

Probation Liaison

The Probation Liaison Officer's report for East Lancashire Intergroup highlights the importance of the role and how effective it can be when dealing with professionals. A presentation at Highfield House Probation hostel in Accrington was well received, with staff introduced to AA during a one-hour presentation. There is now a bi-weekly meeting at the hostel with good attendance, and especially good relations with staff are being built.

As the result of a meeting with the intergroup PLO, the Senior Probation Officer of East Lancashire invited AA to train 40-50 probation officers from Burnley and Blackburn Probation Offices respectively. Offenders in the community are also encouraged by the probation service to attend AA through the chit system.



**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

Seasonal Greetings from all on the Prison Subcommittee!