

# AA

## **PIONEERS IN SKIRTS:**

**THE  
WOMEN'S  
STORIES  
OF THE  
BC/YUKON AREA**



PIONEERS IN SKIRTS:

THE WOMEN'S STORIES FROM THE BC/YUKON AREA

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*"THANK-YOU FOR THE PAST, SO WE MAY HAVE A FUTURE"*

## EDITOR'S NOTE

Shortly after I became the Archives Chair for BC/Yukon Area in 2005, I received an email, forwarded by the chairperson, from a long-time member of Alcoholics Anonymous. She brought our attention to the back page of the book *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes to the BC/Yukon Area*, published in 1983, where it states, "Coming Soon: The Women's Stories, the Interior Stories and the Institution Stories". She wondered if we were ever going to do those women's stories, or if not, perhaps we should consider eliminating that back page.

I decided it was too important to let slip, and in my role as Archives chair I went ahead with the project. I and several other women began to interview women with 35-plus years of sobriety during my two-year term. Some of the stories were transcribed from interviews. Others were more like question-and-answer sessions, based on our long-timer interview outline. Thus, some stories are longer than others.

There is no way that this is a comprehensive list of the women in our Area who qualify for this project. It is only a small sample. We put the word out to as many people as possible throughout our Area, and yet, I know, there are many more whose stories could fill a second volume. At the beginning of the book I have included two remembrances of women no longer with us. This is followed by Elsie J.'s recounting of the early days of AA in the BC/Yukon Area, as she was there right at the beginning and has remained a loyal "friend of AA". After that, the women's stories are in alphabetical order by first name.

For me, it has been an honour to hear and edit these stories. During one of my interviews, I had an emotional moment as I was thinking about this woman's relationship with her sponsor, who is now passed on, and how many years it spanned. I was thinking about my connection with the women that I have known since I have been a sober member of AA, and even the women I meet today who have been around a long time. I feel I am really a part of something big; part of a great lineage — a movement that started long before I showed up and will continue long after I am gone.

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There is just something really incredible about it all. If you take AA out of me, who am I? It is a big part of my identity. I am reminded of the speaker from India at the Toronto International Convention in 2005. He said something like, "I hope you women will one day soon swarm my country because to date the women in my country are not allowed to acknowledge that they are alcoholics. Very few have the courage to come." That hit me hard. I cried and I thought, "We still have a lot of work to do." God willing, we will do it, one day at a time.

Thank you for the privilege of facilitating this project and thank you to the women who shared their experience, strength and hope.

Archives Chair, Panel 55 — BC/Yukon Area Committee

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## SALLY P. : IN MEMORIAM

**By Elisabeth G.**

Sally died recently at the age of 94 years. She was a wonderful, wonderful person and I miss her very much. She came to AA in '50 or '51 and belonged to Kerrisdale, which was a group that had started in 1947 and eventually split into two groups — A1 and A2. Sally came to our group and gave me a lot of information which I have noted down for our group history. I admired her very much, mostly because of the kind of person she was. She was warm, very kind, and she had the spirituality that interested me very much. I wanted to be like her. I asked her once what exactly a spiritual awakening was, and she said the spiritual awakening in AA is “aha”. She said an “aha” is when you hear something for the hundredth time and you say “Oh, so that’s what it is! AHA. I get it!” With that in mind, I realized I am a spiritual person myself because I have had “aha’s” many times.

One time I went to her and told her that I had been sent by the Interview Group Committee, and that I was to ask what she thought about the traditions because she was here when they were accepted in 1951. She said, “Well, we didn’t like them and we fought them tooth and nail because we had got along just fine on helping others and without any traditions. We felt that the traditions were politics. So they were not well received among the people that I knew.” I was very surprised and I didn’t interview her. There were very, very few women at that time.

Sally was working for a radio station at that time, she had a deep and very beautiful voice. I remembered her the first time I ever heard her reading Chapter 5. The story behind that is that she and her husband had been on a holiday down to California and she had been at one meeting where they had decided to read Chapter 5 before the meeting. She thought it was such a wonderful, marvelous idea that she took it to her own group here in Vancouver. She told them about this and started reading it when she was asked at Kerrisdale A2. Then there were people who visited our group, and we did have an awful lot of visitors because we had such lovely sandwiches.

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Kerrisdale A2 was definitely a "Powder Puff Group". That's what they called it — or "Rich Widows Group". You had lace cloth, fancy cups and saucers; beautiful sandwiches; and they came from far and wide to look at the ladies and eat sandwiches. So many people heard of Sally reading Chapter 5 and took it to their groups and that's how it started. So that is very interesting to take note that actually Chapter 5 was first read in Kerrisdale A2 group.

There is another note here from conversations with Sally. They were constantly looking for ways of sobering up the people from skid row and people recently released from Oakalla Prison. They tried to house these people, supply food and transport, find them jobs and look after their women and children. You know, this is not carrying the message; this is carrying the whole family. It was an extreme way. But there was no other help, you see. This group effort did not seem to produce lasting sobriety for the new charges.

Another endeavour of Kerrisdale A2 was the creation of Georgia Street Rehab Centre for Alcoholics. This place was staffed mostly by members from the group on a volunteer basis. The problems then had to be ironed out for the first time with no precedents to follow. After someone on a slip had disappeared with the operating funds for the second time, the Rehab Centre folded for good. That was in the early '50s. These were stories that Sally told me.

They also had a family group which they started from Kerrisdale A2 that included the alcoholic and her and his immediate family, who truly participated in all group activities, including answering the roll call, which meant that they answered "here yes" or "here no", meaning that you hadn't drunk for the last week. This family group only lasted a few years.

There was another thing about Sally. They had a Saturday meeting which was held at Sally and Dick's place in their rumpus room. They lived in Kerrisdale at that time. Dick was not an alcoholic, but he was certainly very supportive of Sally and all her new friends. They met at their home and they first had the meeting, then coffee and visiting. It was tremendously helpful.



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Everybody in those days had been once or many times to Sally's home in Kerrisdale. I have heard about many people who have been there and it always went on even when Sally and Dick went on holidays. They would simply leave the keys with somebody. And all that was supplied by Sally and Dick was the coffee. The rest of the group looked after the sandwiches and all those things. It had discontinued by the time I came in.

## LILLIAN S. (1903-1998): IN MEMORIAM

**By Bev H.**

Lillian began her sobriety in 1949, at the age of 46 years, at the Kerrisdale A2 group in Vancouver. She and her husband and young daughter moved shortly thereafter to Port Alberni where her husband had employment — something to do with marine insurance, I think, but am not sure.

Within a short time, they purchased a lovely piece of property on the ocean just up-Island from Qualicum Bay, which she dearly loved and where she continued to live until she died. For many years she remained a member of the Alberni group of AA, but was very supportive of the new group(s) on the east coast of the Island and eventually became a (founding?) member of the ABSI (As Bill Sees It) group in Qualicum. She served for some time as treasurer of the ABSI group and was a staunch member — other members made sure she got to meetings after she stopped driving. I don't know how many people she sponsored and helped and listened to over the years, but it would be a large number.

Lillian made a significant contribution to mid-Island Alcoholics Anonymous. She was a linchpin — many people relied upon her wisdom and her gentle acceptance. She was an extremely articulate speaker and was very well grounded in the philosophy and practice of the principles of Alcoholics Anonymous. Lillian spoke at numerous rallies and public education meetings around the Island and on the Lower Mainland. (There is at least one newspaper article regarding her speaking that I gave to the archives.) She was on the platform at the celebration of 50 years of Alcoholics Anonymous in BC.

In her later years, members would show up at her home to cut the grass (quite a challenge on the two-plus acres) paint the house as and when needed, and just generally help out — many to repay what she had so freely given in terms of support and wisdom. She rarely, if ever, gave advice.

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Lillian was for a period of time registered with New York Central Office as a loner and was a committed correspondent. She also corresponded with a number of “old-timers” to record the beginnings and progressive growth of the fellowship in the mid-Island. Some of these documents are included in the material now in the possession of the Area 79 Archives.

Lillian continues to be held in the highest esteem by all who knew her — and many who didn't, but have heard her quoted by those of us fortunate enough to have loved and learned from her. We miss her greatly and try to carry the message she brought to us during her 49-plus years as a loving, spiritual and humble member of Alcoholics Anonymous.\*

*\* Lillian is survived by her daughter and two grandsons, who were devoted to her and whom she loved dearly. They all live in Vancouver and are very proud of her legacy in Alcoholics Anonymous, and made her papers and collection available to the Archives.*

## MARRIED TO AA #2 — SHE WAS THERE WHEN IT ALL BEGAN

### Elsie J.

In 1939 I married Gordon J., an alcoholic with a ten-year-old daughter. I was 21 years old at the time and he was 29. I knew he drank too much, but I had never heard the word “alcoholic”. I thought getting married would settle him down and we would live happily ever after. Within the next seven years he was hospitalized, in jail, and I left him several times, all because of his drinking.

The last time I left my husband because of drinking was in 1944. He came to see me at my mother's house and told me he had answered an ad in the paper. This ad was placed in the Vancouver Sun by Charlie B. and paid for by Charlie Welch, offering help for alcoholics through Alcoholics Anonymous. Gordon was the first man to answer the ad, which had been running for some time. Charlie B. had come to see him and brought him the book Alcoholics Anonymous, often referred to as the “Big Book”. He brought it to me at my mother's. I read it and I learned that he was sick and had a disease called “alcoholism”. I went back to him. Charlie came over and Gordon asked him how many were in AA. Charlie told him there were thousands. Then Gordon asked him how many were in Vancouver and Charlie said, “Well, there are just you and me.” But soon after, he came over with another letter — from Everett G. — and then another. So there were four of them. They had enough men for a meeting and Charlie Welch, known as the Candy-Maker, offered his home for the first meeting on December 15, 1944.

Charlie Welch belonged to the very exclusive Terminal City Club in Vancouver. Mr. Welch's wife had died from alcoholism. She was the chocolate-dipper. This was during the war and sugar was rationed. People would line up outside their store on the one day a week they were open. He never had a drinking problem. There was a minister at this club, and several other men, and Mr. Welch told them all about Alcoholics Anonymous, which his brother-in-law had found. His wife's brother visited from Sacramento and brought the AA message to these men. They knew that in order to get started they needed to find a drunk.

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One of the fellows told them he used to belong to the Oxford Group and he knew a businessman who was now on skid row. That was Charlie B. So the fellow who knew him went down to see him on skid row and took him the Big Book. Charlie agreed to give it a go and he took to it like a duck to water.

So Charlie came right off skid row, loved the Big Book, loved Alcoholics Anonymous and met Gordon, and off they went. Gordon was in the Hollywood Sanatorium in New Westminster. In those days the hospitals would not take you in as a drunk. You had to go to the Sanatorium if you could afford the \$15-a-day cost. Gordon talked AA in there to George C. from Calgary and Turner F. from Kelowna, and they started AA in those places. We used to go up there with Charlie and his family before the Hope-Princeton road was built. We would go through Wenatchee and Osoyoos. Often we would charter a bus and take a load of alkies all over BC and the Island.

Charlie and Gordon loved each other for all the years. The war was on and gas was rationed. Being a salesman and being the only one with a car, Gordon never turned down any of the 12-step calls that came, of which there were many. However, it did not keep him sober. The harder he worked for AA, the more he drank. He went on this call once to see this butcher, Huey, whose wife had taken everything, including the piano. Huey was frying a big steak and he had a bottle of whiskey on the stove. He asked Gordon if he wanted a drink, and they got drunk together. Gordon was on the call!

During those two years of drinking in AA, Mary, the wife of Charlie, took me into their home many times, showing me kindness, love, strength and hope, for which I am most grateful. Margery G., the wife of Everett, the first secretary for AA here, and many other wives offered any and all the help I needed. We were close in those days; talk was far more important than sleep. This was the groundwork for Al-Anon. At this time it was not recognized that alcohol affects the whole family. As I read the Big Book, the chapter to the wives, I felt it was a spiritual problem. I was raised to go to church, but it took the fellowship to show me that God is love, and I saw love in action. I heard them say to each other, "Here is my hand; I will guide you and direct you. Follow me."

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It took two years for Gordon to sober up and stay sober, which he did until his death in 1973. With the help of AA he enjoyed 27 years of sobriety.

The first men who came were very professional men; there was a judge, a doctor, a lawyer and a lieutenant. Gordon was just a car salesman. Charlie was a real estate man. Granger was a butcher. Gordon was 34 years old and the youngest of the bunch.

The ad continued in the paper and they were getting lots of letters. Within a year they had over 135 men and some women coming. There were only about three women in AA. There was one woman whose husband was a senator, but she never really did get sober. The wives were invited the last Friday of every month, so we got to know each other. We sat in on the meetings and we just loved it. I loved meeting the other wives because I couldn't imagine anyone else putting up with all the nonsense.

The group was getting too big for the house — people were sitting up the stairs and everywhere. They split up into districts. We lived in the east part of Vancouver and Gordon attended a meeting they named after a founding member. As they learned more about the program, they realized they could not keep that name; they renamed it the Kingsway Group. Gordon and Granger C. and his wife Mary were very involved. The group is still there. Charlie was a real go-getter. He was sort of an evangelist — he was a fantastic speaker. He always spoke at all the big meetings we had. It grew from there. Now they had four or five groups to go to each week. The group in the west part of Vancouver called the meeting the Kitsilano Group, which preferred to be closed.

The wives started the Kitsilano Friendship group. We said that our husbands were learning the 12 steps at their meetings and they were going to get ahead of us, so we better quit this chit chat and study the program ourselves. So we did that. At that time we were called NAA — Non-Alcoholics Anonymous. I have that literature: pamphlets from NAA. That was prior to Al-Anon. We started to write to Lois W. I have the original letters. Lois wrote to us about getting together a preamble. She asked us to sit down and write it. The Kitsilano group wrote the preamble for Al-Anon, which is being used worldwide.

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Bill W. came here many times and he would stay at Charlie B.'s house. His mother even came here from California. Bill's mother and father were divorced. His mother came up with her husband and I met them several times. Charlie B.'s wife was a schoolteacher and they had a little girl who was two years old then. She's 62 years old now and I just stayed with her last weekend. I've known her since she was two. They also had a son named Charlie. They took Bill to the penitentiary. He spoke at Exhibition Gardens to a very large crowd. He also spoke once at the Vancouver Hotel. After Bill spoke, he was in the bathroom and some guy came in and said to him, "I don't know what that fellow was talking about. I didn't think much of that." And Bill said to him, "I don't blame you, son." Granger was there and he would tell us this story many times and we would laugh.

Bill's dad was the engineer of the Florida Keys. He left that job after a hurricane killed over 400 people. He then moved to Cranbrook and was an engineer there. Then he got sick and moved to Vancouver. Charlie B.'s sister, Ada, looked after him until he died in 1954. Bill, of course, attended his funeral here in Vancouver.

Those were wonderful days. We were like a family. We had dinners at our houses. Then we started the Hillcrest Dance on the last Saturday of each month. Gordon was a drummer and had a band. He sold the drums when he sobered up because he said every time he went out to play he got drunk and that it was the drums' fault. But when we started the AA socials, he bought another set. Mary C. played piano. Alec W.'s wife played the violin. We had so much fun at those socials. We had picnics. We had a New Year's bash at the Exhibition Centre and Gordon got a band together. We had music and turkey dinner and the whole thing cost us \$3.50.

At the beginning, there was no literature. We had the Big Book. We used to go to Mexico in the winters. We had the directory and a name — Sandy, who was a taxi driver. We found him and asked him how he got to AA. He was a loner. He told us that a couple came from New York and that he was working as a fishing guide at the time. He didn't show up to take them fishing because he was drinking. So they went back to New York and sent him a Big Book. And that is how AA got started in Mazatlán.

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I feel part of both AA and Al-Anon; it was first through AA that my spiritual growth started. I will be forever grateful to have been exposed to the program and will try to carry the message to others out there every opportunity I have. I am still trying to practise the program in all my affairs.

*Note: Elsie has travelled to China, Russia, Mexico and Hawaii to carry the message, and she is still as passionate about AA today, at 89 years of age, as she has ever been.*



## SOBER TWICE — GOD HAD A PLAN FOR HER LIFE

### Angela O.

I grew up in a pretty straight British family — high on morals. I didn't agree and I didn't fit in. We had a lot of deaths in my family. There was a tuberculosis epidemic and I went to bed when I was seven and I was in bed for a year. I had a shadow on my lung. In the meantime, one sister died and two other sisters and a brother were put into hospital. They all died. My final sister died when I was 13 years old. My mom and dad built a second house to separate the illness. They were told to take us to a dry climate, so they built in North Vancouver! Then I got sent to the States to go to school and never lived with the family again. So I escaped the TB. It was pretty horrendous — five of the eight children died. I guess I was traumatized and depressed, but absolutely didn't know it. I just thought I needed to get somewhere where there was laughter. I noticed there was a dance hall on Davie Street and the sign said \$2.00. I looked up the phone number and called and they said you could come without an escort. I got everybody confused about where I would be that night and I went to the hall. I was as green as grass. I was 16 years old. Some fellow asked me to dance and while we were dancing he asked if I would like a drink, so I said "yes". We went out to this van and he handed me a mickey and told me "drink down to here", which I did. I went into an immediate blackout and when I came to I was wandering around English Bay. I had thrown up and fallen and I was just a mess. I thought that if that's what happened when you drank, I would never do that again. And I didn't, for a couple of years.

My parents moved to the Island toward the end of wartime, and I wanted to live with them. But the house they were to live in fell through, so it gave me the perfect excuse to rent a room. They introduced me to a gal who was a couple years older than me and on Saturday nights they all went for a drink before they went to the dance. They invited me along to the beer parlour. I tasted the beer and thought it was horrible. But the second beer — God, I was gorgeous — I could dance and sing. Well, within 18 months no one would drink with me. I didn't have any friends left. I made my way down to Victoria — a geographical — and from there back east. I had a little girl at 19 years of age. It was the shame of the century — no one even lived together then, let alone had children out of wedlock.

So I decided to stay back east as I knew they wouldn't accept her here. My sister had married a Catholic who was a Mexican and my parents disowned her. They told her, in their arrogant way, that she was no longer welcome in Canada! You can imagine what they would have done with me. Then I got a letter from my brother telling me that my father had died. He said that since I was the baby of the family it was my job to come and take care of my mother, who really didn't need taking care of. So I bought a bottle of rum and sat down to write a letter, explaining that if they wanted me they would have to accept my little girl. I came back and made the decision that I wasn't going to drink again. However, I started drinking about eight-nine months after I returned. Within a year my mother changed the locks on the door and left a note saying that I was no longer welcome and that she was taking my daughter to California.

She had told me the week before that there was something in Vancouver called AA and it was doing wonderful things for people like me. I had never heard the word "alcoholic" and I certainly didn't know I was one. I came to Vancouver to look it up. I went to have a few drinks to get the courage to contact them and... I ended up living on the street. I checked into a hotel, but within a week I had no money left. So they kept my clothes and I lived on the street. I really wasn't equipped for the street, but on the other hand, if I mentioned it today the kids probably wouldn't identify with me because I didn't have a clue. I don't even know how long I lived on the street. I don't remember much about it all but I do remember some good parts. Other people might call it shame but I know it's good for me to remember it. There was a bartender that invited me to stay at his house one night. He lived off Robson Street. At that time there were bootleggers all along Granville, upstairs above the stores. I slept on the couch and in the morning he looked at me and said, "You're not staying tonight; this isn't a flophouse." He didn't want sex with me — nobody did. I lived in the same clothes for about eight months. Another night someone offered to buy me food. It was on Dunsmuir Street across from the St. Regis and I remember thinking I had to pick something really cheap. I had never had Chinese rice so I picked that because it was only 85 cents and I didn't think he would complain. Another man invited me to stay in his room. All the way up I'm dreading that I might have to sleep with him. When I go to get into bed he says, "Oh no, you're not getting under the sheets, you sleep on top of the bed." I was just so grateful to be out of the cold.

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After walking the streets all night, I passed a short man walking outside the Vancouver Sun building. He said, "What are you doing to yourself?" and I said, "I don't know." He asked if I wanted to go for a ride and I did. He had a big Lincoln and he drove me on Marine Drive by the university where all the big homes were. Then he came along to Main Street. I had never been there. There is a hotel alongside the Great Northern Railway. He asked me I would like a beer and I said, "Oh, I need a beer." He took me in and bought me one beer and he had a tomato juice. It was scary in there. He looked at me and said he was not going to buy me another drink but that he was going uptown to a meeting. He asked if I wanted to stay or go to a meeting. I did not want to stay so he dropped me off and gave me a dollar. I went into the Niagara Hotel and it was only about 9:30 a.m. I grabbed a newspaper and bought a glass of beer for ten cents and hid behind the paper. I was trying to get the beer down. I suddenly remembered AA. I went into the bathroom and I swear to God there was a pay phone in there. Shirley W. told me she used to drink there and she used the phone to call the post office and tell them she wasn't going to make it to work.

I looked up the number in the phone book but there was no answering machine, just a message that they were closed for the weekend and would be in on Monday morning. So I drank all weekend. I got myself into a table where there were two sisters who were nurses. I gave them a big story that I was going to be joining the police force on Monday morning. I ended up going to their house for the weekend. They stopped drinking on Sunday and I tried to clean up my whiskey-stained mauve sweater and get ready to join AA the next day. I came down with them when they went to work. The AA office was in the 500 block of Granville Street. They had a woman named Lucy working in the office who was not alcoholic. This was September 27, 1953. She gave me some brochures and told me how it works. She asked me if I could stay sober until 9:00 that night. I told her I never had. She said that if I could there was a meeting not too far from the office. In those days, all the meetings were at 9:00 p.m. because no one had cars. You needed time to get home from work, have dinner and get on a streetcar. They gave me the 20 questions and said I was alcoholic. I told them I was 23 years old and they later told me they thought I was lying because I looked way past 30 years of age. They told me to go just 20 minutes at a time. I made it to 9:00 p.m. and went to the meeting and I REALLY wanted what they had. They all looked great! Charlie B. was there; Colin C., Fred H., Anne Bea M., Audrey and Wilf G. There weren't many women back then. There were maybe five or six. Mavis M. was one.

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I went back to the Island, banking on the fact that my mother might be back from California. She was very disappointed to see me. She was hoping I would be dead. I went to the back door and told her I had joined AA and I needed some money. I hadn't even been to the first meeting yet. I had just been to the office. I think that is amazing; that when you're finished you feel like you are part of it already. She gave me \$50 on condition that I not see my daughter for one year. I took the \$50 and then asked if I could see my daughter. She said, "No, the deal is you take the money and leave." I had to walk back to the water. There were no BC Ferries, just the CPR, which ran three times a day. I had to sit on the dock and see all the beer parlours in the distance with that \$50 in my pocket. I knew that if I went up there I would never see her again. When I got back, I had \$40 and I checked into the YWCA for a week. I went to my first meeting that night. At the end of the week they introduced me to Audrey G., whose husband Wilf had an exclusive men's wear shop. She invited me to live with them. So I went from the street to a week in the YWCA to a home on the beach in West Vancouver.

I thought I would never drink again, and I didn't for 12 years. But I got married during that time and we moved 50 miles north of Lillooet. My husband had a ranch and we raised Arabian horses and Hereford cattle. It was far too soon for me to be away from my meetings. There was no AA there. We came back here after six years and I went to the odd meeting, but I had fallen asleep. I was a drop-in. I never thought I'd drink again. I talked AA philosophy all the time. I talked about God and I went to church. I never made the decision to drink. But my husband had quit drinking seven years before I met him, but he didn't go to AA, so he certainly didn't encourage me to go. I simply fell asleep even though I stayed in touch with some of the AA people like my sponsor. But you know, when I was in AA I was really in it — and some of these people weren't. I worked at the Vancouver Sun and I would go to the Alano Club where they had a big restaurant with five or six waitresses — Charlie B. had put up the money to get that going — and Sally P. would have meetings at her house. I'd go to these and then I'd catch the blue bus back to Cypress Park and they'd ask, "How was it?" Looking back, I wonder how come my sponsor and her husband didn't go to as many meetings as I did.

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My husband had a massive heart attack and was in the hospital for three months. He had been given a lot of drugs, which I had never been around before. I remember being told when I came into AA that I should go to the doctor for a checkup but not to let him give me any pills. I didn't know what they meant and I never asked questions. I thought that if they knew the way I drank they would kick me out. They all looked so good and many of them were professional people. Well, he had always been a serious, uptight person and all of a sudden he was coming home happy. I had never been very happy in my marriage, but all of a sudden I'm thinking this might be okay after all. He came home one night and he had been drinking. It went right over my head. And then he committed suicide — on April 13, 1965.

I turned 12 on September 27, 1965. In November I was at the Bayshore Inn with my in-laws at a banquet. If anyone had told me that I would be drunk when I left there I would have said, "No way." I never had the thought. I had never been to the liquor store. I had never wanted any booze. But I didn't want to go that night and I felt pressured. I was depressed and felt dead. I toasted the Queen with water, like I always did. They had a 30-piece band and they began to play. They all got up to dance and I sat there and listened and sang along — and all of a sudden I felt so sorry for myself. I thought, "I was only 23 years old when I quit drinking and I never had any fun." I drank every drink on the table. I picked up some young guy at the next table and away I went. I came home at 3:00 a.m. and turned on my daughter's light. Catherine sat straight up in bed and I said, "There has been a horrible mistake — I'm not alcoholic after all." She burst into tears.

I drank for eight years. I got a job at a classy Hotel and worked myself right up the ladder. But I drank all the time. I drank to get out of bed and to get to work. At the end I had an American Express card from the Hotel with signing privileges. I kept a good front and many nights I sat in the parking lot and waited to get sober enough to drive home. And then I noticed that the bottle seemed to be going awfully fast and I was concerned that I was drinking more than I thought. So I brought a shot glass home and started measuring. Sure enough, the next day more was gone than I drank.

## PIONEERS IN SKIRTS:THE WOMEN'S STORIES FROM THE BC/YUKON AREA

So when my son got home from school I read the riot act to him. "What are you doing — drinking it or giving it away, trying to act like a big shot?" He started to cry, "No, actually I promised Catherine I would look after you, so I've been pouring it down the sink and watering it." Oh man, did I feel terrible. So things like that were starting to happen. When my daughter came back from overseas I suggested she go to Quadra Island to see my sponsor, who had moved there. I knew that she was almost suicidal from worry about my drinking, but I couldn't help her. The shame I felt for putting my kids in those positions. I had Kevin, who was 16 years old when I quit drinking, and Michael who was seven and a half years old.

I was 43 years old when I came back to AA. I was having alcoholic seizures. I was lying on the couch and my heart was pounding and there was sweat pouring off me. Michael walked by me and I called him back. His whole body slumped and I asked, "Honey, what's wrong. You look so unhappy." He said, "I've been unhappy for so long and I don't know why." I was so sick that I felt if I let go I would die. I knew that I had to work really hard to try to undo what I had done. Michael is 39 years old now and a gorgeous man.

So I was going to a lot of meetings and my daughter, who had moved to Campbell River, called and asked if I was going to their rally. I thought if I didn't go she would disapprove of me and I was trying to work myself back into everybody's graces. So I took the bus and arrived in Campbell River at midnight and went to her apartment. There was a letter on the coffee table telling me how proud she was of me for coming, along with a phone number of someone who could pick me up. I looked around and I saw a book on the shelf called Thy Great Glorious Physician. It was based on Luke in the Bible but read like a novel. I lost myself in that book for several days. I went to the opening of the rally and there were only seven people there. Now that woman who picked me up was Al-Anon and her husband was the chairperson. He was unable to attend that night because they had just opened a new business. She took me home to meet him after the rally. The next day I left the rally and went back to Catherine's apartment in the afternoon, for some reason. The phone rang and it was him asking if I would go on a 12-step call. I ended up 12-stepping the florist's mother who had fallen and broken her ankle at 70 years old. I managed to get her to a meeting Sunday morning. I went back to Vancouver and didn't think anything special had happened — I mean it was a nice rally but I wasn't on a big high or anything. But within a month or so I really felt that God wanted me to move to Campbell River. I have no idea why and I didn't think that God spoke to us.

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I gave a couple months' notice and moved to Campbell River. One of the members of my home group, the Oak Street Group, said, "Angela, why are you going? Everyone loves you here." I didn't know; I just felt God wanted me to. This guy said, "Well, if you do nothing else, take AA to Cape Munch, the reserve on Quadra Island." I had never heard of it but off I went. There were only two meetings a week there — both on the same night! I thought that was totally bizarre. I wondered how I was going to stay sober, especially in that I didn't know anybody. So I alternated going to one meeting one week and the other meeting the next. After a few months I was approached by some AA members and asked to start a group. It scared the hell out of me. I didn't know how we started groups. It turns out that the reason they had two meetings on the same night was because someone got resentful and did it out of spite, which divided the members in Campbell River. So we were looking to reunite AA.

You know, I sponsored a priest when I lived in Vancouver. I didn't know he was a priest at first — he was at our home group every week but didn't wear his collar. I guess he liked what I had to say and wanted me as a sponsor. As a result of that, the Diocese found out about me. There was a priest in Campbell River who was having a lot of problems, so they asked me if I would help. Now, by then I was working at the chairperson's store. There was no Alano club in those days. The courts would send people to our store. I would welcome people as they came into the store, not knowing if they were going to order paint or carpet or if they'd say, "The judge sent me." There were 11 of us on staff but I was the only woman in AA. I would page someone and they'd come down and take him and 12-step him in the coffee room.

I was procrastinating on making the house call to the priest and feeling guilty about it. One day the police were in looking for me, so I called them and asked if there was a problem. "Yes, the Diocese in Vancouver is trying to reach you." I phoned them and they told me they were worried about this priest. I drove up and saw his car; rang the doorbell. No answer. I went back to the police station and asked for help to break in so we could check on him.

## PIONEERS IN SKIRTS:THE WOMEN'S STORIES FROM THE BC/YUKON AREA

Two plainclothes policemen accompanied me — one, I later found out, was a Catholic. They had quite a hard time getting in and I thought I'd be funny and I said, "Gee, I wouldn't hire you guys for a B&E." They didn't find that funny at all. They searched the house and couldn't find the priest. I asked if I could have a look. You know, it says, "We will intuitively know..."\* I had never been in that house before and I walked out the kitchen and down the stairs and there were several doors. I opened one door and Father was sitting there on a keg of wine, hiding. He was sent away and, while he stayed sober, he was never allowed to return.

About six years had gone by and, unbeknownst to me, my sponsor had stopped going to meetings. My daughter had asked me once what I thought would happen to people who stopped going to meetings and I said, right in front of my sponsor, "I think they'll drink." It went over my head that my daughter knew something that I didn't. My sponsor said, "Angela, you don't seem to realize that I'm on a different spiritual level than you are." The hairs on the back of my neck stood up and I thought, "She's going to drink." She did when I was seven years sober. She had 27 years of sobriety. So I was not a lesson to her but she was one to me. She was in the psychiatric ward for five months and then I let her stay with me and took her to meetings. But she never really got it again.

Then I got a call from a woman who said she lived on Quadra Island and had a daughter who had a drinking problem. I told her I would visit with her on Monday, my day off. She met me at the ferry, this very attractive Native woman named Ruby W. She's about 90 years old now. She got me in the car and drove me to Cape Munch, telling me about her daughter's alcoholism. I told her that I would love to help but that her daughter would have to ask for it herself. A little while later I was at the group I started called Lifeline and a Native man whom I knew from Vancouver came into the meeting with a very attractive young woman. I introduced myself and asked her where she was from. She said, "Cape Munch." This was a Thursday and I told her, "I'm starting a meeting there on Tuesday." That meeting has been going now for 26 years. Kim P. asked if there were any registered members of Cape Munch and there weren't. She suggested that I leave Lifeline, since it was established, and join. So I did. I was the only registered member.



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A lot of things happened that were really God things. I was asked by one of the Catholic brothers to take AA to Gold River Reserve. I suggested they may want a Native person there and he said they didn't request that. They just wanted to get sober. Then I suggested they probably would like a man. Then I told him I didn't have a car and he said he would drive me. We left every Wednesday at 5:30 a.m. and I would stay overnight and return in time to make coffee for my home group. The first day there he introduced me to all the homes on the reserve. There was a man on crutches in one home, and he didn't want to come to the meetings. A few months later, towards the end of the meeting, I heard the door open and heard the crutches, and so I asked, "Is there anybody else who would like to say anything before we end the meeting?" He said, "Yeah, lady, I do. I can't stay sober waiting for you every week!" Here he had never drunk again since that first time I saw him. He was always waiting for me every week. And I remember saying to Brother Mike, "Don't expect miracles. I may be the only one who comes back off the reserve sober." I didn't know much then because I wasn't sober that long. I gave him the phone number for treatment. He went to MRTC for a few months and then came back and I sponsored him for a while. He eventually headed up a Native treatment centre. His name is Wilf A. One night, about 15 years after I had last been to Wilf's house, I was sitting in a meeting and a young man came in who looked just like him. When the meeting was over I asked him if he knew me. He said, "Yes, you're Angela. I'm Gary, Wilf's son." He had been sober five days.

AA was there in the 1950s. Alec P. told me that when he came in in 1954 no one had any long-term sobriety. I got there in 1975 and there were only two groups. It was definitely a God thing that I went there. It has been an incredible journey. I'm still there and I go to as many meetings as I ever did. In addition, I joined an acting group as that is something I wanted to do all my life. I also facilitate a hospice group for widows and widowers.

Once the store I worked in was sold, I went to work on a ship for ten years. I was recuperating from an eye operation and I needed to get back to work to support myself. I had a talk with God, and told him that I knew I needed to work but that I really loved living on the ocean and could he please find me a nice little place to live by the water. The very next day I got a call from the captain of this ship asking me if I wanted a job. I told him I wasn't cleared to work until May 1. He said, "That's the exact day we want you." I came to find out that the reason I was on the ship was to do 12-step work.

On my first trip out, the first mate started pressuring me to drink, and said there would be an initiation and that everyone would be getting drunk. I knew I may as well get it over with so I told him, "I won't be getting drunk, I'm a member of AA and I have 11 years of sobriety." Everything went really quiet. They were very good to me on that boat. I had asked God for a home on the ocean and I realized that's what I got. When we got to Kyuka Reserve, there was one couple that used to meet me there on the boat. I kept forgetting to ask them where they lived because I thought I could go to their place. Finally I asked them and they said they could show me on the map. "Don't you live here?" It turns out that they came by boat, without a light, in the middle of flippin' winter to get to AA. And we complain that we're too tired to go to a meeting? Joyce would come to the boat as well. The crew knew her when she was drinking, so they knew why she was there. They would unload the freight and they would wait until I thought she was okay for another week. The power of God is unbelievable.

The most important thing for long-term sobriety is practice. Practise the presence of God; practise being observant of the new members who walk into a group. We can't expect them to say they need help. We need to be the example.

*\* Quotation on page 17 is reprinted from Alcoholics Anonymous, 4th Edition, page 84 with permission of AA. World Services, Inc*

## VANCOUVER ISLAND IS HOME TO HER SOUL

### Bev. H.

At the time of this writing, I am 70 years old, which means that my childhood was during the '30s and '40s and my drinking during the '50s and '60s. It was a different world, with none of the safeguards and acceptance of today. I hope folks will bear this in mind during the reading. As well, what I have written is to the best of my memory and may not be completely accurate as to time and place, especially to do with the growth of Alcoholics Anonymous.

I was born and raised in Regina, Saskatchewan, and started my drinking at Waskesiu, a lake in a National Park in northern Saskatchewan. I had my first drink there at age 15 and we all had this booze and then we went off and threw up. Everybody else went home and I went back for more because I'd had just that little tinge of that feeling before we all got sick and I knew this could be a life-changing thing for me. Of course it was — just not the way I thought it would be.

I went to UBC and drank my way through a year and a half and did not attend very many classes. I was not grateful for this opportunity and ended up getting pregnant and having to get married. We moved to Toronto, where I more or less behaved myself during the pregnancy because I was so sick. I was married for a couple of years when I found myself back at Waskesiu after having back surgery. My behaviour was so unacceptable with the familiar drinking crowd at the lake that my husband left. That was certainly one of the first major losses in my life due to my alcoholism. I had to move back in with my parents in Regina with my very young son.

Fortunately, my parents were able to look after him, because I became increasingly unable to parent. My priorities were feeding my addiction first, not looking after my son. I moved to Calgary and put a bed into the babysitter's home. I got to Calgary because I had to move out of Regina. I'd done myself in there. I should add that at no time in my drinking did I drink like a lady.

## PIONEERS IN SKIRTS:THE WOMEN'S STORIES FROM THE BC/YUKON AREA

I drank like a pig right from day one. I was after the experience, I was after the feeling and that is why I drank. I couldn't go anywhere without drinking, so I developed a pattern of being a daily drinker and I drank constantly. In order to get away from the hangovers, I took Dexedrine in the morning. By the end of the day, to kick both of the hangovers, I took Phenobarbital I had stolen from my dad. My father was a doctor and both of my grandparents were doctors, so I had everything given to me. The one flaw in it all was that I was adopted and so I was lacking a sense of belonging. I drank my way around Calgary and suffered my next great loss, which was a boyfriend I had, a very nice man who was the love of my life. He was too smart to get hooked up with an alcoholic. He was very supportive of me when I was attempting to get sober.

One day while out looking for a bottle I ran into a man who was an AA member on a slip and he called me an alcoholic. It was one of the nicest things I'd been called in quite some time. He and his sponsor took me to a meeting. They gave me the Who Me? pamphlet to read — first reading, I answered ten of the 20 questions; second time, 19 of 20. That is how I got into AA. That was in February of 1962. I was 25 years old. AA was not that well known in those days but there were some pretty big meetings in cities the size of Calgary. At that time they were treating alcoholics with LSD. Thank God for AA. I was taken to a Sunday morning meeting at what was called the "Chapter House". The government of Alberta had given houses, which later became the Alano clubs, to the problem drinkers in both Edmonton and Calgary. They had card game night, a place for us to go, and they had meetings in the basement. They had beginners' meetings every Monday night, run by the same man for years and years. That is where I went to my first meeting. I walked through that door and knew instantly that I belonged. But I was so young — 25 years old and so smart. There was no way this was going to be suitable enough for me to give up my disastrous lifestyle, so for the next four months I accelerated to the bottom. During that time in Calgary I had two pregnancies that were terminated. There were no birth control pills in those days! It is difficult to imagine today the fear of parental and societal judgment of that time, which gave one the feeling of having no other options. The reason I mention this is that later on, in sobriety, I felt I was being punished. Blackouts were constant: it was horrifying to remember and terrifying not to remember.

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God worked overtime to get me into the hands of the right people and to the program. I had not heard about AA before that. My dad wrote me a letter at that time, a letter I still have to this day, saying, "Your mother tells me you have joined Alcoholics Anonymous. Good for you. I know a number of people who have had great success in turning their lives over to God through that organization. I hope you stick with it." I had the backing of my father and that was very important.

My parents had moved out to the Island and my son was going back and forth to be looked after. On my last drunk I was with a number of people who were just out of jail. We called them rounders — just on the edge of the law. I had fallen in with lower companions and inferior environments! They were breaking into my apartment when I wasn't there. The last night that I drank was with this group of people and several of the men broke into a club to rob it, got caught and were looking for me to post bail. My AA friends shipped me out of town on a plane and that was the last drink I had. It was June 9, 1962.

I later had to go back and find a car and my meagre furnishings. During that last drunk I had sold my furniture for \$100 and bought more for \$30 so I would have \$70 left to drink with, and \$70 was a lot of money in those days. When that money was gone I took all the coins I could get and, wearing a babushka and dark glasses (on a cloudy day), I went to the liquor store and asked what I could get. For years I'd judge myself, but today I feel such huge compassion and sorrow for that young woman. My heart just breaks for who I was then. We didn't have the help that is available now. What they did was lock me in a motel and take everything away from me, including my cheques that were no good, and the little cash I had. My son was out on the coast at the time. They came and checked on me every once in a while for about three days. That was my detox. I spent most of it in the shower trying to wash off the dirt, but the dirt was on the inside.

## PIONEERS IN SKIRTS:THE WOMEN'S STORIES FROM THE BC/YUKON AREA

There is a pamphlet in AA called Letter to a Woman Alcoholic and that was one of the first things I read. It starts out something like: "I live across the street from you and I see what you are going through and my heart breaks for you." It was something to that effect. That hit me! I just thought, "If this is true, if these people really do understand where I've been and what I've done and they can still accept and love me, then this is where I belong." So, in I came to AA.

My parents lived in Saltaire and my mother saw an AA ad in the paper. She was scared to death of me, as were others. I was completely out of control — self-will run riot. She almost whispered, "I see there's an AA meeting in Duncan." I didn't say anything but I got into this little car they had and went down to Duncan. Pat M. was chairing this meeting and subsequently I got to know his son, who was also in the program. I knew when I got there that I had to make a decision to get involved. Staying on the fringes wasn't working and I wasn't going to make it. They asked me to speak and when I got up there I gave them a short version of my story, thinking I would shock people and they wouldn't have me. They weren't shocked in the least and they loved me for a long, long time until I learned to love myself.

That was the beginning. John S. (Captain John), who is still alive and is a greatly respected long-timer in Nanaimo, and Jean, his first wife, took me under their wings. Within a few short weeks they sent me down to the Pacific Northwest Conference in Victoria in July. They told me to be on the lookout for a woman by the name of Lillian. Again God was working in my life. Lillian had 13 or 14 years at the time and she became my sponsor. Lillian lived up-Island at Qualicum Bay. She was the most influential person I have had in my life. We had no drinking pattern in common but we had our alcoholism, our recovery and being women. I remember in the early days I phoned her in a hysterical panic — yada, yada, yada. "Oh my dear, if you have taken that first drink, I'm afraid there is nothing I can do for you." Through my hysteria I told her I hadn't drunk and she replied, "Well, in that case come along and have a cup of tea." That's the way I was sponsored.

Lillian, John and Jean took me to the Delegate to learn about service, they took me to other people to learn about the traditions, and always to meetings for recovery. They didn't even ask you in those days if you would like to go — no suggestions. There were lots of musts in those days and I believe in the musts. They would say they were picking me up, going to see Jo W. (Delegate at the time) or we were going to Port Alberni to the meeting. There was a meeting in Ladysmith, a meeting in Duncan, a meeting in Nanaimo and a new one starting. There must have been at least one other in Nanaimo as I don't recall meeting any of the original members at the Health Centre meeting. There was a meeting in Port Alberni and another in Courtenay. That was it as far as I can remember, aside from Barney's house meetings for men in Campbell River, where several men sat around and listened to recordings of Father John Doe.

There were no meetings in Parksville or Qualicum. There was a loner in Parksville and everybody who travelled from Nanaimo to Port or Port to Courtenay or Port to Nanaimo picked up Norm M., the loner, on their way. We had the most wonderful meetings going and coming to meetings. The first time I went to Port Alberni, on the way home I announced that I was going to be a GSR. That was my goal in life. Their response was, "Well, we'll see about that. You need to look after your sobriety first and you don't get to do those things until you have been sober for at least a year." I never have served as a GSR.

They told us many times, "Sit down, be quiet and listen. You don't know anything yet. You don't know about recovery." The saying "I learned to listen and then listened to learn" definitely resonates with me. I don't hear many long-timer voices around anymore and I am fearful because I had to listen to them to learn how to stay sober. I didn't know how to stay sober. I didn't know about the life that I could have and the only way I could find out was to listen to the long-timers.

One critical mistake I made in sobriety was at six weeks sober. I got involved with a member. It is very sad in retrospect because he was married and I didn't know that initially, but by the time I did it was too late. I didn't have the emotional self-discipline to do anything about it. My sponsor, Lillian, called this program an exercise in self-discipline and I couldn't agree with her more, now. At the time I would have argued the point. Of course I had never had any self-discipline, so how would I know what it was all about! I got pregnant almost right away. We lived in a dear little cabin with a fieldstone fireplace on the ocean in Lantzville, for \$40 a month! Our whole life revolved around the Friday night meeting in Nanaimo. It was held in what was then the Health Centre at Fitzwilliam and Prideaux.

My first son in sobriety, Jeffrey, was born June 9, 1963 — one year after I got sober. He died on December 16 of that year, when I was 18 months sober. An Al-Anon woman said to me at the time, "No one would blame you if you drank." During this period my first son, who was now eight years old, was removed from me by his father, due to my past drinking and because I was now living common-law. It was a terrible time and I thought I was being punished for what I had done when drinking. I would storm along the beach hating God for taking away my sons. I wonder if one ever recovers fully from the loss of a child. To stay sane, I got a temporary job at the biological station, my first job in sobriety, and was soon pregnant again with my second son in sobriety, born in October 1964. This son today is fighting his own addictions and demons. He is in God's hands and I have had to learn to "release with love".

My first daughter was born in February 1966, shortly after we moved into a trailer on Lillian's property. We moved to Campbell River because Joe was then employed building the pulp mill in Gold River. There were no meetings at that time in Campbell River except for Barney and three or four men who would meet at his house weekly. I went to the Health Unit and made arrangements to start a meeting. People came out of the woodwork and even some of the men that went to Barney's every week started to attend — the meetings took off on their own! There was a man who worked at the mill, Bill S., who came in and had a wonderful sober life with his family and helped many in that community. He died after only a few years of sobriety. While we were in Campbell River in 1967, Joe met and 12-stepped a man in Gold River, by the name of Ed L., who lives here in mid-Island and is an active and beloved member of the fellowship.



## PIONEERS IN SKIRTS:THE WOMEN'S STORIES FROM THE BC/YUKON AREA

A group was started in Comox at the base and there was one in Courtenay. We would travel around and go to each other's meetings and little rallies. We were very close. It was so much smaller and more intimate in those days. We relied, in a very personal way, on one another. I think we shared more personally in those days, not necessarily at the group level. It was all great fun!

After my second daughter was born, in 1967, we moved back down-Island. It was at this time that my first son returned to live with us. He's a successful lawyer now. As well, my stepdaughter came to live with us and we have remained close over the years, and she has been in the program herself for close to 20 years. There were no meetings in Parksville/Qualicum at the time, so Joe told me to go to St. Steven's Church and we were able to start a meeting in the basement. There were a number of people around at the time, but I don't know where they were going to meetings. Although Lillian lived in Qualicum Bay, she was still going to Port Alberni, which was her home group, along with Walter, Charlie and Len — some of the originals. But she supported our new group as well. The first new people to come in were a couple — he on Christmas Eve and she on New Year's Eve of 1968. They are sober to this day. My last son was born on the Island in 1970.

Our next move for work was to Prince George, where we stayed for a year, and then down to Kamloops in 1972. It was at this time that I went on a 12-step call to Anne M., who went on to sponsor many women in the Kamloops area. I remain her sponsor. By the time I left Kamloops in 1977, there were two women's meetings and close to 30 female members. While there I managed to complete the requirements for registration as a social worker in BC. It was during our stay in Kamloops that our marriage ended. I moved to a small community close to Smithers. It had been ingrained in me that wherever I went there was AA, so I knew that to live and survive I needed to get involved with AA. I met wonderful women in AA in Smithers. But there was no work there. Throughout I have been enormously grateful for my conscious contact with my Higher Power. Without this guidance and loving support I don't believe I'd be here today.

## PIONEERS IN SKIRTS:THE WOMEN'S STORIES FROM THE BC/YUKON AREA

I have witnessed complete and utter miracles in the program. One such miracle occurred with a woman who lived by the tracks in Kamloops. People went to 12-step her and there was ice on the floor. All she had for heat was an oven open for the kids and she would be off at the bar. She got sober. The members worked very hard to get her moved across the tracks. They found her this awful apartment in a back alley behind a hotel. As dreadful as it was, it was far better than where she had been living. It was warm and it was roomy. She was like a beacon — everybody called her princess. She now lives up in Mount Currie, by Pemberton.

From there I got a job as a drug and alcohol counselor in Dawson Creek — then to Fort St. John, where I had a job as executive director of a fairly large non-profit society. I was involved in AA in both places. While in the north I remarried on the rebound, and of course it didn't work. Fortunately, we have remained good friends. We would all go up to Fort Nelson, Hudson's Hope, Chetwynd and Grande Prairie, and down to Prince George, for rallies. Everywhere we went, the kids came with us. We also attended the outdoor AA picnic in Quesnel for years. I have such fond memories of that picnic at Ten Mile Lake. The kids would swing on a rope and land in the lake while we sat around campfires and talked AA and attended outdoor meetings.

After my dearest friend there died, I lost heart, and you have to have heart to live in the north. In 1985 I moved with my two youngest to Penticton and again I immediately got involved in the AA program. After serving as an interim director of another non-profit society in Kamloops, I was offered a job in a women's treatment centre in Vancouver and we made the move. I struggled with living in the city and made several trips to the Island over the nine months I was there.

## PIONEERS IN SKIRTS:THE WOMEN'S STORIES FROM THE BC/YUKON AREA

The only advice my sponsor Lillian ever gave me was at this time. She said, "My dear, come back to the Island — it is the home of your soul." I applied for and got a job in Nanaimo in 1988, again as the director of a non-profit society, and I've been back on the Island ever since.

I belong to a home group — Back to Basics because I believe that is exactly where I need to stay. I think it is very easy to get ahead of yourself and to forget that what it's all about is the basics. We still use one of the topics from the old beginner's kit that we got from New York in 1974. That is the first part: "How to stay away from the first drink, one day at a time." We also discuss one of the Promises from page 83-84 of the book of Alcoholics Anonymous.

I am now retired. I have had such a wonderful life and retirement has been the icing. I've learned how to look after myself and learned what my priorities need to be in life. It's true that when you look after yourself by being there for others, you keep things in perspective and you keep the ego in balance. I have friends and sponsees and we are all connected.

We took a picture at my 30th AA birthday of Lillian and me and several women I've sponsored over the years — it's become generational. I tell everybody I sponsor all about Lillian. Pretty much everything I know comes from her, and I quote her constantly. She left a huge gap in my life, so I keep filling it by talking about her and passing on her message. Lillian was extremely articulate — she was hugely well-grounded in the program. She could say in ten minutes what it would take me an hour to get across. She was thoughtful, well-read; she had a very simple belief in a Power greater than herself. She was not by any stretch a religious person. She used to say that if you are not able to forgive yourself, then perhaps you are guilty of spiritual pride because we ask God to forgive us and if we won't forgive ourselves then we are setting ourselves above God. We are still connected even though she has been gone since 1998. When she died, she was nine months short of her 50th AA birthday and I know she wanted to be around for that.

AA has changed very much — not the program itself, but the practice of it, I think. Most of us in those days had hit a very low bottom and we had nothing left to lose but our lives. It may be easier to accept the “musts” — and there are musts — when one is desperate. My family didn’t want anything more to do with me and I’d lost my friends — except for one, whom I have to this day. There was nowhere to go but up. I know that people get close to one another nowadays, but we were close as a group. We were small, we felt very connected with one another, but we stuck very much to topics that related to sobriety. We didn’t do readings out of the books but we referenced the books for everything we needed an answer to.

When we talked at the meetings it was about: How do you stay sober? How do you get connected to a Higher Power? How do you live your life so that you won’t pick up that first drink? It was completely related to staying sober. It is changed now so that sometimes when a topic is suggested and doesn’t appear to be directly related to maintaining sobriety, I don’t know what to do with it. I think AA is in danger of becoming fragmented if we try to meet everyone’s needs. We only know what it was like, what happened and what it is like now — our stories and how to stay sober.

We were always able to feel when we went to a meeting that we were going to come out of there having learned something about the program of Alcoholics Anonymous and how it related to our sobriety. The groups were smaller and therefore we were able to relate more closely and easily with one another. I think that we are having trouble staying focused on alcoholism and on getting and staying sober. I don’t know what the answer is. I don’t want to see anybody stay in the active part of any addiction, but we don’t have the answers for everybody. We do know what to do to help people stay sober one day at a time.

We used to feel that we illustrated the message — we carried it by living it. “You may be the only Big Book somebody else sees.” We were to model sobriety — attraction rather than promotion. Sponsorship is an enormous area that has gotten muddled, I think. To my mind this is a serious and responsible undertaking. I wonder if we have forgotten what the function of sponsorship is and in many cases may not have had a model on how to sponsor. I suppose modelling sobriety, sponsoring responsibly and going to meetings would be my idea of the best way to carry the message.

There is a feeling that the bigger the group, the better the group. I don't subscribe to that because that is not how it worked — and works — for me. I was very easily distracted in my early years, so when I could focus on one person at the table with half a dozen or, at most, a dozen in the room, I could feel that sense of being enveloped by the group. I could feel that God was in the room and I was able to concentrate on what was being said. I think that, ideally, groups should be a size so that everybody gets a chance to speak in the hour. We do go to listen to learn, but we also go to share because for many years of our lives, when we were drinking, we were not acknowledged — we were not heard, we were not listened to, we were not validated — and we need to feel listened to, heard and acknowledged. Sharing allows these things to happen and it is a miracle how it happens at the group level. As well, I believe there should also be a focus on the traditions and service work, in order to ensure that AA is here for the future.

From my perspective, the most important thing for long-term sobriety is staying active! You have to stay active — not just physically, but mentally and spiritually! It is not easy, especially when you are older. I can say, "Well, I'm 70 now. I've got a great deal of sobriety under my belt. I'd much rather stay home and watch West Wing." It is so easy to stay in the comfortable pew and not go out. I go to meetings where there are anywhere from 20 to 35. A small handful will have any amount of continuous sobriety. The rest are brand new — in their first two, three or four years. Someone needs to be there for them.

In order to have continuous good sobriety, the kind of sobriety I enjoy now, every day I have to be in touch with the people I sponsor, I have to be in touch with friends in the program, I have to go to meetings and I have to live this program and not forget where I came from. I have to be consciously grateful to God and AA. It's been a long time since I consciously put the steps into my daily life — it's become subconscious. I know when I need Step 10 — I know when I've done something wrong and have to rectify that. I recognize when I may be in danger of trying to run the show or when my sanity is at risk. I often have to go back to Steps 6 and 7 to address my continuing defects of character, which surface from time to time. I know when I run up against a situation where I need the power to carry out God's will. You know all of those things — they are a part of your being. I do not believe that I have an AA part of my life — it is my life. It just becomes that — how could it not, after a long time? This would not be possible without a daily connection with God and other members — I would soon forget, I'm sure of it.

There's a huge danger in complacency for me because I know that if that happened I would lose my spiritual being — it would start to drain away. If I stopped going to meetings and being active and seeking the guidance of my Higher Power, then my quality of life would diminish and I would cease to be grateful for my many blessings, and I know where that could lead. I'm not willing to take that chance — life is too good today. I have my Higher Power, my soul mate of 17 years, my dog and the leisure time to be creative, to contribute to my community and to repay Alcoholics Anonymous in a small way for my life, my self-respect and the willingness to continue to learn how to live.

## A “WILD CHILD” FINDS HER PLACE AS A WOMAN IN AA

### Beverly J.

Alcohol was a part of my life as long as I can remember. One of the early stories is of me being in a cafe with my mother and grandmother. The waitress asked, “What do you want, little girl?” I replied, “I’ll have a bottle of beer, please.” The waitress replied, “We don’t serve beer here.” I responded, “Why not? I have it at home.” I did have it at home, as there was usually some around. My dad was a big drinker and there were parties with the neighbours and friends. I was around and they always gave me a “little sip”. I threw up on the neighbour’s sofa when I was around seven or eight years old.

Dad was a big drinker, and Mother always covered up for him. The vibe in the house was usually strained. You never knew what it was going to be when he arrived home; I think the not knowing was the worst. We covered up for him and Mother always said he was just not feeling well. He embarrassed me on many occasions. He fell, along with all those in authority, in my eyes. They say they love you and then they hurt you. It was easy to see; it was all lies!

I learned to play the game. Keep smiling on the outside, and go along — don’t rock the boat. Smile, look as if you’re listening and then do as you please. I was filled with fear, hate and confusion. I also realized early that a drink took away the inside pain. It just made it all go away. I became a wild child, dancing to my own drummer. I stole booze from my dad; he hid it and I found it. He couldn’t say anything as he wasn’t supposed to have it in the first place.

My mother would tell me to stay away from certain kids as they were a bad influence on me. I would laugh as I knew I was the bad influence. At 16 years of age I moved in with my boyfriend at the bootlegger’s. We drank every day; we pawned the TV to drink. We drank beer, wine, anything hard we could get and anything homemade, even vanilla-extract-and-coke cocktails. Embarrassingly, we smelled like a cake for many days after a vanilla party. If I needed a change of clothing, I went to a store and changed clothes, leaving my dirty ones behind. We fought, I lost. We fought, I won. It was a very sick relationship. There was a lot of fear. Fear that he’d leave me, or maybe that this was to be my life.

## PIONEERS IN SKIRTS:THE WOMEN'S STORIES FROM THE BC/YUKON AREA

I ended up home again when I was 19 years old. I went back to school (easier than working), to complete my grade 12. I did my homework in the bar and encouraged my classmates to do the same. I partied as often as possible, mostly all weekend. My dad would say as I was leaving, "See you Sunday!" I would get so mad as I fully intended to come home that night; I really meant to make it but I never did. Mostly I got back late Sunday. I was full of pain and remorse.

There are plenty of stories of black eyes, broken bones and lost weekends. I had my front teeth knocked out at a party trying to stop some fight. I didn't find out for a year who had done it. Then one day I came home a bit drunk, sad and sorry, and for some reason unknown to me at the time, I asked Dad to help me stop drinking. He agreed, being the loving father that he really was, and we called AA. They came and we talked and I went to a meeting the next day. Dad said he would think about it. He did, and he sobered up and joined me a couple of weeks later. We attended a few meetings together.

I guess I thought, "Great, now that's taken care of, I can drink." I was just too young, you see, and didn't want to admit my life was unmanageable. I could see I was an alcoholic, but that didn't really impress me. It was a step up, actually. I had a disease. I needed to drink. I used it as one of the many stories in the bar to get drinks.

But the day finally came; it was an inside job after all. I couldn't live and I couldn't die. I came back to the only place I could feel safe. That was AA. And so the journey began for me, in Regina, Saskatchewan. On August 27, 1967, I took what I thought was my last drink. A week later, September 3, 1967, I had a glass of beer put in front of me at a friend's place and I drank half of that glass. Then I pushed it away and said, "No, I've had enough of this and the life that goes with it." I was 21 years old at the time and well worn.



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I was living out on my own in those days, living with a boyfriend who drank. The beginning was interesting. I worked for my sponsor, Big George, in his sign shop. It was mindless work — but work. I attended a meeting every day; after all, I drank every day. It took me a while to get out of that relationship as there were a few lessons yet to learn. Those drinkers probably kept me sober as I had talked to them about drinking and false pride kept me from slipping as I had shot my mouth off about it. I stayed in Regina for the first year of my sobriety. Then I needed to branch out, get out of there and see the world. I first moved to Edmonton, but found it too cold there and moved on to Vancouver. This would have been in late 1968.

I joined the Bay Group. My parents were in Vancouver by this time also, and Dad was in the Bay Group too. Those were the days. There was the Young People's group as well there in the West End, but they were more young at heart. The Under 30 Group came later, and then changed to the Under 40 Group as we all got older. I didn't stay too long in Vancouver that time, but took off for Toronto and then Montreal. I arrived in Montreal around my second birthday. I met many good friends there; friends that I still have today.

I was still a wild child and had a lot of fun with the AA gang in Montreal. We were always having a meeting. Wherever two are gathered ... it was true. AA really became my life — dragging drunks around to meetings, long nights with the coffee pot, and let's not forget all those moves. It seemed that someone was always moving and we would all take part. We took great care of those drunks in our circle. And the circle was always expanding. We travelled to New York State for roundups and retreats and the gang from there did the same.

I had married a newcomer in 1970 and we moved back to Vancouver in 1971. He was sober three months and I three years. We stayed married for two years and then he went back to Montreal and his mother. A few of the Montreal gang arrived out on the coast and we all got involved in AA Vancouver-style.

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In 1967 in Regina, there were not too many young people and not too many women. I was a big novelty. In Vancouver by the early 1970s the young people and women were starting to be more visible. I was used to discussion groups in Saskatchewan and it took a while to get comfortable with the open meetings here. I wondered how people stayed sober without discussing the steps more. Discussion groups were few and far between, but began to grow and there were meetings in people's houses. Always those impromptu gatherings where we tried to figure out how it worked!

In 1973 I left my home group, Kerrisdale A2, and moved to Melbourne, Australia. I moved following a dream — something I had learned to do again in AA. It didn't last long and a year later I was back to stay. I've moved house all over the Lower Mainland but still belong to that same group. Kerrisdale A2 has watched me grow over all these many 24 hours. I've gone through so many stages in sobriety. The people in the group and many others around the Lower Mainland have helped me grow and flourish. Their example, their love and their understanding have empowered me to be and do the things of dreams.

AA is a stepping stone to life. AA is the rock upon which we stand. AA is the place where I can serve. AA is the place that I feel safe. In AA I am understood and cherished. So many 24 hours have gone by and each new day I discover more. This is indeed a journey, not a destination. I continue to attend meetings, though not as many as in the beginning as I have many places to serve. I find my strength in the meetings and I need this to always remember who I am and where I came from.

AA for me today is different than in 1967. We travelled farther to get to meetings and there seemed like fewer to do the work. There were a lot of new people needing coverage. Today the recovery houses do a lot of the initial hand-holding. AA for me today is the same in many ways, but different because I'm different. I'm not the same mixed-up crazy hard-rock cream puff that I was then. Well, perhaps I'm just enjoying the madness more!!

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I'm big-time grateful for the program and the life that I have today. May I always put action behind that and I know that life will continue; beyond my wildest dreams.

## SHE NEVER LOOKED BACK

### Catherine E.

It was 21 years from the time I had my first drink until I came to AA. When I had my 21st AA birthday it was a big celebration because I had been sober as long as I had drunk.

I was 18 years old when I had my first drink. I was in the Royal Canadian Air Force. I didn't like drinking at all. I heard a lot of people say they knew they were alcoholic from the first drink, but that wasn't the case for me, because I didn't care for the taste. I went to parties and did I get sick. But it didn't stop me. I would go out again to a party.

I got married when I was 19 years old. My husband was going to be shipped overseas, so I wanted to have a baby in case he didn't come back. But he never went overseas and I had the baby... and another one... and another one. And I was still not drinking to excess because we couldn't afford it. I had four children in five years. My husband was a helicopter pilot in the air force and so we travelled a lot. Back then the beer parlours closed from 6:30 to 7:30 p.m. so the men could go home for dinner. So that's what he did — he would work and then go to the bar and come for dinner and then go back to the bar until closing time. Now I got tired of this, staying at home with the kids day in and day out, so I decided to get a babysitter and join him in the evenings. I did not like the taste of beer, but that's all they served there, so I would have one bottle of beer all night. We would go to a coffee shop afterwards and come home at 2:00 a.m. Well, with both of us going out, it was too expensive for us to pay for the babysitter, so he started staying home a little more. I started to acquire a taste for beer. Once a month we went to the officers' mess for the party. We'd take turns as the designated driver, and when I didn't have to drive I thought, "The sky is the limit," so I went to it. And then it just developed. Over time I became an alcoholic. But I also remember that we went to a formal dance and to someone's home for drinks before. At that time I couldn't understand why people wanted to drink before they go out. I heard one of the other women say to her husband, and I couldn't believe that a woman was saying this, "Jack, get me a double, I'm not even feeling good."

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I knew nothing about becoming an alcoholic. At that time I met a pilot who was a friend of my husband's. He had been sober for a couple of years. He wore this little pin in his lapel — a double A. We partied together and we had fun. That was in 1951 and Don had been sober for some time. Don and his wife and I and my husband were transferred together to a northern town. Don used to go out someplace every night and I didn't know where. It seemed like a secret. In the meantime, my drinking was going on and on. I started making my own beer. My husband was away a lot, so I had to keep the books and account for every penny. I couldn't have written down all this money for booze, so I put it on my grocery list — the sugar, the malt and the yeast and everything to go with it. I don't know what the percentage was but it was powerful stuff.

I got introduced to a wine called Zip by my sister-in-law. We'd get together to play cards and they would put an inch of this really fine-tasting wine in a glass and fill the rest with 7-up. It was great, but then I started putting more and more wine and less 7-up until I was drinking the Zip straight. Wine did something to me — I just went totally out of control. I became a full-blown alcoholic. I believe this was my downfall.

I had been in touch with Don over the years. In February 1965 he came out to BC and looked us up. I wanted to talk to him then about AA but I never had the opportunity because Roy was home. Had he been away from home I would have. On the 29th of June, I called Don at 1:00 a.m. in Edmonton. I was drunk as a skunk and I started crying. "Don, you promised you would be out here as soon as the kids were out of school and you're not here yet and I need you." He asked, "Do you have anything else in the house to drink?" "Yeah." "Well, have another drink and go to bed. I'll have somebody call you."

It just so happened he knew someone in Vancouver and he was going to have June call me the next day. Well, God in his wisdom! It turns out that June and her family were vacationing in Alberta and stopped at Don's house the very next morning. Can you imagine? Talk about coincidence. Don gave her my phone number and she called me when she got back to Vancouver. The rest is history. Mind you, I didn't hear from her right away. I remember that Roy and I had been in the habit of having a drink before dinner, which for me became having a drink while preparing dinner.

During this time after I called Don, I remember one day just shaking and holding onto the counter with both hands and I said, "God help me." June called the next day. She lived in Vancouver and I lived in New Westminster. When she called me, she said she wouldn't be able to come out and see me until the weekend since her husband was working and she had no car. I asked if I could see her and so I drove in to her place. I was supposed to go to my first meeting with her and I got a phone call from a woman named Bonny who said that June had to go to a funeral in Calgary. She explained that June had given her my name, and I was so angry that June would give my name to a perfect stranger. Bonny said she'd take me to a meeting and when I said, "Just tell me where it is and I'll meet you there," she said, "No, I have to take you." She was over six years sober at the time. Before I went to that meeting I knew I wanted to have my wits about me, so I was sober for exactly a week. I thought, "Those people are not going to brainwash me or put anything over on me. I'll show them that I'm smart." My last drink was on the 13th of July but my sobriety date is the 21st.

Bonny had trouble finding my place, so we arrived at the meeting just as they were reading the preamble. I said to her, "I'm not going in there late!" She likes to tell the story at my cakes of what I was like at that first meeting. It was the 21st of July and it was hot. I went to the hairdresser's in the morning and had my hair done. I went through my wardrobe and found the nicest thing I could find — an Italian knit suit. I never wore slacks at that time. I wasn't going to have "those people" think I was a tramp. Oh my God, I was so worried. We always dressed at that time. At our conferences we went formal. The meeting was Centre Group and there was a lady there named Muriel who was getting an eight-year card. In my life I never envied anyone what they had, but that day I envied her sobriety. I was really impressed and I thought, "I want that." In fact, I wanted it yesterday. At the end of the meeting, the secretary asked if there was anyone who wanted to put their name on the roll call. I thought I'd never get an invitation like that again, so I was the first one in line — I may have been the only one in line. But all I knew was that I was not going to waste one more minute. There were two other women in the group at that time — Flora and Donna Lee.

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When I was sober three months I brought two more women in. The “Elder Statesman” of the group was the one who decided when you were ready, and I was sent on a step 12-call when I was three months. The Alano club called and asked me to go and one of the men, Gordon P., went with me. He picked me up and my husband was a little put out. He said he would meet me at the meeting. So we went to Millie’s home and then took her to the meeting. Roy was suspicious. But the way I look at it is that if he doesn’t trust me to do what I say I’m going to do, then it’s because he doesn’t trust himself. After I had been in the program, I realized that he was alcoholic too. I was five years sober when I left that marriage — I couldn’t take the abuse anymore. AA was my life and it was great.

Now when I met Millie I thought, “There is no way this woman is an alcoholic because she’s not drunk.” She did the same thing I did, she quit drinking first. She wrote to the box number of AA and that’s how we ended up going to see her. When I joined Centre Group, Bill S. was sober 18 years, John P. was sober about 15 years; we had doctors, lawyers and dentists. And then there was me. Then I had another call from Coquitlam and I decided I could do a 12-step call on my own. So I did. Wrong! Luckily it turned out okay even though she had been drinking. Some of the horror stories I heard afterwards I thank God didn’t happen to me. Jean and I were sponsor and sponsee until I remarried and moved out of town.

When I joined Centre Group they asked me who my sponsor was. I told them it was June but they said you couldn’t have anyone out of town. So they gave me Donna Lee. That didn’t work out because I’m an early riser and want to talk “right now”. She never got up until 11:00 a.m. because she was out doing AA work every night. At Centre Group they voted you in as chairperson and you did that for three months. You never chaired a second time, but I was asked to do it for an additional three months.

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Then I started calling Bonny and I joined a step group in Vancouver. There were none in New Westminster. The ladies there said you couldn't join unless you were sober one year and I had only been sober one week, but because I was a friend of June and Bonny it was okay. We studied the Little Red Book and I've always liked it because it's plainer English for those of us who aren't well educated. Everything is explained and there is always an asterisk to say where it is found in the Big Book or The Twelve and Twelve. I was 39 years old and the women were wonderful. They just took me under their wings. There was a woman named Mavis who was a member of the Kingsway Group. Bill W. was in town and she was sick and couldn't make it. He found out and went to visit her at her home.

After I left Roy, I didn't go to Centre Group because I didn't want him to find me. I moved to North Vancouver and worked at Lions Gate Hospital. I didn't have a home group because of my schedule. It was in 1973 that I married Keith and we moved to Pemberton. I met him at my first roundup. He noticed me sitting alone and asked me to come and join their group — the West End group. In the early days we used to have one meeting a month in a big hall. It was beautiful — everyone would get dressed up. It would be on a Saturday night and we'd have a special speaker. We were in Pemberton for about 12 years. We were numbers eight and nine in the Pemberton group. None were locals — they were all "transients". Two worked for BC Hydro, one was the postmaster, one was a banker and one a Native from Mount Currie. A few years later we started another group on the reserve. Wow, the growth there was wonderful. The first big cake we had there was Alec, the co-founder of the Mt. Currie Group. Everyone came — elders from the reserve, the priest and sisters from the church were there. It was incredible. They asked the priest to say a few words. He had had no idea what went on at AA and he was flabbergasted because everyone talked about God, about their relationship with their Higher Power.

What I loved about being up there is that Native people are so spiritual. There was no swearing. The Father got up and said he had a speech all prepared, but he said, "You all stole my thunder." And someone in the back hollered out, "Well, Father, then give us some lightning." After that, so many people came that we had to get a bigger hall.



Keith and I never missed that meeting. It was 24 miles round trip. One night there was Alec and Earl and Keith and me waiting for others to arrive. A couple came in — James and Linda. Several meetings later James said he had just come back from a treatment centre in Tofino. He wasn't going to stay in AA, but when he saw Keith and me, he thought we were an RCMP and a social worker there to make sure he attended. We loved that couple. We started a step group which took place in their home and this went on for years.

I wrote to New York for permission to start Alateen, because there was no Al-Anon to organize it and the kids needed it. So I got it started. The young girl who was secretary of the Alateen started going to our AA meeting because she was getting more out of it. It turns out that's where she belonged. I saw her a few years ago and she was still sober.

I was GSR of the Pemberton group. Keith and I would take turns being GSR and secretary because we only had three members at the time. I was always interested in General Service and we always came down to Vancouver for the service functions. In 1985 we put an ad in the paper and gave our names to the RCMP and the local pharmacy.

We left Pemberton in 1985 and moved to Squamish. We formed a little intergroup and we had a beeper and each group took it for a week. It was great. No one went without a call. One call came from Whistler — the gal was from California and she needed a meeting. She was a singer and her partner was a movie director. We met them at the little Pemberton group, because it was the only one on that night. The snow was six feet deep, and this guy was in his patent leather shoes! It was so funny. I belonged to a closed meeting on Wednesdays called The 12 Steps and 12 Traditions. The last Wednesday of the month was cake night and it was open. We would do three steps and one tradition a month. Whenever a new person came in we did Tradition 3. There were six couples who drove up to Whistler and started a meeting there. As the group grew, only one couple would go each week to lend support.

## PIONEERS IN SKIRTS:THE WOMEN'S STORIES FROM THE BC/YUKON AREA

I moved to New Westminster 1991 and rejoined Centre Group. I have been a member there since that time. One time I was on a airplane, coming home from a trip to Toronto. A young student sat next to me and noticed I didn't have my complimentary drinks of alcohol. She made a comment and I told her part of my story about being a recovering alcoholic. She was impressed. She told me about her father, how abusive he was when drinking. We exchanged names and addresses.

When I got home, I phoned Central Office to get the address of AA in Tokyo and sent it on to her. I received a beautiful Christmas card from her. She thanked me and told me that her father now had three months of sobriety. So you see, 12-step work can be done anywhere.

What I notice is different in AA now is the language. I cannot bear the cursing. I don't like the "f" word and you hear it, even from the women. I can understand it if you're right off the street, because you need that language to survive. But if you have been in AA for a few years, I don't think it's necessary. I've heard it said that profanity is the attempt of a feeble mind to express itself forcefully.

I had been sober close to five years when I left my first husband, who was still drinking quite heavily. When I went back to Centre Group, I was told that I could not become the GSR because of my personal life, because I had left my husband. If a sober Al-Anon woman left her husband, the husband could still become a GSR. Or if a husband left a drunken wife, he could become a GSR. So if you can't be a GSR, you can't be anything because it starts with that first step. One of the things I did do while I was still married, when I was sober two years, I was secretary of the Pacific Northwest Conference. Several years ago I chaired the long-timers' meeting and I loved it.

The most important thing for long-term sobriety is your Higher Power. I have the God of my understanding. I talk to him every morning. I look out my window and say, "Good morning, God." I thank him for the day and say good night. I believe in the closeness of the Higher Power. I remember hearing a woman say at a meeting that now she says "Good morning, God" instead of "Good God, it's morning". It's better to be green and growing than ripe and rotten. All these women that went before me; I have little bits from all of them. But my Bonny was the closest. I couldn't go to her service when she passed a few months ago, because of illness. I just had my 80th birthday but my neuralgia was so bad I couldn't celebrate much. I haven't been to a meeting in a few years due to my failing health, but I do my readings every day and talk with my sponsee almost every day.

Oh, AA has done so much for me. I have such a beautiful life. My youngest daughter was 15 years old when I stopped drinking. None of my children's spouses have seen me drink. I have eight grandchildren who have never seen me drink. I have eight great-grandchildren. None have seen me drink and I owe it all to AA, to my Higher Power and my friends in AA. The 12 steps are a stiff climb and they're steep. But we have two handrails — God and the fellowship. You see, you don't "go through" the steps, like you "go through" a door. You take the steps and then you apply them in your life.

I am so grateful for my 41 years of sobriety in Alcoholics Anonymous; for a loving God, a loving family and many loving friends.

## EAST TO WEST SOBRIETY

### Cathy S.

"There are those, too, who suffer from grave emotional and mental disorders, but many of them do recover if they have the capacity to be honest."\* From How It Works, page 58, of the book. "Alcoholics Anonymous." That is why I have 37 years in Alcoholics Anonymous to prove the point. I attended my first meeting in Montreal on February 22, 1968, having been delivered by an AA member from a mental institution. For the next six weeks, thanks to my first sponsor, I was picked up and returned by those members. I couldn't understand how that woman could love a brat like me. I had spent my lifetime making sure I would never fit in.

I was raised in a drinking family and had been abused since I was five years old. But the AA promise that "we'll love you until you can love yourself" began to shine some light in this young woman's broken heart. Although I had a one-day slip about a year after surrendering to this alcoholism, I returned to my meeting with a desire to stay sober.

In 1970 I attended a conference and met Bill W. I felt so loved, and from that meeting my life started to take some very positive steps ahead. I also got to listen to Marty M., the first woman alcoholic in AA. She spoke so strongly about going back to the basics: "First Things First", "Easy Does It", "But For the Grace of God", "Think Think Think" and "Live and Let Live".

I started to build my life. While I didn't recognize it as a gift originally, my grandmother had left me a small old house in Cape Breton. There was so much more AA community in Montreal. I wanted to stay but I really felt it was God's will for me to move forward.

When I first walked into a meeting in Cape Breton, Alcoholics Anonymous there was still mostly a men's meeting. The year was 1975 and regardless of what most of those older members thought about a young woman from the outside walking into their meeting, I was indeed ready and eligible.

Within six months after my arrival, a woman from New York arrived with 34 years of sobriety. Just like the first woman in Montreal who had rescued me from the insane asylum, this woman too would have a moving impact on my life. To this day I still consider sponsorship to be one of the most important things within this program. In those days sponsors never babied newcomers, but they were honest. Nowadays I think too many sponsors are out there “talking the talk” rather than “walking the walk”. That’s why I love working with young people when they first come in full of fear and wounded.

With such a solid start down east, one wouldn’t expect a woman to cross the country and live in Victoria. I thought that if I moved anywhere, I would be more interested in going back to Montreal. I’d had such a solid start in AA and I knew people there. But I had a sponsee who was having difficulty in the program and she ended up on the streets. When 12-stepping over the phone didn’t help, I decided to come and help her in person. I was horrified at the damage caused by this woman’s slip from the program. I worked with her and her family, and she was able to climb back up and stay sober until she died two years ago. I realized after a couple of weeks in Victoria that my Higher Power had meant me to be here. So I went home to Cape Breton and packed up and returned to make this my home. For years I had lived with the goal of “give what you got”, and when I was able to love that young woman back to recovery, I felt a need to stay.

My experience in AA right from the beginning has been one of service — either to AA at large or with newcomers one on one. Right from my beginning, I was told not to just “hang around”, but to try to earn my sobriety. I did my first 12-step call when I was three months sober. I’ve spent years answering telephone calls at central office. It wasn’t easy for me to face my first fourth step 35 years ago, but I grew and if I can help anyone else to recover, it is worth my while.

Although I will retire in a year or so, I have no intention of slowing down in AA. I’ll go to meetings and I’ll live my life serving my Higher Power — doing His will.

*\* Quotation on page 38 is reprinted from Alcoholics Anonymous, 4th Edition, page 58 with permission of AA. World Services, Inc.*

## OUR LONGEST LIVING MEMBER

### Cherie D.

To the best of my memory, when I first came in 1954, the first meeting that I attended was 13th and Chesterfield Street in North Vancouver and I believe the hall has since had a fire and the church hall was rebuilt. The church still stands there and they still have the meetings there. That's amazing, isn't it? I went there and I can always remember that first meeting. There weren't, in my memory, a lot of women on the North Shore. I can remember there was a fellow called Ross the barber and he had this wonderful sense of humour and I needed to laugh so badly. It was one of the things that really appealed to me. And he had a girlfriend and she was a member. But apart from that there weren't a lot of women. There were a few Al-Anon women who would come to the meetings and I can remember the meeting at Saturday Night Live. In those days it was called something else. I can remember going to that and I can remember seeing a wonderful-looking woman. She was so beautifully groomed and that really appealed to me. I thought, "I want that." I don't know whether she was AA or Al- Anon. That was another meeting on the North Shore. Then I went to Capilano Group. Capilano Group, in my memory, was started by a member called Sandy D., and Sandy had a Store where a gas station is now, about halfway up Capilano Road. In the kitchen of that Store was where the Capilano meeting started. Then it moved to 22nd and Phillips in the basement of the church and that's where we went for years. I can still remember all the old-timers that were there, and we had a fireplace and on cold nights we'd light that fireplace and it would smoke, and you'd open the lid of the kettle to pour water in for the tea and there'd be spiders in it... Anyway, it was a great meeting and my mother would come to meetings there. She came into AA two years prior to me. That was her group. Gradually women started coming and they got a nice nucleus of women which is still there to this day.

We had a little group and we did social things together and that was really good. It was so fortunate that there was a group of married women who could do a lot of social things together, because there weren't always a lot of women around and I had a husband who was out of town a lot, and I didn't drive. I would always call on one of the married men to give me a ride and they were wonderful about that. They would be very helpful and often if we got a 12-step call, we would perhaps not have a choice. A man and a woman would go together on the 12-step call and we had some real interesting ones. I remember this chap and I took this woman downtown to a store on Granville Street. We got her all the way down there, we dropped her off and she went into the store and we never saw her again. I guess she was out the back door and gone. Some of the memories are funny when you think of them now.

I was going to mention that the West Vancouver Group, which is going to be celebrating its 56th anniversary this month, started at a little tiny building that does not exist anymore on Marine Drive in West Vancouver. That little meeting had two wonderful women. I remember Bea H.J. and I remember Joe W. There were some wonderful men too. Bill G. Sr. was a very prominent figure around this city. You're not supposed to break somebody's anonymity even if they're dead. People generally don't know that. But when he was alive he didn't mind his name being used, especially if it would help somebody. He used to go to that meeting. So that was a great meeting, and then one of the fellows decided to branch off and form another group, and his name was Mack S. He was going to start the Dunderave Group and Dorothy T. decided she was going to go with him. Now I don't really think he wanted her because he didn't think women should belong to AA. He didn't want women at this new meeting but Dorothy persisted and so she went with him. My husband and I were in Calgary, coming back to live on the coast, when we bumped into him outside the club in Calgary. He told us he was starting this new group and when we got to Vancouver we were to come. So we said we would and since we had children by this time, we decided that it made good sense to each bond to a different group. My husband was a member too. We both came in on the same day, so we had a double mirror at home. He was sober until he died. It will be six years ago in October.

So I carried on with my Capilano Group and he went to Dunderave and, of course, I would go occasionally. Later, when the children were in their teens and I wanted to be a little closer to home, I switched over and joined Dunderave, and I've been a member there ever since. So those were the initial groups that I can remember from those days. Those were the choices we had in our group. I was saying to somebody, I think it was Fred C., I can't remember a step group in those early days. I notice that I have that mentioned in my first-edition step book, which was printed in 1951 or 1952. I came in 1954. So we just worked the program to the best of our ability. You know, the solution to most problems was always to work with a newcomer. To this day it gets you off the centre of the universe and seems to resolve your problems magically. I mentioned to Fred that I can't remember the work being done on steps that is being done on steps now. A lot of people have the format of journalling and do a lot of writing and do their steps, and Fred said he thought that that came from the treatment centres. Of course we did not have treatment centres back then. We had Riverview Psychiatric Hospital and Hollywood Sanatorium. I'm not saying that's a good or bad process, you know, whatever works. I guess we did them to the best of our ability and carried on and tried to practise them in our daily lives — and it worked. It is working, at least so far today.

Back in those early days, the format of meetings was the same as now. Mostly, you got up and you told your story; what it was like, what happened and what it is like now. Over the years I've seen slight changes. When I was in Hawaii in the winter, I would notice things take place and then it seemed it probably came from California. Everything always seemed to start with California and then work its way around, so this is what I would see. For instance, I would see people getting up in front of a group of people and being extremely explicit about their Step 5. There seemed to be a whole era where that was the thing to do. They seemed to adopt that and it seemed like a little bit of a lack of common sense about what they were sharing at the podium. It wasn't everybody but it seemed a little odd. Then the next thing I noticed, while wintering in Palm Springs, was a great era of blaming the siblings; putting responsibility on somebody or something else — even the parents — and not taking responsibility themselves. Now that seems to have passed. You'll get these waves that go through and then we find ourselves again.



Now how I got here was that I had heard about AA. Oddly enough, a fellow who travelled with us had mentioned it to me. He had told me all about it. And then my mother had been a member for two years. She had the good sense not to say too much about the program to me. But we came out here on a trip and we stayed with her. She was up at the top of Capilano Road and they were trying to remodel a house they had bought, and we were just staying with them in the unfinished upstairs of the house. I was a binge drinker and once the binge started, it could go on for gosh knows how long, and then I could go on the wagon; it might be a couple of months or more. At this particular time I was on the wagon. We got over to my mother's and my husband decided he was going to go drinking that night. So I thought, I'll show him — and away I went. I can remember being in the old Cave and I can remember insulting a gal that was a prominent Vancouver singer that I had worked with at a radio station. I can remember being very rude to her. Anyway, it wound up in another drunk. I remember making it home to my mom's and the next morning coming downstairs and my stepfather, who was one of the world's only social drinkers, came to me knowing how sick I was and he said, "Do you want a drink?" And I can remember saying, "No I don't." My mom came down and she talked to me. We were heading back to the prairies and my mom asked if I wanted to go to a meeting. I told her that when I got back I'd go. She said that if I went back to the prairies and found it too tough and wanted to come home, to phone her and she would send me the money for a ticket.

I went back and I had that in mind. My husband continued to drink and I had made up my mind one night while he was out. We travelled with a crew; we were selling. My husband was out and he was late getting back and I knew what that meant. I remember getting down on my knees in this hotel room and I swear that I had a spiritual experience, because my normal reaction when he got home would be panic and anger and I'm missing the party and what's happening here and the whole ball of wax, and that didn't happen. When he sobered up the next day, I told him I loved him dearly but, I said, "You know I've got to get sober. I know that if I don't get sober I'm going to be dead." I had to let his mom know; he had a wonderful mother. She was a nurse from the old country and I explained that I couldn't get sober around him.

She said that she had told him this would happen. Anyway, at this point he was sober and we were heading back to Vancouver and he said, "Well, I just want to stop and buy these friends a drink." These were friends that we used to always party with. So we stopped at their house in Edmonton and, lo and behold, the husband had joined AA. He had all this AA literature, and I put it in the glove compartment of the car, and we took off and headed for Vancouver. I didn't have a drink. I don't think Bud did either. We got to Creston and he told me he was going to the dentist and he came back from the dentist reeking. So he had gone somewhere and parked and he had his bottle and got plastered.

So we started off for Vancouver with him plastered. I tell you, it was the old Cascade road and it was nighttime and he was driving, and if I could have gotten out and walked I would have. I was afraid of bears so I thought, no, that's not a good idea either. I remember us stopping somewhere and he tried to buy a bottle from a cab driver. I had never done this in my life, but I threatened that I would call the police if he sold him a bottle. We headed off and we were on our way to Osoyoos and I was wishing he'd pull over, and he did. He passed out or went to sleep and I did too, and when we woke he wanted to know if there was anything to drink. I told him that on his side there was a bottle and on mine there was a 7-up. He said, "Let's leave the bottle for the old prospector that might find it." That was the last drink he ever had. We drove into Vancouver with me reading AA literature in the car. We got to my mom's house.

I can remember that first meeting. It was great. The next night Ross the barber appeared at the door and that was great. Then we were going to work over on the Island and we went over to Campbell River and stayed in a little motel over there. We used to go to the Courtenay Group and the Comox Air Force Base and a group in Campbell River itself. Those were the three meetings we could drive to at that time. I always smile at this because Bud decided one night that this AA thing was working fine for Cherie. What he had planned was to have the secretary in Edmonton wire him and say that he was needed. He would drop me off with my mother in Vancouver and he'd go and tie one on. He said he was driving home that night all happy and smiles because he had this plan.

He was coming through the fog and all of a sudden came the big sign that you don't see anymore: "Licensed Premises"; and he thought, that'll be me on such and such a day. All of a sudden, he said, it hit him: "Who's the alcoholic? Who are you kidding here?" It dawned on him that he was doing it to himself. From there he never looked back. We used to sit in that little motel, which had a wood and coal stove, and the deer came down and ate in the garden. A cute little old motel and we'd both be propped up in bed, one with the Big Book and one with the Twelve and Twelve, with a box of chocolates in the middle. That's how we'd spend our evenings. We made up our minds and had a pact that if either one of us had trouble, the other one had to head for the nearest member.

We had a really healthy approach to being a couple and yet being individuals with our own programs. We didn't try to sponsor each other — we witnessed that in the early days where a couple took the fifth step together and it was a horror story. It was a good lesson for us. Somebody asked me once, "Who's your sponsor?" And they claimed that I said that God was. In later years my husband said to me that, in a way, we did sponsor one another. I don't mean formally or anything of that nature, but we did lean on each other and we could resolve problems that didn't relate to ourselves — for instance, if we ran into something disturbing to us that involved other people, or that sort of thing. My husband was 15 years older than I and he was intelligent, he was wise and he was balanced. That was a big word that he always used and I think it is so important. A lot of people forget that word. Balance is so important and comes into play in so many situations. He was balanced and so it would be natural for me to talk with him. I can't tell you the people that would want to go and ask his opinion; to speak to him regarding something, be it business or AA or personal issues or whatever. Then I had a mother in AA, and also I have a son-in-law who is in AA, and I now have a son as well in the program. So we have a real family affair.

My husband was an international sales manager and that required that we move to England. We attended meetings over there and belonged to a really darling group in Kingston on Thames and used to drive to Epsom Downs. Then we left there and went to the Philippines. Wow. Culture shock! In the Philippines we tried to get a meeting started, and Marcos had just come into power and security was a huge problem. We lived in a guarded compound and at one point had to hire our own guard — three eight-hour shifts — to protect us from our landlord, who turned out to be a dicey character.

## PIONEERS IN SKIRTS:THE WOMEN'S STORIES FROM THE BC/YUKON AREA

So security was a big problem for us. To advertise a group was an awkward situation, but we did go over to the equivalent of the United Church and have a room for our meetings. It turned out the only other member we could locate lived right behind us, so the three of us would sit there with a flit gun for mosquitoes and hold our own little meeting. All those years we lived winters in Hawaii, Bud would go to the men's stag and I would go to the women's stag in the Seventh-Day Adventist Church on a Saturday morning. It was absolutely wonderful. Because they had a treatment program in the hospital, we'd get all the girls that were in treatment coming into our meeting. I met Nancy when she came out of treatment and we formed a really neat friendship.

I returned to Canada and my husband moved from the Philippines to Bangkok to open an office there. A gal we had met once on her second meeting in Vancouver, taken by her brother-in-law to the Capilano Group, had moved to Edmonton. She phoned me to say she was on her way to Bangkok with another AA gal and did I have any contact for her. Bud was out there, so I gave her Bud's address and phone number and he put her in touch with the one woman member in Bangkok. I spent a summer there and did attend meetings in Bangkok in the Holy Redeemer Church. Everywhere it has been such a blessing... a way of life.

After one year my mother had a slip and then came back two years before I came into AA. She passed on with 30-odd years of sobriety. I did all the hard research before coming in, and when I came here I was so desperate; I wanted it so badly to work. I didn't have a sponsor back then. I remember getting the paper out, and a pencil, and trying to write out the fourth step. It wasn't great but it was my fourth step. My fifth I did with a lot of people. There was stuff... even now I don't know if this person would be alive, but the willingness would be there to make the amends. Over the years the amends got made and it's kind of like you really got it. But it's something that you're supposed to practise in your life so that you don't have to keep facing the same mistake over and over. I think in the beginning we're looking at the sins and the harms, and you know we have to be very careful that newcomers don't get into punishing themselves and get morbid about it and compound the felony. It's the underlying principles that I think we are trying to get at. What we're trying to eradicate and correct within our own personality.

I still have sponsees. I will make myself available and, anytime you want, you can phone me. Now that my husband is gone and I'm on my own, and I'm not travelling, I've taken on a few. They laugh because right away I ask, "How long have you been in the program, because I'm not about to be taking on any newcomers and I'm not up to driving at night, so I'm not running you all over to meetings." One gal told me, "I'm low maintenance," and ever since, we've been through flood, fire and famine. I actually had a call this morning from one of them, and just when you think you've got something all whipped into shape — then boom it's back again. Welcome to "one day at a time". Life just keeps happening, right? The message is that it's something you live. It's not something you're reading or writing. It's something that you make the heart of you; that as you go along in sobriety, you learn to edit yourself and you learn to go along and if something isn't right, you go to the Step 10. I'm a great believer in the Step 10. I carry the Step 10 with me on a daily basis. It becomes a way of life.

Now in the beginning, after we'd been in AA here in Vancouver for six months, we went back to the Club House in Edmonton. The clubs were a place where women who had drunk in their homes felt safe to go. Apart from the club, there was a man called George S. He later moved out here and started a treatment centre in Victoria. I know there was a lot of controversy about him being in AA and working for the government Foundation on Alcoholism. He gave a talk at the foundation about AA. Well, actually the talk I went to that I recall, which I thought was very helpful, was a talk on the disease of alcoholism. This was a chalk talk and it was very good. That would have been about 1955. He was a good member and so was his wife. George and Jane started the first step meeting that I had ever attended, in their home. I was invited and part of that first step group that I recall being formed in Edmonton. Then we moved to Regina. In Regina they also had the government-sponsored Foundation on Alcoholism, run by two men who were both AA members. I went to several groups and I found that AA in Regina was wonderful. My husband was away a lot. I didn't drive. I was alone in the suburbs and the social activities were just wonderful. It was so nice because in Edmonton, too, I found we would get together on a Saturday night and have coffee and sandwiches. You know, it was so nice to get back to something normal.

When I think of the changes over the last 51 years, I think that the young people have taken a speed-up course, in a way, because they've been through treatment. Now there are a lot of drugs. I still think that we're open to all. We try to help all. There's nobody that I think wouldn't benefit from the AA program. I like the disclaimer read at the beginning of the meeting. Some meetings or some members are better at observing that than others. I don't go to AA to hear a long talk on cocaine, but I understand them coming to AA. I understand that... I have a stepdaughter in Palm Springs who belongs to both programs and I understand that. She goes to NA as well as AA.

When I think about what is essential for continuous, long-term sobriety, I have to say that I just love Step 2. And I was going to mention the importance of welcoming help from other agencies, you know, such as the church or medical profession. In the beginning, Dr. Silkworth was asked what he saw that causes the alcoholic of long-term sobriety to go back out, and he said that parallel in the brain with rational thought ran some small irrationality. For example, "Gee, I guess I wasn't as bad as I thought I was." "Gosh, maybe if I hadn't married that alcoholic." "You know, maybe if the sky hadn't turned blue that day." So I believe that I need Step 2 to keep me thinking sane, wanting to be sober more than drunk on a daily basis. I need help on a daily basis. I also need it to keep fresh and so I need my spiritual life to be good. I need my AA to keep me centred, so I need my meetings. To keep all this going, I need to practise the program as best I can. I do so every day. I do my reading in the morning, and my little moment of meditation. All these things are just as true for me today as they were at the very beginning. Nothing replaces a meeting. Nothing. Me talking to you does not replace a meeting. I think because sometimes someone touches us at a meeting — and they take us right back. They touch our soul and they take us right back to our feelings and emotions. Over the years I have always gone to meetings as well as doing my reading, doing my meditation — these are the things that make it ingrained in me as my way of life. My husband, Bud, said he never saw anybody have trouble that remembered to ask for help in the morning and give thanks at night.

My thinking changed — because there's no question that the thinking and the way we operate needs to change. It doesn't always happen quickly. You know, like my little sponsee said today, "Just when I think I've got something down pat, it rears its ugly head." Hence the reason I will always need this program. I think that by constant practice, constantly being aware, constantly striving to change, and constantly catching yourself on things that you know are less than what you want them to be — I think that by doing that constantly, you evolve. To me, drink erodes the character. That's what happens. You destroy the character and the morals. The policeman's out to lunch, you know? And then you come in here and you start to rebuild and it's like putting gold into the crucible. Sometimes you disappoint yourself and you know you've done it. That in itself is progress. So you stop and you pull up your little straps and you start over again. And pretty soon that gets tiresome, so you quit that behaviour.

I heard early on that I need to align my will with God's will — whether I want to do that easily or not. I've remembered that because it meant something to me. And meetings are a reminder. I know I've offered advice — and I try to do so only when solicited — and they've said, "Oh I knew that, darn it why don't I remember?" I'm sure you've had that experience. I know I have. We need each other to remind ourselves. So I think that's why meetings are important. I think they're also important because we're sharing with the newcomer. I think that's so important. We see the newcomer come in and they need us. It makes our soul grow; our spirit grows. I was only 24 years old when I came in and for those days that was young. I'm looking around the room and there are all these older people and Ross said, "Youth is one hell of a thing," and he was so right. For me it was a matter of seeing that with youth you get good health and you bounce back far too quickly. You have a convenient "forgetry". I remembered that all across these years. It was important for me to hear what he had to say — because I drank a lot; I mean volume-wise. So I continue to do today what I have always done and try to help others like I have been helped.

## SHE WAS A BLACKOUT DRINKER FROM THE START

**Chris P.**

I started drinking at a very early age. Like a lot of others, in the beginning it was fun. I was 15 years old and was supporting myself, so I had no one to answer to and could do as I pleased. Back in the '50s in Saskatchewan, women were not allowed in beer parlours or bars. All of the drinking took place in houses, cars or wherever. There were lots of country dances and hockey games.

When I was about 18 years old, I went to a hospital to replace blood, as you had to pay for a transfusion then. They gave me a shot of brandy and I took a bus home. Halfway there I got off the bus, got a taxi and had the driver stop and get me a mickey of rye. From that time on, one drink was never enough for me. Blackouts became the norm and a warning was issued to me at work that if I didn't stop missing so many days they would let me go. The writing was on the wall; debts were piling up. I couldn't stand to face my family, so I packed up and moved to Saskatoon. I got a job right away and vowed that things would be different.

It didn't take long before I was back in the nightmare of alcoholic drinking. I moved seven times in that year. My creditors were hounding me at work and there was never any money to pay my rent. It was time to move again. Through a drinking friend of mine, I was offered a job as a photographer in the small town of Kindersley, Saskatchewan. I got onto the baseball team there and although there was still quite a bit of drinking, things seemed like they might get better. This was not going to happen; the drinking got worse and the blackouts came more often.



## PIONEERS IN SKIRTS:THE WOMEN'S STORIES FROM THE BC/YUKON AREA

I didn't even realize at the time that my reputation was not good. The town Mountie came to see me at work one day. Apparently I was drinking in the park the night before and made such a scene that he had to be called to escort me home. I remembered absolutely nothing about that night. It never occurred to me that some very serious things could happen during these blackouts. I was to find out the hard way when I realized I was pregnant and couldn't remember when that happened. I only had a vague idea and even that didn't stop me from drinking. I was in total denial and thought I would drink for the rest of my life. I moved to Vancouver to stay with my sister, drinking all through my pregnancy.

After my son was born, I met a man who was to become my husband. He was just my type, a drinker who loved to party. We had a baby girl, bought a little house and the party was on. It was not too bad when the children were small. I stayed at home to look after them. However, I discovered that I could order booze by taxi or from the bootlegger. As the years progressed, things really got worse. The violence started, and many times the police were called to my home. It was not unusual for me to be sporting black eyes and bruises. I was back at work by this time and still drinking. I got very deep into debt; the lights were turned off, the phones were disconnected and our home was up for sale for back taxes. The remorse and guilt were overwhelming and I lived in total fear all the time.

About six months before coming into AA, I was home really sick with a hangover. I opened my husband's lunch box and found a Who Me? pamphlet. After reading it and answering the 20 questions in it, I knew there was something really wrong with me. Could I possibly be an alcoholic? When my husband came home, I asked him to read the pamphlet. He did and he said, "Don't pay any attention to that." Roger — who worked with my husband — put it in there. "He belongs to AA and they are having a membership drive, and he gets points for everyone he signs up!" He told me to just throw it away. I didn't throw it away; I know now that was when the seed was planted.

It didn't take long after that for total despair to set in. By this time we had a barrel of homemade wine in the basement, compliments of our Italian neighbours. I woke up from one real bad night of drinking and felt as though my whole life had been destroyed. My husband had been picked up for impaired driving and it was then that he said, "I think we had better phone Roger."

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Roger came right down. He stayed with us all day and took us to an AA meeting that night. I knew that night that AA was where I belonged and that I was going to be safe there. I was going to be safe from all of the violence, creditors and, most of all, safe from myself and my alcoholism. This was in March 1970 and I was 38 years old.

I joined the Renfrew Group and was very lucky to have found a group that really took care of me. Especially a woman named Thelma M., who was an amazing example of how AA works. Some of the others in the group were Harry L., Lorne S., Len S. and Jake K. I became very active in AA. Roger sponsored my husband and me, but near the end of my first year I asked Thelma to be my sponsor. They were both a great help. Roger took us to a meeting every night. We went on many, many 12-step calls. There were not very many treatment centres then, so we got our calls right from the sick beds, sometimes taking turns trying to get the sick alcoholic well enough to get them to a meeting. AA was busy in those days; we were 12-stepping all the time. Everybody knew everybody and we all went from meeting to meeting supporting each other's groups. There was a lot of fellowship, friendship and a lot of togetherness.

Lucy was the secretary at Central Office in those days and the office was downtown on West Hastings. Renfrew Group, Grandview Group, Vancouver Heights, East Burnaby, Burnaby Lodge, Burnaby Lochdale and Pyramid Group were the groups in our area. Those meetings were all held weekly and were all open podium-style meetings. Dorothy W. was secretary at Central Office when the controversy over listing meetings as gay erupted. That was a definite growing pain. Some members were outraged over this and voiced that outrage to those of us at Central Office. I was her helper and there were many changes during that time. Dorothy left and I was the person holding it together until we hired a new secretary. However, the new person did not work out at all and most felt it was because she was a non-alcoholic. We then hired a fellow that was a member of AA, but he became the controversy. Much raucousness ensued until one of the Intergroup members walked into the office and fired him. I don't know what happened to him after that. All of the strife and uproar were affecting me and I decided to stop volunteering at Central Office. I did remain 12-stepping newcomers and still remain active in my group, which is Vancouver Heights in Burnaby.

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Things were not all that good at home as my husband continued to drink. I was determined to change my life and was ready to leave him in order to hang onto my sobriety as well as the new way of life I had found in AA. However, he did come to AA six months later and stayed sober. He was 42 years old at the time.

What kept me in AA was a deep, deep desire to have a life that was free of all the things I had lived with for so long — free from the terrible hangovers, the blackouts, the fighting, the debts, the guilt and those terrible unknown fears. It took many years of adjustment to live a sober life. With the help of the program and the people in AA, I was slowly able to learn how to cope with all the not-so-good things, of which there were many. My life started to change. How wonderful it was to be able to wake up in the morning and not be afraid to face the day. How amazing it is that I can leave the house now and return home safely. How great it is that I can be of some use to my family and to myself.

I do think the groups and AA as a whole had a big influence in the community. I believe that the attitude of local professionals was changed by contact with the sober members in our area. The Burnaby Fellowship was started in our area in the 1970s, as a clubhouse for people who are not drinking. Local members Jack H., Don N. and others started it mainly for the fellowship of sober people. I don't know of any severe problems or growing pains. The club had to move several times and is still going strong, renting space to several meetings a week.

There was not any opposition to AA in our area. There was a controversy over Intergroup buying "junk" to sell at our Central Office. Someone had written a cheque to someone who was making "AA trinkets" and the fellowship in the end decided that only conference-approved literature and such should be sold in the office. There were some Intergroup feuds, as previously stated, and from the chaos, Operating Procedures and Guidelines were put into place and are still the format of our Intergroup business meetings.

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What I have noticed is that there are more young people and women in AA now. When I came in at 38 years of age, that was considered very young. There seems to be less community spirit, less involvement and less talk of how to live sober. There does not seem to be a focus on our purpose of attending the meetings, or on reading the Big Book. There seems to be more focus on social chitchat rather than sobriety. There is not enough talk on how to stay sober, in my opinion. I believe, in the end, that carrying the message is best achieved by the power of example.

I owe a great debt of gratitude to AA, and the only way I can repay it is to continue to stay sober and carry the message. To be there at my home group to welcome the newcomer just as someone was there for me.

As I write this, it is 2006. I have been sober 36 years. My son is a member and is sober 23 years. My son-in-law is sober four years, all by the power of example. I thank my Higher Power, whom I choose to call God, every day for guiding me into AA, and for giving me the great gift of sobriety. Sobriety to me means "uninterrupted peace of mind". I thank everyone, everywhere, in AA; I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

## FROM THE NAVY TO THE PSYCH WARD TO THE SERENITY OF AA

### Elisabeth G.

I came to AA in 1962 and I sobered up in September 1965. I had such a bad start in AA. I had started to go to meetings in Halifax in 1963. I was serving in the Canadian Navy; that was in the early '60s. (It was during the Cuban crisis. It was not in the last World War like many people have asked me. I wasn't old enough to be in the Navy at that time.) However, my first few tries did not last. I lost my job. Actually, I was invited by the Queen to leave the Navy. So I came back to Vancouver and started in AA again. But I was not successful.

Now, this was in 1963 and there was no help, really, other than AA. It was the last place to go and also the only place to go if you had a drinking problem. The American Medical Association had declared alcoholism an illness in 1957, so it was still a new concept as such. A lot of doctors did not know about this or didn't even care. There was absolutely no training for doctors about alcoholism, or any kind of addiction for that matter. There was very little known about it and there was still a tremendous stigma about alcoholism. Those who could afford it, of course, travelled to other places to get into a hospital. Those who could not afford it, you know, usually died or ended up in the madhouse. The insane asylum is where I ended up.

The groups were constantly working on bringing in new people. As soon as you had a little bit of sobriety you were put to work. It was the only way we could keep sober, but it was hard work. Nobody in those days believed that you should take leave from work to recover from alcoholism. I am still not quite sure if that's a good idea because with the freedom from work you spend a lot more time thinking. The more you think, the worse you get. That was my experience. When I was unable to work, I was on UI for a while and I found that was the worst time for me. I slipped more often, I had more depressions. I was one of those people who needed a lot of discipline and routine in my life. I could not be idle because that meant trouble.

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We hear from the old-timers today that AA has changed an awful lot, and some of the old-timers are really quite unhappy about it. I hear a lot of complaining about it here in New Westminster. Well, when they start telling me that AA is not what it used to be like, I am glad it isn't because we do have a better AA now. We have more facilities to help people with alcohol problems or with other problems. We have better understanding from the public. It is not such a huge stigma anymore. The women have the courage to come to AA when they need to come. When I came to AA there were very few women and there was a stigma even within AA. I can remember the first few meetings that I went to in Halifax. There were lots of women there, but they were supporting their husbands. I couldn't find an alcoholic woman and when I walked around and asked, people would get quite, you know... well, the women would be quite nasty to me, saying, "Of course I am not an alcoholic. I am here to keep George sober." They were looking at me as being one of those women who had kept him drunk. That is not true because my interest was not in men, it was in the bottle. As a matter of fact, it never was in men.

So here I was in 1963 and 1964 and 1965, going to meetings, not missing very many, but getting constantly drunk. I didn't find more than one woman who was a sober alcoholic. But in Vancouver it's a different thing. Vancouver had more women. Now, I would still think that probably there were many groups where you couldn't find many women or any women at all. Maybe one or two came in, but I would say that maybe one-fifth of the AA population were women, give or take.

We had some absolutely wonderful women that I remember. We also had a few Al-Anons who went to our meetings because the Al-Anon meetings were not very strong at that time. I went to Kingsway Group every Friday, simply because I had seen Mavis. Mavis from Kingsway was a wonderful person. She had travelled with Mary and that bunch who travelled every weekend to carry the message to people up the valley and up the coast and throughout the Island. She was a beautiful woman and she had the most beautiful smile I had ever seen. I couldn't believe she was an alcoholic, so I kept on going to Kingsway because I was determined to hear her story. Kingsway was an extremely chauvinistic group in those days, and they kept their women for sandwiches and Chapter 5. Those were the duties they had. A whole year went by and I did not hear Mavis' story. She sobered up in 1948, which is the year that I started to drink.

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On her birthday, just as she was blowing out the candles on her birthday cake, she started a terrible nosebleed. So she spent the rest of the meeting in the washroom and I didn't hear her story. But I did eventually find the courage about a year later, when I had about two years' sobriety, to go and speak to her and tell her I admired her very much and I wanted to hear her story. I was chairman at that particular time and I called her. She told her story and, yes, she was an alcoholic. Mavis was very well known. She was a very popular figure in the '60s when I came in. The last I heard of her she was in an old folks' home. She became a very old woman. She passed on only a few years ago.

I was 12-stepped by the best people in AA. They all carried the message to me, almost around the clock. I have always been very, very fortunate to be surrounded by very good people. Why, I don't know. It's just one of those things. And these people really wished me well and they really tried hard. Some people even took me to their homes to sleep at their place. Jerry Mc. and Becky were ones that I remember that took me home many times. They were members of the Pyramid group. My current sponsor, Bonnie, also took me home when I was not sober. She washed me up, cleaned me up and put me in a pair of baby dolls. I remember sitting on the floor listening to her records. People did take care of me, but I kept on getting drunk. I was trying to find a sponsor; somebody who could really look after me. I was running around town with my umbilical cord in my hand, trying to find a place to plug it in. It's because my life had become unmanageable. I needed a mama, that's what I was looking for. I finally met Ruth D. from Lifeline and she took me on. I hated her because I felt she was one of these people who wanted to have a badge on her sleeve that said, "I was the one who sobered up Elisabeth G."

But actually, that is how it ended up. I got worse; I became suicidal because even the last possible place I could come to, Alcoholics Anonymous, would not work for me. So I became afraid I would take my life. I always needed alcohol to get the courage to do the deed, and fate and fast thinking by other people got me through four attempts. My last attempt, I remember I took half a month's supply of pills with half a bottle of whiskey. Sally phoned the police station and had them break down my door, because she had phoned me that particular time when I was right in the middle of doing it. Apparently, I fell over the phone and she ran to the neighbours and phoned from there to the police station because, of course, my line kept her telephone inactive and she couldn't phone.

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So I ended up in a coma for a few days. When I woke up, I thought I was in heaven because it was so quiet and peaceful. When I turned my head, I saw my sponsor sitting there and I knew I wasn't in heaven. I started to cry and said, "Why did you do it again? You know I don't deserve to live." She took my hand; she held it and said, "One day, somewhere, someone will need to hear your story." It's almost 40 years ago that this happened and I keep on going because maybe someday, somewhere, I'll find this person. I don't know. I just keep on going.

But, because of this, I had been in the Vancouver General emergency ward four times, and of course in the end they had to have somewhere to put me. My then-sponsor, Ruth, and two doctors and one lawyer signed me over as ward of the government. I was declared incapable of living on my own, so they had to put me somewhere. Of course, each time that I showed up in the emergency ward they would send me right over to the provincial insane asylum in Essendale. In 1964 they changed the name to Riverview Hospital. In those days it was a huge place; there were about 6,000 people there; 4,000 of them were patients. The government took good care of me. They saved my life on several occasions. They also gave me the absolutely newest invention on the market in those days. First of all, they put me full of pills because tranquilizers and antidepressants were brand-new pills and everybody was trying them out. They used us as guinea pigs. I was on Chlorpromazine until my face was blue. It was literally blue because you can't be in the sunshine when you are on this medication and I always loved sunshine. But then they put me on Librium, and I think maybe I was on pills for one and half years altogether and it was massive doses. I never liked medication. I lost my sobriety all the time. I don't think I was capable of staying sober. But I think the pills had a lot to do with it because you can't think. But I never liked the alcohol when I was on pills.

As I mentioned earlier, they had to have a place to put me after Essendale. So I ended up in an old-ladies' rest home down in Kitsilano. It was Mrs. Simpson's home and she did not want me. She had about 12 patients there and the youngest one, of course, was me and the next one was about 72 years old. She didn't want an alcoholic or a young person. But the social worker that I had out in Essendale had said "I think this person will sober up. She needs love and you are capable of giving love." So with that, of course, Mrs. Simpson had to take me.



She really and truly loved me dearly. I stayed at her place for two and half years and I sobered up while I was there. Now, about the pills: I found myself a screwdriver and I broke into the medicine cabinet. She had all the medication for all these old people and mine included. There were big bags of them because every month I saw the psychiatrist they would give me one or two months' supply. So there was enough to kill a few horses really. I stole all the bottles with my name on them and I didn't know what the consequences would be to stop all this medication suddenly. But I put them in a bag and went to my sponsor's house in the middle of the night; knocked on her door and said, "These are my pills, would you keep them for me in case something happens?" So she took them. I never went back to the pills. The reason for this exercise was not only because I wanted to get off the pills, but I wanted to drink so badly and I knew that the pills were ruining my pleasure of drinking. I would pass out immediately after throwing up a lot; I would get one ounce down and pass out. So it must be the pills. However, I tried to drink a few times after this and passed out again anyhow. So obviously my drinking time was over.

I ended up going back to the meetings every day simply because it was a safe place to go to. I had lost hope that I would ever sober up. All these people were so happy and I was extremely depressed. I decided I was an introvert and a depressed person. Now, time has proven that completely wrong. I do like people a lot and I am also a very happy person. So it was definitely alcohol that had driven me to the state I was in. I had no hope at that time, so I kept on going to meetings. But you know, little by little, day by day, I started to get better. I eventually came to a day where I wanted sobriety more than I wanted just one drink.

There was absolutely no help at all in those years for the alcoholic. They had two beds designated for alcoholism in Vancouver General Hospital. In order to get into one of those beds you had to have an alternate illness like a heart attack or cirrhosis of the liver or something like that. So the ordinary alcoholic had only four choices. This is what my doctor told me, actually. He said you can go completely crazy, get Korsikoff's Syndrome and end up in Essendale forever, go to prison, die or sober up in AA.

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We didn't have that many daytime meetings. Most meetings started at 9:00 in the evening, which is a very long time to stay sober. And then after the meetings we would go out for coffee and sit until 2:00 a.m. and talk. There was very little sleep in the first few months of my sobriety. I remember that I was exhausted. I was so exhausted that I actually got measles after three months of sobriety. Mrs. Simpson in the old-folks' home had to keep me in my room secretly, because she was afraid that her other patients would panic if they saw me. I was afraid that I might lose my sobriety or the whole group might fold while I wasn't there. I came back ten days later and they were all there and they were all sober.

We didn't have that many step groups. I started many, actually, because of the fact that I always wanted the traditions to go with it. As a matter of fact, I was the one that started having a step one week and tradition the next week. That was just by complete chance. I had been at a step group. It was privately held, and the rule there was that every time they had a new person you had to start on Step 1. Well, we didn't get past Step 3 for a year and I complained bitterly about this because steps 2 and 3 were not my favourites; neither was Step 11. God and I were still on fighting terms in those days. When I needed Him, I would actually introduce myself very formally. Then I learned to ignore God altogether; but I still believed in prayers, so I used to say "To whom it may concern". But, no, no, good heavens, we didn't have time to do the steps. We were all 12-stepping. There was a tremendous demand and even when it wasn't in demand for us, you have to remember there was no other place for drunks to go. There just was no other place.

We looked for people too. You found somebody drunk and you told them about the program. I mean, they didn't always come out. You knew they were new because they smelled, for one thing, and they shook. They were scared and some of them were crying. You could see them coming through the door and say, "Hi! There's a newbie." We then all wanted to tell our stories.

Then we had to take this person to meetings. In some cases it was around-the-clock babysitting. I've done it several times, but I also realize I was trained from the old school; the school that Sally and Ruth and those people were in, where they took care of the whole person. You fed them, you cleaned them up and sat with them and you fought with them when they wanted to drink, and stole their liquor and threw it down the sink. Oh my God, I can remember Jean and I were 12-stepping somebody in Kerrisdale A2.

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Jean found this bottle and took it to the kitchen; she bent to the sink to pour it out and this girl, it was pitiful, she started to cry. She ran to the sink to attack Jean, but I stopped her and held her in my arms and she just sobbed. It was heart-breaking. That was the last time I was ever part of throwing away other people's liquor. I felt that if you want to drink, well, fine. Sally said to me once that you cannot stop a person in the middle of their drunk. You know, they have to finish off themselves.

While I was in Essendale they gave me this aversion treatment. There were two women and 18 men and you go to the colony farms and get wired up electrically at the fingertips of your left hand; you sit there with a glass of whiskey in your right hand and carry on a conversation; whenever you want to take a drink they zap you with electricity. You had that treatment for three weeks. Well, I was quite immune to electricity. They asked me what my favourite drink was and I said whiskey, meaning scotch whiskey. They gave me the cheap rye — nasty stuff. But you know, if you have nothing else you'll try that too. Of course, I tried to carry on a conversation with these idiots in white jackets and they were so stupid, I mean, this was a room in Essendale and, like every other room, including the bathroom, it was painted green, sort of a nauseating sick green. So they had put some crepe paper around the lamp and they had torn pages out of Life magazine, you know, with Smirnoff and Johnny Walker and things like that, and glued them on the wall, just so that I would get into the atmosphere of drinking. These people don't know about drinking.

I had to take the bus and go into town and go to the unemployment office and look for a job. Now, you try to get a job if your only address is Essendale, BC, you know, the madhouse. Good luck. It was a little bit of a problem. But I did get a job. I got hired as a credit manager at Sears and the day I wanted to show up on a Monday morning, they wouldn't let me out of the insane asylum. So I mean it was crazy. It was insane. But back to this aversion treatment, I was very glad to be chosen among those people who got the treatment. Like I said a little bit earlier, I'd been running around looking for a mama, somebody to look after me and somebody to give me the will to stay sober, the will to want to stop drinking, and here was another thing. I thought maybe this treatment would take that drinking desire out of me. So of course I didn't tell anybody. I mean, I am not stupid. That was my secret. So as soon as I was finished the treatment, I went to town to look for the job and get my cheque.

When I came back to the bus stop, the bus wouldn't leave for another hour. The bus stop was in the centre of town. I thought, well I should go into the bar and see if this really worked. You know, I had taken a lot of electricity in three weeks and the idea was that if you get a glass and put it up to your lips, you start with a convulsion and this would remind you not to drink. So I thought I'd try it. I asked for a triple scotch and water on the side. Well, if it's going to be your last drink for the rest of your life, it's got to be a good one. I don't know what happened. I spent all my money, for one thing, I know that. I got on the bus; I don't remember it. Apparently I got into an argument with the bus driver. Now, I couldn't fight anymore, I had no strength in my body. So I took to biting people. The men in white jackets came in the truck and tied me up. This was told to me by the woman who had taken that course with me, and she was my roommate and she was a wonderful person. I loved her dearly. Unfortunately, she died shortly thereafter and never did sober up. She told me that they came, dragging me in like a sack of potatoes, and just simply threw me on the floor there in the hallway. The nurses came to untangle all the bindings that I had on me. I had my arms this way: you know, where I could not possibly move. But apparently I bit one of the nurses and she stayed off duty for a few days. Then they pumped me full of drugs so I slept for 36 hours. I was just out of it. So it was pretty bad. They threw me into that room, you know, where there are no doorknobs, no windows, nothing to sit on or hang yourself on.

I love the alcoholics who come today; they come a lot earlier and younger than ever. I was 32 years old at this particular time and I was considered a very young person in AA. But I think we could drink longer because we were not doped up with all the drugs that they have today. But when it comes to the convulsions, the DTs, the madness and the insanity of it... I mean alcohol is not a soft drink. It's a horror. It's the worst. It has always puzzled me why other drugs are recorded or illegal, when alcohol is really so bad. It is sold by the government and with profits.

Well, see me with lung cancer now, so? In remission, yes. I am feeling good. Maybe it's gone, I don't know. Another one of the miracles, yes. You know, when I went through this ordeal with the lung cancer, the prognosis to start with was five months to live. However, we changed doctors and we have a different way of doing it, so I am here and doing well. But it is a traumatic experience. So was the car accident I was in. But in both cases there were always AA people around me, giving me the courage, making me feel wanted. Some people even praying for me and, you know, prayers help because I thought to myself, these people, you know, some of these people, they are so busy with such full lives and somewhere along the line they're stopping in the middle of the day to pray for me. So, I have to try a little bit harder. It does work. But I don't know, when people get sick, how they get through it if they don't have AA. I just can't figure that one out, because I have certainly had my trials through my years with health problems.

What I see has changed in AA over the years is that it is more accepted all over. It actually has a very good reputation. It is the senior of all the health programs because there were no other health programs as such before AA. There were religious programs, but not the type that specifically helped you on one particular problem. So it's been the model of all of them and God knows there are many hundreds of copycat AAs. I think we will continue to survive if we remember that this is the problem we have. We can still help the other programs by example and by letting them use our literature, but we have to continue to have a primary purpose. I think that more and more people are starting to become aware of that particular issue, because there are so many people who have other addictions beside alcohol. We cannot possibly identify with the other addictions. That doesn't mean that we should reject them, we should still help them, but they cannot take up our AA time by speaking at meetings about their problems. You know, if you look at it this way, every person that I have ever known has had many problems. You haven't only got one problem. Alcohol might be one, but all the other ones are problems. Some people have problems with money, some people have problems with their marriage, or some people might have sex problems, they might get too much or not enough or the wrong kind, or you know.

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But that doesn't mean that it should be discussed in AA meetings. I think the drug issue is the same. When I was new in AA we had the pill problem. The pills were new on the market and everybody was trying them and then it became almost an epidemic. Now, if we had changed AA at that time to include the pill babies, as we called them, it would have taken a different form and we probably wouldn't have survived to be able to help the other groups by now. So we have to continue this way.

AA has also changed because we are not doing the kind of 12-step work that we did. I think it was very good experience to have and I learned a lot. I learned more what not to do. But, on the other hand, there is room for professionals. At least they have taken away that responsibility we had and that was to keep someone alive during the DTs. We did not have the knowledge to detoxify. Some people detoxified by giving them little sips of whiskey. Others gave them sleeping pills. Now, when I was drinking, four hours after I had had a big drunk, I wanted another drink. For sure. You could kill for a drink. So it was a horrible thing. There were people who died on the street and there were people who died in the drunk tank.

I think the people who are sitting there moaning about the good old days have a problem with their memory because it was a hard time. We worked awfully hard to keep sober and we had it hanging over our heads. My sponsor said her sponsor before her had told her, "If you don't help others, you will lose your sobriety." So you took that as number one. You left dinner parties, you even left work to go on a call. Well, some people might have been smarter than me, but I had drunk with a vengeance, so I had to work the program with a vengeance. We didn't have any study groups as such. There were step groups.

The first female step group, by the way, was from Kerrisdale A2. That was because they had this men's group that was Kerrisdale A1. One of those men decided the women would need one too, so he opened up one. He was the chairman of the women's group. It lasted for a year or two before they thought they had enough of him. But the meeting is still running on Monday mornings. It's often referred to as Monday Morning Madness. I know it quite well because I've known people who belong to it. My sponsor at that time was very involved in it. They started in 1954. The requirement for membership was that you belong to a home group. You must belong to a home group and you must be active in the home group.

So they went through the steps and they still do. I think they have thrown in some occasional tradition. The Step 4 inventory we did. There was pressure on me to do my inventory constantly because I was always getting drunk. So I did my inventory. I sat down and wrote 19 points of 56. Then I phoned my sponsor and told her what I had done and she said, "Well, you have to find something good or it isn't an inventory. An inventory is to check all the assets and liabilities that you might have, and you have no assets. There are assets, you know." So I went and thought about that for a while and wrote down my 32 teeth. Every time I started an inventory I got drunk again. So when I finally did stop drinking I didn't even go there. I didn't go back to inventory until about two and a half years of sobriety. I threw myself into service work instead, and I did service work, and the traditions were really my forte.

It was my sponsor who brought my attention to the traditions and it is so incredibly unique. You read any one of the traditions and it's good language; short sentences and you could agree with it. But you have no idea until you start trying to put it into your life how much it encompasses; how much it really means. Think of it this way, if you want a group to follow the traditions, the group is made up of people. The people, the members, have to understand the traditions, otherwise the group cannot do it. So you have to put it into your life. In Tradition 7, you know, it looks so easy but there is also self-supporting in all of them, but shouldn't I also be self-supporting? Shouldn't I be working them? Shouldn't I also be emotionally self-supporting? Where do I get my emotional support from? I get it from the meeting. The same way I get my financial support from working. This teaches you responsibility. Tradition 4, for instance, says that each group is autonomous. It simply means: mind your own business. Let people do what they want to do. Let them do it their way, whoever they are. Stay out of their affairs. Allow things to happen and you can be allowed to do things your way. You can make the decision as long as it does not hurt anybody, and that's what it says.

I have always been active in my group until the last few years when I haven't been well enough to really be active there. I don't always show up because it is a long drive. But then I go to a meeting out here, so I still attend a few meetings a week.

When I was DCM and it was time to go to the next level, I realized that I have never really done sponsorship work that well. I have always enjoyed carrying the message, bringing them into AA, getting them started, and as soon as they got their first-year cake and they knew as much as I did, then I was not interested anymore. There were a lot of issues that I have had personally that I had to work my way through. And all of these issues had been taboo up to then. When sponsees of mine came with their issues, I mean if it had anything to do with things that I might respond to, I'd stop talking; change the subject; go for a walk. So I had to start living my life and understanding me before I could be a sponsor. So that is what I have been doing ever since. I mean I got into the sponsorship. Now I am keeping sponsees regardless of length of sobriety. A lot of them have more knowledge about life in AA than I have, so I think it comes to the point where it is sort of a mutual support. In the beginning the sponsorship is that you are introducing them to AA and you show them how AA works and how it has worked for you. But later on in life it is a bond. The sponsorship of the old days, like I said, really you sort of adopted this person and sometimes you ended up babysitting them while they were going through their detoxification. That process is not that much different from the family matters where one person is little and helpless, maybe, and you are strong — you sort of bond. You have seen the person at their sickest, at their worst, at the most unlovable place they could be. You are strong and you are there helping them through this and there is a bonding there that is hard to describe. It is very strong.

I think we take it for granted now, but women were the minority and sometimes not taken seriously and not treated as equals. I think especially in Halifax I felt it very strongly. The fact was that these women were afraid of us because we were the ones that their husbands had gone out with. But that is not true. We had nothing to do with that. Well, I've heard a lot of women say when they're speaking that they were suspicious of us; sort of indicating that we have a past. I mean every one of us absolutely went down below the line where we would like to be. But to give us just a blanket bad reputation is not fair because we didn't do that with men. If a man got drunk it was just a good joke. If a woman got drunk, like Sally said, "It seems to me that when a woman falls to pieces it's like she is a beautiful doll and then suddenly she becomes a rag doll; all the straw is coming out of her seams." That is true.



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Because the women that she saw, you know this is ten, 15 years before me, they had really gone very far. She lived in Kerrisdale. They had money and a nice house. They had a position in society. So her alcoholism was hidden because they could afford to hide it. But she was very protective. But I was not protected because I was alone. But I had this knack of picking up good people, I don't know why. There is no doubt in my mind that I really became crazy. I had this tremendous fear of skid row. That was a place that I thought if you ever get down to skid row, it will swallow you and you will rot in hell.

The last drink I ever had was in the morning at 10:00. I had walked over to a friend of mine to demand that he give me a drink because I had drunk the night before. I was then staying at Mrs. Simpson's place and I had come home drunk. She had met me in the hallway and not allowed me to go up to my bedroom. She had taken me downstairs in the basement to her own apartment and put me to bed there so I wouldn't disturb the other patients. Well I had a sort of teal blue suit on, I remember that. It was a top and a skirt in sort of mint material and I had just taken it off and thrown it on the floor, and when I woke up the next morning she was asking me if she could give me breakfast. Of course I didn't want to eat because I was still not sober. But then I thought, I got to get rid of her because she is fussing around me trying to make me feel good. So I said I wanted toast and eggs and bacon and coffee and juice. That would keep her away for a little while. I managed to get out of bed and into my suit and sneak out the back door. I was staggering over to my friend's place; I had trouble keeping my legs straight. I thought to myself, now I'm on skid row. I got the one ounce my friend had left; it was an ounce of cognac. He had one little bit left in the bottle because he was not an alcoholic. He gave me that; I needed it so badly, I swallowed it right away and then I demanded that he go to the liquor store and get a bottle for me.

Meanwhile, while he did that I would go home and have a shower and change clothes. I went home and went upstairs and got changed and dressed and went downstairs and he phoned me at 11:00 to say he had the whiskey there. I said I didn't want to come yet. I wanted to sit around for a while. So he phoned again at 1:00 p.m. and I said the same thing, and he carried on phoning every second hour until 7:00 p.m. and I finally told him to just forget it. So I never drank again. That thing that happened to me on the way staggering over to get that drink; putting a dress on without getting washed; I don't think I had ever done it before. It really shook me up. I was staggering over just to get the rest of that bottle he had. It was just too much for me. I knew it was only a skip and a holler from there to skid row. That place.

So, basically, what I learned about the whole thing, including the aversion treatment, was that in the end nobody, not even AA, could stop you drinking. I had to stop drinking. AA would help me stay sober, but it would not fix up my life. I had to do it. That's where I'd gone wrong all along. I thought somebody would take away all my problems and fix them and look after me. Instead, I had to do the work.

## AT 21 YEARS OF AGE, SHE BECAME AN ACTIVE YOUNG PERSON IN AA

### Eroca S.

My first AA meeting, at the Lifeline Group in Vancouver, was October 29, 1964, when I was 21 and a half years old. I was in fourth year at UBC. I did not realize I would be exceptionally younger than the average member and came to suspect I was the only 21-year-old university student in the world in AA. This may well have been true at the time. I stuck out like a sore thumb wherever I went in AA, but fortunately it went over my head. I tend to be oblivious to such things, and was focused on AA, having been bit by the AA bug right away, to my sheer good fortune.

In 1951, when I was eight years old, my family moved to Courtenay to pursue one of my alcoholic father's many schemes. Working in the logging industry in the Comox Valley, where alcoholism was the norm, his alcoholism progressed. In 1955 a psychiatrist told him he was an alcoholic and needed to stop drinking. I consider this remarkable when large numbers of mental health professionals still cannot diagnose alcoholism 50 years later. AA itself would have been only 20 years old. He came home, and after he had been dry a couple of weeks, one night there was a big ruckus in the chicken house, indicating it had been invaded by a raccoon. In those days raccoons were elusive creatures, so the local animal tracker was called. Suitably, his name was Hunter, and for purposes of our story, Hunter B., as it turned out. He was late arriving because he was at the beer parlour, and, as the story was related, explained that he turned up sober because he was in AA and had been there 12-stepping his brother. As I recall, Hunter was 21 years old and his brother 19 years old.

Life did not become marvellous because my father quit drinking. Nevertheless, my father did two things that contributed to my sobriety. First, he kept sober himself. I figured if anyone as messed up as him could stay sober, AA must be downright magic. The second thing he did was he never bugged me about my drinking. As a result, when I decided I had a problem, I did not have to bear the burden of pleasing him by sobering up. But what gave me a really good impression of the program was all the other fine people I met in AA in Courtenay. One girl was 19 and I saw her go from a downtrodden street kid to a smartly turned-out member of the business world. I probably met the late Bob F. there, the former secretary at Central Office. I always had a feeling that I'd known him before, and when we compared notes one time it turned out he was around AA in Courtenay in the '50s.

I was also impressed with the amount of support and 12-step work I saw happening. My father was out at all hours of the morning on calls, and both he and my mother drove people miles to meetings. My mother even helped 12-step the women. She would become an alcoholic in her late 40s, after they were divorced, and she died prematurely at 55, never having had a chance to sober up. So I am very grateful to the people who laid the groundwork for me. I had started drinking as a toddler, but this was just sips of Daddy's beer and so on. I sampled more substantial liquors as the years went on, but never got really tipsy until I was 11, on leftover booze from a predance cocktail party, consumed while babysitting. Over the years I left a trail of babysitting customers with watered-down booze.

My exposure to the program did nothing to dampen my interest in drinking. I told myself and even my friends (who thought I was nuts) that I would join AA if I ever became an alcoholic when I grew up. Meanwhile, I was not grown up, so I continued to drink whenever I could. I was discreet about my drinking, living in a small town, and never got really drunk until I was 16. I took great care not to get into trouble, for a variety of reasons, not least of which was that it would interfere with my opportunities to drink. When I left home for UBC at age 18, my opportunities increased. However, as my alcoholism rapidly progressed, I had a number of experiences of social drunkenness that became so disagreeable that I embarked on my drinking practice of choice, drinking alone on a daily basis.

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There was a toll on my health and I suffered from vitamin deficiencies for several years after I quit drinking, until it was finally diagnosed and treated. The worst effect was on my mental health. When I came to the program I feared for my sanity, suffering from depression, claustrophobia and a number of obsessions. The latter two promptly cleared up, but the depression and various emotional “outside issue” symptoms took decades of recovery. What helped me to stay sober early on was my incessant, overwhelming craving for a drink. I knew this didn't happen to social drinkers. I was just starting fourth year in an honours program at UBC, had had barely adequate marks the year before and felt on the verge of a massive loss of control. I felt like I would be dead or on skid row in a matter of months. Somehow I had the idea that I could not end up on skid row if I had a degree. Crazy, but it helped.

On the evening of Saturday, October 24, 1964, I phoned AA. The woman at the answering service was very nice and said Lucy, the secretary, would call me the next day. She did and was very sweet. She linked me up with Ginger H., who lived nearby. Ginger called and offered to take me to a meeting. Unused to the idea of meetings available every night, I elected to wait to go to Lifeline, a few blocks away, on Thursday night. Lucy continued to be a supportive person in my sobriety until she took ill and was no longer able to work. I had a boyfriend at the time who was a very fine person, Brian M. I refer to him by his last initial because I trust he eventually decided to join the program. His brother, Murray M., did about eight years later. Brian went with me to my first meeting, but decided he wasn't ready to quit yet. Too bad, because in retrospect, he was the nicest, sanest boyfriend I ever had.

At the time, I was considered a very high-bottom drinker and I am endlessly grateful to the people who unknowingly carried the message to me so that I had the knowledge to quit early. By today's standards, I think I would be considered close to an average-bottom drinker. I got a great deal of support at Lifeline and met a number of people well known in AA, including Fred C., his wife Sylvia and his father Tom; Dick R., who sadly died of leukemia two or three years later; Bonnie, who died recently [March 2006]; her late husband, Jack N.; Ruth D. and Elisabeth G., whom I still see at my own home group, Kerrisdale A2.

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Ginger had her close friend Al C. take me to my second meeting at the Bay Group. Al and his friend Doris L. were a great deal of help to me in my early sobriety. In later years, Al was my sponsor for several years. Al helped a remarkable number of people during the time he lived in Vancouver, and outside of AA was influential in starting employee assistance programs in Canada. A notable member of the Bay group was the inimitable Jack, who yelled his (mildly) profanity- filled talks. I had difficulty with concentration in my first several months, so I really appreciated his ability to hold my attention with his yelling. In regular conversation, Jack was a dedicated AA and a warm and caring person.

At Christmas exams in 1964 I did poorly, but by the end of the year I graduated with my best marks ever. In September 1965 I got a job at SFU, which was just opening. I moved to Burnaby before Christmas and joined the Centre Group in New Westminister. I came to know a variety of characters there from the earliest days of AA in the New Westminister area, including Bill S., Davey MacW. and others. I was able to 12-step a 22-year-old friend, Karen B., in the summer of 1966 and she joined the Centre Group with me. That fall she moved back to Germany, where she got to stick out like a sore thumb in AA even worse than I had in Vancouver.

New Year's 1967, I went to Europe on a shoestring, as so many young people did then. Armed with a World Directory, I attended AA in Germany and in Paris. There were not many English-speaking meetings in Europe then. When I lived in Vienna for a few months, there was no English-speaking group. I met my American non-alcoholic husband shortly after I arrived in Europe and was married in Gibraltar. In the summer of '67 we moved to Hull, England, and I attended AA there. There were two meetings a week for a city of 300,000. Their knowledge of the program was negligible. One night the chairman said, "Seeing that this is an AA meeting, perhaps we should read the 12 Steps," and then read the 12 Traditions. Worse yet, the members looked at him like he was crazy to be reading any of the literature.

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I went to a northern England roundup and there were, at most, 40 people there. It was a good roundup nevertheless. Forty years later I'm sure it's very different there. After all, in the whole Lower Mainland then, there were only one to three meetings a night. I still fondly remember those meetings in Hull and those I met. My husband valiantly attended Al-Anon with the middle-aged ladies, and a sweet elderly doctor and his wife had us to their house for Christmas dinner. Returning home, I was again in New Westminster and back to Centre Group. I've always had a sense of history and I really enjoyed being in a group that then seemed so old — perhaps 25 years.

I became embroiled in graduate studies and when done was thoroughly burned out. I then embarked on a new stage of my AA life in 1970. As I was ready to start getting active again, I learned that a young people's group, the Under 30 Group, had been founded and needed support. I drove into Vancouver from Burnaby every week and became a dedicated member. Like others in the group, I felt very strongly about having a place where young people could go and find others their age. Among the "old buzzards", as I called them, there was some resistance to this because they said we were being exclusive. The same grumblings over "special interest groups" again arose when gay groups were formed. The fact that there have been closed men's groups ever since women have been in AA apparently has never counted in this controversy.

As time went on, one of our members inevitably turned 30. He kept attending until one very rigid member discovered this and had a serious meltdown over it. I should note that there was a group in Vancouver and one in New Westminster which had been called young people's groups for years but appeared to be primarily for the "young at heart". We had all searched for young members in our time and had felt let down, and even deceived, by these so-called young people's groups. Thus, we took seriously making sure our members were actually young so some other young person would not go away disappointed as we had.

To accommodate both our rigid member and our 30-year-old member, we then started the Under 40 Group. Both of these groups were very successful. We found that unlike the "old buzzards", we tended to speak more about our present-day issues and often noticed, at the end of the meeting, that no one had mentioned alcohol after the opening readings from the Big Book and the Twelve and Twelve.

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I can't begin to list all the wonderful people I met there and later worked with on our young people's conferences and dances, culminating in the ICYPAA (International Conference of Young People in AA). in 1978. (This was before the days of acronyms for everything, so we didn't call it the ICYPAA, by the way.) Our teamwork was always excellent, not to mention hilarious. My usual job was secretary, and I had the pleasure of working hand in glove with Pat MacG. as chairman of both a local young people's conference and the ICYPAA.

We had our first young people's conference in 1973, I think in April. It was one day in a church basement at Second and Larch. The food was Kentucky fried chicken and homemade chili. I worked on this with Lillian S., who is now my sponsor, Pat N., Barbara MacL., Bev J., Irma K. and others. It was a huge success. Our excellent speakers were Barbara G. and her then-partner, Rorey.

As Bev J. had been invited to be the banquet speaker at the ICYPAA in San Francisco that year, she, Lillian, Irma and I decided to drive down, both to attend and to research the whole concept of young people in AA. This was at the height of the energy crisis and the hunt for gas during the trip provided another memorable element to it.

Although we didn't have the youngest AA members of any jurisdiction, we found we were as progressive as any. Bev did a wonderful job as banquet speaker. We were enchanted to discover a gay hospitality room, and soon after we came back, this information influenced the formation of our first gay group here.

I was co-chairman of our second young people's conference in 1974, and we were advised to have it at a facility called the Clinton Hall. It was pretty rundown and I had my doubts, but as it was so highly recommended we went ahead. A couple of weeks before the event, Don MacK. and I went to see the caretaker about setup. He was drunk but assured us all would be prepared.



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Needless to say, when we arrived on the Saturday morning, setup was not complete and the caretaker ran around in a great panic. This was greatly exacerbated by the hatching, that very morning, of large black termites, which were crawling out of every available crack. The poor caretaker ran around frantically with a can of Raid. One of the girls, who had recently had the DTs with hallucinations of bugs, had to go home. When we went back to pay the owner a few days later, he said the caretaker had vanished on a bender of several days. The next year, 1975, we held the conference at the Stanley Park Pavilion, which was so beautiful it more than counterbalanced the previous year. Meanwhile, I had moved to North Vancouver and in 1975 had my first child. I still attended the Under 40 Group, which had moved to the East Side and was more accessible.

I'm not sure if it was before or after Under 40 changed its name to Lost and Found that I quit attending. Apparently some people said their sponsors felt unwelcome to attend because of the name. The Under 30 Group also changed its name, to the Broadway Group. I have never agreed with these groups losing their identities as true young people's groups, and continue to harbour a typically alcoholic (albeit hardly crippling) resentment about it. My sponsee, Yvonne, lived in Deep Cove and did not drive, and there were no meetings close to where I lived in West Vancouver, so we decided that would be a good location to situate a group. We got a few others together and started the Deep Cove group. By this time I knew that starting a new group required about five committed core members and after some time as a small group, I gather it has become a large and vibrant group. I have not attended since I moved back to the West Side 26 years ago.

In 1980, I finally moved back to Vancouver, having been a single mother for over four years. I was a member of Kerrisdale A2 for a number of years, but on my own with first one and then two children, I was not a very active member. In 1985, I met and became sponsor to Michelle P., who has since moved back to the US but remains a very dear friend. I introduced her to my friend Graeme W., whom I met earlier in the year and who had just moved back from Toronto with a little over a year's sobriety. They discovered Kitsun, a great non-smoking meeting.

I was a member there for about ten years and it was so great for me because I was very allergic to the smoke in the meetings and it had limited my attendance over the years. The fact that it met on Sunday morning was ideal for me as a working single mother. I had originally attended Kitsun in my first couple of years of sobriety when it was in a scruffy little hole in the wall by Plimley's, the car dealer, on Fourth Avenue, long since cleared away for condos.

After a few years of irregular attendance, I rejoined Kerrisdale A2 in the fall of 2004. It is like coming home again, as there are some members from my earliest days and some from my days of involvement with young people's activities. Now I am an elderly working person with two children still in university. With infirmity due to accidents and advancing age, I don't have much energy for group business, but I show up regularly and help a bit with things like cleanup.

I have seen many changes in AA over the years, some for the good, in my opinion, some not. First on the negative side was "hi so-and-so" after saying "my name is so-and-so and I'm an alcoholic". Sorry — I've never really accepted this.

Second is holding hands for the Serenity Prayer. I don't mind that but liked it better without holding hands. Also, there is the question of germs. Nevertheless, I should add here that I am immeasurably grateful that we say the Serenity Prayer here rather than the Lord's Prayer. I don't know if I would have come back to AA if the Lord's Prayer had been used. It reminded me of both school and church, two places I have never lost a strong aversion to. Also, I find the idea of using a Christian prayer at a nondenominational fellowship to be downright offensive.

Third, I find the attitude to 12-step work has become more lax. I and my early friends did as I saw those before me do — whenever possible doing a traditional two-person, in-person 12-step call, reminiscent of "The Man on the Bed" painting. Now people are more likely to be told to just show up at a meeting.

Fourth, I have noticed a lot of confusion between AA and exercises from the treatment centres. When I was new, nobody wrote out the steps with their sponsors, and we did just fine. The idea of 90 meetings in 90 days is also of this ilk, a concept that comes from Minnesota where treatment became a major industry at one point. Residential treatment came to be considered simply part of the process of joining AA there. If I had tried to do that at any stage of my sobriety I'd have gone nuts. At the same time, I realize this has been a lifesaver for some folks, but one size does not fit all. I also think this confusion between AA and treatment centres has given rise to some of the criticisms of AA that have appeared over the years. However, I am happy to see that the criticisms consistently fail to harm our marvellous fellowship.

Fifth, I have noticed different kinds of AA fundamentalism arise over the years. A newcomer I know was snagged by a sponsor who insisted she had to do the steps like the old-timers had done — going through them all as fast as possible, preferably in a couple of weeks or so. This included a premature ninth step, something that requires a great deal of mature thought. This nonsense appears to have arisen from historical information found in recent years describing how this was done in the very earliest days of AA. Nobody ever gave me this advice 40 years ago — in fact, I was told to go at my own pace.

Other harmful fundamentalism has been in AA since the beginning, by those who advise people they never need outside help. In fact, there was even a conference- approved pamphlet on this when I was new, and I imagine it's still around. I was advised, as wiser minds still advise people, to get my sobriety established if possible, and then get outside help after a year or two in the program if I still felt I needed it. If I couldn't stay sober I was advised to get it right now.

Sixth, I'm seeing much less socializing after meetings. When I was new, all but one meeting in the Lower Mainland, as I can recall, was at 9:00 p.m. In general, people ate dinner earlier then. By 10:00, after the meeting, they were ready for a snack. Now meetings are at all hours, which is good, but 8:00 is about the latest. If I run fast immediately after the meeting, I might get a cup of tea before it's all dumped out. Everyone is out and the door locked by 9:15 except on special occasions. I think the loss of the 30-minute "meeting after the meeting" is a problem. It seems almost that the pace of modern life has become so far out of hand that only those who can sober up on the run can make it.

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On the positive side, I am happy to see a lot of young people in the program, although I realize this is because most people are poly-drug users now and go down a lot faster than we usually did on nothing but alcohol. Whatever the reason, at least they can feel more welcome now and less like freaks.

As indicated earlier, the lack of smoking is a huge improvement. I have known people who didn't go back after their first meeting because they couldn't tolerate the smoke. It kept me away from many meetings I would like to have attended. Overall, it has improved our image and made the program accessible to more people.

What I really appreciate is that AA has not changed in its essentials over the years. I continue to be deeply impressed by the genius of the program and how that was distilled into the steps and traditions. I have a particular love for the traditions and how, if followed, they make AA indestructible. I often tell outsiders that if someone is trying to attack AA, the traditions render their task akin to picking up a bar of wet soap in the shower. The subversive anti-authoritarian in me (aka: everlasting teenage rebel) really enjoys that. It's like, "Sorry, say what you like, we have no opinion on outside issues."

I especially appreciate the idea of principles before personalities. The longer I am in AA the more I realize that it is some sort of cosmic crapshoot as to who sobers up and stays sober and who doesn't. I have seen wonderful people die of alcoholism and morally reprehensible people stay sober. I never used to judge people in AA. Once I got in touch with my feelings, I came to realize there were many people in the program I did not like or did not approve of at all. The miracle of it is that coming to realize this has had only positive effects on my sobriety. As Ginger H. used to say, "I don't like everyone in AA, but I do love everyone in AA." Another very wise thing she said was that she came to realize that everyone is practising the program to the best of his or her ability. I was also advised that whatever is true in AA is true in the world at large, which has allowed me to put principles before personalities in other areas of my life too.

To a certain extent, I regret that I have not been able to stay as active in the program over the years as I was before my children were born. However, choosing to devote the bulk of my time to my children, who were able to grow up in a non-alcoholic home, strikes me as a bit of a no-brainer. As Al C. used to say, AA is a bridge back to functioning in the normal world, and I am glad I have been able to do that for the most part. I have chosen to leave the AA stardom to the newer people and those with no kids. So I will continue to enjoy seeing my friends at meetings and sit anonymously in the middle of the group and listen, which I need to do as much as I did when AA saved my life on October 24, 1964.

## SHE MADE A PROMISE SHE COULDN'T KEEP

### Jeannette N.

I called AA on October 8, 1968. A lady named Ann C. answered my call. She said she was ill — she had the flu — and that she didn't want to give me her illness. I said, "I have so much poison in me, you cannot give me anything else! If I don't get help today, I won't need any at all!" I was too desperate to worry about her being sick in bed.

Ann C. lived across the street from me. She got out of her sick bed and came over. When she arrived at my apartment, she saw a lot of pills all lined up. I had lined up all the prescription pills doctors had given me over the years as I had tried to quit drinking. Uppers, downers, sleeping pills, tranquilizers — you name them, I had them. I had filled all the prescriptions, but I rarely took them. They made me feel sick because I was still drinking. So I just kept on drinking and left the pills alone.

Ann went home shortly afterward, but she sent her husband, Harvey C., over that evening. He came with some other AA men; they were on their way to an AA meeting at the Kingsway Group. I gave them some coffee and talked with them for a while. Then they left for the meeting. I removed their cups to the sink but somehow never got Harvey's cup! I kept going back to lie on the chesterfield and I would keep noticing Harvey's cup there. But when I got up to remove it, I would forget what I got up for. So I would lie back down on the chesterfield. The cup kept staring at me — but I could not remove it. By 1:00 a.m. I finally called Harvey and told him about this cup. He talked to me until I got the cup to the sink.

## PIONEERS IN SKIRTS:THE WOMEN'S STORIES FROM THE BC/YUKON AREA

I had been sober a few weeks, until October 20, which was my son's 21st birthday. When I was carrying my son, I couldn't stand the smell of booze. So I told my unborn infant that I would get drunk with him when he was 21 years old. I gave him a birthday dinner and then some of his friends came over. One pal brought him a mickey, saying that since he was now 21 he could drink legally. They drank at the dining room table. They left the bottle sitting on the table when they went into the living room. I remembered my promise to the baby as I cleared the dining room table. I took his mickey to the sink, poured some into a glass, and lifted it to my lips. I don't know if I ever got any in my mouth because when I lifted the glass I could see Harvey's face and finger at the bottom. So I heaved the glass into the water-filled sink. Since I don't know if I actually took a drink, I now use October 20, 1968, as my AA anniversary date, rather than October 8.

At first I was only a weekly participant at the Kingsway Group. I think I was on a dry drunk for six years. I needed more guidance than just the open meetings and sponsor help. In the early days the meetings had mostly men, who were just spouting off drunkalogues. Men did not seem to want women in the groups. Women were rarely called to speak. Six years after I got sober, I was at a morning step meeting when the phone rang. It was Ann C. telling us that Harvey had passed away. My first sponsee, Dorothy H., was there when I told them the news. She said, "Now, Jeanette, you'll never be able to drink! He's up there watching you." Just like he was watching me and that drink on my son's birthday.

In my seventh year I was introduced to the 12-step Novalco program. I wish I had heard about that program sooner, because I needed the steps to help me shape my new life. I always mention it to newcomers because I want them to get the help sooner than I did. Eventually, I started teaching others to lead the series. I still have groups in my house and I am now 83 years old.

When I had been in the program for ten years I became a GSR. Two years after that I became the DCM. In my early sobriety I answered phones at Central Office until 10:00 p.m. I also went on 12-step calls. My first call was when I was only a few weeks sober. My sponsor was at work and could not get to the person until later, so I sat with that person until my sponsor arrived. Back then, few people came to AA as referrals from recovery centres. There were not that many around, and one of the recovery centres that I went to did not recommend AA to help in my daily struggle. Once Central Office informed us of a person's need, we phoned them and set up a meeting time. We tried to go to their house, right away if possible. We told them our stories and suggested they accompany us to a meeting that week. I like to give them a Who Me? pamphlet. Usually I read part of it with them. I have them answer the questions. I leave that pamphlet, 44 Questions and The Group with them. If they were not receptive, we would leave our phone number and give them permission to call us when they wanted more assistance.

There are more women in AA now and they are made welcome. There are more young people as well. In fact, I'm one of the few old fogies, yet, when I started there were many old men in the groups. I do not think that round-table discussion groups were available in the past. They occur now and they are open meetings. Many people think they ought to be closed meetings. Twelve-step meetings should also be closed, but they are not. The meetings now still run on the same format — preamble is read, "How It Works" is read, participants are asked to speak. At half-time, we stop for coffee and a chat. We start again, pass the collection basket, listen to more speakers and close with the Serenity Prayer.

What I believe to be the most essential for long-term sobriety is sponsorship, weekly meetings, close sharing and 12-step series instruction. I like to bring the newcomer home to see how I live. I like to share my sobriety, and my path to sobriety. A person who has done the steps, who has been in AA long enough to know how it works and who is willing to share his story and his time is the best qualified person for doing 12-step work. The first few pages of Chapter 3 should be read to the newcomer — this tells him what alcoholism is all about and whether he fits in.



## OUR PANEL 33 DELEGATE

### Kim P.

My sobriety date is November 24, 1972. I started drinking young. I always say I can blame my mother for being an alcoholic because I was 3 lbs. 5 oz. at birth and I couldn't take formula of any kind, so my mother got a voucher [during the war you needed a signed voucher from your doctor to buy liquor] and went into the beer store and got beer, and she kept me alive on beer. Apparently when I was younger I used to crawl behind the couches and take the top of the beer when they had a party, so I always liked beer. But of course that stopped... I didn't grow up in an alcoholic home, but I grew up in a broken home. I never saw a lot of drinking in my growing-up years, but I discovered what alcohol could do for me at the age of 16. I quit school at the age of 16 and went into the St. Regis beer parlour in Vancouver with another friend, and I always think about it because now it's a Starbuck's and it makes me chuckle. You were supposed to be 21. My stepfather said to put your "hands up", so we did that and they brought us two beer and tomato juice. We didn't know what to do with the tomato juice, so we poured it in the plant, and we did it again with the next one. After the second beer I became a "part of". It took away all my insecurities and all my fears. It took away not feeling attractive, not feeling good enough, growing up poor and hungry in hand-me-down clothes which I never liked. I was a true "status seeker". I discovered at that age what I call my liquid courage; something that allowed me to be "a part of". I didn't get drunk all the time, of course, at that age, but from the age of 18 years to 32 years, when Alcoholics Anonymous found me, I was a daily drinker.

I had got hired in the lobby of a Hotel in Vancouver, and I said I could do this and do that and manage a beauty salon and train people, and the only thing I knew how to do was hair. Mainly it was because I lied about everything. I don't know if any of you have ever done that. So when I got the job, I had to go to school in order to do all the things I said I could do. I lost weight and got sick, and I was in my doctor's office and he said if I didn't put on weight he would put me in the hospital. He said that what I had to do was go home from work and relax; have a drink. I shouldn't eat right away, I should have a drink.

Well, a drink for me was alcohol. To my mom it would have been a tea, a glass of milk or orange juice. I was basically a daily drinker from then until AA found me. Now, I didn't get drunk every day but I did a lot of things in my drinking; when I took a drink, I was never sure where I would end up or what was going to happen. My alcoholism took me to a place where the only desire I had was a desire to die.

A few things happened. I met my first husband; I won him on a bet. I ended up sleeping with him, which was a "no-no" back then, so we told everybody we'd eloped; got married. That was fine. My mother believed me and had parties. We got gifts. So I couldn't get out of that. And that was another thing: I'd get myself into situations I couldn't get out of. But he was good for me. He fit my status. He just needed another year of university to be an engineer. After he got that we went to Montreal. We went up the social ladder. I became an excellent hostess. We got married five years later. We came back here and bought the house. Everything was just going tickety-boo and I knew I would show everybody that I had finally arrived. I always drank. I drank every single day. Sometimes I drank sort of socially; you know, wine with dinner, cocktails and all that, but it wasn't too often that I didn't go over the line and get drunk. We had a three-bedroom, three-bathroom home in White Rock, and my husband came to me one day and said he wanted to move his first wife in. She had three children, none of them his. We'd been together ten and a half years at the time. I got drunk; I threw a few things at him and around the house, and then walked out. They speak of the ego of the alcoholic; I talked to my neighbours like nothing was going on, hopped in my car and drove to the wharf. That was my first suicide attempt. I recall the last two years of my alcoholism — my road to hell. That's when I started missing work; ordering my booze by cab so it'd be delivered every payday; not paying bills; passing out. I was a blackout drinker.

When I got sober, I found out from my brother some of the things I did. He followed me one time when my first husband and I separated. We'd separated, got back together, and separated again. I just said I would go out to Haney and hit every bar from Haney into Vancouver, and my brother said "I'll drive you". He did, and he said the thing that would happen when I'd get drinking is I'd pick a fight with someone in the bar — usually a man; never a woman. My stepfather had trained me and I could throw a 200-pound guy over my shoulder, and my poor brother... but this is what I would do. And I guess a lot of that maybe subconsciously was to do with my dad leaving. He left when I was about eight years old and he left with married woman, and I was always told all my life that I looked like him. I tried everything I could to not look like him. That was a big thing — a big thing for me.

So those last two years were hell. All these doctors tried me on pills. None of them worked for me. I had a cabinet full of pills and finally my mother came down and she left some pamphlets in my home. By then my breakfast was a beer with an egg in it... made perfect sense to me; I got my protein and it stopped the shakes so maybe I could make it in to work; and maybe not. I carried liqueur chocolates to work. I'd go into the bathroom and break them, take the cognac or brandy out of them. I never ate the chocolate. I went to go off the Pattullo Bridge and the police brought me home; told me I was sick. I went to walk in traffic, hoping a car would hit me, and the gal I walked to work with (it was only three blocks away) had her husband drive us to work in the morning. She was terrified. She didn't know what to do. I had no idea of the insanity. I had no idea of what was wrong with me.

I always figured that I was born into the wrong family; at the wrong time; in the wrong place; that I chose the wrong men. I had an absolute fear of men. I was raped when I was 15. There were five guys involved. I never talked about it. I never shared it with anybody until I got sober.

## PIONEERS IN SKIRTS:THE WOMEN'S STORIES FROM THE BC/YUKON AREA

My last suicide attempt was when I went up to a family reunion in Salmon Arm. Mom is a Finlander and they love family reunions. I went up there to say goodbye to everybody and I was going to drive my car off the Hope-Princeton highway. On my way back I stopped and saw an aunt and uncle in Summerland, and I didn't drink too much; I didn't get drunk and I didn't insult anybody that weekend. I was driving along the Hope-Princeton and I swerved my car to go over the edge, and a trucker stopped me and another one followed me all the way home to where I lived in New Westminster. He told me I was sick and I should get help. And I was angry. I finally knew what the compulsion of anger was, because if I had had a knife or something I would have fired it at him. All I did was go upstairs and get drunk. One of my younger brothers was staying with me and he was terrified. That was in July.

In October that year, my mother came down to this hospital auxiliary gathering and of course I'm drinking in the morning. She sees what my breakfast is; I'm right out of it. At that convention, they had an AA booth and my mother picked up all the pamphlets, and she left them in my home and asked me to read them. I picked them up in late October or November. I read magazines from back to front, so you know I read the Who Me? from bottom up, so I didn't answer any more than two questions. But I picked up A letter to a Woman Alcoholic and there was something in that pamphlet that gave me a spark of maybe wanting to live, and I don't know what it is. I've read it many times since and I've no idea what clicked.

I called our Central Office and a fellow named Bing called me back because there wasn't a whole bunch of women around then. They wanted to send someone out Friday night and Saturday night and I said "no", I was having company. I always laugh at how busy I sounded, but the reason was I had a two-bedroom place that hadn't been cleaned for I don't know how long. I agreed that someone could come Sunday morning and I stayed up all Saturday night and cleaned the apartment. I think of the ego of the alcoholic. There was no way that I could let you come over to my place without it being perfect. I cleaned and I even went out and had some baked goods and had coffee made. At that time I had long, bleached blonde hair and I wore hairpieces. I always say thank God for makeup. I wore false eyelashes.

They came with two gals. They talked to me and wanted to take me to a meeting. I had no idea what Alcoholics Anonymous was. I had no idea where we were going. Somehow I thought we'd be going to Main and Hastings. They took me to North Van to the Avalon Hotel where they had the breakfast meeting. When we got there I was quite impressed. There were Cadillacs and Lincolns and Mercedes in the driveway and I thought they'd checked me out, because I'd given them my last name. All I remember is that I couldn't hold a cigarette and I couldn't hold a cup of coffee. Then they took me to somebody's apartment in West Vancouver that overlooked the ocean and I thought, "Ah, this is pretty classy."

They took me to a few more meetings, but my ex-husband came to see me and told me that if I kept going to Alcoholics Anonymous I'd ruin his family name. I didn't know what you had but I decided I didn't want it. Now I had given away all of the booze — I don't know why — except one. I kept a bottle of rye, which wasn't my drink. I lived alone. I had a bottle of rye hidden behind a post in the cupboard. I got into that bottle of rye and some pills that had been left and I was going to take my life again. I lived on the 12th floor of an apartment and I went to jump off but my hair was in rollers and I didn't want you to find me that way. So I sat down and I called the doctor that was looking after me at that time. Dr. Green came over to my house, at three or four in the morning (they don't do that anymore, I'm sure), and he said to me, "Well, I can put you on medication," because there was absolutely no place to go. There was no detox for women. I believe Charlesford House was around then, but it only took eight women and it was mainly for street women. They didn't take anyone who had a job or who could work. It was more or less like a safe house. It didn't have a program or anything at that time. Dr. Green said I should go back to Alcoholics Anonymous. He called Bing, and he and his wife, Marg, came over at three or four in the morning and took me back to their place. I went into the DTs. They just kept feeding me hot and cold liquids.

The next night was Friday and Bing took me to the Kingsway Group and introduced me to his sponsor, Harold. He told Harold what had happened to me. Harold said, "If you were drowning and someone threw you a life-raft, you'd grab onto it. Why don't you do the same thing with the program?" I'd like to tell you that's what I did, but I was in Alcoholics Anonymous for three or four months before I became an alcoholic. And the reason I'm here today — they don't do a lot of it today, but they did back then — is when Bing got hold of me, he showed up at my place with his wife every single night to take me to a meeting. He never phoned me and said, "Would you like to go to a meeting tonight?" He maybe phoned and said, "I'll be by to pick you up at 7:00 p.m., we're going out to Chilliwack." He had me working the phones when I was ten days dry or ten days sober, and I figured I could do that because I've always worked with the public. There was a real funny incident: I got a phone call and called the secretary of the group, and she tried to tell me that she was having a dinner party and wasn't available for a 12-step call. But I'd already heard you all say you do everything to do a 12-step call — that you gave the information to the secretary of the group and the secretary got somebody — and I wasn't taking "no" for an answer. I was following the instructions. Finally she said to me, "How long have you been sober?" and I can still remember pulling my shoulders back and saying, "Ten days." Well, all hell broke loose. She called a meeting at Central Office. It's one of the reasons you have to have six months of sobriety before you can work the phones now. They don't let people like me on there, brand-new, anymore.

When I came in there, they really talked about if you don't take your first drink you won't get drunk. One of the things they wanted me to do was get a woman sponsor. There weren't many women around. I was 32 years old and I was single. The only thing I knew how to do was crave attention. Just picture it: I was about size six back then and hot pants were in; I would take up to two hours to get ready. I'd come home from work and get in a bubble bath, and I would take the rest of the time getting ready to go because all I had to do was make that entrance. And I would make that entrance and I'd be fine. I made one of my grand entrances in Chilliwack or Abbotsford one day, and I'm leaning up against the wall and this person I heard speak at the very first meeting I was at came up to me and said, "You're new, eh?" And I said, "That's right." He said, "Well, try it for 90 days, you dumb blonde, and if you don't like it you can have your misery back." I no longer use the language I used with him, but I was determined I was not going to drink for 90 days.

## PIONEERS IN SKIRTS:THE WOMEN'S STORIES FROM THE BC/YUKON AREA

I knew absolutely nothing about sobriety. I used to think I only went to meetings because they showed up and took me. I always said I went because I was brought up polite. Today, I know I went because I had no idea how sick I was. I used to think if I could take a tape recorder and record some of these stories, I could write a best-seller and I'd never have to work again. There weren't many women, so of course I didn't identify because most of the speakers were male. You could go to meeting after meeting after meeting and never hear a woman speaker. If I was at a meeting Tuesday and I'd heard you speak Monday, I'd wander off to Hawaii because I'd already heard you in my mind. You all talked about rolling cars and chewing glass and biting off ears and I didn't identify at all.

But there was a breakfast meeting in North Vancouver. A woman spoke there and I admired her every time she did. I'd never go and talk to her, of course, but I really liked her. Most of the women that were around at the time had grey hair and I figured they had probably never gotten in fights in bars and done some of the stuff that I'd done. One day someone invited me up to her place. It was a Sunday and there was a bunch of people arriving, and she knew their names and kept inviting them to stay for supper. I thought, whatever it is, she's got it. Not only did she know their names but they could stay for supper. All that was in my fridge by this time was my makeup, my nail polish, and maybe a chunk of cheese. I used to put my bikinis in there to keep them cool so I could put them on when I came home to sit out in the sun. I had no food in my fridge at all. I really, really admired her. One day I was at a meeting with her and her husband when one of my brothers was down, and when we went back to my place I handed her my Big Book and asked her to sign it as my sponsor. She became the "door opener" for me because she allowed me to be who I had to be. I was one of those that had no idea what feelings meant. I had lived such an outward existence; you know, like, dress me up and I'll be whatever you want me to be. My whole life I was a caregiver. I took care of other people but I never thought of taking care of myself. A lot of my family was lies. If you said someone in your family was a doctor, somebody in my family was a doctor. I was so ashamed of where I came from: growing up poor and growing up hungry.

It was New Year's Eve of 1972, at the home of the woman who was to become my sponsor, that I accepted that I had the illness of alcoholism. We were standing in her yard just after midnight. Up until that point I had been arguing and debating with anyone who was willing — about everything, including God or no God. Of course, then I wanted everything right away. Winnie is my sponsor and she encouraged me to do the steps with her. Some of the things she said to me that I still live today are... Never sit on the fence; always be a part of. Join a group. As alcoholics we must be part of a group because we are undisciplined. Always be willing to give back. Be a good member of AA. Show up to your business meetings. When the hand of AA needs you to be there, be there. One thing she told me was if I did the 12 steps of AA it would change my negative thinking to positive. She also told me something that I use today when I'm having one of those "irritable, restless and discontented" days, and that was, "Never look at what you are doing; look at what you aren't doing." And she encouraged me to be a part of service. When I first came in, I was doing everything. I was answering phones; I was on the hospital committee. You name it, I was doing it. I had rollerblades on. I figured if I did it all at once you'd leave me alone.

She took me out to an Area quarterly meeting in Chilliwack, and I think I might have been sober just over a year. It was World War III. Nobody liked one another. Everybody fought with everybody and it was just awful. We were driving back and I said to her, "I'm not getting involved in that," And she said, "That's right, not until five years sober and not until you know what you belong to." She gave me two books to read. One was the Service Manual, and I think it's too bad that they made it beige because no one can see it. The other was AA Comes of Age. She said, "Find out what you belong to," and I did.

In the meantime, I got involved in Intergroup and all the other service structures. In my early sobriety I met the then-Delegate, Al B. When Al was around, he was talking about going to the Okanagan. Well, that was no big deal to me. I spent all my summers there. Then he was talking about going to New York and I thought, "Hmm, I'd like to be Delegate and going to New York on your money." I did a lot of drinking in New York. Well, as we went along, he finally told me that to do that is a privilege earned. It's not something that everybody can do. It's a part of giving back. It's another service job, and it's at the bottom of the pyramid, not at the top.



## PIONEERS IN SKIRTS:THE WOMEN'S STORIES FROM THE BC/YUKON AREA

I did what my sponsor said and I believe I'm still sober today because of the number-one thing: I belong to a group. If I didn't belong to a group, I don't think you would see me very much. I did all kinds of service jobs through Intergroup. I did public information. I was public information chair for Area 79. I followed a fellow in my group. His name was Web J. He was past Delegate and past Trustee. He sort of voted me into positions whether I was there or not. I became his alternate GSR when he was GSR. I became GSR when he became DCM and I sort of just followed behind him. I ended up on the Area Committee when they let go of the public information chairperson they had at that time. We had a meeting in Victoria at a quarterly because I was never a District Committee Member. Back then we weren't in the procedure that you have today because they didn't have enough people for everyone to go from General Service Representative to District Committee Member and work your way through. Anyway, there was a big debate that went until three or four in the morning until I was ratified. Then I went on to be Alternate Delegate. And that was interesting because the person that just rotated out as Alternate Delegate didn't get Delegate, so stood for Alternate Delegate again. Then I became Delegate. I always feel if you're kind of bored with your sobriety or if you're having trouble, get involved in service because it's great. What it did was enhance my communication skills. The people I met!

I always wanted to go south, but you get involved in service and you travel north. You go to all these small towns, Whitehorse for example, and it's awesome what comes back to you! The joy of going to the General Service Conferences is pretty awesome; to watch God as you understand Him work with a bunch of egomaniac Delegates, because everybody has an opinion. When I was Delegate, the big issue was the gay issue and the gay pamphlets. I was down there and everybody was up at the mikes and we couldn't get a two-thirds majority and they were all sort of fighting about it. Then a black man got up and he said, "When I came into Alcoholics Anonymous, there was a white phone and a black phone, and I picked up the wrong phone, which kept me out for a number of years. I wouldn't like to see anyone kept out of Alcoholics Anonymous no matter what their race, creed or sexual preference, whatever it is... we always provide whatever is needed." The whole room went quiet. They took a vote and they got a two-thirds majority to push the pamphlet through. That was awesome.

Another thing about sobriety is that we get sober and life happens. I've had a lot of adversity in my sobriety. I think it's because of the way I came into AA and the people I met. The way we did 12-step calls back then. I have absolutely nothing against treatment or anything, but when you did a 12-step call back then, you never took anybody to detox. You sat with them. You took them to meetings. You got a group of people and you passed them on to them. You worked with them. They never went to doctors unless they really had to. So I feel really blessed the way I was 12-stepped and looked after in Alcoholics Anonymous. That I was allowed to find out who I was at my own pace and I was encouraged to give it back; which I did. I'm one that believes that you can stay sober under any and all conditions — if you belong to a group; if you have a sponsor; if you have a Power greater than yourself that you believe in; if you do the steps; and if you're willing to give back.

I've had it all. I got married and divorced in sobriety. I married again in sobriety and I thought we would live happily ever after — if he'd only chosen to stay sober. I hung around there for four years when I knew I shouldn't have. I was about eight years sober and I was a trusted servant, and if you're a trusted servant you don't get sick; you're all together. I became emotionally sick in sobriety, which can happen. I was ashamed again at what was happening in my life; a second divorce. I didn't want you to know my life was falling apart, so I couldn't tell anybody. As well as an alcoholic, I'm also a runner, so I packed up my car to get out of town and got as far as Hope. I came back and I called somebody. I had to go off to the Island and do a workshop and I didn't want to do it. The person that called me said, "For as long as we've known you, you've always loved AA; we're not asking you to talk about you. You've always done it. But why don't you ask God as you understand him to let you share what's happening in your life?" I was at a meeting and got asked to speak, and what was happening in my life came out. And what happened is what occurs every time we're willing to open ourselves up: people just opened up to me. Through every adversity I've had, people have just walked with me and talked for me when I couldn't talk; been there for me; taken me to meetings. It's a beauty, this thing we have.

But what happens to people who stay sober longer — I know this is true for me — is that pride and ego will get in there. You think, “I’m sober 30-some-odd years, I should have the answer.” The thing I really know is that when I’m hurting or life is happening, I don’t have the answer. That’s why it’s important that I belong to a group. Because even after all the years I’ve got, if I don’t show up at my group for a while, I get a call asking if I’m okay. If I didn’t belong to a group and I wasn’t connected, they wouldn’t be calling and asking. That’s the beauty. We’re three legacies of Recovery, Unity and Service. I was brought up to never refuse a 12-step call. I have never refused a 12-step call. Even if I have company for dinner, I’ll take the call and I’ll take care of it because if somebody hadn’t answered that phone at Central Office and taken the time to come and see me, and taken the time to go through all my bullshit and lies, I wouldn’t be here. I always hope to give the same thing back to somebody else.

I think once you’ve been through all the service structure (and it’s a joy to go through it), you should do what my mentor, Mac C., told me: When you rotate out of service (and I believe in rotation with all my heart; at every level), just become a member of your group. You’re just there. He said, “If you leave your group, you have nothing to rotate back to.” I loved what Al H., another Trustee, said when he gave his keynote address. I think about it often. He went to a noon meeting and somebody handed him a jar of pickles and said, “Can you slice these?” He said, “Okay,” and went into the kitchen. Then another member said, “Don’t you know who that is? She went, “Nah, I don’t know who that is.” “That’s Al H., a Trustee.” She said, “What’s a Trustee? I need the pickles sliced.” And he said that’s what he was going to continue to do when he rotated out. He was going to go back to his group and continue to slice pickles.

I live today the life that I always wanted to live. A fear I had was to retire and end up in poverty. I always thought I would have to leave the community I’m in because I wouldn’t be able to afford it. Then my niece and nephew came along and asked, if they built a house with a suite for me, would I move in? Now I live in the most gorgeous suite with a four-year-old and a two-year-old upstairs who visit me regularly. I have family all around me. It couldn’t be better. When I do retire it won’t matter how little or how much I’ll have to live on. I will be fine.

And then just the other day, I walked through another fear. I always had a fear of drowning, so I would never go in a speedboat. My niece upstairs came and asked if I would go to Steveston for fish and chips and I said I'm not comfortable in boats. She said, "Well, our boat's safe." And then the little four-year-old, Liam, came down and said, "Auntie Kim, our boat is really, really safe. If you come with us, we'll have lifejackets." I thought, "I just did a Fifth Step and just told somebody to walk through their fears and if I'm going to walk through mine, why not walk through it with people that I trust?" So I went.

So one thing I know on this journey, if you're open, it's a day at a time and we can always learn. I think AA is fine just the way it is. I think if we stay around and carry the message of "Singleness of Purpose" and we're open to talking about what AA is and what AA isn't, it will be there for those yet to come; any of my family that might need it. I feel real strongly that there's no need to turn somebody away if they happen to show up there and they have an addiction to a different substance. I think that we love them until they find the place that they fit in. I don't think we should ever shame anybody or ever make anyone not feel welcome in those rooms, and I feel it's my responsibility to introduce them to other programs that are there for them. If AA doesn't work for them, they are going to leave and find one that does anyway.

I hope that as I carry on in my sobriety, I will never become a "bleeding deacon" that isn't open to listen to somebody or listen to change. Tomorrow I'm going to Women's Day. When I came in, if you had a Women's Day, you might have got 15 to 20 women, if you were lucky, and they would have come from all over BC. You go there now and there are at least 150 women sitting in that room, and it just awes me that here we are. Women no longer have to be ashamed to come to AA. They are not turned away at the door when they come with their husbands, which happened in the early stages. Backs aren't turned on them.

There was one woman Delegate before me, but we've had a lot of women Delegates since. We're not just a fellowship of men or a fellowship of women, but a fellowship of men and women, and we're all over the world. I think we're alive and well in BC.

What I've seen change over the years is the 12-step work. That's a big, big change. You'd get a 12-step call and you didn't take them into detox or dump them into treatment. You don't hear us talking much now about if you don't get the first drink, you won't get drunk. You don't hear much about sponsorship. It was talked about from the podium. The other thing that has changed is the rituals. When I came in, we never gave tokens out for lengths of sobriety. If there were medallions, they were never bought by the group. They were given to you by your sponsor. There was never chanting like "keep coming back". Of course, my group doesn't do it so I'm okay with it. But I think the biggest thing is the 12-step work and we don't talk about it enough. I often wonder if any of the new people that come in ever get that opportunity to go and call on a "wet one", or do they continue to work with people that come out of treatment centres or recovery houses? Do they ever get that call to go and call on someone that's "in their cups" or really throwing up?

Now some of the positive things that I've seen change in our Area. When I came in, AAs and Delegates had to travel with their own money because there wasn't the support in the area. I remember our then-Delegate, Mac C., telling us to sit down and shut up, and that you didn't go to the Conference to carry the disruptions or discourses from your Area. You took care of that at the Area level. You were supposed to go to the General Service Conference to carry the message, to make AA as a whole strong. What's best for AA as a whole, not what's best for your district or your group or your Area. What I've seen happen over the years is the connection with the outlying areas. When I came in as public information chair (remember we didn't have email then), I hand-wrote all the District Committee Members and introduced them to public information. I think what you do now, the change that I see, is that you bring your DCMs into committees and switch them around and somebody off the Area Committee calls them all the time. That the quarterly meetings and assemblies are throughout the province instead of always in the Lower Mainland is really positive.

## PIONEERS IN SKIRTS:THE WOMEN'S STORIES FROM THE BC/YUKON AREA

I think the service workshops are positive. I remember doing a traditions workshop in '73 and the only ones at the workshop in the morning were the cochair and me. In the afternoon, people sent their sponsees in. People wouldn't go to any workshops if the word "service" or "traditions" was mentioned. There were hardly any closed step groups/discussion groups. There were a couple but that was by invitation only. You had to get a card invitation. So I see that change, good changes where there are step meetings and closed discussion groups. I've seen positive input that has enhanced the Area. You get excellent turnouts to the quarterlies and the assemblies. Archives was just getting its start when I came in. It didn't go around but was kept in Colin and his wife's basement. The Grassroots: I remember us discussing putting that together at the Chilliwack quarterly, and look at what it is today. There's some awesome material in the Grassroots, and that's positive.

I'd like to talk about my mentor. I hope that everybody gets a chance to have a Mac C. in their sobriety. I met him in 1974 at a North Shore Roundup. I was drawn to him for what he had and not in a male/female way. His plane was delayed, so I spent five hours with him at the airport. He was one of those that loved AA and believed that everything we had was because of AA. He'd phone me from wherever and I would be ticked off and natter at him, and he'd say, "I know, sweetheart, don't drink, go to meetings, clean house, trust in God and work with others." And I'd go, "But you don't understand." And he'd repeat that to me again and I'd get mad, slam down the phone (I broke a few of them), and get in my car and drive away. I'd drive out to Hope and come back and realize that what he said was true.

One time there was a roundup and I was hosting again. I was ticked off with the other speaker and if I had been behind him on the Lions Gate Bridge, he would have been in the ocean. I'm nattering about driving Mac to the airport again and I'm not going to do anything in AA again. These ungrateful people, blah, blah, blah. I'm going to do hair and makeup in the theatre where you're appreciated. Then we got to the airport and while we were having coffee he said, "The only dependency you're ever allowed is on a God of your understanding. The minute you place your dependency on people, places and things, you're going to be hurt, you're going to be sad; you're going to be disappointed. And the other thing is you'd better always remember that everything you have is due to AA. When you become unwilling to give it back, you're going to lose it all. Nothing is yours." Those words come to me every time I'm asked to do something.

It's not that I'm worried about losing something. Mac was one who believed that alcoholics drink, that's what they do. So if somebody calls and they've had a slip, you go and call them again. It's the most natural thing for them to drink. I remember in my early sobriety, when you know it all, I'd been 12-stepping this gal and she didn't stay sober and then she came and disrupted the meeting. I got up to the podium and told them not to pay any attention to her, that she didn't want to be sober anyway. Of course, this divided the room. Well, after Mac had given this talk at the roundup, we talked about it. I got home and on the Monday I got a call from the hospital to pick somebody up, and of course it's this gal. I said, "Yeah, I'll come and get her, but you'd better tell her who's coming." I went and got her and she was shaking in the car. I was able to say, "If you want sobriety today, I'm willing to walk with you." It was a great lesson because she got 15 years. And so Mac taught me not to judge. Don't think I don't do it — I do — but he told me not to do it.

He taught me that, on awakening, before I even put my foot out of the blanket and onto the floor, I invite God into my life and I ask God to walk with me for that day; that I just keep it very simple. At night I thank God for a good day of sobriety. That's all I have to do as far as prayer and meditation go. I don't have to do anything else because if I invite him before I do any reading, before I have my tea, before I do anything, God's going to be with me that day. Mac is the one who said to me one day, "If God is, there's no discussion. God is, no discussion." God is everything.

I don't know how to describe Mac. He had such a great sense of humour but he had such a beautiful love of sobriety. He'd say, "I'd rather be at home with Norma and my grandkids, but I owe my life to AA and it's up to me to give back." I feel the same way he does. As long as my health is okay I'll do whatever I'm asked to do. Everybody I met when I was Delegate that was a Class "B" Trustee was sponsored by Mac. He was so loved and so respected. He always told the story about the two guys that he 12-stepped over and over again because nobody would go and see them. They said, "If you had a meeting that nobody else would attend, we'd go." So he started the Golden Slippers meeting at 7:00 a.m. in Winnipeg. He'd have to take them for breakfast and pay for it. The only time they were sober was when one was the secretary and one was the treasurer. Eventually they both got sober, but not for quite a while.

Mac really taught me that it's not up to me whether a person gets sober or not. That's between them and God; it's whenever that psychic change happens. My only responsibility is to carry the message and show up. From that day on I never got upset if somebody went out and then called me again. He also taught me that God takes the credit and God takes the mistakes. All I am is an instrument. So that is basically how I live my life today; I'm only God's instrument and my only responsibility is to do what's in front of me this day.



## YOUNG PEOPLE IN AA PIONEER

### Lillian S.

I came to AA in Sydney, Australia, having landed up there from my home in Montreal, Canada. I telephoned their AA office. It seems like I always knew about AA. A friend of mine's husband had joined and I read the 20 questions at that time, three years before I joined. In Sydney no one was called a sponsor, but there was a woman who took me to meetings and helped me with the steps. Basically she was someone I could talk to.

Back in Montreal in the late 1960s, I was part of the group that started the Young People's Conference, which became ICYPAA (International Conference of Young People in AA). All I remember about that is baking ten cakes. In the early 1970s in Vancouver, I was part of the same thing, although I didn't have to bake the cakes this time. I was one of three people that started the first gay meeting. The others were Pat N. and Dan McK. We three sat for one year before it got off the ground. I have also been a GSR and DCM, and performed all the functions needed in a home group. All of these positions were carried out in my home groups in Montreal, Vancouver and California.

In my area of Vancouver, in 1974, we started Live and Let Live, the first gay group on record. The other people that supported us and some that eventually did join the group were Bill and Shirley D., Peter and Monica B., Beverly J., Pat McG. and Melda McC. Live and Let Live was started out of need for a gay group.

Everybody knew everybody and there was more of a sense of community. Back then there was more personal contact — we helped each other with house renovations and yard work and that sort of thing. People tended to take newcomers home and help them. There was also more contact between Central Office and the community in order to help the newcomers.

## PIONEERS IN SKIRTS:THE WOMEN'S STORIES FROM THE BC/YUKON AREA

We tried to contact new members through our local doctors. Meetings were held once a week. Live and Let Live was first a Twelve and Twelve discussion meeting and now has become a topic discussion meeting. There was a special problem in that there was a debate for some time about whether we ought to list ourselves in the directory as a gay meeting. The problem was solved when General Service Office said that there should either be all special interest groups listed or none (i.e. men's group, women's group). The group's name was and is to this day Live and Let Live.

I think we were well received for the most part. There was controversy, but we grew through it. I personally suffered from bigotry while chairing the BC/Yukon Convention. It unfortunately lost money that year and some said it was due to the fact that I was gay! I thought it might have been due to the postal strike and that we couldn't get our notices out.

These are some of the Intergroup feuds that I remember: hiring a gay man as assistant manager — he was hired, by the way; listing gay meetings, which did happen; and listing Native American meetings, which was done and then undone.

People in the gay groups, in general, are very service-oriented and attend all the functions, helping to spread the word as best they can. Our group reads the preamble as part of the format at every meeting. We have a group treasurer and accountability. We celebrate individual and group anniversaries. We have Al-Anon and Alateen in our community and we have good relations. There has been lots of AA growth in our group and our area. It is great to see that there are lots of young people, women and minorities. Everyone is welcome and made welcome. We have good relations with "outside agencies"; lots of medical students attend our open meetings. Our group participates in all the provincial and regional service assemblies, workshops and forums, as well as the conventions and conferences.

What I have seen change is that there are more people and less of a sense of community in AA now. It is changing in that it is harder to get people involved in service. I believe that carrying the message is best achieved by going to meetings. Also, by doing what you say you are going to do.

## PIONEERS IN SKIRTS:THE WOMEN'S STORIES FROM THE BC/YUKON AREA

More service would improve the group. The main handicap in my group is that only the same people participate in service, over and over. The main attribute is our welcoming attitude. We have door people greeting before the meeting, then good-nighters and thankers at the door after the meeting. We handle slips by welcoming people back.

The most important thing for long-term sobriety, in my opinion, is remaining committed to your home group, service, continuous study of steps/traditions and concepts. Do not drink or otherwise partake.

## SHE'S ALWAYS FELT RESPONSIBLE TO PASS IT ON

### Maggie C.

I started drinking when I was 16 years old. I come from a large Irish Catholic family. My older brothers and sister had problems with alcohol. We lived on a farm in a small town called Whalen Corners about 50 miles north of London, Ontario. I left home when I was 15 years old after graduating from grade nine. My dad said I either had to continue in school or get a job. I had to get permission from the parish priest to quit school. So I moved to London and worked for McCormick's candies and biscuits. I roomed with the family of a chap I went to school with. I quit there and moved into a nursing home and worked as a live-in with the elderly. I was there for about a year and met my husband during that time. We met in November 1956 and married in June 1957. There was a lot of alcoholism in his family and the priest warned me that maybe I shouldn't get married. But at 16 years old you couldn't tell me anything. I thought I could change it.

I had my oldest boy on December 31, 1957, when I was 17 years old. I started drinking with my husband because he was a full-blown alcoholic at the age of 26. I figured if you can't beat 'em, join 'em. I looked older than I was, so I drank in the bar. Sometimes I was asked to leave by the Morality Squad. My husband tried Alcoholics Anonymous, so that is when I was introduced to it, back in 1957. But I didn't know it was for me until later on. He was in and out of the program. I had three more children, in 1958, 1960 and 1962, so I had four children before I was 23 years old. I drank in between. We were sociable — we went to dances, to the Legion — I liked to play darts and euchre, but alcohol was always the centre. There was always fighting involved. I got beat up several times when I was pregnant. He was always looking for the food money and I would hide it. I knew it wasn't him but the alcohol, but I didn't know it was an illness until many years later.

## PIONEERS IN SKIRTS:THE WOMEN'S STORIES FROM THE BC/YUKON AREA

We took the geographical cure and thought that if he got away from his drinking buddies, it would be better. We moved to Alberta in January 1965. He couldn't find work, so he came to Vancouver and got a job washing dishes at the Fraser Arms Hotel. Then we moved to Maple Ridge. We tried to make a go of the marriage — try to patch it up, separations and back together again. It just didn't work, so I finally left in June of 1966. He went back to Ontario and stayed there. He took me to court and I had to go back to London, Ontario, to get custody of my children. It was tough; I was a single parent. I had to pack them on the train and go all the way out there and then back again six months later.

Where I lived, the woman upstairs was in Al-Anon and her husband was in AA. They invited me to meetings and I went. May H. gave me the Who Me? pamphlet. It wasn't until 1967 that I could pick out bits and pieces and identify. She said, "I think you are an alcoholic and you belong in AA. You won't be happy until you do." I was in denial. I answered two of the 20. And then when I came in on February 8, 1968, I answered all but two.

When my youngest son was three years old, he was hit by a car. The doctor put me on Valium and Phenobarbital for my nerves. I got addicted to them and couldn't function without them. So when I came into the program and quit drinking and quit the medication, I had a nervous breakdown. I had eight shock treatments. It was after therapy and about five years in the program that I went back there and took the fifth step. I always say that I could live the program through the fifth step because that wonderful doctor told me that the root of my problem was alcohol. A big load lifted because I knew something was wrong with me. My life was totally spinning out of control and I didn't know why and I couldn't do anything to stop it. After the treatments I was much better. That doctor told me to apply the 12 steps and the 12 traditions in my everyday life. He said to use them as a blueprint. He was a psychiatrist at Crease Clinic and at Vancouver General. He was not an alcoholic. He said he had seen a lot of change in me in the five years since I was a patient there. He said he believed that if I had not sought help when I did, I wouldn't be here now — that I would probably be in Essendale permanently. That's how much of a tightrope I was walking. So for me to be sitting here — I am truly a miracle, but it's been hard work.

In the early days of my sobriety, and for the women who came before me, there were no treatment centres for women. Charlesford House started the next year. There weren't that many detoxes for women either. I did it all at home, with meetings and doctor's help and my AA program. I kept coming to the meetings and I was identifying. Back then we called it "someone is reading your mail". It was an expression they used. The old-timers were telling us to sit and listen with an open mind. Every time I went to a step meeting and they were on the fourth step, I would run out of the room. It was because I was looking at the immoral inventory, not the moral inventory. The old-timers told me that I was not a sinner, I was a sick person trying to get well. That made sense to me. They told me I had an illness and I had to treat it like heart or stroke or diabetes. I could handle that.

I was sober about 18 months when I found the God part of the program. I was raised Catholic, but that was a different God. It was a God that was going to punish us. We were very fearful all the time, even as children, that what we did was terribly wrong. I had bargained with my higher power many times: "Dear God, get me out of this jackpot and I'll say so many novenas or so many special masses." At the time I meant every word of it, but my alcoholism got in the way. I didn't keep up my end of the bargain, so that is where the guilt and the remorse come in. And more so for women alcoholics, I think, because we're nurturers. We are here to look after others, it's our nature. At least back then it was like that. There was a lot of stigma with women alcoholics. We were the lowest on earth. You could walk into a bar with ladies after work, and some guy would buy you a drink and would assume that you were his for the night. There were conditions. Now, I think young ladies could come in after work and no one would think anything of it. But back then there was a stigma.

I don't know what I would have done without the old-timers — those that had come before me. Now I feel it is a legacy I have to pass on. I have a "no nonsense" type of sobriety because that's what was handed to me. I wanted what they had — the peace and serenity in the faces of those coming to the meetings. My stomach was in knots all the time — constantly churning. I developed a conscience when I got sober. When I was out drinking, I felt I deserved to go out. I worked hard and looked after my children so I would "deserve" to go out. A light went on when I realized what the matter was.

The way we 12-stepped back then was I took them home and sobered them up on my couch. We don't get so many calls anymore because institutions are taking away our 12-step work. But in the beginning that's what we did — it was one to one. We took them home and sobered them up. We took them to a doctor. We gave them corn syrup and orange juice and you worked with that person for some time.

My kids were ten, nine, seven and five years old when I sobered up. I worked full-time at Vancouver General Hospital. It wasn't easy. I had to go to meetings and lots of times I consequently missed baseball and soccer tournaments. The children, as they get older, they're a bit resentful because I deprived them of that. But they haven't walked in my shoes. They don't know where I was coming from. I had to go to the meetings for my sanity; in order to stay well. I still go to meetings because I can still get those defects of character — like anger and resentment. I go to meetings now to know how to stay sober and what to do about my unmanageable life, because for so many years it was unmanageable. The oldtimers told me to take it easy because I didn't get that way overnight. It's going to take a lifetime to unscramble it. They told me I could stay sober under any and all conditions and I've done that. I've lost brothers and a sister to this illness. I divorced my first husband in 1975. I was married to my second husband for 22 years, and four years ago I lost him to lung cancer. Grieving his loss is one of the hardest things I have ever had to do. He was sober 25 years when he died.

What I have noticed change in AA over the years is that we have people coming in with dual problems. There is more of an outside issue. The groups have gotten too big. When I first came in there were only eight or nine meetings a week and you saw the same people at those meetings. Now, there are over 700 meetings. We are so big that it is hard to reach people on a one-to-one. I think it's important to be a door greeter. I was door greeter for 11 years in the group I sobered up in, the Pleasant Group. I would like to be a door greeter, especially at my own group. It's so important — attraction rather than promotion. So one problem is that the meetings are so big and so stretched out. I think treatment centres are a good thing. I think, though, that they take away some of our 12-step work. A lot of us think that way.

The most important thing for long-term sobriety is to never forget where you came from. Never cease to be grateful. Work with others. Try to carry the message the best you can. Try to live the 12 steps the best you can. It's through example. If you are not grateful, or you get bored going to meetings, then it's a matter of time before you make excuses for not going. I've always said that my key to sobriety is having a God of my understanding. Spirituality. God works through people. We are the chosen ones because there are so many that need the program, but it's for those who want it. Getting out of ourselves and getting rid of ego — self-centredness — is key. It's not what can AA do for me, but what can I do for AA. I thought that way from day one — what I can do to pay back. I belong to a women's step meeting and I enjoy working with these women. They are so thirsty for knowledge, like I was when I first came in. They are teaching me so much. And they're getting it. I was 28 years old when I came into the program and many of them are that age. I tell them, "If I could do it, so can you."

I feel peace and serenity most of the time. When I don't, there's something in my program I'm not doing. If you get out and work with others — I feel I owe a responsibility. I always want the hand of AA to be there. And it's so rewarding. God works through all of us. He and only He can allow people to change. I can't change anybody. The only person I can change is myself. But through His love, guidance and grace, He has given us... people who are bankrupt spiritually have difficulty grasping this program. That's another key. I've never forgotten to include the God of my understanding in my life. I ask for help in the morning through daily meditation and I take an inventory at night before I go to bed. I also thank him for what he gives me through the day, whether it's a rainbow, the sunshine or the gift of hearing a child laugh. I stop now and watch the robins and I talk to the squirrels when they go by. I notice nature more now. I've been on a spiritual journey all these years. When I don't let go and let God and I'm in the driver's seat, I'm in trouble.

I've always felt that my heart has gone out to the woman alcoholic. We have a harder, tougher time. One is the stigma of society and we are prejudged. The key is that I had to learn to forgive myself. It says we "carry the message to the alcoholic who still suffers". It doesn't say anything in there about drinking... because it could be the guy or gal sitting beside you with one day or 55 years. We are all just trying to maintain, especially when life throws us a curve.



## PIONEERS IN SKIRTS:THE WOMEN'S STORIES FROM THE BC/YUKON AREA

Whenever I see someone sitting alone I go over and say hello, because you never know, you might be able to prevent just one person from going out. When I drank, I had no self-esteem, but alcohol helped me get through the day. It gave me false courage and helped me talk to people. For the first 15 months in this program, I cried every time they asked me to share. Every time I shared my story, I would relive the guilt and remorse. But now I cry sometimes when I get a cake or when friends get a cake. It's hard to realize I've come this far.

I realize that God had a plan for me a long time ago. I was going to enter the convent when I was 16 years old. I cried when I made my first communion at six years old. It was God helping me connect with the spiritual back then. He must have seen something in me that I couldn't see in myself because I'm here. This is a God-given gift — a gift of grace. It's a privilege to be here and it's nothing to be treated lightly. It's an illness and we are losing so many who go back out — some after many years. I can't afford that because while I know I have another drunk in me, I can't guarantee that I have another recovery. I tell struggling people to think, "If I take you [the drink], where are you going to take me?" Alcohol is a great remover — it will remove you from your loved ones and from your self-respect.

Women have come a long way. When I went on 12-step calls I would get really upset because the person wouldn't stay sober. If we went to see a man, there were three of us who went — a lady and two men. Never go on a 12-step call alone — we never did that. That's a stop away from a 13th step. Some people will have slips because they're having an off-day and go to 12-step somebody and the liquor is right there. I have a lot of respect for alcohol and I don't put temptation in my way. I never kept alcohol in my home from the time I sobered up. But coming back to the 12-step calls, I'd come home upset and call my sponsor wondering if I had said or done the wrong thing. I was told we plant the seed and carry the message, not the alcoholic. I have tried my best to be the best member of AA I could be. It's attraction, not promotion. We want people to stay. If someone is bored in sobriety there is something they're not doing. I tell them to work with a newcomer, work with others, do service work at Central Office. There is always something you can do. I have paid my dues to be here and to have the gift of sobriety — there is no life like it.

There are so many doors open. My grandson will be 19 years old this year and I was there when he was born. God gave me the strength to look after my husband while he was ill. If we share our problems with others, it's half the problem. And no matter how long we've been around, we need to be able to say, "I'm hurting today." The still-suffering alcoholic could have 20 years. But you won't know until you reach out. I read their faces and go and ask them how they are doing.

## OUR KELOWNA GAL

### Sandi D.

I sobered up for the last time on October 9, 1969, in Vancouver. My first AA meeting, however, was in Kelowna. I sobered up when I was 22 years old and was coming into the “old people’s” group at a time where there were a lot of people in their 60s and 70s just getting started in the program, so they were telling me they had spilt more down their shirts and blouses. I just thought that I drank a little bit better than they did so I got to the point quicker. I didn’t understand or relate to some of the things they talked about because I had not gone to jail, I had not been in any institution, hospital or otherwise; but I was definitely my father’s daughter.

I got drunk my first time at 13 years old, although my father tells me a story about when I was cleaning up bottles from their parties, and at three and a half years old I got drunk, and as I wobbled over to the other side of the room I fell over and passed out. That’s a little bit of my drinking history. When I came into the program in 1969, women were very, very few. For lack of a better way of putting it, the older women did not want any of the young women to come in and participate at their level of sobriety, I guess. There was maybe a handful of people under 30 years of age when I came in and it was very difficult.

I spent my first two years in AA in Vancouver and then moved to Kitimat, where there were virtually no women except the one I 12-stepped, and she was in and out and back to the psych ward. Finally they just shipped her out of there on a plane, because it was just too much for her to be isolated in Kitimat. I moved from there to Mackenzie, and again there were no women except for the odd one who came in and left. So for about four years I had no women to communicate with, but I wanted sobriety, so I worked the program as best I could by following the 12 steps and the 12 traditions. One of the things that was really difficult was that the women thought they had something to be afraid of in me because, you know, that’s sometimes part of the alcoholic way. But all I wanted was sobriety. I hung in there and finally I opened up.

## PIONEERS IN SKIRTS:THE WOMEN'S STORIES FROM THE BC/YUKON AREA

They had closed meetings in those days where nobody was allowed to attend unless they wanted to be sober. I started a meeting at our place in Mackenzie because I needed to have some female interaction. Some of those in attendance were Al-Anon women, which really did help to bring balance in sobriety to the last year and a half that I was in Mackenzie.

After that we moved to Edmonton for a few months and I didn't get to many meetings. The ones that we did go to were phenomenal. There was still quite an age difference in the majority of the groups, but they accepted me as being a member of AA in good standing. Then we moved to Prince George for a while.

I was ten years sober when I had the great reward of being able to chair a rally of 500 people. It was amazing because my tenth AA birthday fell right on the Friday of the rally. I tried really hard not to let my ego get out of whack. I never really had much trouble with that because we had Chuck C. from California as guest speaker. Actually, he spent a night at our place in Prince George and he shared many, many things with us. Now, 27 years later, it's really hard to remember all of what he said, but one of the things that has stuck with me is, "You know, you do it for free and for fun and because you want to." And he said, "Once you put that into your everyday life in sobriety, things will just happen. Both good and bad, but you've been given the tools to cope with whatever comes your way."

I was asked, "What was it like to be a teenage alcoholic back in the '60s?" I got married when I was 17 and had my first baby one year later. It wasn't that I had to get married, I just wanted to get out of the system. I had grown up in foster homes since I was five and I needed to belong somewhere, so getting married seemed to be the logical thing to do. So I did just that and one year later had my first son, Jim. I didn't do much drinking other than the usual Friday or Saturday evening where you'd sit around and have a 26-ounce bottle of rye. There was not so much beer drunk then; you'd have a drink of rye and Coke, or whatever. My oldest son was born when I was 18 years old and I craved alcohol by then. I had drunk and been drunk quite a bit through my early teens, but this was a whole different want or need for alcohol. I wasn't an alcoholic who stayed at home and drank behind four walls. I was out in public and danced in all the halls 'til I couldn't drink anymore.

I remember one night I came to and I was sitting a car two houses down from where I lived. I was so cold and I couldn't figure out why I was so cold. Well, I had no coat on, it was minus-26 degrees and the lake had frozen over that year in Kelowna. I got up and knocked on a door. I didn't know where I was. I just fell into someone's arms when they opened the door. They sat me in front of their oven. When I got up to use their phone, I looked outside and could see I was only two doors away from my own house. That's what it was like — I drank in blackouts from the time I was 13 years old. In those days they said I was drinking in the latter part of my alcoholism because of the blackouts. I continued to drink in blackouts up to when I sobered up. I would come to periodically throughout a night, but that was rare. I would find myself in the most horrible situations. I think we all know what those can be. I knew I didn't want to lose my kids. I didn't want my boys to grow up like I did, without their mom and their dad, so I decided when Jim was just a few months old that there was something I needed to do about my drinking. Two years later I had baby number two. At that point, the drinking was really out of control; I used every excuse to drink. I hung onto that toilet bowl every time — how I suffered. But I really liked the taste. That was the way it was, until I quit. God intervened, I guess, for lack of a better way of putting it. He put a fellow in my life that was sober in the program and that was my introduction to AA — that first meeting was here in Kelowna 37 years ago this past September [2006].

Going through the second ten years of sobriety, I did a lot of learning. I learned how to live with my children, to help them grow up by spending the time with them. We did a lot of moving around; we moved from Prince George to the Island, back and forth. Then I split up with my second husband and moved back to the Okanagan. My father, bless his heart, phoned me in the middle of the night Christmas night of 1989. I had just celebrated my 20th AA birthday a couple of months before that, and from that day 'til this my father has been sober, going to meetings on his schedule, not anyone else's, and he's maintained sobriety and is doing well.

## PIONEERS IN SKIRTS:THE WOMEN'S STORIES FROM THE BC/YUKON AREA

I'm skipping a mate in here, because it was bad. He was one I thought I should have in my life. I was 15 years sober and he needed to drink more than he needed to be sober, so I went through all the stuff of having someone wet the bed. It was very difficult because he was always looking for me to give him the excuse to drink. We finally parted company. About the same time as my dad sobered up, I met my third husband. When my third husband waltzed into my life, he and my dad had decided they needed to fix up my life. He has been on the scene every day since and it's been a good walk in sobriety the last 17 years of my sobriety. I finally have someone I can talk to and relate to.

Through the years there's been a lot of non-involvement with women or women tend to be very wary of women because of potentially "bad" situations. Women in my age group in the late '50s and early '60s had a certain respect for themselves. We had self-respect and if we saw a couple, we left them as a couple and did not interfere in their lives. I find that there's a lot of stuff that's happening now that didn't happen many years ago, when I first sobered up. I'm finding that this seems to be evolving with the lack of self-respect that seems to come with the dually addicted personalities. That's just my understanding or what I've seen evolve as I go along in my life.

I'm going to talk a little bit about the last 20 years of my sobriety — the wonderful things and the sad emotional stuff that a mother has to deal with. My son, Jim, had his coming out as a gay person when he was 16 years old and it was not a happy time for a family in the '80s, as I guess everyone could imagine. At the same time that he was coming out, my marriage to my second husband was breaking up. I was trying to make sense of the marriage breakup, and my son being gay made it quite a difficult time.

I have been with my third husband since 1989. After we were together a while, about January '92, we got a phone call from Jim asking us to come and see him. The plan was for him to follow us back to Penticton, but when the time came he phoned to say that he was too sick and couldn't come. Instead, we went to him and at that time he informed us that he was HIV positive. When we arrived I looked at this young 27-year-old man that was lying in the bed desperately ill and I said, "Jim, you're really, really sick." He replied, "Oh, no, Mom, I'll make my 30th birthday." I thought if he had another year we would be very lucky. We ended up with 13 more months.

But the last seven months of his life, he came home to live with us in a 600 sq. ft. house. He and his partner finally got an apartment, but he spent all his time with us because his partner never allowed him to be sick. We had to learn how to use the program and how to live every day as if it were the last one we had. When he did finally pass away on the 7th of April, 1993, he had said everything he wanted to say and I had said everything I needed to say. There were no regrets.

Shortly after his passing, my stepdaughter came to see us. She was having baby number five. She asked if she could add Jim's name to his name. I said that would be a great honour for this little guy. So, his name is Cassidy James. We were all allowed to be a part of the birth of that little boy. So it was like — when one life ends, a new life begins.

We've had many things happen in our lifetime. We've struggled with my youngest son, Sid, who had a tremendous drinking problem and liked to smoke dope. That was all part of his life and we've been able to watch him turn his life around. My husband's youngest son is still practising drugs and alcohol. It was quite a horrific time, but we've lived with seven children; we now have six living. We lived in sobriety with them in our home. We have shared with them what we've learned, but not imposed. If we impose, we chase them away. So what we've done is try to be the best example of the Big Book in action every day of our lives. We lived each day that way through the living and dying of my son. Through this program we live each day as if it's the only one we have. There isn't a day that goes by that my husband and I don't share our good and our bad at the end of the day. I feel there's never any bad — it's just one good day after another. I thank God at the end of every day for my sobriety, my health and my life because I wouldn't have any of this without sobriety — without AA. I've received another gift of sobriety.

When I was 20 years sober, my father sobered up, and this year my mother came to my 37-year AA birthday cake. She's been sober every day since. So there are gifts. We have children that are not drinking, who are living their lives in and around sobriety but not in the program. But they're not drinking and they've got a good life.

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I just wanted to add that I know in sobriety you don't really need to have another person every day of your life to share it with, but I do have and that is a bonus. I really appreciate that I do have my husband, Adam. The life that we share in sobriety, we share every day. That's how our life is. We work the program and we carry it to the people around us, not telling them, but just living it and being the best example of that program in action and putting it to use.

We've had many things happen this year — we've had an employee that we had to let go because she had taken hundreds of thousands of dollars and used it for gambling. However, we've managed to turn that around since March 2006. In that time period, our 40-year-old son had a heart attack and came home to live with us while he got well. We've lived the program — we dragged him off to meetings and he got well. He's able to go to work in four months of recovery time instead of six months to a year. The program has given us everything that we need to have in our life. I enjoy sharing my life and I enjoy having the women that I'm sharing this story with today in my life, because we're in sobriety and we want to be sober and we want to live sober. I'll be forever grateful that God put Fran in my life and then Jan and Sue — it's made for a great day.

My primary purpose is staying sober and helping other alcoholics to achieve sobriety, which is AA's singleness of purpose. I've noticed over time, over many years, we're no longer alcoholics, but we're dually addicted and it seems there have been changes in the personalities that are coming to AA. People are not reaching a bottom that I observed in the late '60s, the early '70s, where people had nothing. Today, I think we have to get back to the singleness of purpose, which is working with the alcoholic and dealing with the alcoholic and not the dually addicted part. I think if we can do that, we will maintain the Alcoholics Anonymous program which was put together all those years ago, back in 1935.



The most important thing for long-term sobriety is sticking with the winners, which I don't hear enough of anymore, and finding what works for you as a person. What I learned early on was that if I wanted sobriety, I had to become part of life, and that's not just staying within the realm of alcoholics and living in their front room or them living in ours. It meant becoming part of life, like going out and having lunch or dinner, or going out to a concert, a hockey game or football game, watching our children grow up, seeing them go to their hockey games and whatever sport or plays they're a part of.

Also, it is important to go to meetings, maintaining singleness of purpose — staying sober and making sobriety number one in your life. I will be forever grateful for the sobriety I have maintained for 37 years, one day at a time, and that's living life too, going to work, and not hiding. Maybe I haven't gone to as many meetings as I should have, but I've definitely tried to live the AA way of life every day of my life, because God knows I'm the best example of the Big Book in action if someone else can't read or write. I have to live that way for myself in sobriety.

## WHO, ME, ALCOHOLIC? SHE CAME THROUGH THE AL-ANON DOOR

### Winnie Y.

I came to AA in a last-ditch attempt to try to be a perfect mother and a perfect wife. I had found out that I could no longer work and drink, so I couldn't drink because I had to go to work. So I just said, "That's it. I am not going to drink anymore." And about a week later my husband went on a jag and came in and said, "What's the number of Alcoholics Anonymous?" I had my pat answer because I was raging and I said, "Look it up," knowing full well he had never looked up a telephone number since I have known him. My first AA meeting was in 1951. Now, it was different then. My first husband went to Billy Bishop. It was at the Legion in Kitsilano. It is one of the oldest groups — that one and the Centre Group in New Westminster. I think those two are the oldest. But that was alcoholics only. I was only allowed to go when they had their social night. Once a month they had a social night with entertainment and just a big deal, which was very neat. I fell in love with that kind of stuff. I thought, well, you can do things other than drink. Then of course my husband never stayed sober, so that was dropped there.

I liked drinking because I could be part of and I was pretty well equal. Then, of course, if you got too close to me or figured it out, I would do something so that I could move on. And that was why I came into AA with no friends and to be sort of accepted. I didn't trust but I was sort of accepted. But I knew if they ever heard my story, I was out. I fought the first three years of my sobriety; you know they keep telling you it will get better. I spent three years of it getting worse and worse. I became overweight after I had the baby at a year sober. Now, I was not drinking but I was not in AA. So I got the diet pills back, and of course you don't need booze with them. But nobody warned me that they could cause depressions or anything. I hit bottom on that. I ran out on a job I had. Well, I shouldn't have been back at work, but anyway, I was taking the diet pills to give me the speed to keep going.

Finally, I just cracked and ran out and I got myself to a doctor. They sent me out to an outpatient psychiatric unit, and the psychiatrist there decided some shock treatments would work. We started those and they scared me so badly that I knew something had to be done. It was either do something or die. I had finally decided that I would like to live. So I quit the shock treatments. The psychiatrist called me up and sneered at me, "What are you going to do?" He was just treating me (in my mind) like I was a stupid child. And I thought, "I don't need you either."

But, I knew, I had been to Al-Anon way back in the '50s, but I couldn't see any purpose to it because they weren't telling me how to get him sober. They were expecting me to do something about me, and there was nothing wrong with me (ha-ha). So desperation finally took hold and I was talking to a lady that I had known back then and she said, "Why don't you come to Al-Anon? We have got a really good group I think you would like. It's a step group that has just started." And I thought "who the hell do you think you are", you know. 'Cause I didn't like her before and I wasn't too thrilled with her now. Because she'd changed, I hadn't. So finally desperation took hold and I knew I couldn't go to AA because, after all, I wasn't an alcoholic. I didn't drink back then. I looked for all the differences. In those days nobody talked about feelings. All they had was their drunkalogues. I heard very little about feelings. However, perception is a big thing too.

Anyway, I called her and said, "Can I come to your meeting?" And she said, "Yes, I'll meet you." Oh, you sound very nice, you didn't say you would come and get me or anything. Desperation! I got on the bus and I went over to the old Alano Club on Broadway and we were allowed 12 chairs in the poker room at the back of the Alano Club for our meeting. Al-Anon did not have a good name in those days. That group, I think, was one of the great groups, because they got down to business on the steps. These women wanted the steps and they knew they were there for a purpose. Elsie was one of the old Al-Anons. I won't say what the name for her was. They were known as the Stitch and Bitch group. There were some really good groups.

When they made an AA 12-step call on the North Shore back in those days, they would tell the guy, "Don't let that wife of yours go to Al-Anon and ruin it." Oh yeah. It was late '60s before they got Al-Anon going over there. What were they doing that was so bad? Nothing. You were just changing. You know, when you are married to an alkie, you'll do anything to please him and maybe keep him sober; don't do anything to rock the boat; and that was the mentality. But they didn't see that there was something wrong with them; that they had a sickness that makes you stay married to an alcoholic. Well, in these groups like our step group and some others that were really serious about it, they started being different. I started going and, like all of us when we first come into the steps and they say there is something wrong with us, we don't like it. So I started trying to change. But you know, it was so hard. They would say, "You don't like it, change it." "But I can't." They said, "Because you like it." Of course it was a constant battle between my Al-Anon sponsor and me. Then one day, an AA I knew called and said she was drinking. She told me some of her story and it was my story. I knew then I was an alcoholic.

AA members used to ask, "Well, didn't you ever drink?" "Well, yeah, I used to drink quite a bit." I remember what I heard in 1951 at my first meeting: that it does not matter how much you drank, what you drank, where you drank or how long you drank... what did one drink do? So I sat down and I tried to figure out when I ever had one drink, right from the first time I ever drank. Yeah, once when I sick and all they had was scotch with no mixer, and my stomach was just turning and I didn't want any more to drink after that. But I had that built-in radar: if you are going somewhere where they're only going to have one or two drinks, have coffee. I drank to get drunk. I would not drink to celebrate but to get drunk — because that's why you celebrate.

So I went to the AA meeting and that was weird too because I had been going to meetings all along, and everybody knew me and they even asked me to speak. It was a relief, though, when I got up and said, "I am Winnie and I am an alcoholic," and I could look at everybody and didn't have to worry about anyone taking pot shots at me. I asked the chairman afterwards why he had asked me to speak. "I have just never heard you speak up. I've seen you at meetings all the time." And I said, "That was my first meeting as an alcoholic."

I decided to join the Golden Key group, and Mickey was the secretary then and he said, "Well, when was your last drink?" I said, "Let's take it from when I finished the shock treatments." He asked, "When was that?" I said, "I don't know. It was sometime between the middle of June and middle of July, somewhere in there." I mean, my memory was shot. So Mickey said, "Well, okay. If that's the way you feel about it." So he said, "I'll cover up the top half of the calendar and on the bottom half of this calendar, you take a pen," and that's how I got the 10th of July, 1965.

So I kept on going and I stayed with the Golden Key group. We used to go to an awful lot of meetings out in Chilliwack and Aldergrove. Aldergrove started their group and in those days there weren't many women around. There were two or three other ladies at Kingsway when I came in, and Dunderave had Dorothy and Cherie. But of course I didn't talk to them.

Dorothy spoke to me one time when I was sitting in the lobby at the Hotel Vancouver at one of the roundups. She came over and spoke to me. Why would she speak to me? Her of all people! I always, well, just stood in awe of her; of them. I can't remember the names of the other two ladies. I would smile nicely at them, but it wasn't until I was eight years sober in 1972 that I actually spoke with them. I had been to a roundup in Edmonton and they asked me to speak as a quick fill-in for someone. A fellow there was a friend of Dorothy's and when he came out to West Van group to visit, he recognized me. Dorothy said, "Would you like to go to coffee with us?" In those days, of course, I didn't go for coffee and I seldom went to the meeting alone. But to go for coffee after a meeting was an absolute no-no for me. I had to be home immediately after or I was in trouble.

Anyway, I went for coffee with them and we got talking, and Dorothy said she used to drink at the St. Helen's and you had to be damn careful and make sure that you had your chair with the back against the wall. I said "YOU used to drink at the St. Helen's?" She said, "Well, I was one of the better ones." Oh my God! And that's when the wheels started to turn a little bit because I had heard her story of what she came in like and that Bill W. took her to the BC/Yukon Convention. She had no shoes, no stockings, and he said, "You're going with me," and she said, "I can't, I haven't got any clothes to wear." He took her into the Alano Club and got all the women together and got her some clothes, some shoes, and he took her to the convention.

So then, I thought, well, I was in as much awe of her as she was of him. This was before she and Albert were married. She was about 18 years sober then, and I thought, wait a minute, with 18 years' sobriety she should have something. This is the fruit of your labour for staying sober. I thought maybe if you stayed sober that long you might have something. But it never dawned on me that I could ever come anywhere close. But I was feeling different, I was feeling better. I think that was a sort of levelling off and my scale of up and down started to meet more in the middle. But Dorothy wasn't that high, but then I wasn't that low. So, it came a little better. I was able to accept myself as having grown and that I did belong like anybody else.

My Al-Anon sponsor died just before I came into AA. And then I got a man sponsor. I met him while I was still in Al-Anon. He was a friend of the bunch that used to be around. He was just a real quiet, peaceful person and he always kept things so simple. What really clicked it was when I was on the rollercoaster and things were falling apart again. I would have little ups and then it would go crashing again. This one time it crashed and rumours came out that my husband had started drinking. So Len phoned to see how things were going. I said, "No, he's not drinking." He says, "Oh, that's good. But how are you?" "Well, I'm fine." He says, "How are YOU? I am asking how things are going for you." And I said, "Well, if you want the truth, the pits." He said, "That's what I figured." So, I don't know, somehow I was able to talk to him and then he started from that day on for about two or three weeks, every day, just about the time I was going to hit bottom emotionally again, the phone would ring and it would be him. Not the same time every day. "I'll pick you up for the meeting at 8:00 and that's the way it is." He just kept it simple. He never went into detail. When I'd ask him something, he would say, "Well, what are you going to do about it?" "Well, that's what I am asking you." He says, "No, it's your decision." He said, "You know right from wrong. You got off track, but you know right from wrong. Now you do what you feel is right. If it doesn't turn out, come back and talk to me again and we'll discuss it. I am not going to take the fall if things don't work out."

It was always like that. He would never tell me what to do, but we could discuss it. I would be screaming and crying and whining and he'd say, "Oh well, you're sober, aren't you?" Of course I would grit my teeth and say, "There has to be more than just staying sober." I hated that phrase: "You're sober aren't you?" So anyway I just kept on going, and then when the end finally came and I decided that I didn't have to put up with this rollercoaster anymore, it was just one more time. It had been going pretty good for a few months and then the bottom fell out again. I thought, I just can't go on. So I phoned him. "It looks like we're going down that old road." Well, he sat for a while and then he asked, "Are you?" and I said, "No, don't think so." "That's what I wanted to hear," he said. "Now what are you going to do? Are you going to go down that road again? Are YOU?" So I said, "No. I'm on the 11th step." Somebody had taught me that if you've got a decision, put it on the 11th step. And that made sense to me. Then the decision came that I'm not putting up with this anymore. I didn't like it anymore and I changed it.

I am so grateful for all those people who were here when I came in. Not so much the women here because I never got to know them, except Dorothy and Cherie. I never got to know the older people like Mabel because I just wasn't around that area. You know, you would see each other, you always knew who each other was. They did not talk about how they drank. They all drank behind closed doors. Except Dorothy, and even then she didn't tell it from the podium. It was one on one. Things were not spit out from the podium in those days like they are now. In those days you had to know somebody and get to talk to them before you knew how they drank or what they did or how much they had changed. You had to go on face value of what they were then and that was all you knew. You did not see behind that. When they talked, it was about the change that had happened, or of the parties or how at the end they drank at home, that's all. Maybe they didn't do the crazy things that I did. I don't know, it was just almost a whole different culture.

We used to go down to the Young People's Group. I don't know whatever happened to it. But the first time I was asked to speak down there, I was just petrified. They said, well, you've got to tell your story. "I can't, what do you think, they won't have anything to do with me." Because I had been afraid to say too much because in an Al-Anon meeting one time, when we were discussing the fifth step and everybody was saying, "I've never done anything in my life that I couldn't discuss right here" — oh, I am in the wrong league. And I was sure I was going to get thrown out. I told my story and nobody even batted an eye and everybody said, "Wow, that's great, glad to hear your story." I was still in the mould that I stayed in for years and years and years: to serve coffee and sandwiches all the time. At every meeting we had coffee and sandwiches. I always stayed back and made coffee or sandwiches. I would keep that table between you and me.

Then Kim came along and that was a whole different ballgame. She was my first sponsee. I tried to sponsor lots of other people, but it never worked. But she was my first sponsee that stayed sober, and the questions she asked. I thought, I can't tell her I don't know. I'm supposed to know these things, so I'd better do some checking. So I started really getting into the step groups and doing some changing and learning because I had to pass it on.

And then I ended up as a GSR [General Service Representative] because we started going out to Aldergrove again. They wanted to register as a group. Nobody had a clue as to what to do. "Well, will you be our GSR?" I said, "I can't, I don't belong to your group." "Does that matter?" And I said, "Yeah it matters. You can't belong to one group and be a GSR for another one." "Oh. Well, you're in town, can you get hold of Central Office and can you maybe contact New York for us and see what we have to do, and we would sure appreciate that." So I contacted Central Office to see what had to be done to get a group started. I wondered what the big deal was. I could quit this group in town here and I could join Aldergrove since I'm out there all the time anyway. They need help. So I said, "Okay, I'll be your GSR," and I started out there.



## PIONEERS IN SKIRTS:THE WOMEN'S STORIES FROM THE BC/YUKON AREA

Then I became the DCM [District Committee Member] and then the secretary of BC/Yukon. They asked me if I would do it because when I had started as GSR I got tired of the constant bickering and arguing about the same things over and over and over. Finally I decided to keep minutes. This subject came up and they're going at it. "Wait a minute. We settled this two months ago!" So I put up my hand after somebody shut up and said, "Excuse me, but on such and such a date it was moved by so and so, seconded by so and so and carried, that this was going to be done. Why are we arguing about it?" And everybody went "Huh?" and the chairman said, "I beg your pardon?" and I said, "I took the notes." "Oh yeah, here it is," he said. "Carried, quiet, no more." I thought, you know, you can make a difference. So I kept on making notes and then they decided that I should be secretary. And I thought, "I can't type. I have to take everything in longhand. What if I miss something? I can't write that fast." So I got myself a tape recorder and I taped every meeting. I would go home and transcribe that into longhand and then my daughter would type it for me. And that's how I became secretary of BC/Yukon.

I was a GSR when they first started listening to the rest of the BC/Yukon area and moved the quarterly GSC meetings around. That would have been in 1969, I believe. Pat O., GSR from South Burnaby, and I and a bunch from Aldergrove went from down here. We drove up to Prince George and went to the meeting.

That was the first year that they had the BC/Yukon Area Assembly moved out of Vancouver — all the way to Penticton. You think that didn't cause a riot around here. Well, the attendance wasn't as big as Vancouver. But the interior was getting more awakenings, and the groups were getting stronger and there were more coming in, and they were getting sick and tired of everything having to be down here. They felt that Vancouver had control of the BC/Yukon area. A whole bunch used to come down and they are the ones that started stirring the pot that we needed something up there. It was great in Penticton. Of course, we were a fairly new Area Assembly as far as the committee went and nobody knew what to expect.

It had been down here and was held at the Gay Paris, which was a nightclub on Kingsway, for years. It got too big for that and that's when they switched to the Vancouver Hotel. The committee decided they were going to be sure nothing went wrong, so they informed the Vancouver Hotel of how much coffee because the Gay Paris used to tell us at the end of every gathering exactly how many pounds of coffee we had used, translated into how many cups of coffee we had served. So they kept records of that, but the hotel said, "We do know how to cater to these affairs." Well, we just wanted to know. "We wanted you to know how much coffee was drunk so you won't run out. That would be terrible." "We know what we are doing." They ran out! You couldn't get a cup of coffee in their dining room. You couldn't get a cup of coffee in their coffee shop. We had taken it all. We had no coffee on Sunday. Oh boy! Talk about scream and yell.

So we are brand new. We don't really know what we are doing and how to cater something like this in Penticton. Certain people were supposed to be there, but to get them from all over when you are down in Vancouver... trying to coordinate for up there through people, and you can't afford that many phone calls, so it has to be writing or word of mouth. It was very interesting. There were certain people that were going to be there for registration and they were going to do this and do that. I got up there and got everything set up and then looked at the registration desk. Nobody there! And there is nobody for this and there is nobody for that. What in the world? So I go, "Oh, I'll take the registration desk," and then I would watch who came in and I'd say, "Hey! Could you give me a half-hour and sit on the registration desk? I've got things to do." "Oh sure!" And then somebody would come in and I'd say, "Could you stay on the coffee for half an hour for me?" "Oh yeah, what time?" Well, I'd tell them and I would write it down. That's the way the whole thing went. Finally I did get registration people to work for a little more than 20 minutes or half an hour at a time, as more came in. My God, it was an experience. But everybody loved it and it was way more laid-back, and way more fun than it was having it down here. Well, I was tired, but it was so exciting to be a part of and to find out I could organize, that I could do things, that people would actually do something for me if I asked them. It was just another whole awakening.

I always say you get new beginnings. "I wonder what is going to happen now." It's change in attitude. It makes a big difference. I always remember this little guy named Frankie R. We used to call him "Pinchie" because he was always pinching people. He always bounced around. "AA's changing to 'Attitude Adjustment'. Change your way of thinking and you change your whole life." He did a lot of good. It was important because people really got under your skin in those days. You think back, they were like a thorn then. But when you think, if it hadn't been for that little thorn, you wouldn't have changed.

To me, the most important part of this whole program is sponsorship. That's one of the biggest responsibilities you could take on. People say, "Okay, I'll be your sponsor, come and talk to me," but they have never read the book on sponsorship. They have never looked into it. It's sad.

To me, the most important thing for long-term sobriety is remembering where you came from. Remembering what steps you took to get to where you are now and doing them on a constant basis. Not saying "Oh, I don't need that part" or "I don't need that part". And I am not an advocate of the 90 meetings in 90 days. If you are single, yes — where you have nothing else, nobody else except your old drinking pals. But if you have a family, a husband, children, you have a home to look after — that fits in there too. You can't be running off, and I know a lot that have. "Well, my sponsor said 90 meetings in 90 days. I've got to go." "How about your kids? What about your husband?" "Well, if I don't go to the meetings, I am not going to stay sober and I won't be there anyway." Wrong. It says our AA program must come first. That means that we are doing the steps; that we are using the steps in changing our way of thinking and changing our way of life. It doesn't mean chasing out every night to go to a meeting. And that's a man or a woman. We are looking for a balanced life. A balanced life is not a meeting every night. I have known people that have gone to seven meetings, ten meetings a week and still went off and got drunk. So don't tell me going to meetings keeps you sober. You've got to have rest, work, recreation, home life and spirituality. That's how you make a balanced life. You break one of those spokes out and that wheel doesn't go too well. You break another one out and it collapses.

Your anchor has to be, to me anyway, the spirituality which you get through the steps of the program. They told me that I could take my group as my Higher Power, and at the time that was pretty easy to do because I couldn't remember what was said. I couldn't read. There was no sense me picking up a book to read. I couldn't understand it. Yeah, the shock treatments do a number on you. But once in a while, when I went to the meetings, somebody would say something that would hit. This one lady, she was such a neat lady, said that the slogans were instant sanity. And she explained some of them. And at meetings sometimes when she talked, it was about whatever slogan she was working today.

My opinion about what I had to do was that there were 12 steps and I had to take all of those 12 steps every day to be perfect. Then they told me I had to do the Just for Today pamphlet. Try that one. Of course, "Oh, that sounds easier, so we'll do that." Every one of those, every day. So I finally said, "I can't do all that." She said, "Nobody said to do all of that. You do one at a time on a daily basis until you are comfortable with it." Huh? That's too simple. Then one time they told me I set my goals too high. Really! "You just set your goals too high. Nobody could ever reach what you want to do. Like do all of the steps in one day. So what are you going to start to do now? You're going to set a goal for your day so low that if you sat and drank coffee all day you would still accomplish it." That sounded kind of stupid, but you've got to start somewhere. It always came back to me: they haven't lied to me yet. Everything they've told me I should try, if I did it, it worked.

So that's what I did, and I'd take that just for the day. Take the first one, just so that for today I would be happy. That was a laugh. It would be a nice day like it was today when I got up. "Today is going to be a good day," I'd think. So I get up and I'm making lunches and I've got the coffee on and everything is going, and my daughter comes down. "Good morning, honey," and she snarls, and I always reacted to somebody else's mood. I never grew up to act on my own. But I kept on trying and it got better, and then I picked out another one and it really, really, really worked.

All of a sudden, when people were taking potshots at me and they were supposed to be kidding but they were cutting, this one came up: "Just for today I will not show my feelings or be hurt. I may be hurt, but just for today I will not show it." Well, they told me I had to try it; I was moaning and crying about that one too. But I tried it and I would bite my tongue. I would turn my back. I would walk out of the room. I would do absolutely anything to get away from these barbs. It was getting better and then, oh, I have no idea how long I had to practise, but it seemed like forever. But one day, I was standing in a position where there was nowhere to run. Now a nasty comment comes along and everybody's going into gales of laughter and thinking it is so hilarious, and I am waiting for that gut feeling and I'm thinking, "Oh, it works." And I just looked at him and I said, "You know, I don't see it that way at all and I don't think that's funny," and carried on with what I was doing. Guess what? Dead silence. Oh, it does work; one more time they didn't lie to me.

These were all the things that were almost a mind trap at that time. But they haven't lied to me yet. They said they would walk with me and make me strong. They haven't lied to me, they've been there. And it was just keeping on. Oh it was a journey, alright. And they told me I was always trying to climb mountains by going straight up. They had to give me things that I could visualize. They said, "Have you ever seen the peaks of the mountains in Squamish?" And I said, "Yeah." And they said, "That goes straight up, right?" "Yeah." "Can you climb it?" I said, "Of course, not." They said, "But people do it every day." "Yeah, I know. But I can't." They said, "Of course you can't because you don't know how." And then they said, "What you do, you go up a little way, then you rest, then you go up a little farther and then you rest. But nobody can go straight up there." Then they said, "You go round and back, sometimes down and then back up. Sometimes you'll slip. But if you're trying you will always find a shrub to grab onto that will hold you. You'll get to the top."

I tried not setting goals so high. A little girl in Maple Ridge, she was 16, she set the world record for women's high jump. And they said, "Do you think she started out at six feet and a half-inch?" They said, "That kid probably started jumping at four years old." And they said, "Her pole was probably six inches off the ground. She has gone and worked all these years for over 12 years — really, really practising." They said, "She's knocked the pole off many, many times and she'll knock it off again. But she keeps on trying." I could visualize that. These are the tools they gave me to work with, and that is why I always talk about the tool kit.

I used to talk to Kim about building the house. That's what she heard the time she came to the meeting when I was speaking about building a house that had been condemned and torn down, and how you used the steps on it. But now it's just doing the steps, remembering how you got to where you are at. If you forget how you got to where you're at, you're going to go back there. I am a firm believer in that.

