

One on One: AA Sponsorship in Action

Editor's note: In a new book published this year by AA Grapevine, AA members write about their experience with sponsorship from both sides. We selected a few to whet your appetite for more—the book is available through the SJIG Literature Committee, or the Grapevine website. – Patty H.

Shopping for a Sponsor (May 2008)

It took many years (and many relapses) before I understood the value of sponsorship. I had to learn the hard way that the word "I" does not exist in the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. I was my own sponsor for many years, and I got the results one might expect: repeated relapses, much frustration, and a deep sense of failure. I did not find the happiness, sense of purpose, and joy I heard about from others in AA until I surrendered,

Sponsorship continued on page 2

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

- 2 & 3** AA Sponsorship in Action (Continued)
- 4** Answer to June's Question of the Month
- 4** Step Seven (Continued)
- 5** Tradition Seven
- 6** Happy Anniversary, Barrington!
- 6** Announcements & Question of the Month
- 6** Editorial Policy & Contact Information
- 7** Fellowship Announcements & Things to Do

Humbly Asked Him

Step Seven: Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.

How do I humbly ask Him to remove my shortcomings??
How do I even know what my shortcomings are??

I believe, in order to be successful with Step Seven, I must practice humility. I can sum up what humility means to me in one word: TEACHABLE.

I came into the program of Alcoholics Anonymous with a lot of old ideas along with a whole bushel of character flaws. It was obvious that if I stayed on the playing field I was on, I would continue to strike out in the game of life.

I had the belief system that I knew best and if I didn't, then fake it. That attitude got me in a lot of dangerous situations with no idea how to get out of them. I worked hard to get what was mine and never once did I think about how my actions affected others.

Step Seven has taught me that I must put ALL my needs, wants and desires to the side and pursue character building. I had to learn to give, and give some more, and continue to give, even if what I got back was nothing. It is ONLY through this constant work for humility that I gain true and complete freedom from the bondage of self.

When I got sober in 1998, my 10 year old daughter was suicidal; my 15 year old son was being arrested every week; my 15 year old step-son was stealing cars, beating up on people; and my 17 year old step-daughter was pregnant with twins. My husband at the time was barricaded in the bedroom, the doors and windows screwed shut, with a loaded semi-automatic rifle. The craziest thing of all was I thought I was living a normal life and could not see how out of control my life had become.

In order to make a change, I had to be willing to look at things differently. I had to be willing to TRY to conduct my life from a different playing field. Wow!! What a tall order!!

I will tell you this--changing my behavior was incredibly painful and I would often think of drinking to end the pain and

Step Seven continued on page 4

and we (my sponsors and I) started to walk this journey together.

Newcomers frequently ask me how to choose a sponsor. Looking back, I now see that I've probably spent more time choosing a dress or CD than I've spent choosing the person who would help me with the most important task of my life—living sober, one day at a time.

Today, I am blessed with two wonderful sponsors, both solid AAs, and each a gift from God, who came when I became willing to become teachable. From their examples, this is what I have learned about what sponsors are and are not.

A sponsor's only job (and only area of expertise) is to help fellow alcoholics not take that first drink by passing this program on to others as it was passed on to him or her in order to stay sober. The only qualification is his or her own experience learning to stay and live sober, and the gift a sponsor gives is the hope, should another alcoholic care to listen, that he or she might do the same.

What sponsors are NOT:

Sponsors are not guidance counselors, marital counselors, lawyers, nor doctors. (I have seen tragic results from well-intentioned sponsors advising their sponsees to discontinue medications without their regular doctors' consent.)

Sponsors are not bankers, mortgage companies, nor other financial institutions.

Sponsors are not babysitters, best friends, nor preachers.

Sponsors are not dictators or drill sergeants.

Sponsors are not God.

What then, you may be wondering, do sponsors do?

When I asked my sponsor this question, she suggested I read the seventh chapter of the Big Book, "Working with Others." A sponsor's only job (and only area of expertise) is to help fellow alcoholics not take that first drink by passing this program on to others as it was passed on to him or her in order to stay sober. The only qualification is his or her own experience learning to

stay and live sober, and the gift a sponsor gives is the hope, should another alcoholic care to listen, that he or she might do the same.

With this in mind, here are some other questions I learned to consider when choosing a sponsor:

Does he or she truly walk the walk, or simply talk the talk? (I learn best from demonstrations, not lectures.)

Is she or he active in service work?

Do they speak from their own experience?

Does he or she refer to the Big Book, the "Twelve and Twelve," and other AA literature when they speak?

Most importantly, is she or he happy in sobriety? I spent years in the miserable darkness of alcoholism. I did not know what real happiness was when I came through the doors of AA. I needed someone to teach me, by example, how to live in peace and joy and service in this world through the Steps and the fellowship of this program. I believe that happiness and joy are a result of taking the Steps and doing the next right thing. I cannot do this or any part of the program alone and today, thanks to the God of my understanding, the program of Alcoholics Anonymous, and my sponsors, I never have to again.

--Rita H., Greensboro, North Carolina

A Bigger God

I recently asked a newcomer, "Have you gotten a sponsor yet?" She said no. "How do you do that?" I told her all you have to do is ask.

"Okay, how about you?" she said. "Will you be my sponsor?"

For a split second, I forgot to breathe. I didn't mean me. She needed a sponsor with a lot of time, someone with more than a measly three years. And then I heard myself say, "I'd love to sponsor you." It just slipped out. Now I was really in trouble. I'm not a sponsor, I'm a sponsee. I don't have time to sponsor someone else; I have to work my own Steps.

The next thing I knew, I was talking about reading the Big Book. I must have been coherent because she seemed pleased when we parted ways, me telling her exactly what my sponsor had told me, "Call even if you have

nothing to say. It's like a fire drill—you want to be in practice when there's an emergency."

I beat myself up on the ride home. Couldn't I have come up with something more original to tell her? "Call even if you have nothing to say!" It sounded so...well, sponsor-ish! I'd hated making those calls in the beginning, those "Hi, I'm just checking in" messages I left on my sponsor's answering machine.

I'm afraid of change. Afraid of progress without perfection. It's always been this way. I sat down and I prayed. I prayed for the willingness to be the best sponsor I'm capable of being. All I have to do is share my experience, strength and hope. I got out my Big Book and began reading from the beginning.

I've been a sponsor now all of four days, but it feels as is I've been through a century of spiritual growth. I'm definitely an inch or two taller! Because of this subtle shift in perception about myself, the shift from working the Steps as a sponsee to working the Steps as a sponsor, I'm bursting out of my seams!

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When I'm in fear, my sponsor always tells me, "Maybe you should get a bigger God." This used to dumbfound me, but I get it now. The longer I stay sober, the fuller my life gets, and my God expands accordingly. Instead of protecting what I have, I've taken to staying open. "Open, open, open," as one of my sober friends likes to coach herself. This week, I find myself on a moment-to-moment basis, asking God, "What's next?"

--Stefani R., Los Angeles, CA

The Spirit of Sponsorship (from Dear Grapevine, December 2001)

My sponsor of over 20 years died two years ago and although I couldn't be with her physically, I was there in thought and spirit.

What made her so special? Perhaps it was her enduring love and enthusiasm for the AA program. Or maybe it was her unshakable belief that all people are inherently good and contribute something positive to life. All I know is what this woman did for me as a frightened newcomer and what she continued to do for the next 20 years.

When I questioned the meaning of life's peaks and valleys, she told me that the secret of life was simply to live it. When I became resentful at someone in AA, she advised me to listen to the message, not the messenger. She taught me to look for miracles in unlikely places and to make myself available to appreciate them.

That's why I love a story her family told me when they returned from scattering her ashes on the sea. She loved the ocean and always said that after she died, she wanted to come back as a dolphin. When they released her ashes, her husband and children saw two dolphins swimming beside them.

"Look!" one of them shouted. "There goes Mom, and she already has a new sponsee."

--Lynn C., South Deerfield, Massachusetts



Answer to June's Question of the Month

What convinced me that I had a problem?

I was never really "convinced" that I had a problem. Still today, my disease tells me (more often than is comfortable) that I do not have a problem. That, after all, is the nature of this demon; it tells you that you do not have a problem.

Nevertheless, then as now, what brought me into the rooms was a moment when I realized that I myself was a living problem. I could no longer understand myself or my life or how things had come to pass with me. I had no answers, no direction, and no will or energy to proceed on. More than a problem, I had a crisis.

I could move neither forward nor backward and did not so much feel this as a problem, as I felt it to be a jumping-off point. It was either move toward death and destruction, or take to my knees in an act of surrender. I thank a higher power for pushing me to my knees and then, into the rooms.

A problem is something you grapple with, something to solve, something outside yourself. I was in trouble, in crisis, and needed to be rescued or saved. I still need that today and the answer is always the same; get down on my knees and ask for help.

Another aspect of "problems" is that they need to be managed, and I cannot manage: the First Step tells me that. I need help, assistance, and the willingness to surrender both the problem and myself and do what I am told to do (even if I do not think this is the right course).

I had no idea, twenty years ago, that going to my knees was the right course, or any course at all for that matter. But I did it; was forced to do it; was pushed to do it. That is always the right answer for me and for the problem that I am.

--Masonville Marty

More Answers:

"I ran out of people to talk to. I kept finding myself the last one standing in my favorite taproom. The ride home was lonely." – *J.C., LMST Audubon*

"I first thought I had a problem when the bartenders at the corner bar all knew my name. I ignored that for a few more years until I was in such despair it was suicide or AA." – *Anonymous, Willingboro*

suffering. However, thinking of others ALWAYS got me through.

When I reached my 4th AA anniversary, much to my horror I found that I continued to act almost EXACTLY as I did when I was drinking. I knew at that point that I must get rid of these behaviors or surely I would return to drinking. I knew that I was not capable of change on my own. I thought I had changed; however, here I was 4 years sober and still doing what I did drunk.

Step Seven has taught me that I must put ALL my needs, wants and desires to the side and pursue character building. I had to learn to give, and give some more, and continue to give, even if what I got back was nothing. It is ONLY through this constant work for humility that I gain true and complete freedom from the bondage of self.

For every difficult moment in my life that I was willing to share with another, take direction and try something different, I grew in my faith of God. I really had no choice but to try, as the wreckage of my past was right there in the present, waiting for me to clean it up. I had to learn to trust God; otherwise there was NO WAY I was going to be able to change.

What I found, in practicing humility, was an enormous trust in a Higher Power on ALL things, great and small. With this newfound faith, doors opened and change came about (although my life was still incredibly difficult). Slow and steady like the tortoise.

In Sept 2013 I will be 15 years sober. My life does not look ANYTHING like it did when I got to Alcoholics Anonymous. With God's help, the principles of AA and seeking humility, I live a life today that I never even wanted!! I no longer look like my past and Alcoholics Anonymous has made me into the very thing I never wanted to be: A LADY!!

--Linda Lee P., California

Tradition Seven

Editors' note: I attended a meeting in Beverly recently where the focus was on the 7th Tradition. A newcomer with just 14 days put a dollar in the basket and said (voice breaking), "14 days ago I wouldn't have had a dollar." – Patty H.

I have been a home group member of a Step and Tradition meeting since I first sobered up in 1989 in Southern Florida. How lucky for me to be surrounded by such wisdom and experience (although, I didn't think so at the time, I can assure you of that!)

In that group, I gave new meaning to the words "at some of these we balked," especially whenever we would discuss a tradition. (OMG. BORING, I thought!) Lovingly, the elder women of that meeting began teaching me the traditions and I will pass along to you what I have learned; I am forever grateful for the foundation of understanding they gave me for my journey.

First, Tradition One is the goal of all of the traditions--unity of the AA group, to keep the fellowship and the groups together. The remaining 11 traditions advise us on how to achieve the goal of unity.

...After much debate of the pros and cons of accepting large amounts of donations, the AA board concluded that like drinking, accepting the donations would set up a disastrous chain reaction: "Whoever pays the piper is apt to call the tune."

In 1941 when the Saturday Evening Post released the Jack Anderson piece, thousands of frantic alcoholics began writing to the AA Foundation (now the General Service Office) wanting to speak to other alcoholics and find out how their newfound program was working. The Foundation was overwhelmed; hand-written responses needed to be written, but by whom? They needed full-time help. The Foundation asked the AA groups for voluntary contributions to help cover these expenses. At the same time, some grateful members' families tried to donate large sums of money to AA. After much debate of the pros and cons of accepting large amounts of donations, the AA board concluded that like drinking, accepting the donations would set up a disastrous chain reaction: "Whoever pays the piper is apt to call the tune." The donors might begin to tell AA how it had to be run!

Final conclusion: AA must always stay poor. By relying only on AA members' contributions to keep twelfth step work

available, the members have the ultimate say on how AA will provide services.

Through the hat!

Within Tradition Seven the most important words are "self-supporting." That means the group will pay for its own rent, literature and refreshments, and will maintain a prudent reserve in the event something happens that would interfere with the ability of the group to meet. The message of AA must survive! AA can surely survive without me, but I cannot survive without AA and hope that the doors are never closed.

"Self-supporting" also refers to service. There are many ways other than money that I need to be "self-supporting." I have to roll up my sleeves and get the jobs done that need done. Not only at the Group level through rotation of group jobs (and making sure I am taking one)! We make our own coffee, greet newcomers, make sure literature is available, and are self-supporting for any chores that need to be done.

If I can afford it, I always put \$2.00 (or more) in the basket at the Group level, to try to cover the cost-of-living increases for service work.

This doesn't stop at the Group level. All of the working entities of AA need our groups' support in order to make the necessary tools available for twelfth step work. I belong to a group that is financially supporting the service entities of: District, Intergroup, Area and the General Service Office. (The individual groups decide the percentage of contributions.)

In my personal life, I pay myself first and have a certain percentage put aside so I can continue to survive. I will practice all these principles in all my affairs as long as I am alive.

*In Loving Service,
Julie W.*

*Women's 12 x12,
Melrose, Massachusetts*

Editorial Policy

Anonymous South Jersey is a monthly newsletter published by and for members of South Jersey Intergroup (although we welcome readers from other areas!). Opinions expressed herein are NOT to be attributed to AA as a whole, nor does publication of information imply any endorsement by either AA or South Jersey Intergroup. Quotations and artwork from AA literature are printed with permission from AA World Services, Inc., and/or The AA Grapevine, Inc.

Contributions from readers are encouraged—you can write about your experience, strength and hope in general, or you can focus on one of the steps or traditions. You can also write about something that touched you at a meeting, something that bothered you at a meeting, or some service commitment you especially enjoy. Submissions are edited for space and clarity. Contact information is required and anonymity is respected.

Due to space limitations, we are unable to publish flyers for events in this newsletter. However, we are happy to include your gathering in the general list of fellowship announcements.

Please send your submissions to newsletter@asj.org.

CONTACT INFORMATION FOR SJ INTERGROUP:

South Jersey Intergroup Association, Inc.
PO Box 2514
Cherry Hill, NJ 08034

Office/Literature Sales: 1-856-486-4446
Email: info@asj.org
Website: www.asj.org

24 Hour Hotline: 1-856-486-4444
Toll Free Hotline: 1-866-920-1212

SJIG holds its monthly meetings on the third Wednesday of the month at 8pm at St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church 989 Route 70 East, Cherry Hill, NJ

Happy Anniversary, Barrington!!

The Barrington Early Evening Recovery Group was founded on July 13, 2006. It is an open discussion meeting held on Thursday evenings at 5:30 pm, with a Step meeting held on the third Thursday of each month. This group meets at the First Presbyterian Church in Barrington.

Here are a few AA history "fun facts" from our Archives page on our Intergroup website: www.aasj.org:

July 2, 1993: 50 years of AA celebrated in Canada

July 2, 2000: 20 millionth copy of the Big Book given to Al-Anon in Minneapolis, MN

July 28-30, 1950: First AA International Convention held in Cleveland, Ohio

--Jenn C., Archives Chair

Announcements

The chair and co-chair of the newsletter committee (and many others) will be rotating out at the end of the year. Now is your chance to get involved in service at the Intergroup level. If you think you might be interested in taking over the newsletter, we're happy to help you make a smooth transition. Please contact Patty or Angie at newsletter@asj.org for more information.

Question of the Month

For next month's issue, we'd like to get your response to this question:

Can you tell us about one of your amends in a general way?

Please email your replies no later than Friday, August 16, to newsletter@asj.org.

DEADLINES FOR SUBMISSIONS

August, Step and Tradition 8	Friday, August 16
September, Step and Tradition 9	Friday, September 13
October, Step and Tradition 10	Friday, October 11
November, Step and Tradition 11	Friday, November 15
December, Step and Tradition 12	Friday, December 13

For each month, we'd love to get your submissions on the step or tradition that corresponds. We are always looking for AAs to share their Experience, Strength and Hope (ESH) in print.

Fellowship Announcements & Things to Do

July-August 2013

Thurs. July 18 – The I Am Responsible – Men's Group is celebrating its ONE-YEAR ANNIVERSARY! Doors open at 7:00 pm, meeting 7:30 pm - 8:30 pm. Join us for desserts. This is an open meeting, and all are welcome. 400 Club Clementon in Clementon Plaza [next to Clementon Lake Park]

Sat. July 20 - Cape Atlantic Intergroup Unity Picnic. 12-4pm. Estelle Manor Park-Pavilion A, 109 Rt.50, Mays Landing, NJ. Admission \$7. Starts at 2pm. Speakers: Vinnie K. and Jessica E. Info: Cris K 437-6188 or Kim R 402-2388.

Sun. July 21 – Beverly's Fellowship Group is celebrating its 37th Anniversary. Speaker at 2pm, food at 3pm. All are welcome! St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, 158 Warren St., Beverly.

Tues. July 23 – The Mt. Ephraim The Living Room Group will celebrate its 7th anniversary at Mt. Ephraim Methodist Church, 201 New Jersey Ave., Mt. Ephraim, NJ. Starting time is 6:30 with plenty of food and fellowship - all are welcome.

Thurs. July 25 – Swedesboro's 23rd anniversary at the Bethesda Methodist Church in Swedesboro. Ice cream sundaes starting at 7:00, with reading and a speaker starting at 7:30.

Sat. Aug 3 - Area 45 CTF Conf. at St Charles Borromeo RC Ch, 176 Stagecoach Rd, Sicklerville, Spkrs: Al B., Marcus M. Info: KathyJo S. at 609-790-3740 or Priscilla S. at 856-649-6844.

Sun. Aug 11- District 14 Picnic Noon - 6pm \$10ea/Under 12 FREE. 50/50 & Door Prizes/Games/AA/AIAnon Spkrs, Bring A Chair/Sports Equipment - desserts/side dishes are WELCOME! Jersey Oaks Camp, 80 Batter Cake Ln, Lower Alloways Creek (LAC) Near Maskells Mill Pond Fish & Wildlife Mgt Area Rt49 Quinton/Jericho Rd Follow D1

Tues. Aug. 27 -- SJIG's Unity Committee will hold a meeting at the SJIG office in Pennsauken (5090 Central Highway, Suite 3). Interested in Unity, Service and the Traditions? Want to know what the heck UNITY is all about? Come meet with us and learn more about the UNITY message! Information: Michelle C. 856.305.3796 - Brian Y. 609.579.1848 - Pauline W. 856.899.4507.



