

ANONYMOUS SOUTHJERSEY

SOUTH JERSEY INTERGROUP

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Director of "Bill W." Discusses New Film and Legacy of AA's Founder

The first feature-length documentary about A.A.'s co-founder explores Bill W.'s life and legacy.

What is there left to be said about Bill Wilson that hasn't already been said? Are there things about him that we in the fellowship still don't know? Those were two of the questions I had for Kevin Hanlon, the director of *Bill W.*, a documentary that opens on May 18th in New York, Los Angeles, and other parts of the U.S.

"We both believe that (Bill W.) was one of the most important people of the 20th Century...almost certainly the most important person of the 20th Century that most people have never heard of..."

— Kevin Hanlon, Director of *Bill W.*

It took Hanlon and his producer/partner Dan Carracino eight years to get the film made. "Making a film about the founder of an anonymous society," Hanlon writes on his website, "especially one who died in 1971,

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Embracing Humility

Step Five: Admitted to God, to ourselves and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.

In my head, when I was drinking, I was the worst worst person in the world. It is a kind of arrogance. If I wasn't the best, then I was definitely the worst. Never was I in the middle of the pack. I used my bad behaviors to stay up at night and drink. I would be exhausted, hung over. I would go to bed, my head a constant grinding conversation of what I did today, yesterday, a week ago, a year ago, ten years ago, then my secrets would start speaking to me, reminding me what I did, how I did it, why I am the worst worst person in the world. I needed a drink.

One drink would help me sleep. And after one drink, I had another problem--the fact that I drank all the alcohol, passed out, and was going to be in horrible shape the next day. Now, I had to clean up my immediate mess, and answer the question of why I couldn't stop drinking.

Coming into AA, I found immediately that one problem went away for me. I felt liberated by the shame and guilt of saying every morning that I wasn't going to drink, and drinking every night. I thought I could stay sober on that feeling of freedom. I mentioned it to my sponsor. "I feel so free. I won't drink again just so I can keep that feeling." And my sponsor laughed and she said, "Yeah, that will keep you sober for a few weeks. Then what?"

Understanding the first three steps helped me make a fearless and thorough moral inventory. I was willing to do anything to stay sober, no matter how uncomfortable. It was a matter of life or death. But now that I decided to turn my will and life over to the care of God, I had to figure out how to do that. The fourth step inventory was one way for me to show my willingness to turn all those problems and secrets over to God.

In fact, I was very comfortable admitting my faults. To

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Bill W. and his wife Lois

presented obstacles.” I asked Hanlon about those obstacles and much more—beginning with my query, what hasn’t already been said about Bill W.?

“Dan and I have been close friends since we were in high school, and we had talked for years about making a film together,” Hanlon told me. “Purely by coincidence, when the time came that we were both serious about committing to a film project, I happened to be reading the authoritative history of Alcoholics Anonymous, a book written by Ernest Kurtz entitled *Not-God*. I found the book to be fascinating, and was particularly moved by the story of Bill Wilson’s life. The more I found out about Bill Wilson, the more I wanted to know what really happened. But after reading most of the books that had been published about him, Dan and I had the same thought that you’re asking in your question here – hasn’t everything that could be said about Bill already been said? After doing some research and confirming that no feature-length documentary film had ever been made about him, we decided to go ahead and make the film anyway, because we believed that his life merited a full-length documentary film. After all, here was a man who, at a time when there was virtually no hope for alcoholics, came to the very brink of dying from his

addiction, and then not only found a way to save his own life, but created a fellowship that has since saved the lives of millions of other people, too. That seemed like a pretty compelling story to us. In addition, the medium of film is very different from that of books, and we felt that telling his story via film was worth the effort. So we dove in and went ahead.”

In the movie, audio recordings of Bill telling his story and relating the history of Alcoholics Anonymous are used, along with staged “re-enactments” of certain important events in his life. Why this approach?

“We went back and forth on this one: at first Dan wanted to do re-enactments, and I was dead-set against them; later, we reversed positions,” said Hanlon. “But I think the determining factor here was the decision we made to use as much of Bill Wilson’s archival audio to tell the story as possible. In various talks that he gave over the years, which were recorded by A.A. tapers, Bill himself described many of the events of his life, both before and after his sobriety. Once we committed to trying to let Bill tell his own story through these archival recordings, and to stay out of his way as much as possible, we realized we would need some visuals to cover those sections of the film. My intent in directing these recreations was to create short, silent movies – almost to create moving paintings – that would simply carry the particular story that Bill Wilson was telling at any particular time.”

Bill Wilson died in 1971. As Hanlon and his partner acknowledge on their website, it was a challenge to find people who knew him when he was alive. But he says they got very lucky.

“We found two men that had worked with him at AA headquarters and on the Grapevine (Tom. W. and Mel B.), a former General Manager at GSO who knew him pretty well (Bob P.), and a wonderful woman who had gotten sober in AA in New York in the 1940s (Ruth O.). All of them knew Bill to some extent, and all of them are in the film. (Ruth, by the way, lived in Toms River, NJ, for many years, and passed away last month at the age of 97 – when she had 68 years of continuous sobriety.) The person who may have known him best of all was Abram Hoffer, who worked

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One AA Shares About Tradition Five

Each Alcoholics Anonymous group ought to be a spiritual entity having but one primary purpose—that of carrying its message to the alcoholic who still suffers.

Some years ago, I had a friend who was trying to stay sober, but she didn't like AA much. She'd stopped coming around for some time. Then, out of the blue, she called and invited me to a new 12-Step group that had a new vision of recovery. Because I knew that Bill W. kept an open mind and left no stone unturned in his search for more tools of recovery, and because our own literature includes this quote--"There is a principle which is a bar against all information, which cannot fail to keep a man in everlasting ignorance — that principle is contempt prior to investigation"--I decided to investigate one Friday evening.

This program uses a modified version of the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. The fundamental difference is the use of their version of God—to them, the only true version of God—and verses from their sacred literature to bolster each Step.

I was skeptical going in. I've known too many alkie who find any concept of God difficult to swallow, even when they're lying bleeding on the sidewalk. The brand of fundamentalism pushed by this group probably wouldn't fly with that kind of alcoholic. I wondered: If this were the only recovery available, then would they let that one die?

The first half-hour of the meeting was spent singing hymns, led by a woman on guitar. The leader of the group introduced himself as a "workaholic." I found myself wondering whether workaholics go through detox? Did they suffer DT's?

When the hymn half-hour blessedly ended, we split into two groups: women and men separated. Among the men was a man whom I'd known from AA, who had disappeared a while back. It turned out he had found this group more appealing than AA. Sadly, he started drinking again and, as far as I know, has not found sobriety.

And aside from that poor man and one of my

anyone. I was a serial self-deprecator. But sharing my moral inventory with my sponsor during the process of my fifth step was the true act of right-sizing. In my fourth column, almost every resentment, fear, sexual harm, and miscellaneous harm, I took responsibility completely. I was selfish, fearful, inconsiderate, AND dishonest. My sponsor listened to my life story as I read my fourth step to her. She helped me take responsibility properly. Not completely, but properly. She crossed off my selfishness when it didn't apply. She helped me understand, with compassion, where the fault was. That is the true meaning of humility--having a "clear recognition of what and who we really are, followed by a sincere attempt to become what we could be," as it says in the Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions.

After I was done, I felt liberated, not in the superficial way of early sobriety, but in a way that helped me feel closer to my Higher Power. My sponsor gave me a sense of humility. It did feel like an ancient ritual. I meditated afterward and felt an overwhelming sense of serenity. Perhaps it was the first time in my adult life, I felt like I could manage my life. My sponsor asked me to identify my moral defects, as we discussed in my fifth step, but she also asked me to write a list of twenty assets I possessed. She said that if I got stuck, I could call her. And I did. It took me two weeks to make that list of twenty. But that process helped me meet me for who I was truly was. She was someone I hadn't known in a very long time.

—Anonymous

Happy Anniversary!

Blackwood Women's Step celebrates 23 years.

The Blackwood Women's Step group was founded in May 1989. This group was started to help women work out their everyday problems using the Twelve steps of AA. Their meeting is held every Monday night from 7:15-8:15. The last Monday of the month focuses on one of the traditions. The current location of this meeting is at the Blackwood United Methodist Church, 35 E. Church St.

— Jenn C., Archives Chair

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Fellowship Announcements and Things to Do

Friday, May 18 - Marlton Group (POP) Anniversary. 11:00 AM. Prince of Peace Lutheran Church, Rt. 70 & Cooper St. ¼ mile east of Rt. 73. 2 Speakers.

Saturday, May 19 - Mays Landing will celebrate their 39th Anniversary. Rte 50 in middle of town at the Presbyterian Church. Lunch at Noon with speaker to follow at 1 pm.

Saturday, May 19 - 482 Club Spring Dance. 9:00 PM - 1:00 AM. \$10 (non members) \$5.00 (members). Soda & coffee provided. 1585B Route 73, Pennsauken, NJ. Next to Spa Fitness, Rt. 73 S to Rt. 130 S ramp. Entrance off ramp.. 856-663-3009.

Sunday, May 20 - Area 45 Spring Assembly - Registration, 8:30 am; New GSR/DCM Orientation, 9:00 am; Assembly, 10:00 am; Lunch, 12:30 pm; Workshop, 12:45 pm; Committee Meeting, 1:30 pm - approx 3:00 pm. Elmer Grange Hall, 164 Woodstown-Daretown Rd., Pilesgrove, NJ, 08098.

Monday, May 21 – Masonville Big Book/Step Meeting Anniversary. Mt. Laurel, NJ, at the Masonville United Methodist Church, 200 Ark Rd. (Masonville-Centerton Rd.), off Marne Highway (RT. 537) Food will be served at 6:00 PM and two speakers at 7:00 PM.

Friday, May 25 - GOYA 1st Anniversary. 8:30 PM. 482 Club, 1585B Route 73, Pennsauken, NJ. Next to Spa Fitness, Rt. 73 S to Rt. 130 S ramp. Entrance off ramp. 856-663-3009. Speakers at 9:00 PM.

Monday, May 28 - Memorial Day Alcahthon sponsored by SJIG Unity Committee & hosted by the Woodstown Group of Salem County. 6:00 AM - 6:00 PM. Meetings hourly. United Presbyterian Church, 46 Auburn Rd., Woodstown, NJ 08098. More info: Kathy Jo - 609.790.3740 or Billy A. - 703.980.6515 or unity@asj.org Food donations gratefully appreciated.

June 1- 3 - Matt Talbot Retreat. Serenity Weekend for Recovering Alcoholic Men. Marianist Family Retreat Center, 417 Yale Ave., Cape May Point, NJ. <http://www.capemaymarianists.org/> Cost: \$150.00. Contact: Joe 609-313-2999 or Jim 856-842-3060

Sunday, June 3 - Flat Water Kayak Introduction Training and 3 hour Paddle on Wading River. 8:30 AM. Bring water and snack for paddle. Also, bring picnic type food to share at tailgate social after trip. No children. No pets. No open toe shoes or sandals. Wear clothes that dry quickly (no cotton). Sponsored by SJIG Social Committee. Mick's Canoe & Kayak Rental, 3107 Rt. 563, Chatsworth, NJ. \$37.50 p/p. Hosted by Sherrill B. - 856.889.5595 sherrill@sherrillbarrettnutrition.com RSVP to leader: Paul Serdiuk - 609.462.3593 pis1@cccnj.net by May 24. This event is held in conjunction w/ South Jersey Outdoors Club.

Tuesday, June 5 - Reflections 4th Anniversary meeting. 11:00 AM: Food. 12:00 noon: Speaker. Thundergust Picnic Area, Parvin State Park. Parvin Mill Road, Pittsgrove, NJ.

Saturday, June 16 - Founder's Day Picnic. Subaru Pavilion, Park Ave at Cooper River Park, Cherry Hill, NJ. 1:00 PM - 5:00 PM. Free. Speaker: Joann C at 2:00 PM.

Monday, June 18 - Williamstown "As Bill Sees It" will celebrate their anniversary breakfast at 9:30 AM. Guest speaker starts 10:00 AM. First United Methodist Church, 159 S. Main & Church Sts. Williamstown, NJ. NEW

June 29, 30 - July 1 - 1st Annual Liberty Bell Roundup. The Woodstock of AA. Ramada Philadelphia Airport, 76 Industrial Hwy., Essington, PA 19029. \$35.00 Registration. Liberty Bell Roundup

with Bill on niacin. Dr. Hoffer was a close personal friend of Bill's, had an extensive personal correspondence with him, and saw him many times each year when he traveled to New York for work. Dr. Hoffer is also in the film."

Hanlon says they are not advocating for or against A.A. with the film, and they worked hard to be as accurate as possible in telling Bill W.'s story—and it IS a story well worth telling, according to Hanlon. "We always thought that A.A. members would have an interest in Bill's life and story, and we hoped that to some degree we would be able to bring him to life, to make him a real human being for our audience. But we also hope that his story will be of interest to people outside of A.A., as well. Bill Wilson's influence is enormous, even if it's often not seen directly. And as I stated earlier, we feel his life would be interesting to many people who have no affiliation or relationship to A.A."

Is the GSO in New York aware of the film? Have they endorsed it?

"We've tried to do everything possible to respect the Traditions as we've made the film, and we felt that Traditions 6 and 10 in particular mean that AA, and GSO, really could not get involved in the making of the film. It seemed to us from the very beginning that our film would have to be considered an outside issue and enterprise, so we did not solicit any support or help from GSO. And since we're not A.A. members, we felt it was a good thing to remain as independent as possible as we did our research and began making the film.

The one major exception to this, however, was that we did request permission to do research in the archives at GSO in New York, and we received wonderful help and support from the entire archives staff."

The filmmakers are not members of A.A. Why would they take eight years to make a movie about Bill Wilson, if it wasn't something that they could relate to? Turns out that they can:

"Like so many people, Dan and I have seen the devastating effects of alcoholism on people in our families – in my case, on many, many people in my family. So, this is definitely a personal issue for us,

About Page 124 Productions

Kevin Hanlon's production company is called Page 124 Productions. Hanlon said an A.A. member pointed out a passage on page 124 in the Big Book to him many years ago:

"Cling to the thought that, in God's hands, the dark past is the greatest possession you have – the key to life and happiness for others. With it you can avert death and misery for them."

"At the time, I was dealing with some very painful things from my own past, and this was enormously helpful to me. When Dan and I first set up our company, we were struggling to come up with a name for it – and I suddenly remembered this passage. I thought it was probably the best summary of A.A. I had ever heard – and I still do. We've both been very happy with it as a name for our company."

and a story that hits very close to home. I believe that Dan and I felt so determined to see it through because of the respect we came to feel for Bill Wilson and the enormous sacrifice he made for the welfare of so many other people. At some point, we just became committed to making the best possible film we could about him. We both believe that he was one of the most important people of the 20th Century (he's almost certainly the most important person of the 20th Century that most people have never heard of), and we felt he deserved to have his story told. "

If you'd like more information about the film, including where it's being shown in different parts of the country, here are some helpful links:

Bill W., the movie. (<http://www.BillW.com>)

Page 124 Productions. (<http://www.page124.com>)

The Trailer to *Bill W.*

(<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WDjTW154WwQ>)

— Patty H., Newsletter Chair

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!).

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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.

Send your submissions to:
newsletter@aasj.org.

sponsees who had accompanied me to this meeting, there were no other alcoholics. In that room were a porn addict, a food addict, the workaholic, and a drug addict. This lone drug addict had been accepted into a rehab, but couldn't get a bed until Monday. I'd seen enough of this group to know that nobody there could possibly identify with him, or worse, to help him. I gave him my number, but never heard from him.

The entire experience gave me a deeper appreciation for AA's Tradition Five. In our fellowship, nobody has tried to "sell" me on a particular brand of Higher Power—the only purpose has been to carry the message of hope that a power greater than myself, of my own choosing, could restore me to sanity. And I've never gone to a meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous where I've wondered whether anyone there can identify with my problem with booze, because the primary purpose of AA is to help the alcoholic who still suffers. Had I gone to my first meeting and heard someone share about his porn addiction, I might have left thinking I'd gone to the wrong place.

Tradition Five guarantees that, as long as AA guards its Traditions, people like me will always find a safe, friendly place to recover.

— Bert W.

Question of the Month/Letters to the Editor

We love hearing from readers, whether it's to chastise us or to praise us. We were thrilled to receive the email below:

Letter to the editor:

Thank you for a wonderful April issue. The issues just keep getting better every month! I especially enjoyed the "Convention" and "My Friend Bill" articles but the entire issue really spoke to me. Thanks again! LisaXXX

We are not blowing our own horn—we just wanted you to see that we'll print your responses.

So...

If you find writing an article daunting, how about a letter? For next month's issue, we'd like your short reaction to this statement:

"Our primary purpose is to stay sober and to help other alcoholics achieve sobriety."

Please email your response no later than Friday, June 15th, to newsletter@aasj.org.

Keeping it Green

A Beginner's Story

This story appeared in the May 2012 online edition of the AA Grapevine.

I realized I had a problem with alcohol when I tried to stop—or even slow down—my drinking. To me, the problem was other people's attitudes about me when I drank. The only time I felt comfortable and happy was when I drank. It made me feel like I was a part of things, and not an outsider. Why were people mad at me when all I was trying to do was feel OK? It made me angry that they criticized me, that they were trying to take away the only thing I had to help me feel less alone and less unhappy about myself.

I read the First Step; then I looked around at the people in the room, all sorts of types of people smiling and happily taking to each other. These were people who had been like me, but now were free. I felt I was in the right place at last.

I continued to drink. As the anger and resentment grew and were aimed at others, and even at life itself, I became violent whenever I got drunk. I said hurtful things to people I loved for no reason other than I was angry and confused and they happened to be there. Bob Dylan wrote a song that says, "Tears of rage, tears of grief, why must I always be the thief?" That sums up exactly how I felt about my life

So I decided to give up drinking rather than to live experiencing the guilt and remorse of harming others just for the sake of my own bitterness. But the more I tried to stop drinking, the more I drank. I promised myself I would not drink, then would watch my feet walk me to the bar, where I would hear my voice order a drink, and see my hand lift the drink to my lips. I would get very drunk again, and again, and again. Sometimes

I managed to stay off the sauce for two or three days, but eventually I would hear the familiar words: "This time I will have just one or two. It will be OK."

One morning, after a night of shame, I realized that when I drank I could not control how much I drank and that I was not in control of my actions. When the urge came—no matter how much I wanted to stay stopped—, it was as if someone ordered me to get drunk and I had to follow his orders. At that moment I believed there was some sort of evil spirit that had power over me. Angrily, I began to pray to God, "Why won't you help me? What do you want from me?"

My priest suggested AA. I heard a voice in my head that said, "Turn yourself in—just take the suggestion." When I got to my first AA meeting I noticed a sign in the wall that read, "The Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous." I read the First Step; then I looked around at the people in the room, all sorts of types of people smiling and happily talking to each other. These were people who had been like me, but now were free. I felt I was in the right place at last.

I know people in AA who have experienced (and continue to experience from time to time) the same doubts, fears, anger, and confusion that we all drank to escape from. We talk and laugh about them, but we no longer have to drink over them. We share real sympathy because we are among people who understand us. First with the people in AA, then with people outside the program, I began to see that I am not so different after all. I am no longer alone; and I am grateful to be me.

— Elmo, Hollister, Calif.

