

October 1995

AA Everywhere - Anywhere

*Alcoholics Anonymous Celebrates 60 Years at Our
Largest-Ever Anniversary Convention*



"Wherever I looked, there we were," wrote Richard from Colorado, and Geff from Ohio marveled: "So many once-broken people all patched up by AA, and having a good time together." Those reflections were typical among the throngs of sober alcoholics who attended AA's birthday bash in San Diego, California, the weekend of June 29 to July 3, 1995. It was the largest AA Anniversary Convention ever held (more than 56,000 people registered), and the largest convention of any kind that San Diego had ever hosted.

The theme, "AA Everywhere — Anywhere," came to life even before the Convention opened. Butch from San Diego met some early arrivals at his regular downtown meeting: "We had a slew of out-of-town and international visitors — two from Ireland, a half dozen or more from Finland, one from Germany, one from Switzerland, a couple from France, one from Wales, one from New Zealand, and one from out of state, Tennessee.

"It was possibly the most exciting meeting I've been to in twelve years in AA. The leader called on many international guests, and we got to hear the message in several foreign languages, with their companions interpreting for us. I truly experienced the language of the heart!"

"I was able to meet new friends from all over the world," said Sandy from California. "We may not have talked

the same language, but the eyes and smiles said the same thing: 'Welcome, I'm glad you made it.' I bet at night there was a glow in San Diego just from our eyes." And Martha from Kentucky "liked the feeling of connection with people I'd never met. I was constantly reminded of the line in the Big Book about our being a group of people who normally would not mix."

Many participants arrived early to see the sights and enjoy the nearly perfect weather. "Like ants on a marshmallow, AAs converged on the downtown area, strolling the harbor walk and plazas, going from hotel to hotel, meeting to meeting," wrote John from Pennsylvania. "And everywhere people were doing the 'San Diego Salute' — you meet a fellow AA, hesitate for a second, then like a giraffe, you crane your neck forward to read the nametag."

Marilyn from Oregon arrived early on Thursday and had a chance to help set up chairs on the infield at Jack Murphy Stadium. "None of the stadium employees could figure out why we were so excited about setting up those chairs, even after we explained about AA service. It took us two hours, and eventually the employees began to talk with us, sharing about a friend who drank too much, or a brother. We carried the message even in the mess of all those crooked chairs. Afterward, at the Big Meetings, we were able to see all 11,000 chairs from above, and I was proud of us drunks. To be one among

many is all I've truly wanted, and at twelve years of sobriety, setting up chairs still gives it to me."

How an AA Convention Works

Once it began, the Convention flowed smoothly and looked easy — but "easy" generally has a story behind it. For San Diego, the story began fully nine years ago, when the 1986 General Service Conference heard bids from several cities and selected three potential sites. The final site was selected by the Board of Trustees after visits to all three cities. As Eileen G., GSO staff member who served as Convention coordinator, explained: "Essentially, we're renting a city, and all its major facilities. We have to know that the stadium will be free when we need it, that hotels will be able to accommodate many thousands of people, that adequate transportation will be available."

After the site was decided upon, Convention planners could relax for a while, and about two years ahead of the event, the action heated up on several fronts. In San Diego, a host committee chairperson was selected by local AAs, and Bobbie C., along with co-chairs Gary U. and Gail N., formed a core committee that took on the job of recruiting, organizing, and training 6,000 volunteers to serve as the city's welcoming face for the crowds of visitors.

Planners met with all city agencies — harbor and airport, police force, fire department — to arrange permits ("for everything," according to Eileen G.).

There were conferences with the hoteliers, letting them know that AAs have some habits different from most conventioners. Warned that at a past Convention some hotels had run out of coffee, the hotels came through beautifully. The ice cream lasted, too — but planners for the year 2000 will need to give warning that San Diego's automatic teller machines ran out of cash!

And Then It Begins

For many, the Convention experience begins even before the opening day. Marianne from Germany made a stop at the General Service Office in New York on her way to San Diego. She said, "Just two days before the opening, and my heart was already filled with love and overflowing joy to be a member of AA." Alberto, a Convention volunteer from Chula Vista, talked about the two people in his group who registered but weren't able to attend. So the group officers met and decided to hold a raffle to donate the registrations to group members who couldn't afford to come.

Ken and Jackie from Louisiana wrote that "during our connecting flight to San Diego, the flight attendant asked over the PA system whether there were any friends of Bill W. on the flight. We were sitting at the front, and as we raised our hands we turned around to see that at least three-quarters of the passengers had their hands up, too."

The Convention opened officially

on Thursday night, with a "block party" in the city's harbor area, along with dances at the Convention Center and at the Hyatt Regency Hotel. "Thursday night was out of this world," wrote Arlene from New York City. "My husband and I went to the big dance at the Convention Center. The energy was absolutely explosive! The sight of so many happy, sober people dancing under one roof was exhilarating. The floor was shaking (what a relief it's not me who shakes anymore!) and the beams over the stage were moving up and

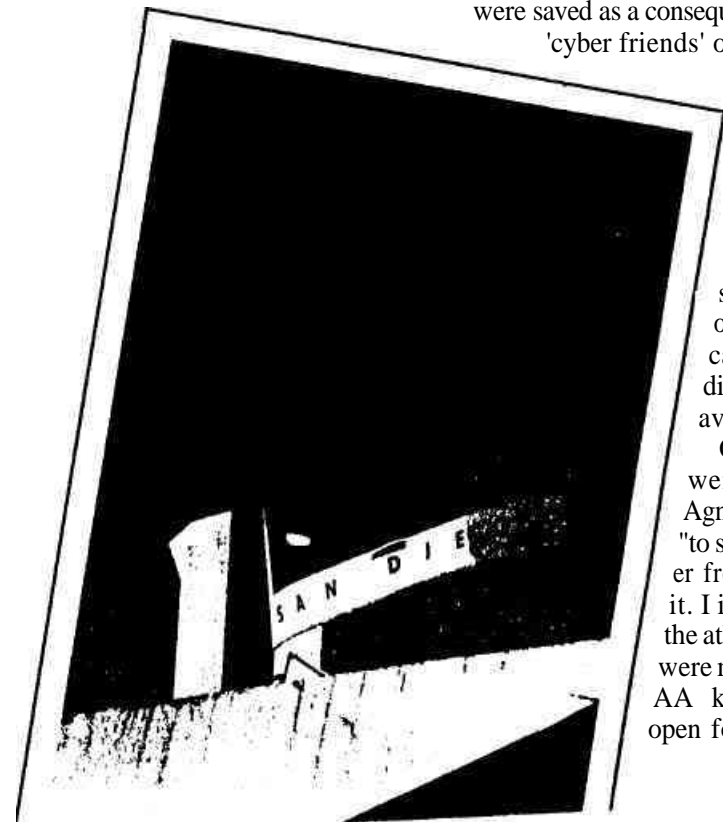
down. What a celebration! Happy, joyous and free!"

All day Friday and Saturday, panels and workshops on every conceivable AA topic challenged Convention-goers' decision-making abilities. David from Arizona reported: "Fits of indecision. Sessions checked Thursday night and scratched out in favor of other sessions were suddenly reconsidered. Too many choices! Off to ... whatever."

"In the afternoon I attended a session on 'Electronic Meetings,' where people sharing from the floor presented two instances where alcoholics' lives were saved as a consequence of having 'cyber friends' on the Internet.

In both cases, one person was able to discern that something was wrong with the other and, despite thousands of miles of physical separation, dispatch police to avert tragedy."

Geff from Ohio went to the "We Agnostics" meeting "to see how the other free-thinkers did it. I identified with the atheist types, who were mostly just glad AA kept the doors open for us. The ones

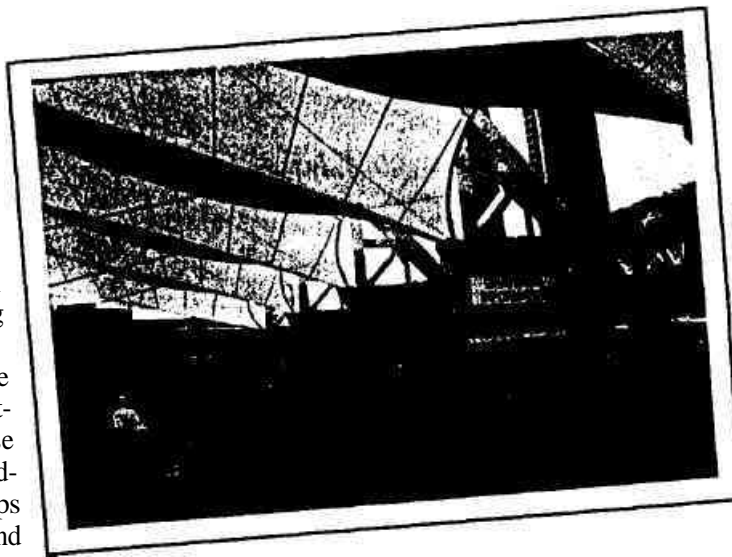


with long-term sobriety seemed to have learned to coexist cheerfully within the frameworks they found. It made me feel like I'll just keep plugging away."

Among the most popular meetings were those that involved old-timers, the Steps and Traditions, and the daily challenges

of working the program in the real world. Many meetings were so crowded that people had to be turned away at the door, and experienced Convention-goers knew to come early or they might not get in.

At the "Practicing These Principles" panel, says Pat R., who served as its moderator, people were sitting on the floor, in the aisles and along the walls, on the steps to the dais. Pat saw a woman with a walkie-talkie come in, look around, and motion to her: "I'm the fire warden," the woman said quietly as the speaker continued, "and I'm going to have to ask everyone to leave who doesn't have a chair." The warden waited for the speaker to finish, then made her announcement: "We couldn't get all of you out of here if there was an earthquake." And she added, "Before you go, I want to say



how much we appreciate you people. I've worked in this building for seven years, and have never met such a courteous and cooperative group."

The third floor of the Convention Center, an open-air space under sails that form a roof, featured food concessions, a large area with tables and chairs for relaxing, eating, or just chatting, a huge message board, sales booths for the souvenir book and Grapevine materials, and a Grapevine information booth where a pilot issue of the proposed Spanish edition was available.

Signing souvenir books was the order of the day, and overseas visitors in particular were seriously at risk of writer's cramp. Doug from California explained that someone went home with a different kind of memento: "On Sunday, someone parked an old white pickup truck by the exit to the stadi-

um, complete with thick black magic markers. The truck was signed all over, even on the bumpers and headlights, with names, sobriety dates, slogans, messages, phone numbers, and drawings. It was a traveling Convention souvenir book."

Hospitality suites were set up at the Marriott and Hyatt for a variety of groups, from young people to old-timers to Birds of a Feather (airline personnel). A first was the Living Cyber hospitality suite, where AAs who had been corresponding on the Internet had a chance to meet face-to-face.

Geff from Ohio had been e-mailing to Butch in San Diego: "One of my best moments came when I looked for Butch to say hello. And I see this bearded guy, with the nametag Butch, and I go up and thank him for everything. And he's all modest and friendly, says he was just trying to be useful. After about five minutes, I think we both realized it was a different Butch. But I made another friend, and we laughed, and I stumbled on to new adventures."

And They Say We're Not Organized...

Registration began at noon on Monday and continued through Saturday afternoon, with peak days on Thursday and Friday. Many had preregistered, but more than 12,000 people registered on-site. The lines moved smoothly. John from Pennsylvania was impressed: "Friday morning at nine, we were in the

pre-registration area to pick up our badges. We got our badges and moved through registration quickly — amazingly quickly for a group that never wanted to be organized."

That speed was the result of meticulous planning and hard work on the part of personnel from the General Service Office and the Grapevine. GSO controller Don Meurer, a nonalcoholic who has worked for AA for fifteen years, outlined a few of the hundreds of details that had to be arranged: setting up Convention bank accounts, scheduling Convention Center bonded cashiers, ordering on-site registration forms and signage, arranging for armored car pick-ups of cash taken in, designing the floor layout of the Convention Center to make sure traffic would flow, and shipping souvenir books and other materials to (and back from) San Diego.

Many GSO and Grapevine employees, most of them nonalcoholics, worked twelve-to-sixteen-hour days all week to serve the needs of Convention-goers — and they often went the second mile. On Thursday, an elderly couple stopped their car outside the Convention Center to ask where to go for registration, and John Kirwin, GSO's assistant controller, delivered their badges to curbside, saving them the trouble of standing in line.

Grapevine controller Bob Scherer was in charge of the souvenir book and Grapevine sales booth, and remarked that it really is an honest program. On

Saturday afternoon the sales booths stayed open late to accommodate AAs who still wanted souvenir books or the Grapevine's new Spanish translation of *The Language of the Heart* — but not late enough. Returning Sunday morning to pack boxes to ship home, Bob realized that a large number of books had disappeared overnight. Dismayed at first, he then spied a box of cash — \$826, to be exact— on one of the counters. AA members had bought their books on the honor system.

Flags, Flags, Flags

The Flag Ceremony and Big Meeting on Friday night is always the high point of a Convention, and this was no exception — even though the trip to Jack Murphy Stadium wasn't easy. Ken and Jackie from Louisiana said they were "very impressed with the transportation system — except, of course, during the infamous Friday wait at the Convention Center curb. Buses only hold so many passengers, and it was obvious that some of us were going to have to wait a while. Add to that the disconcerting rumor that 'the stadium was already starting to fill up' (at four in the afternoon, no less). As buses rolled by, they were hailed with good-natured 'boos' (imagine people boo-ing and laughing at the same time). At the stand next to ours, I heard a group saying something in unison, and a few seconds later laughter rippled through the crowd: they were offering up the Serenity Prayer.

"But of course, we made it to the stadium and were in our seats with time to spare. At eight o'clock came an announcement that we were almost ready to start, but one bus was still in transit, and they were going to wait for it. There we were, in a full stadium, while 60,000 alcoholics waited for *one busload*. It was one of many heart-swelling moments."

Kit from Alaska rode a bus that got caught in a "monumental traffic jam. After about an hour, people began to grumble and complain. Then behind me a woman rose to her feet and announced that she was going to read from the Big Book. When she got to chapter five, 'How It Works,' people joined in to say with her the words we had all heard so many times. And as we said the final phrase — 'God could and would if He were sought' — the traffic jam unsnarled and a passageway cleared for our bus to move through. We arrived ten minutes before the meeting began."

Nowhere was the Convention theme, "AA Everywhere — Anywhere," more evident than in the opening flag ceremony. John from Pennsylvania wrote: "Flags from eighty-seven countries were paraded out, Olympics-style, and two huge screens, on the left and right, broadcast the speakers. Lights from the cars on the surrounding freeways kept us informed that we were still on earth, but as the house lights were brought up, I had the sense that I was in almost a

sacred place. Where else on earth could there be gathered this many souls, all trying to help each other?"

Flag bearers, some in national costumes, marched into the stadium and lined up in front of the dais. From Antigua to Chile, Ireland and Poland, through South Africa and Western Samoa, every country was cheered loud and long.

Flag bearers were chosen at random from members who registered from each country, and they regard their service as a great honor. In the case of the Fiji Islands, the name that came out of the hat was a man who lived in the Islands but was not a native. However, late in the day on Friday, a native of the Islands arrived at check-in, and the original flag bearer withdrew in his favor. AA's spirit of sacrifice was alive and well.

Hamid, who was born in Iran, volunteered to carry the Iranian flag if the person who came out of the hat did not show up. It was down to the wire. Hamid participated in the rehearsal, but the designated flag bearer did arrive. "I was resentful for about thirty seconds. Then I gave him a hug and watched the rest of the rehearsal."

Bradley from Chappaqua, N.Y., was impressed by the sobriety countdown early in the meeting: "I had always looked at a person with twenty years of sobriety as an old-timer. I was amazed to see that the median and average length of sobriety of all participants probably ranged from ten to

twenty years."

Saturday morning began early with a Fun Run/Walk, starting at the Convention Center and going along the waterfront and back. Joan from Nevada, who started walking for exercise soon after she got sober, says: "I stayed at the back of the group so as not to be in the way of serious runners, but I soon found myself passing people, and was able to do the whole thing without slowing down. It was one of my most grateful moments in sobriety to participate as a sixty-one-year-old grandmother."

Brent from California said: "When I signed up for the Fun Run, I thought it would just be a pleasant experience, and a good opportunity to get out for my morning exercise. But I don't think anyone anticipated what awaited us at the finish line. A crowd of one hundred or more formed a human funnel. The closer we got, the louder and more excited became the cheers and encouragement. Across the line there was another double line of fifty or more. I have been in these before, but nothing ever felt like that. It was an outpouring of love, encouragement, and recognition of accomplishment like no other I have ever seen."

'More Than 5,000 Years of Sobriety'

The first-ever Convention Old-Timers Meeting on Saturday night featured 129 members with forty or more years of sobriety, fifteen of whom told their stories. "I couldn't keep from crying

when I heard those stories," said Geff from Ohio. "One guy forgot where he was but everybody stood and cheered. He was family and had kept this thing alive and had passed it down to my generation, so that even cynics and skeptics like me, if they were beaten enough by alcohol, could get sober, too." And Barbara from California wrote: "The old-timers on Saturday night set a wonderful example of humility for all of us when they stopped immediately at the gong without expecting special privileges because of their length of sobriety."

Marie from California, forty-five years sober, reflected: "My heart is so full of the wonder of it all. Saturday night, there was a ramp for people like me, who move about in wheelchairs. As we reached the end of the ramp, my nurse and I were greeted by a man from the host committee. He asked if I had more than forty years of sobriety, and then helped us make our way to the enclosure where other early members were gathered. Our names were put in a hat, and fifteen names were drawn — my name did not come out of the hat, but I was there and a part of it."

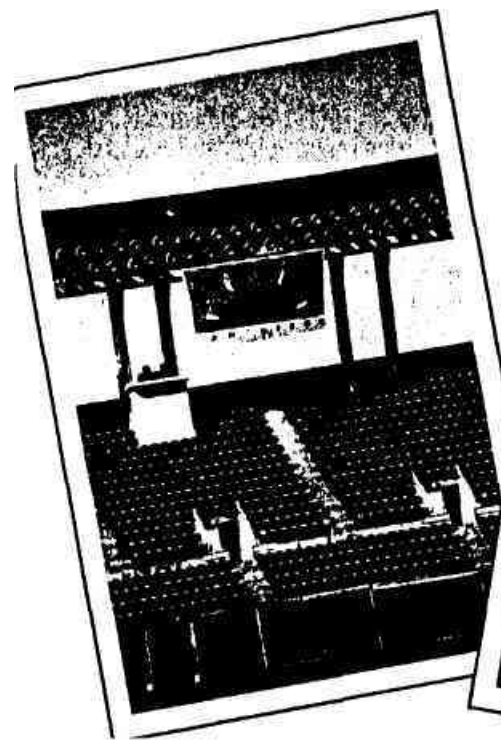
"The program was fifteen years old when I joined, and now it is sixty. I remembered the days and nights we had carried the message of AA to people who did not know of the program. As I looked about me, I could see what we had helped to do." Another old-timer, Allen from Los Angeles, "wondered how I could say 'what it was like, what

happened, and what it's like now' in five minutes. But my name didn't come up, so I removed my necktie and relaxed, knowing that my forty-one years was a small part of the more than 5,000 years of sobriety among the 129 names in the hat. The phrase 'the whole is often greater than the sum of its parts' seemed to reverberate in the stadium that night. Had the gathering been for a ball game, the rooting fans would have had divided loyalties. But no one could possibly doubt the solidarity among those electrified sober drunks."

At all three Big Meetings — and indeed, throughout the city — AAs carried a message of courtesy and mature sobriety. "During and after each meeting, there were our Fellowship members picking up and cleaning up," wrote Conrad from Tennessee. "Many of the stadium workers said they never saw the place so clean, or so orderly, during or after an event. As we left the stadium, the city police were outside directing traffic, and we asked them how it had gone. They replied, 'Rather boring, but we never witnessed anything like it before — not one bad incident.' I heard early in sobriety that each one of us may be the only copy of the Big Book a nonalcoholic sees. In San Diego, that took on a whole new meaning for me."

And the Balloons Went Up

Sunday morning came, and for the last time Convention-goers climbed onto buses for the trip to Jack Murphy Sta-



dium, this time for the Closing Big Meeting. When hundreds of balloons soared into the sky at the end of the meeting, it was a time for goodbyes (till the next time), and for reflection on the meaning of the weekend as a whole.

"One thing I heard Sunday morning really impressed me. One of the speakers referred to 'this room.' A voice behind me questioned, 'Room?' and another voice responded, 'We're still just a roomful of drunks.'"

Ross J. was deeply affected: "I was so happy there, so excited, awed, emotional, childlike, yet infinitely a part of the power of the flowing of God's love. Now I want to return and use that energy to redouble my service efforts. Out

to my local jail to tell others about the hope and laughter and endless smiles." Mary from New Jersey resolved to take a more active part in her home group: "Too often, I have sat back out of inertia, wanting to be 'nice,' and not speaking out when newer members ignored the Traditions. At San Diego, I learned that without the Traditions, AA might not have survived for us to be there in Jack Murphy Stadium."

And Richard from Colorado felt much the same way: "For thirteen years I have steadfastly refused to go to conventions and conferences — my only reason for attending the International was that it could be coordinated with

Convention '95



a visit to my parents. But there, I experienced a deeper calling of the spirit of our Fellowship than I had ever known. I learned that AA is more than I could imagine, and I am as much a part of it as I choose to be. I know that I no longer have to be like the person I have been. Thank you, God, for this experience. Please show me how to use it to help the new person coming to the meeting tonight."

Sara from Cold Spring, New York, saw the Convention experience as part of a whole: "The thing that touched me most at San Diego was the sense — especially at the Sunday morning

meeting — of being at a great big home group meeting: boisterous, serious, surrounded by intimates, old and brand-new, moved to tears and laughter by the reality and honesty of the speakers. And afterward? The host committee cleaned up. Our people gathered trash and folded chairs (all that was missing was the grimy coffee pot). Politely asked to vacate the premises, we went — where? — to the nearest diner, where my sponsor, a fellow member, and I did a 'meeting after the meeting' with twenty-five plus new and old friends. Just like home. No — it was home." ~



The View from Under a Yellow Visor

Over 6,000 volunteers from San Diego County, from other California locales, and at least two from as far away as Ireland donned purple and blue vests, large yellow Host pins, yellow visors, and big smiles to meet and greet the thousands of celebrants at AA's biggest birthday bash.

Some of the volunteer coordinators started preparing for our guests' arrival two years in advance. Most of the rest of us began attending organizational meetings, an orientation at the Convention Center, and other on-site training sessions several months ahead of time.

We could hardly wait for the fun to begin and most of us arrived early for the volunteers registration day that started at 2 p.m. on the Sunday prior the Convention's opening. In fact, so many of us showed up that before the doors opened the crowd waiting to register formed a line that reached from the main entrance of Exhibit Hall B out through the long entry corridor and halfway to a neighboring hotel!

Then we fanned out throughout the city to Lindburgh Field, the bus depot and even north to stations along the coastal Amtrak/Coaster train route, to welcome the hordes of AAs, Al-Anons, and friends who flocked to San Diego. We were at the major hotels, on the downtown streets, in the Gaslamp District, through the tri-level Convention Center, along the Embarcadero, and at Jack Murphy Stadium where the three major events were held.

We answered questions, gave out directions and information, smiled, waved, and tried to personally welcome as many of our visitors as we possibly could. As one local newspaper said, "There are no AA police," but some of us felt like that's what we were as we tried to gently remind our guests about San Diego's strict "no smoking in public places" law, the AA Convention's request that no pictures be taken in meetings or at AA gathering places, and the safety requests to not run in hallways, elbow ahead in lines, or stand on chairs to see over the crowds.

These requests allowed us to hear every version of "But... I'm different" that we could come up with: "But I'm only taking pictures of my friends"; "But I've lost my ___" (fill in the blank: wife, sponsor, etc.); "But I'm a volunteer who is late for a commitment" (yes, we were guilty, too).

Far too soon to suit most of us, the Sunday closing ceremony at the stadium came to an end. As the crowds filed out we waved goodbye, hugged old friends and new, made plans to meet again, and began folding down the 11,000 chairs that had been set up on the stadium field.

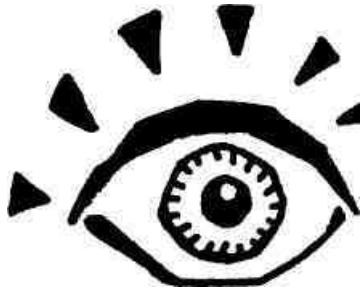
You Conventioneers shook hands with us, hugged us back, and tried to thank us for a job well done. We wanted to explain, but words were inadequate to express what was in our hearts.

We wanted to tell you that it was an honor to be of service; the lumps in our throats were too big to permit us to say much of anything.

Thank you for being here. Thank you for sharing your experience, strength, and hope with us. Thank you for affording us the privilege of volunteering at AA's 60th Anniversary International Convention.

God willing, we will see you all again at the 65th in Minneapolis in the year 2000.

Louisiana D., *Oceanside, Calif.*



... As Others See Us

"Mother of All AA Meetings"
"AA Success Is a Cause for Celebration"

These are but two of the high-note headlines in San Diego's Union Tribune, from a series of articles about Alcoholics Anonymous and the Convention that ran for four days starting June 19, 1995. They sparked my interest in how the media were reporting our event, and their attitude toward AA. So I studied the newspaper and TV reports for that period, not to learn what AAs said when interviewed, but what the media were saying about us.

Here are a few examples from several writers who contributed to the series in the Union Tribune.

~ "AA is a unique made-in-USA creation that has been able to take root and thrive in other countries and cultures. The San Diego Convention comes at a time when the AA Fellowship is seeing a burst of international growth of its power to change the course of human lives."

~ "Earlier the parking lot of the Stadium (where three big meetings were held) looked a lot like most other gathering except there wasn't a beer can or a bottle of wine in sight."

~ "AA has held together and flourished for sixty years with an organization that looks from the outside like a recipe for anarchy. . . . One researcher concluded that the lack of a conventional power structure in AA gives it the tone of the 'classical anarchy' that social philosophers only dream about."

~ On page one of the Los Angeles Times, there were these observations in a story headline: "AA Quietly Marks 60 Years of Deep Impact on Society." The article says: "AA members and guests are in the midst of celebrating a movement that has changed the attitude of Americans toward alcoholism and radically altered the way the culture approaches myriad ills and afflictions.... It is hard to exaggerate the impact of AA and its founders.... AA is also unique in its structure and its relentlessly modest public persona. In a modern culture obsessed with celebrity, AA is hopelessly retrograde."

~ An Associate Press story said: "Downtown bars are serving up fruit drinks. Airport traffic is as heavy as a Christmas weekend. Coffee flows at the rate of 200 gallons a minute."

~ And from Time magazine: "Though many who feel they have been saved by AA cannot explain exactly how or why it works, they do believe they stay sober by helping others to stay sober too...."

The media generally were in some awe of our "organizational" structure, or lack of one. "Alcoholics Anonymous is a kind of talking pyramid scheme in which drunks who've sobered up help the next one to stare down the liquid demon. Then he helps the next one and so on. ... A cornerstone of AA is that no one is responsible for the destruction in an alcoholic's life except the alcoholic himself," wrote the *Union Tribune*.

In a major editorial, the San Diego paper named AA as "a program that successfully treats the root causes of many of our nation's worst social problems." It goes on: "And how much does this program cost the taxpayers? Not one dime.... The underpinnings of the organization are people helping each other, thereby helping themselves. There are no contributions from outside AA. What's more, it is free to all who need and want it. And it has no leaders — most AA members don't even know each other's last names — so there are no power plays or major personality conflicts."

Likewise, the television reports I saw were circumspect and respected our anonymity. The AAs who were interviewed were off-camera with the lens pointed at their feet or their badges, and in the case of longer shots, the lenses were slightly out of focus so anonymity prevailed.

Oh, there were minor errors or misplaced emphasis, such as referring to our "taking a pledge" or "signing up for AA" — nothing of lasting significance to outsiders, as I see it. The series of articles did include discussions of other treatment modes, the limitations of AA, and a little outright criticism. Most of the criticism came from the world of academe, one savant reported as saying, "There's little scientific proof that AA's program leads to sobriety." I read no further, turned to look into a mirror, saw an AA miracle and smiled.

All in all, I would say that for a Fellowship with no organization and a public relations policy based only on attraction, Alcoholics Anonymous "attracted" unbelievable amounts of publicity and respect. The media don't have to like us, true, but it's kind of nice that they do, and that they recognize, as we've always known, that it works. It really does.

Anonymous, California