

February 1951

*Low Bottom or High Bottom...*

## TWELFTH STEP WORKSHOPS

*Two experiments that do raise bottoms up!*

**A**N act of Providence *plus* an act of improvisation *equals* a beginning on the Twelve Steps *plus* a pair of shoes to take steps in. In such an equation of alcoholic mathematics perhaps 4,000 New Yorkers have found the beginning of The Road Back through two unique recovery "clinics."

Alanon House and Twelfth Step House are both co-operative ventures of AA individuals from metropolitan groups; as different from one another as everything in AA is different, and yet akin to one another in their assembly line techniques of providing outer props of food, clothing and shelter along with inner props of hope and spiritual help. Geographically, both houses are in Manhattan, and both lie just this side of Paradox as "official" AA reckoning goes. Neither is a Group nor a Club; neither is inside the AA structure, but both have been constructed by AA's.

A postcard from Korea with the simple address "Alanon House, New York" got prompt delivery to the old brownstone front on 46th Street. The house (only the basement and first floor are Alanon space) stands equidistant from Tenth Avenue's Hell's Kitchen and Broadway's Great White Way. And inside from twelve noon to twelve midnight there's a mingling of folks from all the vastness of New York's byways. Alanon is an outgrowth of the first New York AA Clubhouse, and in its present form

dates from late in the year of 1948.

Since then 5,000 12th Step calls a year have gone out from here, by visiting "flying squadrons." Maintained by voluntary sponsors, Alanon dedicates itself "to serve all Groups in the Greater New York area as a central facility for individual 12th Step work by their members ... it is an informal meeting-place for active AA's who believe in the necessity of an AA Open House." Voluntary sponsors man the desk and perform myriad duties.

Any AA can find sober company here, and out-of-towners are invited to use lounge, writing room, the little rooms marked "Adam" and "Eve," arrange with the Desk Custodian for mailing privileges, the acceptance of phone calls and telegrams, and the recording of messages. A restaurant provides soft lights for a coke, a meal, or a place to bring a date. A bulletin board announces two open meetings a week conducted by metropolitan groups, and a variety of personal notices ranging from "Gladys: I have your gray gloves" to "Joe D. called and has a job for Harold B."

But the Alanon accent is really on the Newcomer, and come they do. For the referral or the happenstance wanderer, there is sympathetic listening from Voluntary Sponsors. For the sincere, there is more than refuge; there is often dramatic action. Shoes, arrangements for nearby lodgings, small loans, an overcoat, or a pencilled



*The first step toward the  
First Step — a shave, — a  
suit of hand-me-downs...  
Clothes may not make  
the man, but . . . . .*

note to a neighborhood doctor. Charity?... no, it is more "I am my brother's lender" than "keeper." Monthly, an average of 150 money pledges are gratefully sent back to the brownstone house that was a haven from the brimstone for guys and gals who had walked their next to the last mile when they found Alanon.

Far downtown and the width of Manhattan Island away is another house of refuge ... Twelfth Step House, barely a block from the border of the Bowery. "That?", and the cop on the corner will point, "That's 61 Fourth Avenue, and four flights up if you can make it."

A "prep school" for AA, some of the individual sponsors call it, and point out that nearly every entering "student" has the degree of L.L.B. — Lowest Low Bottom. For this is the edge of Limbo where names and years and the very purpose of living disappear in dim doorways amid timeless cauldrons of Sneaky Pete and Smoke and other panhandled ambrosias. Across the street from 61 Fourth stands John Wanamaker's store, but around the corner is the long Street of Nobodies. Across the square from 61 is Cooper Union, where Abraham Lincoln talked of slaves. Ninety years before the slaves of the dark





*January 1... turkey... leftover from AA New Years Eve parties*

Bowery found the half-hidden door that leads to Twelfth Step House.

It isn't a house. The street hallway leads to steep, long stairs ... four tortuous flights to a great bare room. And at 12 noon, 40 figures in rags and cast-offs wait for the plain door to open. Inside there are chairs, and there is warmth, and a bare desk. And someone to talk to ... someone sober to talk to.

The interviews are simple and to the point. Do you want to stop drinking? If you do, what's your name ... or, sometimes, what do you use for a name now? When did you have your last drink? Where are you going to sleep tonight?

And one more question... if you stay sober five days what kind of job could you work at?

For the emphasis at Twelfth Step House is on work, say the AA individuals who have spent two years developing this therapy plan. The newly arrived may find himself assigned to floor sweeping or some light chore within his first hour. There is neither time nor space here for the man who will not, within his physical capabilities of the moment, make an honest attempt at work even if it is only the labor of his will to avoid that first drink. "A Twelfth Step Work Shop," says the typed slip

given each new applicant, "a place where ... prospects can be given the working tools of AA indoctrination..." and then channeled to the AA Group most convenient for them."

A "happy" case history would run something like this on the Twelfth Step House record cards:

Monday — "Joe D. Age about 38. Does not know family's address. Last worked as a porter about five years ago. Had his last drink yesterday afternoon. Has mild shakes, but wants to 'get squared off like Bill H. who came here last November. Needs flop tonight."

Tuesday — "Helped clean prem-

ises. Was here from opening at noon until after tonight's meeting. Shaved self. Has week's ticket for Municipal Lodging House."

Wednesday — "Here twelve hours today. Talked with new men this afternoon and joined in question period at meeting. Remembers address of married sister. Contact will be made with her."

Thursday — "Joe says feeling great now. Brought in 60¢ earned at odd jobs in neighborhood and asked if he could repay cost of first night's flophouse charge."

Friday — "Have job for Joe starting tomorrow at X-hospital as live-in porter. Outfitted him with

*Uptown at Alanon... coffee haven in the Roaring Forties...*



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suit, shirt, tie and shoes. Loaned \$3 carfare to get him to new job."

Joe's story could happen to almost any of the day's crop. The recuperative power of the Bowery boys is often phenomenal.

Any alcoholic is welcomed at Twelfth Step House so long as his behavior does not interfere with the welfare and progress of his fellow victims. Trouble makers, "goof ball" addicts and some special "problem fellows" may be sent away on "suspensions" up to 30 days, say the by-laws, but no alcoholic who really wants to attain sobriety can ever be permanently barred.

Statistics are roughly arrived at, but about 2,000 persons had at least one or more days of sobriety through "the course" in 1950. One-thousand were given clothes in the same 12 months. Twenty-eight flophouse accommodations for one night is the standing record. About 780 were placed in jobs. Of these probably 400 will make full recoveries.

Like Alanon House, Twelfth Step House not only accepts contributions of services, cash, clothes and food but must sometimes actively "hustle" for the maintenance of its brood of unwashed 'untouchables.' Mention of Twelfth Step House in a national magazine article on Skid Rows brought manna from strange places. An anonymous Texas contributor has sent \$10

every month since he read of the work at 61 Fourth Avenue. Collection baskets at the four meetings a week often contain folding money from visiting "high bottom" AA's as well as beer caps palmed-in by shaking "first day" hands. Christmas Day, 1950, the log book tersely says: "Attendance 75. Collection \$1.62."

On the bulletin board is a large chart headed "Information that may be of help in making a new start." Three types of information are listed ... "Lodging houses, rooms, flops" ... "Places to get jobs" ... "Where to get deloused."

Volunteer workers state the case of Twelfth Step House something like this: There has to be a bottom rung someplace; this is it. This isn't "grass roots" .. it's mostly dirt roots, but they too can grow. Maybe it operates outside the AA structure, but it does get AA *inside* these guys. If it has open hands for outside financial support, it also passes help on with open arms. And the workers add: "Excuse us from not having more time to tell you about our workshop, but there are more feet coming up those stairs. Hear them?"

Yes, there *are* new feet shambling up those long and hard four flights of stairs. Feet in rags, and feet that pause long to rest. But their shuffling draws nearer... they are feet that want to CLIMB....



*Twelfth Step ... with stripes ...  
the AA helping hand reaches through iron bars in ...*

## NEW YORK CITY PRISON PROGRAM

THE Assistant to the Commissioner of Correction of the City of New York felt that he had been very fair to the visitor, the man who called himself "an AA volunteer." Even the Assistant's Assistant sensed that the crux of this meeting was at hand.

And then the Commissioner him-

self pushed the typed reports aside and spoke directly to the visitor: "Well, Mr. AA, suppose we did let you talk to say 1500 of our inmates within a year. How many of 1500 would your AA business save?"

The volunteer pondered. Percentages and statistics, that's what officialdom understands, and the

wheels seemed to be whirring out some neat number.

"If we can explain AA to 1500 men in one year, sir..."

"Yes," the Commissioner waited.

"One man, sir."

The Assistant jumped when the chief's voice boomed out: "Sold! You make sense, Mr. AA. Your program gets its trial!"

In four and one-half years that pre-date and post-date that interview in Manhattan's Tombs Prison office, twice 1500 men behind bars have heard the AA message from many volunteer AA visitors. And 400 times the one promised man has found sobriety and a new way of life on arriving "outside."

The AA activities within the city's houses of detention, jails, workhouses and penitentiaries are no longer on trial. As recently as New Year's week, 1951, a four-page mimeographed outline of AA procedures for prisons and institutions has been distributed via official department channels to 50 City Magistrates, 20 Probation Officers, and other guardians of the law. By direction of, and with the blessings of Commissioner Albert Williams who has been a friendly tower of strength to the new AA Centre Street Committee.

Page one of the historic charter states "Type of Work," and lists these five approved activities:

1. Conduct AA meetings at City institutions.
2. Visit inmates when requests

for such visits are received from the authorities or when the need for such special visits are indicated.

3. Interview and introduce AA to people who are interested in AA and who come from such institutions and departments.
4. Write to interested inmates of all city institutions.
5. Offer general co-operation to the Courts and Departments in rehabilitation work with alcoholics.

Legal sanction for the New York Program came after one more "disorganized AA organization" proved that the Twelve Steps can work inside stone walls as well as outside them. It was one more milestone for one more facet of AA that, like Topsy, just plain grew.

Back in 1945, one more unfortunate, weary of breath, slipped after a brief AA endeavor. The slip led to trouble and a term in Manhattan City Prison. A letter from the cell-bound slippee reached his sponsor... a busy salesman who knew nothing of jails, prison regulations or institutional red tape. Perseverance by the sponsor finally resulted in visits to the rashly importunate member in temporarily bad standing. The renewed AA contact acted as a quick tonic, and at exercise time the prisoner talked his revived AA to a cell-mate who blamed alcohol for his new residence. On his release, the returned brother joined his spon-

sor in getting the AA word into other prisoners. Soon a dozen, some ex-cons themselves were wangling visiting permissions to carry the word inside the grim, gray walls.

In April of 1949, the faithful handful of volunteers made an appeal through the New York Intergroup Bulletin for more helpers. An even 100 responded.

Keepers of the faith are now 150 members pledged and banded together in Centre Street Committee. A recognized AA group, it holds one closed meeting a month to program the field work. Although 95% of the work is with men inmates, women have been added to the group. They will not only carry out the visiting service in the Women's House of Detention (ladies' jail in the heart of Greenwich Village) but will also visit families of male inmates, to secure co-operation in the family unit for the released or paroled man of the house. A special sub-committee, the Welfare unit, is headed by a long-dry Sing Sing graduate and will try out a job-finding service for released men who have shown a sincere desire to become good AA's.

Special meetings are held for prisoners out on probation until they gravitate to neighborhood groups. Most of them have had many meetings "in stir" as their training period. Attendance at Riker's Island (main city prison) is limited only by meeting room size, 270 often squeezing into a space comfortable for only 250.

Old timers of the volunteer AA prison workers hail the newly sanctioned set-up, but can tell off-the-record stories of "unofficial" sanctions through the early years from friendly court employees, some say even sympathetic judges, and from AA cops whom they refer to as "the finest of the famous finest."

And old timers say solemnly that the new program of carrying hope and help through barred windows comes from an old AA recipe for successful accomplishment—man hours of persistence. And they say that each meeting with our incarcerated fellow men reminds them of an old familiar motto.

You must have seen it in some meeting room, It reads....

"But for the Grace of God!..."

**"ROUND THE TOWN"** *Broadway and 76th Street*

