

The A.A. Story in Connecticut

By Jean V. Sapir

"Alcoholics Anonymous is a fellowship of men and women who share their experience, strength and hope with each other that they may solve their common problem and help others to recover from alcoholism.

"The only requirement for membership is an honest desire to stop drinking. A.A. has no dues or fees. It is not allied with any sect, denomination, politics, organization or institution; does not wish to engage in any controversy, neither endorses nor opposes any causes. Our primary purpose is to stay sober and help other alcoholics to achieve sobriety."

-- Preface to all A.A. literature.

No one can review the literature put out by Alcoholics Anonymous without being caught up in the sheer excitement of its wild fire growth both here and all over the world. Nothing else can so well make manifest the extent and desperation of the need this fellowship has been able to fill for so many.

Although the movement was born in 1935, and by 1941 had but 2,000 members, some of these belonged to pioneering groups in the Connecticut towns of Westport and Greenwich. Connecticut, thus, was in the movement almost from the beginning. When, in 1941, the Jack Alexander article in the Saturday Evening Post brought the A.A. message to millions of readers all over the country, those who wrote in from this state for help could be referred to groups within its borders. By the time Connecticut got its first clinics for the treatment of alcoholism into operation - in the late 1940's - A.A. groups were firmly established in New Haven, Hartford, Stamford, Bridgeport and other cities as well as in Westport and Greenwich, and a substantial number of native citizens of this state owed their very life, as they would themselves say, to the

sobriety and active fellowship they found in the movement. Its success, together with the success of the pioneering work done by the Yale Plan Clinics, demonstrated to the Connecticut legislature that alcoholism could be arrested and alcoholics rehabilitated, and prepared the way for the granting of state support for a rehabilitation service, and the creation in 1945 of the Connecticut Commission on Alcoholism.

One member in New Haven who has remained sober since he first heard of A.A. back in 1941, gave the writer a vivid picture of how the first group in this city came into being, a story which must have been duplicated in many other communities throughout the state. At the same time he read the Post article he was in his fifties and in despair over a destructive drinking pattern which he could not overcome. When told of the Westport group, he and three friends in a like predicament went to visit it, and with the help and active support of this group came back to form one of their own. The Twelve Steps of A.A. became a way of life to each and they met together as an A.A. group in each other's homes. Since the core of rehabilitation through A.A. consists of "twelfth step" work - members giving to others the help they have themselves received from A.A. - they worked hard and long to bring A.A.'s message and help to other alcoholics. At the end of two years the nuclear group was larger, and about fifteen possible members were hovering about. These were people who were attracted to the A.A. program but were not yet ready to come to grips with their own problem. It was a grim struggle but through the dedicated effort of its early members the group continued to grow, and as it grew, it gathered momentum. By 1944 it had its own club room, open any hour of the day to responsible members, and a substantial and active membership. In the early 1950's new groups within the same city began to be formed, and today someone struggling to establish sobriety through A.A. can go to a different meeting each night in the week either within the city or within its suburbs. Many of these meetings are held in the clubrooms of churches of various denominations, demonstrating the sympathetic support given by established religions to this movement, and to the sense of kinship most A.A.'s come to have with any religious expression.

This growth pattern is typical of A.A. growth in other communities, though club rooms are not part of the set-up in every situation. For a group to become rooted in a community there must be at least a few members who put A.A.

in the forefront of their lives, and who make themselves responsible for the regular performance of the tasks which keep the group going - arrangements for meetings and the exchange of speakers, formation of committees to take care of certain chores, and above all seeing that calls for help are answered and new members sponsored. A.A. is in essence a democratic movement. Each group has the responsibility of developing its own leadership and program, and of making its own decisions. Offices are held on a six months basis only, thus giving the recent members an early opportunity to serve their fellow members, and to experience the satisfaction and the enhanced sense of belonging this can bring. Leadership in the group is something apart from office holding, it is a moral affair, and establishes itself spontaneously as it is earned.

As of today, there are in Connecticut fifty-eight A.A. groups holding weekly meetings in thirty-six different communities. This leaves out of account open meetings held on a weekly basis in correctional and in mental institutions, and the closed meetings held among inmates in at least three prisons - Danbury, Wethersfield, and the State Farm and Prison for Women.

What keeps all this going?

First, it is necessary to understand something about what goes on at an A.A. meeting. Second, it will help to know how the groups cooperate to strengthen each other, and to bring the A.A. message to alcoholics whose behavior while drinking has brought about their confinement in institutions. Above all, it is vital to realize the importance all members of A.A. give to the act of helping other alcoholics, for the maintenance of their own sobriety. Many times speakers at A.A. meetings end their talks this way: "I hope what I have said has helped someone here; I know that by talking I have helped myself."

For each A.A. meeting a leader is chosen. He will usually be someone who has been in the movement for some time, and will be prepared to discuss one or more of the twelve suggested steps of A.A. He will usually illustrate from his own experience what taking a particular step can mean. He might describe, for instance, how he had been a person who did not find it impossible to acknowledge his powerlessness over alcohol, but who could not acknowledge that there existed any power outside himself upon which he could draw for the help he needed so badly in fighting his drinking. He might mention he had been a belligerent atheist ever since he had decided the matter of his philosophy of

life twenty years ago at college. He might tell how he finally settled for the group itself as his higher power, and how his hold on sobriety was indeed strengthened through its help. He will probably also remark that the time came without his even noticing it when he found himself referring to the support he got from the group as "God's help," and realized that all along this phrase had meant the same thing to him as to everyone else. He might add that perhaps the experience of being helpless in the face of the power of destruction in the form of alcoholism prepared him, the atheist, for reception of the idea of its opposite, a constructive power, in the only way possible to him. From the time he could feel support from this power through the group, his burden was lifted. He had to experience God before he could accept him.

After some such discussion the leader will introduce his first speaker Bill, say, or Tom. Bill may be a member with some years of sobriety behind him and accustomed to telling his story in front of his fellow alcoholics. His hope is that some one person will recognize his own difficulties as similar to those being described, and will gain new courage to face them. He may hope, also, that such a listener will seek him out to discuss his own alcohol problem, perhaps for the first time with anyone.

The second speaker may very well be someone who is making his first speech in A.A. This will be an important step for him since he will be saying out loud, in front of all these people not to mention himself, things about himself he has only recently dared to scrutinize. He will also talk about how the A.A. program and fellowship has helped him. Between and after the speakers, the leader may talk about the A.A. steps, which have meant most to him, and after a collection the meeting will end with the Lord's prayer. A social time will follow with light refreshments. Members will mingle and those new to the group will have a chance to make themselves known and to talk over their alcohol problems with members, among whom they can find a sponsor for themselves if they ask seriously for help in gaining, or maintaining, sobriety through the A.A. program. It is through this individual sponsorship that the A.A. membership grows, the sponsor undertaking to render all help possible before, during and after episodes of drinking, so long as the new member is genuinely trying to establish or maintain life on a non-drinking basis.

Just as one member sponsors a new member in an A.A. group, so an A.A. group will sponsor a new group in another community. When a town has no group

of its own, people who seek the help of A.A. will attend meetings in the nearest town that does have a group. When they feel ready to start a group in their own home town, the group in which they became members will help them get going in every way possible. This will mean the furnishing of experienced speakers for meetings and general consultations on problems which arise. The latter can take place at closed meetings from which the public, and alcoholics not yet ready to become identified with the movement, are excluded.

From the very beginning, therefore, A.A. groups have exchanged speakers. As more groups formed, it was felt best to organize this exchange by setting up "inter-group" committees for this purpose. Each group sends a delegate to the monthly intergroup meeting for his district, where visiting speakers are arranged for through a kind of pooling process. Each delegate has a list of all meetings to be held for the month. These are gone over on a day-by-day basis, and as the date for a group is mentioned its delegate makes his request for visiting speakers and some other delegate must offer the same. All note down these arrangements, and each delegate goes away with a complete recording of what will be going on in A.A. for the coming month. There are two such intergroups in Connecticut: The Hartford Intergroup which covers Hartford and surrounding communities, and the Fairfield Intergroup, which covers the west end of the state, including New Haven and its suburbs.

This pooling and distribution of speakers through the intergroups have acted to strengthen and stabilize an important service which many individual groups have been striving to give to their communities. Wherever possible they have offered or have accepted invitations to hold weekly A.A. meetings in penal or mental institutions where there are alcoholics. Intergroup can take over the task of finding a variety of speakers for these meetings, leaving the local group to work in an individual way with inmates who wanted to become members when they are on the outside.

Probably the first institutional work in this state was done by the Hartford group back in 1942. This was at the Hartford County Jail and was warmly backed by the sheriff. It was aided by our present governor, then Judge Ribicoff, who became interested when he saw for himself what A.A. could accomplish. It cannot be emphasized too strongly how important such support can be. A.A. should have sympathetic understanding as well as formal support from the staff and administrators of the institution thus benefited, and should

receive the same consideration in relation to arrangements for meetings which would be accorded to any person or group offering therapeutically important services to patients or inmates.

An example of what can be accomplished along this line is the cooperative work currently being done between a devoted group of A.A. women from the Fairfield Intergroup and the Connecticut State Farm and Prison for Women. Open meetings have been held for the past three years on alternate Sundays by these women, and are attended in a supervisory capacity by the Farm's officer on duty for the weekend, who sometimes will be the superintendent. Any woman at the Farm may attend and many do. Since March, 1955 there has also been a "closed" group of acknowledged alcoholics meeting regularly as an independent group every Monday at 1:00 p.m. The Farm's senior parole officer attends as advisor but with no responsibility for the program. The women inmates themselves recruit members for the group, none of whom attend under pressure from the Farm. The group occupies itself largely with reading and discussing the A.A. book, "Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions" and other A.A. literature. Former members who have retained connection with A.A. on the outside while they are on parole, occasionally come back to lead these meetings and to discuss their situation in the community as a parolee and as an A.A. member. Any member of either the closed or the open meeting may ask for an A.A. sponsor in her home community when she leaves the institution. During parole such a woman, then, will have help both from the institution in the person of her parole officer and from A.A. in the person of her sponsor and of the group she will join. She will thus have an enhanced chance of learning how to be at ease with sobriety and to face successfully all the stress and strain postinstitutional life entails.

Closed groups among inmates also exist at the Federal Prison in Danbury and at the State Prison in Wethersfield. Meetings at these institutions are supervised by the Protestant and Catholic chaplains. A.A. has been holding meetings at Norwich State Hospital for the past two years and for a longer period at Middletown State Hospital. No meetings have as yet been permitted at Fairfield State Hospital, though individual A.A. members may come into the hospital to interview alcoholic patients. Through the interest and support of one particular physician at the State Tuberculosis Hospital at Uncas-on-Thames, A.A. has been meeting at this hospital for the last four years. Patients

occasionally may receive permission to attend A.A. meetings in the community. Other tuberculosis hospitals are currently working towards building up patient acceptance of A.A. contacts, realizing as we all do that the tuberculosis patient who is also alcoholic stands little chance of retaining health gains made in the hospital if he returns to uncontrolled drinking once he is back in the community.

The Commission on Alcoholism's Blue Hills Hospital has had A.A. meetings each Thursday evening since it was opened. These are arranged by the Hartford Intergroup and we on the Commission's staff can bear witness that many of our hospitalized patients have been introduced in a very real way into the fellowship of A.A. at these meetings. Through our out-patient clinics in particular, A.A. and the Commission maintains a mutually helpful relationship in terms of referrals back and forth. A.A. members as individuals also have been part of our salaried staff at our experimental Compass Club - a halfway house for chronic alcoholics - ever since it was opened. Also, our clinics have frequently acted as professional medical, psychiatric, or social counsellors to A.A. members of established sobriety upon request, and have arranged hospitalizations on a preventive basis when it seemed indicated.

A survey of A.A. activities in Connecticut could not be concluded without reference to two new developments both of which hint at growing acceptance by the public to the idea that alcoholism is an illness. Veteran members of A.A. have noted for some time that younger people have been coming to A.A. for help and asking for it more as a preventive measure than as a last ditch affair. Many of these younger people have been able to achieve sobriety in A.A. and have no doubts whatever that without this help they would have continued on their destructive path until something dreadful happened. But the important fact is that they were able to cut short their drinking before they "touched bottom." In some communities separate groups for younger members have been formed and their members present A.A. to other young alcoholics as something to use as they had used it themselves - as a preventive measure.

The other new development is the "Al-Anon Family Group" movement. It is a fellowship among spouses of alcoholics, and in some instances other family members, and functions somewhat along the same lines as A.A. Spouses of alcoholics who have shown no interest in doing anything about their drinking are not excluded, and members report incidents where a wife has gone on her own

to the Family Group for awhile, then has been followed by her husband "just to see what it is all about." Usually the Family Group will meet at the same time, and in the same building, as an A.A. group, so in such a case the husband would be directed to the A.A. meeting where he would indeed get the chance to see what was going on.

The first step for the Family Group reads "We admitted we were powerless over an alcoholic and that our lives have become unmanageable," and the suggestion that the spouse leave the alcoholic in God's care follows quite naturally. There is not space here to say more than that this movement has brought new ease and happiness to many wives we know, taking as it does the burden away from the spouse for the management of the alcoholic, and focusing the spouse's attention on his or her own spiritual life. Through attempting to take the twelve steps of A.A. the spouse's attention will be led gently, with the support of the group, to consideration of his or her own problems and needs, and to a better understanding of alcoholism as an illness. Every caseworker working with the families of alcoholics knows how important such a shift is, and all professional workers in this field have every reason to endorse the work of Al-Anon Family Groups, as they undoubtedly do the work of A.A. itself.

Towns and Cities in Connecticut in which there are A.A. Groups

Branford, Bloomfield, Bridgeport, Bristol, Clinton, Danbury, Darien, East Norwalk, Essex, Fairfield, Green Farms, Greenwich, Hartford, Kent, Manchester, Middletown, Milford, New Britain, New Canaan, New Haven, New London, Newtown, Old Greenwich, Ridgfield, Southington, Stamford, Stratford, Thompsonville, Torrington, Unionville, Wallingford, Waterbury, West Haven, West Hartford, Westport, Wilton.
