

From the May 1958 Grapevine

*It took him some time to become aware
that there was more to AA than his group*

Give My Regards to New York



I AM ONE of the thousands of AAs who could have been—but were not—present at the Convention in St. Louis in July 1955. I wasn't interested.

I had been told that at this Twentieth Anniversary Convention our co-founder would, on behalf of himself and the original old-timers, formally propose that all of our worldwide general services should be permanently turned over to the members of Alcoholics Anonymous. I still was not interested. I couldn't see what this had to do with me.

At that time, sober a little over a year, it was difficult for me to connect general services with my own sobriety. Anything that began with the words "General Service" was, if you lived on the West Coast as I did, referred to simply (and very often disparagingly) as "New York." I knew we had to have "New York," and that we were supposed to send money there to support the operations of General Service Headquarters [now the General Service Office—GSO], but the whole thing bored me. I listened with impatience on the rare occasions when a com-

mittee member or a general service representative was granted a few minutes at a regular AA meeting to make his pitch. My AA horizon embraced the group and, to a limited degree, our local intergroup central office. The rest was out of sight and out of mind.

Then I became a general service representative of my group, and later a committee member. I glanced through "The Third Legacy Manual," listened to our delegate's annual report on the General Service Conference, and attended committee meetings in a perfunctory manner because it was the thing to do. My group sent in its \$2.00 per member [now \$3.65, as the 1973 Conference suggested] to "New York." As far as I could see, this was the extent of my responsibility.

Then one day I found myself discussing an action taken by our area committee with two alert and informed AAs who had about twenty-eight years of sobriety between them, had seen the beginning of the Third Legacy, and had given their time and their hearts to make it a success. And this was no peaceful chat, because they talked to me

about principles, and about individual responsibility, and about the historic significance of the precious gift of the Legacy of Service; and I resisted all the personal implications of what they were saying; and they got mad and shouted at me; and I got defensive and shouted back at them; and we had one hell of an afternoon.

But afterward, I began to think calmly about some of the things they had said. And I took an inventory of my own personal relationship with "New York." How much did general services have to do with my own sobriety? What exactly was the extent of my *individual* responsibility for the survival of our general services? For the survival of Alcoholics Anonymous?

My own personal experiences in AA provided me with the answers.

It began on the morning when, sick and beaten, I picked up the phone and called the number I found in the telephone directory, under "Alcoholics Anonymous." I needed help. I knew no other place to look for it.

I said to the man in the central office, "I'd like to talk to someone

about my drinking," and an hour later a man who lived in my own neighborhood was sharing his experience, strength, and hope with me.

So I incurred the first installment of my personal debt to general services. Because, you see, at the other end of the telephone line was a man, and an office, and money to pay the man and to keep the office open; and behind all that was a system, an organization of AA groups supporting that office, and sending representatives from the groups to watch over that office and see to its operations; and behind *that* was General Service Headquarters—"New York," if you will — men and women, armed with the carefully documented experience of thousands of groups and dozens of central offices, who poured out ideas and advice and suggestions to the Los Angeles AAs who started that office, and who continue to do so when asked.

Our central office has a sponsor—"New York."

Later, I went to my first meeting, sober now for a few days, and there I found the answer that has made it

unnecessary for me to take another drink. After the meeting, I raided the supply of free literature. I took one of everything they had, and I read all of it before I went to bed. And the next evening, at my second meeting, I bought the Big Book.

I would like to make a flat statement right here: I could never have stayed sober if it had not been for the Big Book. When nothing else and nobody else can get me out of my own way, an hour with the Big Book does the trick. I am a "book AA." It has all the answers to all my problems.

Do you see how my debt to general services grew and grew? Without general services there would be no pamphlets, and there would be no Big Book, and for many of us, there would be no sobriety. Somebody had to start a publishing company; somebody had to write the material; and somebody had to distribute it to thousands of groups and thousands of Loners all over the world. And you know who the somebody is: "New York."

After a while, I began reading the Grapevine. I like to read the Grapevine because it raps my knuckles, slaps my back, tickles my funny bone, and shakes my hand, all at the same time. It is a critic, a guide, a good-natured friend, and an unmitigated joy. I am in love with the Grapevine, that's what I am. I love it so much, I steal from it. So do my friends.

Who is responsible for the Grape-

"How much did general

vine? "New York." And thus my debt continued to grow.

Speaking of literature, has anybody noticed how the accuracy of newspaper and magazine articles about AA has improved lately? And the films and TV shows? It's been a long time since I've seen a syndicated article referring to AA as a "cure." And, more and more, writers are calling our disease a disease, instead of a moral weakness. This is the kind of publicity that helps to carry the message, that helps me every time I make a Twelfth Step call. It's good publicity, and I'm grateful for it.

Then, too, have you noticed that the anonymity breaks by members of AA have dropped off sharply in the press and elsewhere?

Why? General Service Headquarters. "Fact Files" giving an accurate, concise explanation of what we are and what we believe and what we do, and why it is important for us to remain anonymous at the public level. Written by "New York," distributed by "New York."

Now I would like to tell about a particular personal experience with general services.

One night, I attended a small discussion meeting in a desert community, and after the meeting four of us were standing around the coffee urn, and somebody said,

services have to do with my own sobriety?"

"Wouldn't it be great if we had an open meeting down here, with guest speakers from Los Angeles?," and somebody else said, "Let's start one."

In a way, this was funny, because the oldest on the program among the four of us had been sober just four and a half months. We were ignorant; we were confused; but we did have an idea. So we talked to some of the local old-timers about our idea, and they gave us a dozen good reasons why it wouldn't work; and deep discouragement set in. What to do?

Well, we wrote a letter — to General Service Headquarters. And you should have seen the reply that whistled back by airmail. A friendly, encouraging, wonderful letter, pages of it, directed to our particular local problems, answering one by one every question we had asked, and pointing out a number of things we hadn't even thought of. *Service* — from "New York"!

So we were given support and hope and the capsuled experience of thousands of groups that had gone before us. We held our first open meeting a few weeks later, and the old-timers came and enjoyed the meeting; and recently the group marked its third anniversary, strong and well-knit and flourishing.

Thanks to "New York"!

One more story. I think the work that General Service Headquarters does is God's work. It is spiritual. Here is a personal experience to show why I think so.

A couple of years ago, I flew on short notice to a small island in the British West Indies, to meet a ship that was coming north from Brazil. Before leaving the U.S., I checked with General Service Headquarters and they told me there was one AA Loner on the island, a British subject who had to guard his anonymity with care.

I arrived at the island several hours ahead of schedule. I had passed through a lot of old drinking territory on the way, and old memories were seeping into my mind, and I sure felt like talking a little AA with somebody. So I went around to the address that had been given to me and met Clay.

I introduced myself and said, "Ann M. in New York gave me your name and address," and this man just stood there and beamed.

Then he grabbed my arm and shoved me into his office, and he called his wife at home and said, "Doris, there is a man here that got my name from New York," and he hung up and said, "She'll be right down."

So I went out to their home and spent the day with them. I met their two kids, Patrick and Prudence,

and the dog, and several cats, and I looked at the pictures in the family album, and I heard Clay's story.

Five years before, Clay had drunk himself out of his trade in England, and the only employment he could get was out of the country. His wife made the hard decision: to send him off alone, because she couldn't risk the trip, with one small child and another on the way, and Clay's drinking, and so forth. And then, a week before the sailing date, Clay saw an ad for an AA meeting in a London newspaper. He went to the meeting, and Doris went with him, and when they got home that night she asked, "Well, what do you think?"

He said, "I think I've found it."

On that slim hope, Doris shipped out with Clay.

That is the only AA meeting Clay has ever attended. He has never taken another drink. He told me, "I get all the bulletins and things from New York, and of course I have the Big Book. And I receive a personal letter once a month from one of the girls in the New York office." Then he grinned. "Also, my kids have got uncles."

I said: "What do you mean, uncles?"

"Well, the people in New York give my name and address to AA

merchant seamen whose ships dock here, and these chaps always head straight for my place. The kids call them their uncles." Then he said, "They come here instead of hanging around the pubs in town, and it keeps them out of trouble. And they help me stay sober."

I never spent a better day than the day I spent with Clay and his family. I never saw more heartfelt gratitude for AA — and for "New York."

So I have changed my mind about "New York." And I wish now that I had gone to the big Convention in St. Louis. I wish I had been there to hear Bill challenge 5,000 sober alcoholics: "We are ready to deliver the world services of Alcoholics Anonymous into your hands. Do you accept this gift?" And I would like to have heard the roar that thundered back at him: "Yes!" from 5,000 throats.

I wasn't there that day, but the gift was accepted in my behalf. Not only the gift, but the responsibility for the gift. The lifeline of my own sobriety was delivered into my hands, together with the responsibility to guard it, support it, and extend it. And to be alert, and vigilant, and informed about it.

There is a big debt to repay — to "New York"!

Jim K.