

County of San Diego, California Alcoholics Anonymous History

Don Sheive of San Diego, good friend here in AA, provided the basic electronic text of this brochure. I performed the cosmetic changes for this effect. It is a duplication of an original San Diego Alcoholics Anonymous brochure published over 22 years ago. In 1979 three additional paragraphs were added, not included in this version, with the closing statement:

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- Ron Long

The Story of Alcoholics Anonymous in San Diego

Preface

Early in November of 1940 a sober alcoholic named Hal S. went looking in San Diego for another alcoholic who needed help. Hal had been a member of Alcoholics Anonymous for nearly two years, and he knew that his sobriety depended on helping other drunks to try to stay sober. After all Alcoholics Anonymous had started in 1935 when an alcoholic named Bill W. went looking for another drunk in Akron, Ohio, and found Dr. Bob.

In San Diego, Hal found Tom B. --- and that was the beginning of the AA story in San Diego County.

In the fall of 1940, Alcoholics Anonymous was barely known on the West Coast. The book written by the founders of AA had been published in 1939, but there had been little national publicity about this unusual new fellowship of alcoholics who shared their experience, strength and hope with each other to solve their common problem and help others to recover from alcoholism. One year after the publication of the first edition of the "Big Book," the New York headquarters of AA was listing 22 cities where AA groups were holding weekly meetings, most of them east of the Rockies. The New York office was keeping in touch with "loners" in 16 other cities. The best estimate was that the original 100 members of AA had grown to about 1,400.

Information about AA had been appearing mainly in various newspapers. In San Diego, then a city of 200,000, a story about AA published in The New York Times had caught the eye of an anxious father whose son Tom was having the kind of trouble with alcohol that Alcoholics Anonymous might be able to help. Tom's father wrote to the author of the Times story, Edwin C. Hill, and obtained the address of the Alcoholic Foundation, the organization which had been set up to handle the affairs of AA. From the foundation he ordered a copy of the book explained how the AA program works and containing the stories of some of the men and women the program had helped. The first AA "Big Book" reached San Diego in May 1940.

But a book supplied by his father did not help Tom. Months passed, and Tom kept on drinking. It was later in the year that Hal S., a former San Diegan who had found sobriety in AA in Los Angeles, decided to return to San Diego and bring the AA program with him. He needed a contact in San Diego, and asked the New York office for help. From the files in New York came the name and address of Tom's father.

That led to Hal's introduction to Tom, who agreed to give the AA program a try as a member of the group Hal was organizing. In his search for prospective members, Hal also got some help from a non-alcoholic friend, Ray Lanto, who was an assistant county assessor. Ray put Hal in touch with two women, Marge C. and Alta M., who were willing to try AA as a solution to their drinking problems.

The first AA meeting in San Diego was held on November 7, 1940, a Friday night, in an apartment at 3229 Adams Avenue. It brought together four alcoholics -- Hal, Tom, Marge and Alta. Actually there were 11 people present altogether, including Tom's parents and friends and relatives of the others.

Friday became the regular meeting night of the new San Diego group of Alcoholics Anonymous. The meeting was held in one member's home, rotating from week to week, remaining open for the participation of alcoholics and non-alcoholics alike.

New members were scarce, but Hal had a solution. He had been introduced to AA in Los Angeles by an understanding judge, and knew there was a ideal source of newcomers for the group -- the city jail. Ray Lanto, who became an enthusiastic friend of AA in its early days, again helped out. He persuaded Police Chief J. T. Peterson that it would be worthwhile to let Hal and his sober friends hold a meeting every week in the jail at the foot of Marker Street, which was known to the drinking crowd as "Peterson's Hotel." So beginning late in 1940, prisoners who were interested were allowed to leave the cellblock to meet with AA member from outside on Monday nights. As expected, some chose to continue their association with AA after they checked out of "Peterson's Hotel."

In its early months the San Diego group could count on around 15 alcoholics to attend the Friday night meeting -- some staying sober, some not. Non-alcoholics continued to participate fully in activities of the group. The concept of "open" and "closed" meetings had not yet developed.

In January of 1941, Hal and four members of the group got a chance to tell their stories on a local radio station, KFSD, an event which produced a spurt of inquiries about AA. By this time, a telephone number in a member's home was being listed to receive calls for Alcoholics Anonymous, and the group had rented a Post Office box to receive inquires by mail. Posters were placed in streetcars and buses giving the AA phone number and mailing address.

A breakthrough in public interest in AA came in March 1941 with the publication of a now-famous article by Jack Alexander in The Saturday Evening Post, then one of the most widely read magazines in America. So intense was the response to this publicity that within a few months the nationwide membership jumped to 8,000.

The Jack Alexander article also kept the AA phone ringing in San Diego. Soon, attendance at the Friday night meeting had reached the point where the crowd could not be accommodated in the members' homes, and the meeting was moved to a hall at the East San Diego Women's Club. The San Diego group held its first picnic in the summer of 1941 at Eucalyptus Park in La Mesa. By November, on its first anniversary, the group was listing 75 members, and was ready to make its first contribution to the New York office -- \$50.

On December 31, 1941, San Diego AA held its first New Year's Eve dance in a ballroom in the basement of the Maryland Hotel on F Street. The princely sum of \$35 was spent to hire a student band from San Diego State. A New Year's party with nothing to drink stronger than coffee was considered unique enough to merit a story about the event in one of the San Diego newspapers.

San Diego at that time was being swept into the turmoil of World War II. AA members were on the move - into the service or out of town to defense jobs. Blackouts and gas rationing disrupted the routine of San Diego life. For a time, the Friday night meeting was moved to the mezzanine of the California Theater Building in downtown San Diego, and then to the San Diego Women's Club on Third Avenue. Although the meeting place shifted, and faces changed, the continuity of AA in San Diego was not interrupted during the war years.

Al R., who came to the San Diego group in 1942, recalled many years later that the secretary would "call the roll" at the beginning of each meeting. If a name called and there was no response, someone volunteered to telephone or visit the missing member. Al recalled that soon after joining the group, he missed a couple of meetings in a row and received a postcard from the group secretary Bill K. Printed on the card was the Serenity Prayer, and across the bottom Bill had written: "Al, we missed you at the meeting." Knowing he was missed, said Al, got him back to the meetings, for good.

Hal S. had brought with him from Los Angeles the custom of opening each meeting with a reading of a portion of Chapter Five from the Big Book. This custom had originated with the group which met at the Cecil Hotel in Los Angeles; it is still associated with AA in Southern California. The recitation of the Lord's Prayer at the end of each meeting also came with Hal from Los Angeles and has prevailed from the beginning in San Diego. The Serenity Prayer, familiar to AA members, arrived a little later. An AA member in New York had spotted it in a newspaper and called it to the attention of Bill W., the AA co-founder, and others in the New York office. They saw that it had a special meaning for alcoholics, and decided to pass it

on to AA members in the newsletter published in New York for distribution to groups around the country. By 1942 the prayer was becoming firmly rooted in AA.

In December of 1943, Bill W. made his first AA talk in San Diego -- at the Friday night meeting then being held at the San Diego Women's Club. He and Lois also were guests at the New Year's Eve party held that year in the same clubrooms, and Bill helped with the entertainment by playing his violin.

Hal S. also brought from Los Angeles the unofficial rule that a member should have been sober at least a year before leading a meeting. The rule could not always be followed in San Diego in the early days; often no one was available to serve as leader who could claim a year's sobriety. As the fellowship grew, however, the one-year sobriety requirement endured as a policy for choosing leaders for the Friday night meeting, even though it did not always prevail as new, smaller groups began to be formed after the war.

The first attempt to start a second group came in 1944, when Jim H. organized a meeting in National City; however, that group failed to survive. Not until 1945 did any group make a lasting appearance. Among the earliest of these were groups in La Mesa, Old Town, North Park, Mission Hills, a women's group and a young men's group. About this time, the original group which had come to be called the Main Group, moved its meeting night to Wednesday. It was understood that any additional groups would meet on some other night so that all AA members in the San Diego area could continue to attend the Wednesday night main meeting. The first Banquet was held in November 1945 at the San Diego Club.

AA in San Diego reached a milestone in the Spring of 1946. Attendance at the Wednesday night meeting was running as high as 200. It was becoming difficult for a group so large to discuss and vote on the increasing amount of AA "business" and organizational details that had to be dealt with. The solution was to invite each of the seven groups then listed in the county to send representatives to meeting at the Chamber of Commerce building in Old Town to establish a "Central Committee" for San Diego AA. The committee, which held its first meeting on April 13, 1946, assumed responsibility for recommending an "over-all general policy" to guide AA activities in the county.

Until that time, AA members had been watching their fellowship grow with no clear idea of where it was going or how it would get there. There were no policies to guide the activities of individual AA members, their groups, or the fellowship as a whole and to manage its business affairs. Moreover, the Twelve Traditions of Alcoholics Anonymous had only begun to be disseminated by the New York office to help individuals and groups find the answers to the kind of questions that were arising. The Traditions made their first appearance in the May 6, 1946, issue of the monthly "Grapevine" being published in New York. During 1946 and 1947, each issue of the "Grapevine" included an explanation of one of the traditions.

With Otto R. as chairman and John B. as vice chairman, the new "Central Committee" in San Diego laid down an organizational framework which eventually evolved into the Coordinating Council, giving a voice to all groups in the affairs of AA in the county. At first, the work of the Central Committee was tied closely to the activities of the Main Group. For instance a Leader elected for a three-month term by the Central Committee presided at the Wednesday night meeting and represented AA in any contacts with outside organizations. An Assistant Leader was responsible for conducting a Beginner's Meeting preceding the Wednesday night meeting, and automatically succeeded the Leader after three months. A Secretary elected for a one-year term served both as secretary to the Main Group and handled records and correspondence for the Central Committee. A Finance Committee looked after the Main Group's collections and dispensed its funds.

Within a year the roster of groups was approaching 20, and some members of the Central Committee were convinced that the time had come for AA to rent an office and employ a secretary full-time. The committee called a general meeting of San Diego AA members on January 29, 1947, to decide the issue. A total of 127 members attended to debate whether AA should assume this new financial responsibility. The vote was 86 to 41 -- in favor.

This began a period of difficult financial struggle for San Diego AA -- and opened a wound that was a long time healing. The La Mesa Group voted to withdraw from participation in the activities of the Central Committee, declaring that the plan to open a central office was too ambitious. The group thereafter

considered itself responsible only to the New York headquarters of AA. It was several years before the La Mesa group returned to the fold.

The Central Office opened in 1947 in quarters in the old Broadway Building, with Elizabeth S., known as "Liz" to her AA friends, as the paid secretary. The office moved in 1948 to the California Theater Building, where it remained until the move to the present location at 2100 Fourth Avenue in 1971.

The Central Committee became the Coordinating Committee and finally the Coordinating Council, with the voting system and committee structure undergoing many changes in ensuing years.

The publication of the Twelve Traditions in the "Grapevine" helped groups and committees arrive at decisions affecting the future of the fellowship. In the early years, for instance, there was no distinction between the AA program and the social activities that AA members organized among themselves. Pot-luck dinners, poker parties and other entertainment were considered as much a part of AA as the more formal group meetings. One of the hopes of the new Central Committee was to obtain a building that could serve as a combination central office and "clubhouse." Timely advice came from the New York office that owning or operating clubrooms was incompatible with the Twelve Traditions.

This did not kill the idea of a club for AA members however. The "Old Town Social" on Saturday nights had been a popular AA event for years. Out of it came the inspiration for organizing San Diego's first Alano Club, which opened in 1948 in rented quarters at 1358 Fourth Avenue. Although separately organized and supported in keeping with the Traditions, it quickly became a unofficial headquarters for AA social activities.

The Alano Club was a success as a social center but was not always appropriate as a place where AA members could practice the 12th step of their program -- carrying the message to the still-suffering alcoholic. There was a need for some kind of haven for alcoholics in search of sobriety who needed a square meal and shelter as well as the moral support of AA. The result was another separate organization formed by AA members -- The Pathfinders -- which opened in a storefront at 127 F Street in 1950 and was the forerunner of the present Pathfinders recovery home and others like it.

AA members in ensuing years frequently took part in organizing clubs, recovery homes and other activities inspired by the principles of sobriety of Alcoholics Anonymous. At times there was confusion and lively debate about the proper relationship between the AA fellowship and these independent activities. The Sixth Tradition of AA regarding related facilities and outside enterprises finally became the basis for a policy of cooperation without affiliation.

In 1948 the co-founder of AA, Bill W., visited San Diego to speak at an unusual public meeting. Hundreds of doctors, clergymen, lawyers, officials of welfare and law-enforcement agencies and other interested citizens filled the Russ Auditorium to hear Bill explain the AA program and how it works. The audience of 900 made this the largest meeting ever held in San Diego up to that time at which the subject was alcoholism.

In that same year, the other AA co-founder, Dr. Bob, also visited San Diego, and the 13th anniversary of his sobriety fell during his stay. He received a birthday cake at the Central Meeting -- a cake with the most candles ever seen at an AA birthday in San Diego up to that time.

When Lois and Anne, the wives of the co-founders, accompanied Bill and Dr. Bob to San Diego on their 1948 visits they found that the seeds of Al-Anon were being sown. In 1947, the first "Associates Group" for members of the families of alcoholics had been formed. The Associates Group became San Diego's first Al-Anon Family Group when the Al-Anon organization came into being in the early 1950's.

The custom of observing the anniversary of sobriety with birthday cakes goes back to the beginning of AA in San Diego. In 1950, the now-familiar 90-day token came into use in AA groups as a symbol of early achievement of sobriety. The token, bearing the text of the Serenity Prayer, was created by Bill B., an engraver and AA associate whose wife Grace had found sobriety in AA in 1946.

The first issue of "The Coordinator" -- the newsletter distributed to AA groups and members in the San Diego area -- appeared in October 1948. The newsletter served to keep members abreast of the AA activities, and also to remind them of their obligation to the support of the Central Office. Contributions from groups and the proceeds from passing the basket at the Wednesday night meeting was consistently falling short of covering the office expenses. Early in 1950 the

Central Committee voted to establish the "Buck-A-Month Club" as a way for individual AA members to contribute directly to the support of the Central Office.

The present Hospital and Institution Committee is an outgrowth of the Monday night jail meeting which dates from before World War II. In the mid-1940s AA members began carrying the message into the psychiatric ward of the County Hospital, and then into County and State honor camps on the outskirts of San Diego. The separate committees responsible for these meetings finally were merged into an H&I Committee to coordinate the entire effort.

The General Service Conference of Alcoholics Anonymous was established in 1951 to serve as an assembly of delegates from throughout the world, assuming responsibility for the future of AA services. This brought into being the San Diego Area Assembly to elect a delegate to the General Services Conference in New York and to carry back to the groups the results of each conference. Tom B., who had been one of the four alcoholics at the first AA meeting in San Diego in 1940, was elected as San Diego's first New York delegate in 1951.

AA grew steadily in San Diego. The Wednesday night Central Meeting was moved from the San Diego Women's Club to the Craftsmen's Hall on Centre Street to accommodate the growing attendance. Finally that hall became too small. On March 7, 1956, the meeting was moved to the more spacious Veterans War Memorial Building in Balboa Park, where it has been held each Wednesday night ever since.

From one meeting of four alcoholics in 1940, San Diego AA has grown to include more than 300 groups with a combined membership in the thousands. Meanwhile, the fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous has circled the world and currently numbers more than one-million members in 30,000 groups.