

'A.A. Meeting'—in the Park, Past the Lua Lounge

In the lush Hawaiian Islands, where sunshine and warmth are the usual weather du jour, some groups hold their meetings in a local park. As the experience of two groups—one on Oahu, the other on Molokai—shows, the human climate is less predictable, changing as it does from one moment to the next.

On Oahu a group called Kukui Hele Po (roughly meaning 'darkness into light') meets in Honolulu's Kapiolani Park at the 12 coconut trees across from the zoo, just past the last hotel on Waikiki beach. Reports Fred T., "In the early days of the group, which started out as a pseudo-soup kitchen, it wasn't uncommon for the treasurer, or a few of the members to boot, to finance a slip with the treasury. Local legend has it that the Honolulu police were concerned about the strange group of people gathered in the park every night, passing a flashlight around, so they installed a proper light. Little did they know that with that light they launched us into modern times. Now the members could actually see what the Big Book said, and it worked its magic and they got sober and multiplied.

"Today we have a core group of about 20 members, and our attendance runs from 40-70 people a night. We don't serve soup anymore but we have hot coffee, and we are very into service. It's a big park, so if you're in the

neighborhood and can't sleep, you're welcome to stop by from 9:30 p.m. on. We'll leave the light on, with the 'door' open and lots of friends to help you stay sober."

On Molokai "the A.A.s have been doing some serious Twelfth Stepping lately," reports Shari L., chairperson of her area's Committee on Cooperation With the Professional Community. "We now have 10 meetings a week on this island, and the newest one, Starting All Over Again, meets every morning except Sunday from 7-8 o'clock in One Alii Park. Our attendance ranges from one to nine people, depending upon who's hanging out there at the time."

Recently, Shari says, "the police banned beer drinking from the 'Lua Lounge' (a table next to the luas, or restrooms) at the Little League Park across the street from the 'cop shop,' and the action has moved to One Alii Park. The Lua Lounge is now located at a table near the luas at this park, just a stone's throw from our A.A. meeting. This has been both humorous and sobering, almost like watching a movie called *How It Was*. In between sounds of beer tabs being popped come the soothing words of the Serenity Prayer. While we A.A.s watch our brothers and sisters retch with the pain of a colossal hangover, we share our message of hope and joy with each other."



Box 4-5-9 is published bimonthly by the General Service Office of Alcoholics Anonymous, 475 Riverside Drive, New York, NY 10115, © Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc., 1996

Mail address: P.O. Box 459, Grand Central Station
New York, NY 10163

Subscriptions: Individual, \$3.50 per year; group, \$6.00 for each unit of 10 per year. Check—made payable to A.A.W.S., Inc.—should accompany order.

The A.A.s make it a habit, Shari notes, “to offer our morning aloha and a cup of coffee to our friends at the Lua Lounge and to wish them a successful day of fishing. (Most of them need to fish for food and are blessed with the talent to do so.) We refer to them fondly as the Fishing Meeting. Sometimes we’d laugh, and sigh, when the Fishing Meeting had more attendees than the A.A. meeting, but we kept coming back. Twice when there was only a single A.A. at our meeting, she joined the Fishing Meeting, and they offered her their coffee and shared their breakfast. More importantly, they asked about A.A. and how it was working in her life.”

Sensing that something exciting was going on, Shari and her fellow A.A.s made sure to “suit up and show up, no matter what the actual or emotional climate was each morning.” And, yes, Shari says, “miracles do happen. Through the message of A.A. and its messengers, two of the Lua Lounge people have embraced sobriety. They stay closely connected with an A.A. sponsor and have begun to work the Steps. But perhaps the most touching miracle happened some days ago, when a senior member of the Fishing Meeting, whom I’ll call George, came over and sat down with us. He took out his glasses and wiped them clean on the shirt he’d been wearing for a month. Carefully, not missing a word, he read the Promises [Big Book, page 83]. He couldn’t last the whole hour without a beer, so halfway through he took off for the Lua Lounge, then returned. “As the meeting was about to end, the secretary asked our newcomer to lead us in the closing prayer. With head lowered, he said, ‘I do not know how to pray.’ We all held out our hands, the hands of A.A., and closed ‘in the usual way’ together. Then, as if struck by lightning, we asked ourselves: What if George can’t stay sober for a whole day? What if 24 hours are 23 too many? Quietly, and aside from the others, a couple of us asked him, ‘Can you come back tomorrow, sit with us and try not to drink, just for one hour?’ He promised to try.”

The next morning, Shari relates, “as we sat for our A.A. meeting—which now had more attendees than the Fishing Meeting—our brother-who-still-suffers sat with us. He took out his glasses, wiped them clean and read the Traditions with grace and clarity. A man of honor, he stayed true to his word and did not drink for the whole hour. After the closing prayer, he said thank you and hugged each of us tightly. The miracle of knowing you’ve kept one promise, braved your first intentionally sober moment and truly belong—all these feelings were written on George’s face as he brushed a tear from his eye. Then he turned and walked slowly back to the Lua Lounge to ‘fish’ for a beer. And we A.A.s? We keep coming back one day at a time, one hour at a time, for the alcoholic who still suffers.”

Twelfth Intergroup Seminar Renews Commitment

Finding ways to strengthen ties was the main concern of the Twelfth Annual Intergroup/Central Office Seminar. “Our groups are the heart of our service network” says Donna S., manager of the Central Ohio Fellowship in Columbus that hosted the event. “At every workshop and presentation session, representatives were looking for new ways to jump-start group interest and participation in our common effort: to carry the A.A. message.”

The three-day seminar, held Oct. 24-26, actually kicked off a day early with a bus trip to Akron, where the attendees visited some A.A. landmarks, including the Mayflower Hotel, where in 1935 Bill W. was tempted to toss a few at the bar but made a lifesaving phone call instead; King School, where the first A.A. meeting was held; and the home of A.A.’s other founder, Dr. Bob.

The weekend of workshops, panel presentations, sharing and fellowship brought together approximately 150 intergroup/central office managers and employees—more than have attended any previous intergroup seminar. Together with directors and staff of A.A. World Services and the Grapevine, they tackled topics of key interest, such as providing for A.A. members with special needs, responding quickly to calls for help, motivating self-support contributions, literature pricing and handling, and much more. There was a prevailing sense of unity that Donna underscored in her greeting to the participants: “We meet in the spirit of singleness of purpose, to exchange ideas and to share our common problems. . . . We meet to renew our commitment to the alcoholic and to realize again that in our mission we’re not alone.”

Among others who spoke at the seminar was Andrea Brennan, nonalcoholic supervisor of the Order Entry department at the General Service Office. "I have been to all but one of the intergroup seminars," she reminisced. "At its inception the seminar was a shouting match between the intergroup offices and G.S.O. staff. We couldn't believe it was taking 12 to 16 weeks for them to get their literature orders, and they in turn couldn't figure out why. But today delivery time is just four days, and we all get along fine." Andrea further noted that "during my 20 years at G.S.O., I've seen intergroup/central office managers come and go, and I've become friendly with many of them. Now they call me just to say hi, and it feels great. I don't think I could ever leave this job because I know I'd never get this kind of warmth from customers in the outside world."

To obtain a report of the 1997 seminar, write: Central Ohio Fellowship Intergroup, 1561 Leonard Avenue, Columbus, Ohio 43219-2580; or phone 614-253-8501. A \$5 contribution is requested (except from seminar participants) to help cover production and mailing costs.

The Thirteenth Intergroup/Central Office Seminar will be held at the Villa Hotel in San Mateo, California, Oct. 9-11, 1998. Says Sally Mae S., who heads the San Mateo County Fellowship of A.A.: "We look forward to cohosting the seminar with five neighboring intergroup offices here in Northern California: Contra Costa Service Center, Walnut Creek; Eastbay Intergroup Central Office, Oakland; Monterey Bay Area Intergroup; and Intercounty Fellowship, San Francisco." For further information, contact Sally Mae S., San Mateo County Fellowship, 1941 O'Farrell Street, Suite 107, San Mateo, CA 94403; or call 650-573-6811.

Open and Closed Meetings— There Is a Difference

What is the difference between an open and closed meeting? What's discussed at each? Are there exceptions that stretch the boundaries? . . . Can a drug addict attend a closed A.A. meeting? Who makes the rules anyway? And does the newcomer know one meeting from another?

As the Fourth Tradition points out, "Each group should be autonomous except in matters affecting other groups or A.A. as a whole." So, predictably, the meetings held by our thousands of groups each have their own imprint. Overall, however, most meetings—from beginners to Step and speaker meetings—fall under the category of *open* or *closed*, as defined in the pamphlet "The A.A. Group" (pp. 16-17).

Open meetings are available to anyone interested in A.A.'s program of recovery from alcoholism. Closed meetings are for A.A. members only, or for those who have a drinking problem and "have a desire to stop drinking." Whether open or closed, A.A. group meetings are conducted by A.A. members. At open meetings, non-A.A.s may be invited to share, depending upon the conscience of the group.

Over the years misunderstandings arose concerning the appropriateness of subjects aired at open meetings. The matter was considered so important that members of the 1987 General Service Conference discussed it into the night and then issued a statement, to be made available gratis as an A.A. service piece for those groups wishing to use it: "This is an open meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous. We are glad you are all here—especially newcomers. In keeping with our singleness of purpose and our Third Tradition, which states that 'The only requirement for A.A. membership is a desire to stop drinking,' we ask that all who participate confine their discussion to their problems with alcohol."

Traditionally, open meetings are for anyone who wishes to come. But experience has shown that a discussion topic should not be chosen willy-nilly; on the contrary, it is suggested that open discussion meetings be run according to a careful format and procedure so that sharing centers on recovery from alcoholism. Ironically, placing emphasis on A.A.'s primary purpose appears to be even more important in an open than a closed meeting. Some people forget they're at an open meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous, not a generic Twelve-Step meeting.

What happens when a professional or other non-A.A. member identifies himself at a closed A.A. meeting? Two solutions that have worked: 1. Some groups take an immediate group conscience and, declare the meeting "open" so the visitor can stay and observe an A.A. meeting. (One A.A. has observed that "chances are, the alcoholic newcomer there has no idea what a closed or open meeting is and, unless there's contentiousness, won't be hurt if the format is changed.") 2. Other groups, wanting to protect the anonymity of A.A.s present, take the visitor(s) aside and recommend an open A.A. meeting in the area, or else they ask an A.A. volunteer to take the person for coffee and a one-to-one discussion of how the program works.

Another thorny question: Are people with problems other than alcoholism, specifically drug abuse, welcome at closed A.A. meetings? The 1997 Conference approved a revised definition of A.A.'s Singleness of Purpose statement that offers an answer: "Alcoholism and drug addiction are often referred to as 'substance abuse' or 'chemical dependency.' Alcoholics and nonalcoholics are, therefore, sometimes introduced to A.A. and encouraged to attend A.A. meetings. Anyone may

attend *open* A.A. meetings. But only those with a *drinking* problem may attend *closed* meetings or become A.A. members. People with problems other than alcoholism are eligible for A.A. membership *only* if they have a drinking problem.”

Over time A.A.s across the world have written to the General Service Office requesting information about various aspects of open and closed meetings and sharing their own experience and points of view. Here’s a sampling, in Q&A form:

Q. *What do you think about A.A.s who talk at meetings about their experience with drugs as well as alcohol?*

A. More and more people coming to A.A. today are addicted to both alcohol and drugs, so it is not surprising that they talk about their drug use at meetings. People can share freely at closed A.A. meetings and mention their experience with drugs, but the important thing is not to lose sight of the fact that it is an A.A. meeting. And in our meetings, as in our literature, we generally try to present the bond we share—our alcoholism—rather than our differences.

Q. *At meetings, is it necessary to identify yourself as an alcoholic in order to share?*

A. When I came into A.A. many years ago, there were no rigid rules about introducing yourself. It seems to me today that if you don’t say who you are and what you are, someone yells out, ‘Who are you?’ And, quite frankly, I think that a person’s being there, in the meeting, shows that he or she has a desire to stop drinking. Why can’t we let newcomers be themselves, and why do we have to force people to say the same thing? I’ve always felt that just being there was enough. I’ve never heard of a ruling that you have to identify yourself as an

alcoholic in order to share. . . . But the decision rests with your group conscience.

Q. *Should a child be allowed to sit in on a closed meeting?*

A. Many people bring young children to meetings because otherwise they would not be able to come—either they can’t afford a babysitter or are unable to find one. The decision rests with the group. Often it is handled on a case-by-case basis; other times a group develops certain guidelines to be followed.

Q. *I was taught in A.A. (27 years ago) that all A.A. Step and Tradition meetings should be closed. Is this right?*

A. A.A.’s shared experience shows that most groups decide to have their Step and Tradition meetings closed. However, each group is autonomous.

Q. *Can non-A.A. members share at meetings?*

A. Yes. From the very beginning of A.A., groups have had non-A.A.s both in attendance and as speakers at their open meetings. In fact, Bill W. often asked non-A.A. doctors, clergy, etc. to share at meetings. Of course, whether or not to do so is up to the individual group conscience. The beautiful thing about autonomy is that there are no rules that might infringe on a group’s capacity to carry the message. Even if we don’t agree with what other groups do, they have the right to be guided by their group conscience. If we look through all A.A. literature, we find much that seems inconsistent and contradictory, but I believe this is the very nature of A.A. since it is a spiritual Fellowship and cannot be nailed down in specifics. The idea of autonomy is also spiritual and leaves the questions to be answered by a power greater than ourselves.

BOX  **459**

Order Form

Individual:

Single one-year subscriptions (\$3.50). Please send _____ individual subscriptions \$ _____

Special Group Rates:

Bulk subscriptions (\$6.00 each unit of ten) Please send _____ units of ten \$ _____

Mail to:

Name _____
Address _____ Apt # _____
City _____
State (Prov.) _____ Zip _____

Amount enclosed \$ _____

Enclosed check or money order
and make payable to:
A.A. World Services, Inc.
P.O. Box 459
Grand Central Station
New York, N.Y. 10163

Q. *How did closed meetings start?*

A. A.A.'s roots go back to the Oxford Group, an evangelistic Christian movement that grew up in the 1920s. Along with the regular meetings there were "drunk squads" of alcoholics who would meet separately. In the early days of A.A. when all the members were men, the wives used to attend the meetings with their husbands, according to Lois W. (the wife of A.A. co-founder Bill W. and herself the founder of Al-Anon). She said that closed meetings were started because the husbands became tired of having their wives tag along to all the meetings.

Reminder

June 1, 1998 Deadline For Fourth Edition Stories

The trustees' Literature Committee's Subcommittee on the Fourth Edition of the Big Book is gathering stories for possible inclusion in the proposed Fourth Edition.

The deadline for receipt of manuscripts is June 1, 1998. The documents should not exceed 3,500 words, double spaced, and the words "Fourth Edition" should appear on the outside of the envelope and at the top of the first page. Your mailing address should also appear on the first page of the manuscript and you should keep a copy for your own files. Mail to: Literature Coordinator, General Service Office, Box 459, Grand Central Station, New York, NY 10163.

Staffer Warren S. Puts His Experience To Work at G.S.O.

The General Service Office welcomes new staff member Warren S., now on the Correctional Facilities assignment vacated by Pat R., who retired in December. To his work Warren brings experience and zest. "This is a terrific team I'm with," he says. "I'm delighted to be here and feel I have the opportunity to give back what I've been given in A.A., and to grow and become a better person."

Warren's arrival in A.A. was a long time coming. Born in Manhattan, but raised primarily in the neighboring borough of Queens, he was the fourth in a family of six children: two older brothers and a sister, and a younger brother and sister. "I started drinking around 15," he remembers. "We had hooky parties, and I always felt I had to be the life of the party."

Drafted in the Army at 19, Warren corked the bottle during Basic Training. "But I made up for it afterward," he acknowledges, "while at Fort Knox in Kentucky for advanced training to be a cook. One time while doing KP, and well-lubricated on cheap wine, I was the ringleader of a prank that involved pelting raw eggs at a fellow pulling guard duty. A sticky situation all the way around, it probably was the catalyst behind my landing in Viet Nam for a year. I got out physically unscathed, but once home was into alcohol and drugs in a big way. I tangled with the law, landed in prison in New York State, and began serving on the installment plan. In other words, every time I got out I thought I'd get my life together, but I couldn't stay away from booze and drugs. You might say I gave the revolving door a few quick turns."

Each time Warren was in prison, he'd hear about A.A. meetings being brought in. "But I wasn't interested," he recalls. "Unlike the A.A.s, the church groups brought in cigarettes and women. I liked that." In 1984 everything changed. "I hit bottom," Warren explains, "and wound up in a Manhattan veterans' hospital for a 21-day detox and rehab program. The night before my discharge, a fellow from A.A. came around and shared his story with me. He said he'd been successful in staying sober, but I was leery. I told him I was scared because of my track record but agreed to go to a meeting with him my first day out. And so my miraculous journey in A.A. began in March of '84, at a meeting of the Amsterdam Group on the Upper West Side."

Once sobriety took hold, Warren says, "I converted my old GED scores into a diploma." Then he took several more constructive steps toward building a new life. He graduated from college in 1989 with a B.A. degree, landed a job working in the Child Welfare Division of New York City's Human Services Department and simultaneously set about earning a master's degree in social work. Soon after, he was appointed director of a Foster Care Prevention Program funded by the City of New York.

Meanwhile, Warren settled back in Queens again and continued to be active in A.A.—mainly as a member of the Linden-St. Albans Group. And for the past eight years he has been taking A.A. meetings into the Bedford Hills Maximum Security Prison for Women. "But for the first few years, even though I was staying close to the program," he notes, "I used to be afraid that my sobriety wouldn't be strong enough to withstand a major life event without my going back to the old ways. Seven years ago, it happened—my father died. The Fellowship was there to support me, and I did not drink. That did a lot for my confidence in the A.A. support system and my own recovery."

While serving as an appointed committee member on the trustees' Correctional Facilities Committee from 1992-1996, Warren met G.S.O. staff member Pat R. "At

the time we were both living in Jersey City," he relates, "and when a staff position became vacant in 1995, she suggested during one of our commutes together that I apply, but I didn't. In September '97, however, I spoke at the regular Friday morning meeting at G.S.O., heard that there would be a vacancy—this time created by Pat's retirement—and applied. To my continuing wonder, here I am."

Of his assignment on the Correctional Facilities desk, which he took on in November, Warren says, "I can relate personally to the overwhelming fear and despair the alcoholic inmates feel. By sharing what happened to me, I hope I can help even a few sick alcoholics to trust in the fact that A.A. opens the door to them, to a life that can be well-lived."

Tradition One— A Hero's Courage Is A Legacy to Us

"I don't know how many times I've read Tradition One in *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* and come upon this paragraph at the end: 'Countless times, in as many cities and hamlets, we reenacted the story of Eddie Rickenbacker and his courageous company when their plane crashed in the Pacific. Like us, they had suddenly found themselves saved from death, but still floating upon a perilous sea. How well *they* saw that their common welfare came first. None might become selfish of water or bread. Each needed to consider the others, and in abiding faith they knew they must find their real strength. And this they did find, in measure to transcend all the defects of their frail craft, every test of uncertainty, pain, fear and despair, and even the death of one.'"

Looking back in amazement still, Stef D. recently shared his thoughts about Eddie Rickenbacker and the First Tradition in an article that appeared in his area newsletter *We Care*, which he later forwarded to the General Service Office. Continuing, the article states, "I recently read the Rickenbacker reference again at my Wednesday night Book Study, but this time I did something different: Upon returning home, I logged on to the Internet to find out what it was all about. I learned that 'Iron Man Eddie,' as he was called, was a Congressional Medal of Honor winner and a flying ace who downed 26 German pilots in World War I. But the story in the Twelve and Twelve refers to an incident in October 1942. That's when Rickenbacker was aboard a B-17 on a secret mission to New Guinea. The bomber crashed into the Pacific Ocean. Eddie was one of seven men who then spent 24 days afloat in life rafts before being rescued. The eighth man died.

"Now that I actually know more about what happened, and can imagine what it must have been like for them to spend 24 days floating in the middle of the Pacific, wondering if they would ever be found, if they would live or die, I find that the story means a lot more to me."

Also, adds Stef in his article, "it helps to explain the First Tradition, especially the Long Form: 'Each member of Alcoholics Anonymous is but a small part of a great whole. A.A. must continue to live or most of us will surely die. Hence our common welfare comes first. But individual welfare follows close afterward.' If Iron Man Eddie and the rest of his crew had lost faith in one another or in their Higher Powers, if they had not pulled together, if they had not realized that their only chance for individual survival required group survival . . . all would have died. And if we ever lose sight of our common welfare, then the life raft we call A.A. won't survive either—and neither will we."

Stef's words are anchored by the thought with which Bill W. concludes the chapter on Tradition One: "By faith and works we have been able to build upon the lessons of [Rickenbacker's] incredible experience. They live today in the Twelve Traditions of Alcoholics Anonymous, which—God willing—shall sustain us in unity for so long as He may need us."

One Year and Growing Strong

Bob C. of Kannapolis, North Carolina, was recently elected to an office in his Friday Big Book Study Group. More importantly, he celebrated his first A.A. birthday last fall. "I was 55 when I re-entered the doors of the Fellowship on October 7, 1996," he writes. "I came this time because I knew I had to quit drinking, not find a way to control it. I begged God for help because I knew I couldn't do it myself."

Bob remembers his first six months in A.A. as "excruciating: Not many handshakes were offered, and even fewer phone calls. That's because I didn't know to ask for them. I made 128 meetings in my first 90 days and then, still hurting, regularly attended morning, noon and night meetings at 17 different groups. Still, one guy told me after I picked up my three-months' chip that he'd thought I wouldn't make it."

The first five A.A.s Bob asked to sponsor him "turned me down," he says. "They were either too busy or there was a personality conflict—but I persevered in trying to connect with a sponsor I could identify with, and finally it happened. (In retrospect, a guy once told me that you could educate a polecat but all you'd wind up with was an educated polecat. I wasn't sure if he was referring to

me or not.) My new sponsor, Roy G., began helping me through the Steps—it took only two-and-a-half months and 47 pages to cover 40 years of Step Four's inventory. But I'm disabled and retired and had ample time to get through them all. Of course, more was revealed as time passed, and still is."

Eventually, Bob notes, "I was getting burned-out from all the meetings I was attending. My sponsor told me to cut out half of them and give some time to my own life. By then it was finally starting to sink in: Utilize, don't analyze. Spiritually, fake it until you make it, which I'm still doing."

Besides serving as a group officer, Bob makes the coffee for two of the meetings he regularly attends and also participates in a weekly prison meeting. He welcomes the chance to sponsor inmates and, after their release, take them to outside meetings. "Right now the more responsibilities I have, the better," he says. "They keep me sober until the rest of my program can catch up. I say this daily: God grant me the serenity to accept my own rate of recovery."

An Oldtimer's Caveat: A.A. Needs Love, Not Micromanagement

"It is not important to me whether a person stays sober in A.A. (that's personal). My responsibility is to make sure that the doors of A.A. stay open. A.A. doesn't need micromanagement—it's about fellowship and love."

Reflecting on the A.A. he knew as a beginner in 1956, Mike O. of Islip Terrace, New York, says, "When I sobered up at age 25, I didn't get a great welcome. One oldtimer remarked that in his time he'd spilled more than I ever drank, and some others were afraid A.A. groups would be flooded by hospital people who'd eat the cake, drink the coffee and miss the basket. I remember that there were roughly two factions in A.A. back then: the orthodox bunch who would kidnap a drunk and fill him full of coffee, and the contingent who always kept a pint of booze handy so the fellow wouldn't go into DTs.

Mike says that "the A.A.s I got to know and love always told me the program is based on self-honesty—you take what you need and leave the rest. These were the same members who gave of themselves by making coffee, putting up chairs. . . . Their attitude was, 'If you're an alcoholic, you'll stay; if you have problems other than alcohol, you won't. It's your decision.' And when the police and firemen started sending people to A.A. with a note, it was the group conscience that

determined whether or not to let them stay. What I'm saying is, we should not try to fit the people to the program but let them fit the program to themselves."

Recalling how some A.A.s were sticklers in defining the only requirement for A.A. membership as "an honest desire to stop drinking," Mike notes with a chuckle that "we took the 'honest' part out because the newcomer usually was too far gone to know what that was." In essence, he says, "A.A. is people, and in this day of computers and mass communication, we should never underestimate the precept of one drunk helping another. Let's keep it simple—protecting A.A. is an inside job, and it's about stressing the importance of the Traditions, group involvement and giving back what we ourselves have received."

The Ask-It-Basket Started Out as Something Else

Once upon a time, when A.A. was still in its teens, the Second General Service Conference was preparing for a Question and Answer session. Hank

G., then general manager, sent Dennis Manders, G.S.O.'s nonalcoholic bookkeeper, out to find a "suggestion box" with slit in the top for questions. Dennis searched through stationery stores to no avail. Passing the window of that old, distinguished emporium Abercrombie & Fitch, he spied a wicker basket with a slit in the top—a fishing creel. "It was a very pricy item and we didn't have a lot of money in those days," Dennis remembers. However, he bought the creel, and rushed it back to the Conference, where co-founder Bill W. dubbed it "The Ask-It-Basket." Dennis, who retired as G.S.O.'s controller in 1985 after 35 years of service, still services as senior adviser to the trustees' Finance Committee.

In time Ask-It-Basket sessions at the Conference were discontinued, and the creel was retired to the Archives. But even sans container, the Ask-It-Basket sharing session continues to be a favorite at A.A. Regional Forums. It's when attendees can ask any A.A.-related question on their minds—and get an answer from someone experienced in service, often a trustee, delegate, or member of the G.S.O. or Grapevine staffs. Following are some Q&As



from the 1997 Forums held in Alaska, Illinois, New York State, Quebec and Minnesota:

Q. *How can A.A. members best welcome newcomers who come to A.A. without going through detox or treatment?*

A. Among the many responses: Read Chapter Seven of the Big Book that explains what to do. . . . Take the newcomer to a meeting and you both will benefit. But don't go alone on a Twelfth-Step call. . . . Much of our literature helps prepare us for anyone who walks through the meeting room door. . . .

Q. *Is there any literature that says this is a spiritual program and not a religious one?*

A. On page 9 of the pamphlet "Members of the Clergy Ask About Alcoholics Anonymous," it's stated that A.A. "is not a religious society." Also, page xx of the Big Book.

Q. *How do home groups obtain greater participation from their members?*

A. Sponsorship is the best way.

Q. *What is being done to help elderly A.A.s who have difficulty getting to meetings?*

A. A growing number of districts and areas are forming Special Needs committees in an effort to help the elderly as well as members with disabilities.

Q. *Does using the triangle-within-a-circle symbol break Traditions?*

A. No. We claim no proprietary ownership of the symbol. We don't hold a copyright for our Slogans or the Serenity Prayer either.

Q. *What is G.S.O.'s position on medallions?*

A. G.S.O. has no position on medallions. Some groups find them helpful. (One attendee reported that her group was uncomfortable about spending so much money on medallions, so they switched to aluminum chips, which are less expensive.)

Q. *What will happen to the Big Book stories in other languages if a Fourth Edition is published?*

A. Other countries have been encouraged to publish their own stories in the Big Book. Some of the foreign language editions do not include stories.

Q. *How long in advance should information be sent to G.S.O. and the Grapevine for inclusion in Calendars of Events?*

A. Approximately three months lead time is needed.

Q. *Re the trustees and General Service Conference committees: Is there a difference between their goals and agendas? Is this a matter of checks and balances?*

A. The two committees work in the same area but with different roles. The Conference committee brings forward the conscience of the Fellowship. The trustees' committee does the actual hands-on work.

Q. *What spiritual principles should be considered when we find group participation dropping off at district and area levels?*

A. An angry atmosphere makes some A.A. people uncomfortable and drives them away. A positive spirit is helpful. Many districts and areas find it beneficial to take periodic inventories.

Q. *If our group has a few extra dollars, should we send them to G.S.O. immediately or wait a few months until we have more to send?*

A. It is better to send small contributions on a regular basis.

Q. *Why does the Grapevine pocket calendar start with Monday? Can that be changed in 1999?*

A. Yes, it could be. This year [1998] the week-ends are shaded in for service-minded A.A.s to mark their service commitments.

Q. *I gave a gift subscription to a sponsee who is an A.A. member; can we give you gift subscriptions in money?*

A. Yes, we use these free subscriptions for A.A. members who need a Grapevine. Some A.A.s do specify to send a gift subscription to someone. We keep a list of these.

Q. *Under the Seventh Tradition, can a bequest of more than \$1,000 be divided among other A.A. entities?*

A. Conference Advisory Actions concern the General Service structure. We are not in the business of telling others what to do. So the recommendation that each bequest be limited to \$1,000 applies only to G.S.O.

Q. *What is G.S.O.'s feeling about people identifying themselves as an "addict/alcoholic" or simply as an "addict"?*

A. G.S.O. has no opinion on how people choose to identify themselves at A.A. meetings. Our Third Tradition tells us that the only requirement for membership is "a desire to stop drinking." The pamphlet "A.A. Tradition—How It Developed"—in Bill W.'s discussion of "Who Is a Member of Alcoholics Anonymous?"—says of the newcomer: "Nowadays, in most groups, he doesn't even have to admit he is an alcoholic. He can join A.A. on a mere suspicion that he may be one, that he may already show the fatal symptoms of our malady." Many have found that sponsorship helps newcomers understand that A.A.'s primary purpose is to carry the message to alcoholics. If people have other problems, such as an addiction to drugs,

they may be referred to fellowships similar to A.A. that address their problems.

Q. *How can we convince people to increase Grapevine subscriptions?*

A. Share what the Grapevine has done for you.

Q. *How are we doing on the Internet?*

A. A.A. has had a Web Site for the past year and a half. Considered a Public Information tool, it includes the A.A. Fact File, the pamphlet "Is A.A. for You?" and a letter to professionals, a list of intergroup/central offices and answering services (U.S./Canada) and international G.S.O.s.

Q. *Does A.A. send money to countries that experience floods or other natural disasters?*

A. No. We budget approximately \$160,000 a year to help carry the message elsewhere through A.A. literature; other countries also support this effort. Last spring several areas in the U.S./Canada service structure were severely flooded. One area in particular lost much of its literature due to a fire during the flood, and G.S.O. sent literature to help out.

'Hello and Welcome' Are Magic Words

Just as our "being there" at meetings is important to the vitality of the group, so can being there beforehand with a warm hello induce the sick alcoholic to take that giant step inside—like a miracle wanting to happen. One Manhattan A.A. tells the story of a chronic slipper who was walking past the door of a meeting he had sometimes attended. Wavering, he made a bet with himself: "If that old guy is still sitting by the door in the same seat, I'll go in; if he's not, I'll leave." The greeter was at his old stand; the slipper stepped inside, sobered up and now does some greeting of his own.

Providing a point-counterpoint, Jim, of Irvine, California, shares his experience as a greeter. "I was sitting in my usual seat in the front row at the speaker meeting," he writes in the October issue of *Lifeline*, the newsletter of the Orange County Intergroup Association, "because my sponsor had told me there was no good A.A. past the first three rows. A man who looked vaguely familiar approached the podium, said his name was John and proceeded to tell how it was and what happened. My ears pricked up—I always like hearing people talk about going from being drunk to sober—and suddenly he was pointing at me and saying that I was the guy responsible for his being there sober."

As the speaker continued, understanding dawned. "I was a greeter at my home group," Jim explains. "My sponsor knew I'd been a lonely, isolated drunk and was struggling to get out of myself in sobriety, so he 'suggested' I take the position. (He always said that when the words left his mouth they were suggestions, but when they hit my ears they were orders.) My job was to welcome people as they entered the room, tell them where the coffee was and help to answer their questions. Which is what I was doing the night John came to the door. I had seen him many times during the past months, and he usually reeked of booze. He just couldn't seem to get sober although he came to meetings anyway. I welcomed him back again, saying something like, 'It's good to see you here.'"

As John related his story from the podium, Jim remembers, "he said that was the first time he really heard someone say he was welcome at A.A. drunk or sober. And he said it was the turning point for him. He corked the bottle and has kept it corked. We barely glimpsed each other again until the night I heard him speak, but his story made me realize two important things:

"1. You never know when something you say will be the key to someone else's recovery. I try to be the best example of A.A. I can be because I may be the only edition of the Big Book someone may have on hand.

"2. When someone is not ready to get sober, there's usually nothing right you can say to force it to happen. Conversely, when a person is finally ready, there's nothing you can say that's wrong (well, almost nothing). John might have sobered up even if I hadn't been at that meeting—but I'm glad I was there as the greeter. It was a small way for me to give back some of what had been given to me."

Correctional Facilities

Lost Boys Find Trust and Love In Nova Scotia

For the past nine years Canadian A.A.s in Nova Scotia have been taking meetings to the local Youth Centre and, reports Keith P., who coordinates the effort, "it is difficult to say who has benefited most, the boys or us."

Initially, says Keith, who also is a district committee member, "We met 12 boys who were streetwise and untrusting of adults—just scared, angry, emotional chil-

dren. We started with the A.A. program and learned as we went along. We let our instincts guide us, showed caring but never an interest in a boy's crime per se—and never tried to judge or preach. At one meeting I recalled that back in 1976, while in a 28-day rehab program in Maryland, I had been introduced to hugging and said how meaningful it had been to my recovery. Afterward a boy came over to me and said shyly, 'I'll hug you too'—and so began the custom that we hug each boy entering or leaving the meeting. That's when real sharing began, and the boys came to trust us A.A.s more and more. We in turn learned about the horrible real world of young people caught up in alcohol and drugs, physical and sexual abuse of all kinds, neglect and plain lack of love."

The Centre, Keith explains, "is designed for youths aged 13-18 and maintains them in 10 cottages accommodating 12 boys each. One cottage houses those needing help with substance abuse. At first we A.A.s provided meetings once a week on a rotating basis, as is our custom in two other institutions. But later the Centre requested a second meeting, and for this one we sought volunteers who felt they could commit regularly and over the long term. For the past four years we have had five A.A.s, women as well as men, whom we could count on to show up week in and week out—which has been very reassuring to these young boys who've never known constancy or a stable home."

From the start "we tried to meet the boys' needs with compassion," Keith says. "With God's help they began to grow, and we grew as well. We carry the A.A. message, the Twelve Steps, and we give our love. Results are sometimes slow in coming, but we do see progress as it takes place. When a new boy appears, he tends to be hard-looking and maybe sullen, but after awhile he'll appear younger, more relaxed and trusting; then with time he begins to take on a more mature appearance as he feels better about himself and gains more confidence. Are we always successful? No. But we plant the seed and someday, 'maybe' . . . We know that many who left the Centre haven't come back through the revolving door, and the few we do hear about directly seem to be doing well for the most part."

Here Keith tells what has happened to two of the boys: "At age 13, one had committed a senseless murder while in an alcoholic haze. Last fall, after a couple of years in A.A., he spoke at a mini-roundup and, before 200 people, acknowledged his crime for the first time. The other, who had killed during a fight, also spoke candidly at the same meeting. By this time many of those present were crying openly, and everyone there was in receipt that day of a gift—the miracle of sobriety in action. Both boys are now released. One is in a group home, going to school and A.A.; the other entered university this year. From them and the other youths we

A.A.s have gained more than we can say. I know I am a more compassionate person and more grateful for my life. I believe there is no greater need today than carrying the message of hope to the young who are incarcerated for crimes triggered by the alcohol and drugs and hopelessness in their lives."

P.I./C.P.C.

A Little Footwork Goes a Long Way

Today in DeKalb County, Georgia, in the Atlanta metropolitan area, there is a copy of the Big Book in every school library or counselor's office. "This wonderful opportunity to carry the message was made possible," says David S., chairman of the District 13 D Committee on Cooperation With the Professional Community, "because one member was willing to do a little footwork. And the possibility became a reality because of the unity and support of A.A. members in our community."

It all started, David says, when a fledgling member of the Public Information/C.P.C. committee visited a local high school, met with the principal and offered him a packet of literature: several pamphlets, a schedule of open A.A. meetings and a Big Book for the school library. He further mentioned that if the school were interested, A.A. would provide speakers for health classes or other events. Fortunately, the principal was receptive."

The newcomer related his experience to his fellow P.I./C.P.C.s and, reports David, "the spark was lit." Soon the enthusiastic committee members were visiting all 22 local high schools, providing each one with a packet of literature. During one visit, contact was initiated with a school administrator; she gave a green light to having A.A. literature placed in every public school in DeKalb County. Says David: "This meant that the P.I./C.P.C.s needed to obtain 120 Big Books—in addition to the open meeting lists and pamphlets. But thanks to the support of our area groups, we had enough money to cover expenses."

Some A.A.s felt the project violated Tradition Eleven's dictum that "our public relations policy is based on attraction rather than promotion." But, counters David, "it was never our intention to sell A.A. to anyone. To our way of thinking, a Big Book on a library shelf isn't promotion; it is simply there for those who might have questions about the Fellowship and lets them know A.A. is available if they want it. The decision is theirs."

Items and Ideas on Area Gatherings for A.A.s—Via G.S.O.

FEBRUARY - MARCH 1998

Calendar of Events

Events listed here are presented solely as a service to readers, not as an endorsement by the General Service Office. For any additional information, please use the addresses provided.

February

- 5-8—*Harvey, Illinois*. We Are Not Saints Conv. Write: 15651 S. 94th Ave., Ste. 382, Orland Park, IL 60462
- 5-8—*Cleveland, Ohio*. 34th IAAWC. Write: Ch., Box 12730, Cleveland, OH 44112
- 6-8—*Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada*. 11th Annual Mid-Winter Round-Up. Write: Ch., Box 742, Station A, Fredericton, NB E3B 5B4
- 6-8—*Brawley, California*. Imperial Valley Roundup. Write: Ch., Box 393, El Centro, CA 92244-0393
- 6-8—*Ocean City, Maryland*. Footprints in the Winter Sand. Write: Ch., Box 3772, Salisbury, MD 21802-3772
- 6-8—*Salem, Oregon*. Soberfest. Write: Ch., Box 17403, Salem, OR 97305-7403
- 6-8—*South Padre Island, Texas*. XXXV Asamblea Estatal Hispana. Write: Ch., Box 8453, Brownsville, TX 78526
- 13-14—*Kingston, Ontario, Canada*. International Institutional Conf. Write: Ch., 43 Lennox St., Kingston, ON K7M 4S3
- 13-15—*North Little Rock, Arkansas*. 16th Dist. 9 Conv. Write: Ch., Box 26135, Little Rock, AR 72221
- 13-15—*Syracuse, New York*. Salt City Mid-Winter Roundup. Write: Ch., Box 3588, Syracuse, NY 13220-3588
- 13-15—*El Paso, Texas*. 36th Annual Jamboree. Write: Secy., Box 3115, El Paso, TX 79923-3115
- 13-15—*Temple, Texas*. Sixth Annual Corrections Conf. Write: Ch., 1207 N. 12th, Temple, TX 76501
- 20-22—*Pattaya Beach, Chonburi, Thailand*. Third Thailand Roundup. Write: Ch., Box 1032, New Petchburi Road Post Office, Bangkok 10311 Thailand
- 20-22—*Suwanee, Georgia*. Fifth Annual Unity Weekend. Write: Ch., Box 1333, Norcross, GA 30091
- 20-22—*Burlington, Iowa*. Eighth Southeastern Iowa Roundup. Write: Ch., Box 298, West Point, IA 52656
- 20-22—*Virginia Beach, Virginia*. 22nd Anniversary Oceanfront Conf. Write: Regsr., Box 2801, Virginia Beach, VA 23450-2801
- 27-28—*Sikeston, Missouri*. 17th Five Corners Conv. Write: Ch., 501 Maple St., Kennett, MO 63857
- 27-March 1—*Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada*. Saskatoon Roundup. Write: Ch., 311-220 3rd Ave. S, Saskatoon, SK S7K 1M1
- 27-March 1—*Kansas City, Kansas*. Sunflower Roundup. Write: Ch., Box 25771, Overland Park, KS 66225

- 27-March 1—*Falmouth, Massachusetts*. Cape Cod Pockets of Enthusiasm. Write: Ch., 5373B Ogle Circle, Otis AFB, MA 02542
- 27-March 1—*Secaucus, New Jersey*. NER-AASA '98. Write: Ch., Box 1576, Morristown, NJ 07962-1576

March

- 6-8—*St. Albert, Alberta, Canada*. St. Albert Roundup. Write: Ch., 65 Gervais Rd. #105, St. Alberta, AB T8N 6H6
- 6-8—*Boise, Idaho*. PRAASA 98. Write: Ch., Box 7652, Boise, ID 83708
- 6-8—*Troy, Michigan*. 46th State Conv. Write: Ch., Box 1775, Garden City, MI 48135
- 6-8—*San Antonio, Texas*. Weekend in SA. Write: Ch., Box 790651, San Antonio, TX 78279-0651
- 13-15—*Toronto, Ontario, Canada*. Ontario Regional Conf. Write: Ch., 234 Eglinton Ave. E., Ste. 202, Toronto, ON M4P 1K5
- 13-15—*Monterey, California*. NCCAA 51st Spring Conf. Write: Ch., Box 852, Anderson CA 96007
- 13-15—*Victorville, California*. 14th Annual High Desert Conv. Write: Ch., Box 1894, Apple Valley, CA 92307
- 13-15—*Sioux Falls, South Dakota*. Sioux Empire Roundup. Write: Ch., Box 566, Sioux Falls, SD 57101
- 13-15—*Gallatin, Tennessee*. Correctional Facilities Workshop. Write: Ch., 241 Eastland Ave., Ripley, TN 38063
- 20-22—*Pomona, California*. 26th Annual ACYPAA Round Up. Write: Ch., 669 E. Foothill Blvd. #169, Upland, CA 91786
- 20-22—*Ruston, Louisiana*. Seventh Upstate Conv. Write: Ch., Box 651, Ruston, LA 71273-0651
- 20-22—*Lake of the Ozarks, Missouri*. Circle of Unity Conf. Write: Ch., Box 415, Osage Beach, MO 65065
- 20-22—*Spokane, Washington*. Fourth Annual NW Pockets of Enthusiasm Roundup. Write: Ch., Box 18146, Spokane, WA 99208

Closed Meeting Topics From the Grapevine

For more detailed suggestions, see the pages noted.

February (pages 41): Along Spiritual Lines

March (pages 16): "The Dirty Window"

- 27-29—*Kings Island, Ohio*. 15th Annual Area 56 SW Ohio Mini Conf. Write: Ch., Box 355, Wapakoneta, OH 45895
- 27-29—*Butler, Pennsylvania*. Seventh Annual Getaway Weekend. Write: Ch., 210 Mansfield Rd., Washington, PA 15301-8931
- 27-29—*Newport, Rhode Island*. 22nd State Conv. Write: Ch., Box 14554, East Providence, RI 02914
- 27-29—*Rapid City, South Dakota*. 14th Annual Rushmore Round-Up Conf. Write: Ch., Box 594, Rapid City, SD 57701-0594
- 27-29—*Williamsburg, Virginia*. Virginia Area Committee Spring Assembly. Write: Ch., 3383 Whipple Court, Annandale, VA 22003

April

- 3-5—*Akron, Ohio*. 23rd Annual Northeast Ohio Mini-Conf. Write: Ch., 3378 Washington Blvd., Cleveland Heights, OH 44118-2541
- 9-12—*San Diego, California*. 21st Annual San Diego Spring Roundup. Write: Ch., Box 82477, San Diego, CA 92142
- 9-13—*Scarborough (near Perth), Western Australia*. 33rd National Conv. Write: Ch., Box 6359, East Perth, Western Australia 6892

Planning a Future Event?

Please send your information on April, May or June events, two days or more, in time to reach G.S.O. by February 10, the calendar deadline for the April-May issue of Box 4-5-9.

For your convenience and ours — please type or print the information to be listed on the Bulletin Board page, and mail to us:

Date of event: from _____ to _____, 19 _____

Name of event: _____

Place (city, state or prov.): _____

For information, write: (exact mailing address) _____

Contact phone # (for office use only): _____

Flip up this end of page - for events on reverse side



- 10-12—*New Orleans, Louisiana*. 30th Big Deep South Conv. Write: Ch., 4041 Tulane Ave., Ste. 301, New Orleans, LA 70119
- 17-19—*Grand Forks, North Dakota*. Northern Spring Roundup. Write: Ch., Box 14121, Grand Forks, ND 58208-4121
- 17-19—*Superior, Wisconsin*. 53rd Annual Roundup. Write: Ch., Box 996, Superior, WI 54880
- 24-26—*Ridgecrest, California*. IWV "Frontier of Hope" 11th Annual Roundup. Write: Ch., Box 6157, Ridgecrest, CA 93556
- 24-26—*Ames, Iowa*. 11th Annual Roundup. Write: Ch., Box 2491, Ames, IA 50010
- 24-26—*Fairmont, Minnesota*. Fourth Annual Sunlight of the Spirit Weekend. Write: Ch., Box 748, Fairmont, MN 56031
- 24-26—*Canandaigua, New York*. 13th Annual Conf. of the Lakes. Write: Ch., Box 25261, Farmington, NY 14425

May

- 1-3—*Lincoln, Nebraska*. Spring Fling. Write: Ch., Box 30852, Lincoln, NE 68503
- 1-3—*Greensburg, Pennsylvania*. 49th Laurel Highlands Conf. Write: Ch., 11470 Blossom Hill Rd., Pittsburgh, PA 15234
- 1-3—*Aberdeen, South Dakota*. Area 63 Spring Conf. Write: Ch., 819 S. 11th St., Aberdeen, SD 57401
- 1-3—*Oconomowoc, Wisconsin*. 47th Annual Southern Wisconsin Spring Conf. Write: Conf. Tr., Box 1094, Waukesha, WI 53187-1094
- 14-17—*Daytona Beach, Florida*. Eighth Annual Spring Roundup. Write: Ch., Box 4911, South Daytona, FL 32121
- 16-19—*Eureka Springs, Arkansas*. 22nd Annual Springtime in the Ozarks Conv. Write: Ch., 26 Eureka St., Eureka Springs, AR 72632
- 29-31—*Waycross, Georgia*. Okefenokee Roundup. Write: Secy., 1707 Oconee Rd. Waycross, GA 31501