

YOUNG PEOPLE AND A.A.

This is A.A. General Service Conference-approved literature.

recovery

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 a desire to stop drinking. There are no dues or fees for A.A. membership; we are self-supporting through our own contributions.
- A.A. 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.

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YOUNG PEOPLE
AND A.A.

Too young?

Coming into A.A. as young people, we found that there were common challenges to face. In the beginning, we often feel we are too young to be alcoholics. Some of us didn't drink for a long time; others didn't drink hard liquor, stumble around, or forget what we did or said when drunk. Being young in the everyday world we face peer pressure, stressful relationships with our parents, and parties being a way of life. In A.A., we often feel different because we may be the youngest person in our group, and some have even had an uninformed older member discourage us by saying things like "I spilled more booze than you drank."

These are hard realities for young people in A.A. On the other hand though, by sticking with it and finding younger and older members to help us, we found a solution to our drinking problems. In A.A. we've found a way of life that helps us deal with everyday stress and peer pressure; and that life is better and more fun without alcohol. We also see that we develop closer relationships the longer we stay sober. To us, it doesn't matter how old you are, how much, where, or what you drink. What matters is how alcohol affects you. You are the best judge of whether or not you have a problem. And you know this from

your gut — whether you feel guilty, lonely, ashamed, or whether alcohol is interfering in your life. (The questions at the end of this pamphlet may also help you decide.)

If drinking is causing you trouble, and you want to stop but can't seem to do it on your own, give Alcoholics Anonymous a try—try it for 90 days, and if your life doesn't get better, at least you'll better understand your options.

All of us felt strange about going to A.A. But we now see that A.A. saved our lives—and is the best thing that ever happened to us. We also now know that there are many members who are our age—in fact, approximately 10% of A.A. members are under the age of 30.

Where do I find A.A.?

Many of us found A.A. in our hometowns by looking up Alcoholics Anonymous in the telephone book or on the Internet. Others got the word from a school counselor, doctor, relative, or friend. Or, we were introduced to A.A. by a judge, or while we were in a hospital or detox. Some of us read about A.A. in the newspaper, or heard about it on radio or TV.

For information about A.A. in any given area we can write to Box 459, Grand Central Station, New York, NY 10163 (that's the A.A. General Service Office or G.S.O), or visit G.S.O.'s website: www.aa.org

There are several kinds of A.A. meetings:

Open meetings are open to anyone, alcoholic or not, who is interested in A.A. At open meetings you will hear stories like the ones in this pamphlet.

Closed meetings are limited to those who have a drinking problem (or think they may have). Here, we are free to speak up and ask questions. At closed meetings we often hear practical suggestions on staying sober.

At beginners meetings, we discover that we are on the same level with anyone who is new to A.A. Even if there's a business executive or a grandmother next to us, we're all starting from scratch together,

tackling the basics of A.A.

Some communities have young people's groups. You can find these groups in local meeting lists, or by asking other young members. Young members can attend any meeting, and as you'll see in our stories, a bond of understanding links alcoholics of all ages and circumstances.

How do we stay away from drinking?

We go to A.A. meetings as often as we can. From hearing the stories, we realize we are not unique. We learn to identify with the feelings of the speakers and not compare the outer facts of our story with those of others.

We also read A.A. literature such as the pamphlet *Too Young*, the booklet *Living Sober*, and the books *Alcoholics Anonymous* and *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*. (Other valuable A.A. literature is listed at the end of this pamphlet.)

We reach out to other members—talking to others before and after meetings, and on the telephone.

We change ourselves, gradually, day to day. We help other alcoholics. And by helping, we stay sober, sane and happy.

In this pamphlet, there are A.A. stories, personal experiences of young members like us. We hope they will help you find your way.

Tina
She joined A.A. at 13

“If I could have stayed cool, I’d still be drinking.”

I loved how alcohol affected me. It numbed all the torment in my brain. I had new friends, the older kids. I was cool—finally!

If I could have stayed cool, I’d still be drinking. Very quickly, though, I started getting into trouble. Going to sixth grade was getting in the way of my life, which at this point consisted of getting drunk as much as possible.

When I was 11, I was put into what I assumed was a mental hospital. I was relieved that I was crazy. Crazy is cool. I realized much later that the place was a rehab.

I did resolve at this time that I didn’t want to ever be in any institution ever again. I would do everything in my power not to be locked up.

Every time I promised something, I couldn’t follow up with action. Sometimes I was sincerely going to change my ways, and I couldn’t. Now I understand that it was alcoholism. I would promise everything, but I’d never admit that drinking was the culprit. If I admitted that, then I would have to stop.

I was in a bunch of institutions. The last

one was a group home. I had a choice to go to a rehab, but I thought I wouldn't fit in there (drinking wasn't my problem; it was my family). I was terrified when I went to my first A.A. meeting. However, I was told the guys in A.A. were cute, so I went. The speaker talked about how he used to drink at night and pray that he would not wake up in the morning. Then when he came to, his first thought would be, "Dear God, I have to go through this another day." He said he felt like the only person in the world who had ever felt that way. I was aghast because I felt I was the only person in the world who had ever felt that way. I identified.

So I was 13 and going to A.A. meetings. Everyone was older than I was, even most of the kids at the young people's meetings. But alcoholics in general will find a reason why they don't belong. It could be religion, it could be class, and it could be race. Mine was age. But I found that alcoholics understand other alcoholics. It was upsetting to find alcoholics who understood me, because that meant I was an alcoholic. And if I was an alcoholic, that meant my family was right, and that really sucked.

I was taken through the Steps, and found I had the same experience as everyone else had when they went through the Steps. I have found that because of the spiritual principle of anonymity, regardless of how young or old or "special" I am, in A.A., I'm just a drunk.

Kevin
He joined A.A. at 14

“I loved drinking, and I loved what went with it.”

My life was, for the most part, perfect up until my first day of school. I had no idea that life had so many rules. But what I most remember was an overwhelming feeling that I just did not fit in.

I have had two overwhelming spiritual experiences in my life. The second was when I decided to get sober. The first was when I took my first drink. There was this substance inside my body, and I knew that I had to find more. That was the best drink I ever had—and I would spend my drinking career trying to recreate it.

I loved drinking, and I loved what went with it. I was just as addicted to the lies, the shady people and places as I was the alcohol. My grades suffered until I stopped going to school altogether. My friends and family began to scatter. I found myself in places without any idea of how I had gotten there. I overdosed on alcohol.

At some point, I even decided to run away from home. I left home and proceeded to burn all of the bridges that I could. My family said that they were much happier with their house with me not in it. My friends wanted nothing to do with me. I spent the remainder of my alcoholism

homeless, breaking into cars for money, and sleeping on a small bench in a park.

My parents managed to track me down and got me to a rehab. When I was informed that I would be in that place for a two-week evaluation, I screamed at my parents and stormed out of the room. When it became obvious I was probably not going to be allowed to leave, I collapsed on the couch in the middle of the room and began to cry. I had met complete defeat. I was tired of running, ducking, dodging, crawling and hiding. I could go no further. I then realized I was in a safe place.

When you are truly ready, God will put all of the right people in all of the right places at all of the right times. Since that day, I have not found it necessary to tempt fate again. I have come to understand that to do so would be like asking God to realign the planets one more time just for me.

I have been given an opportunity to grow up with these Twelve Steps in my life. It is with the utmost of gratitude that I have just celebrated my 19th year of continuous sobriety in A.A., one day at a time.

MYTH:

I can't be an alcoholic, because I can't drink too much. I get sick.

FACT:

You'll see some of our stories in this pamphlet are about young people who kept on drinking even though our stomachs protested. We too are alcoholics.

Nicole
She joined A.A. at 14

“Anyone old enough to have a problem is old enough to seek help from A.A.”

At 12 years old, alcohol had already stopped working for me. I had been drinking for four years and had lost whatever ability I once had to control when and how much I drank.

Two years, later I was institutionalized for alcoholism and drug addiction. All the pain and suffering I had experienced made me willing to admit I had a problem.

Both my parents had been sober in Alcoholics Anonymous since before I was born, so I knew A.A. held the solution to alcoholism. What I didn't know was that anyone old enough to have a problem is old enough to seek help from A.A.

My treatment center began holding meetings every week shortly after I arrived. When I returned home and started going to meetings around there, I felt out of place. I was much younger than everyone else and could not see how anyone else could understand what it was like to be me.

That changed one night when I heard an older man share. Though his experiences were much different from mine, I recognized the feelings. It was the first time I heard my story in a meeting. I hear parts of

it now in nearly every person who shares. That unity kept me coming back.

After I had been sober a while and had worked the Steps, I began to sponsor other women, some younger and some much older.

I spoke with the drug and alcohol counselor at my school, who then put three girls having trouble with alcohol in touch with me. I watched them experience the same things I did at A.A. meetings. Today, my group still consists primarily of older men, and I am still the youngest one, though nobody seems to notice. We are all equal.

Today, I am 16. I still run into people who think that I am too young for A.A., but I understand now that our differences, especially age, are insignificant in comparison to what A.A. is doing for us.

I am the secretary of meetings, attend conferences, and sponsor newcomers, just like any member. I thank my group for accepting me as I am, for its Traditions and principles that enable me to be here, and my Higher Power for getting me here. I ask every newcomer to remember to overlook the ways they might be different, and every old-timer to do the same.

Gwen

She joined A.A. at age 15

“I didn’t know how to stop, or what I would do if I did.”

Drinking caused so much trouble in my family that I promised myself I would never drink. My parents didn’t get along. They’d fight and we kids would be real scared. I prayed that they’d quit drinking and fighting, but they never did.

When I was 11 years old, my mother died, and I was sent to live with my grandmother. There was no drinking at her house. She was very strict and religious, but I didn’t mind. It felt good to be someplace quiet and safe.

A cousin around my age also lived with grandmother. She had a lot of friends and they let me hang out. I remember we were at this kid’s house, after school, and he took a six-pack out of the refrigerator. I was scared, but I took a big gulp just to show that I knew what I was doing. I was surprised — I liked it.

I started to feel high — everybody was laughing and dancing around. I felt so good, and I didn’t even know that I felt bad before I drank. My cousin and I then spent just about every day at that kid’s house drinking beer.

Things started to change when my

grandmother got a job and made me and my cousin come home after school to baby-sit our little cousins. For a whole year I had been getting high, but there was no beer at grandmother's. I couldn't take it — I got real nervous and was mad at the kids. One day, my cousin saw a neighbor up the block and she got him to give her this whole big beer bottle. We finished it. That day I blacked-out. I didn't remember what happened, but I couldn't find one of the kids. When I came to, there was a police car outside and my grandmother was yelling at me for not watching my cousin. He was six years old and lost.

He turned up okay, but that really scared me. It also got me mad—it wasn't fair that I had to baby-sit after school. I wanted to be with my friends, drinking beer.

After that, I felt mad all the time. I got left back twice and started having fights with my cousin.

When I was 13, I ran away to try to find one of my sisters. I never did find her, but I did find people who'd let me hang out. I learned how to drink hard liquor and I discovered pills, too. I hardly remember those two years. I lived in different houses and once, for about a week, I stayed in an empty car. I stayed with all kinds of people, and whenever I came to I was so scared I wanted to kill myself. I know I was very lucky nobody else killed me.

One day, I was real hung over and was opening a beer to calm down. I looked at a newspaper, and noticed the date — May 5th. That was my birthday: I was 15. I started to cry and I couldn't stop. I got the beer down

and felt better, but kept crying. I started to think about all the things that I'd done since I had run away. I didn't know that there was a way out. I forgot my own birthday. That day, I didn't stop drinking, but my thinking started to change. I started to think that my life could get better if I didn't drink. I just didn't know how to stop, or what I would do if I did.

A couple of weeks later I was in a car accident with some other kids. I don't remember being brought into the emergency room, and when I woke up I had casts on both legs. A nurse told me that I'd been very drunk and was lucky to be alive, adding, "Maybe you wouldn't be here if you didn't drink."

A lady came to visit me that night and told me that she used to get into drunken accidents all the time. She said that she had an illness called alcoholism and that there was an A.A. meeting in the hospital, a meeting for people with drinking problems.

I wanted to get out of that hospital ward, so I went to the meeting, where a man who looked about 30 asked me how old I was. When I said I was fifteen, it was hard not to cry. This guy told me that he'd been in A.A. since he was a teenager, and that it was the best thing he'd ever done for himself. A couple of older people talked about themselves, but sometimes I thought that they were talking about me. After the meeting, a lady asked me where I lived, and I said "nowhere." She stayed with me while I called my grandmother.

I talked to my grandmother for the first time in a couple of years, and she said she'd

been praying that I was okay. She told me I could come back, but not if I drank; and I said I would try.

I left the hospital on crutches and with the telephone number of an A.A. person. She said I should call as soon as I got home.

That was the beginning of my getting better, and it was four years ago. A.A. members used to take me to meetings. The more I listened I saw that my problem was that I have a disease: alcoholism. And I saw that maybe I could do something about it — like not picking up the first drink, today. After a couple of weeks, I started meeting teenagers in A.A., and that really helped a lot; to stay sober with people like me who were trying to get it together, sober.

I go to a lot of A.A. meetings, and being sober is the most important thing in my life. If I'm not sober, I don't have anything — friends, a place to live, a high school diploma or anything to hope for. Sober now, I haven't forgotten my own birthday in four years.

MYTH:

I can't be an alcoholic, because I can drink a lot. I never get sick.

FACT:

Some of our stories in this pamphlet are about young people who had large capacities for alcohol. We are also alcoholics.

Laura
She joined A.A. at 15

“I prided myself on drinking more than the older kids.”

I grew up in a home with two professional musicians for parents and a loaded wine cellar. Parties were frequent, and alcohol was offered to me even at a very young age. I can remember my first taste of wine at age four.

When I was 13, I began associating with people adults labeled the bad crowd, and prided myself on drinking more than the older kids.

I was still going to school, getting good grades, and impressing people with my musical talents. I loved being the good girl, but hated it at the same time.

Then one day I woke up in a hospital bed, intravenous fluid being fed into my arm, straps holding me down, oxygen tubes in my nose, and absolutely no recollection of what had happened. Others told me that I drank a soda bottle of liquor, fell down a flight of stairs, urinated and vomited all over myself, and passed out in the back of a friend’s car.

At age 14, things got even worse. I began drinking more often, larger quantities, and alone. I fell in love with the oblivion I got through the bottle. I dropped out of high

school in the first half of freshman year, and got money by stealing. I was determined to go on drinking, whether through my mother's bank account, pawning jewelry, or robbing houses.

At 15 years old, I was living with a boyfriend in a beat-up car that we would park in the middle of the woods. I needed alcohol to numb the pain I was feeling inside. Finally, we were arrested by the police and faced five felony charges. Soon after that, I was taken to a long-term rehabilitating boarding school. It was on that day that I got sober.

For the next three years I stayed at this institution. It was rough in the beginning. I rejected the idea of a higher power and continued to be a lying, manipulative little brat, even though I wasn't drinking. And since I no longer had alcohol to blame as a scapegoat, I soon realized that there must be some deep-seeded defects that had been the cause of so much pain in my life.

I watched hundreds of other kids just like me grasp onto a solution that seemed beyond my reach. One day I simply asked a fellow alcoholic how they did it. It was in this act of surrender that my journey in true sobriety began.

My life did not get any easier, but at least I was able to live it. My idea of a higher power became something I could depend on always. I worked the Steps, and—damn it—this program worked for me! I still struggle on a daily basis, but I always know that there is a seat for me in the rooms of Alcoholics Anonymous, where I will be welcome to sort through my problems.

Today I am 19 years old, still sober, and attending college. I have my family back; I have dignity; I have serenity. I go to meetings daily and have a sponsor I can depend on.

This has been the greatest experiment I have ever tried, and I have found that surrendering has enabled me to win.

MYTH:

A.A. members want to drink all the time. They're miserable and grumpy.

FACT:

Most of us are very comfortable not drinking. We also have a lot more fun than we ever had before.

Chris
He joined A.A. at age 16

“I saw evidence that A.A. worked, and worked well.”

I picked up my first drink when I was 12. The effects of alcohol made me sure it was the answer to my problems. There was a hole in my life until I picked up a drink. My family life was depressing. I am the fifth of eight kids. My older brothers drink regularly and seem to suffer from alcoholism too. I always felt out of place as a kid. Though I seemed to know everyone, I felt very alone. I often think of myself, before I drank, as a dehydrated meal that just needed to have liquid added to become complete — that liquid was alcohol.

I first got drunk on beer, but quickly switched to liquor. Really, I drank what was available. I usually drank straight from the bottle and carried a flask whenever possible. I never thought it unusual to steal liquor, to drink in the morning, or to drink alone. At first, alcohol was a savior, but soon alcoholism humiliated me and made my life miserable. I entered high school with average grades, “great potential,” to quote my teachers, and played three sports a year. Soon, everything declined. Suicide seemed like a good idea, an ultimate escape from depression.

As I drank more, I couldn't keep that pleasant buzz; so I drank more quickly, and soon passed out or threw up.

When I was 15 years old, an incident in school got me to A.A. I had been drinking a lot of whiskey and wine and stumbled through the school halls and ran into a vice principal. He took me to his office, where, though it's hard to remember, I must have told him about my problems. He suggested to my family that they take me to an A.A. meeting. Though he wasn't an A.A. member, he knew the program worked.

At this point, I didn't care what happened. I went to my first meeting that night at a detox. The meeting was large and it was anniversary night. The celebrants spoke of the pain of drinking and the joy of getting sober. That's all I can remember of that night.

After the meeting a neighbor with eight years sobriety who worked at the detox suggested I stay for two weeks and learn about this disease. Once again I didn't care what I did. I thought detox would be a vacation, but it made me very uncomfortable; they insisted I face myself.

After I left detox, I attended A.A. meetings. I would admit my life was screwed up, but I wouldn't admit defeat from alcohol until six months of slips and depression convinced me to surrender to A.A. I remember in those six months of drinking misery telling people, "I'm too young to be an alcoholic." I also had a million other excuses why I didn't belong in A.A.

I didn't believe I could recover, and I didn't believe that A.A. worked. But more

meetings provided evidence that A.A. worked and worked well. Even better, I began to identify with others' stories. Convinced I was powerless over alcohol and needed help, I came to believe I could recover through A.A. Over the last four years, I've learned that if I can just stay sober one day at a time, with the help of a Higher Power, I have a chance. I've tried drinking and going to meetings, not drinking and not going to meetings — but the best is not drinking and going to meetings.

Sobriety to me is not just quitting drinking but changing my attitudes. The Twelve Steps of A.A. are making me useful to others. Now I have a sense of purpose in life. I feel guided. I'm no longer in the pinball machine of life like when I was out there drinking.

MYTH:

I can take one drink and get away with it.

FACT:

While many of us could sometimes take just one drink and not drink again that night or the next day, sooner or later, we'd get drunk again. Just trying to control drinking is a sign of trouble.

Anisa
She joined A.A. at 16

“I thought my life was over; little did I know it was about to begin.”

Before I ever took my first drink, I felt insecure and different from others. I had my first drunk at 14, driving around in a friend’s car, drinking beer. I felt warmth, acceptance and confidence—and had my first blackout.

Bad things started happening regularly after that, including trouble with the police, being kicked off school teams, and being grounded by my parents. Most shamefully, I attacked my mom. I was a violent drunk and tough talker, willing to take on anyone. In less than two years, I had turned into a sneaky, deceitful, and dishonest person.

The low point came when I decided to get a buzz before a high-school football game. Coming out of a blackout, I found myself in an ambulance. The paramedics told me I was on my way to a treatment center, after having had my stomach pumped and nearly dying of alcohol poisoning.

The next morning, hung over and full of anguish, I crawled from the bed to the cold bathroom floor, where I hugged the porcelain and dry heaved into the toilet.

Is this what life had become? Visions of friends and family went through my mind,

and I felt more shame than ever before. That was Oct. 18, 1987. I thought my life was over; little did I know it was about to begin.

The next day I attended my first A.A. meeting, though I did not think it was for me. I was just a social drinker not an alcoholic, a term reserved for people who lived under bridges.

After three weeks of daily meetings, I overheard two kids saying that I would never make it. In true alcoholic form, I thought: I'll show them! At the A.A. meeting that evening, I introduced myself: "My name is Anisa and I am an alcoholic." It was a breakthrough. For the first time, I admitted I was alcoholic and accepted somewhere inside myself that maybe it was true.

After 30 days, I was released from treatment and returned to my school, my home and my friends. But everything was different because I was different. Immediately, I got a sponsor and started carrying around my Big Book, attending A.A. and other support groups. There were so many young people getting sober that, at 16, I was one of the oldest! I found a place for myself in the groups and started hanging out with others, drinking coffee, bowling, going to movies, living life without putting anything into my body.

By the time my senior year of high school started, I was almost one year sober and my entire life had changed. While my peers were partying, I was contemplating my Higher Power. This made school life confusing, but I persevered. "Fake it 'til you make it" became my mantra. I gradu-

ated and went to a junior college. With the help of other sober alcoholics, I learned how to study, how to cope with pressure, how to turn my weaknesses into strengths, and how to build my self-esteem through working the Twelve Steps.

After 17, years I have a life beyond my wildest dreams. I have lived and traveled in Europe and North America, visited cities I never knew existed, become open-minded about life, and taken up an interest in art, literature and nature.

At 16 years old, my ambition was to be a drunk on a sofa. Today I have been given a freedom to choose everything in my life. I can be myself every waking hour by simply asking my Higher Power to help me stay sober, not taking the first drink, and helping others.

MYTH:

If the party is a real success, then naturally nobody can remember it.

FACT:

Most people do not have blank spots in their memory or “blackouts.” Getting this wasted is not normal, and blackouts are a symptom of alcoholism.

Norm

He joined A.A. at age 16

“I just wanted to die. I remember feeling very, very lonely.”

Until I was 12, I was the best kid in town — good in school and a “nice guy.” My family moved when I was thirteen and I discovered beer and pot. Drinking and smoking helped me feel comfortable and a “part of,” and I decided that was the solution to loneliness. Drinking was fun, it was cool, and I felt accepted — by myself and by the other kids.

I drank beer every chance I got and liked everything about it — the taste and especially how it made me feel. It wasn’t always easy to get — usually I counted on the older guys to buy it. And they were cool, in charge, nobody pushed them around — and they got high whenever they wanted. I wanted to be just like them.

It’s funny the way I changed so fast. When I was 12, I thought I’d be a cop or a teacher. One year later, all I could think about was getting older so I could buy as much beer as I wanted, with no questions asked.

Because I was hung over and shaky every morning, I started having trouble in school. I couldn’t even write down my homework assignments, much less do them.

My folks were really on my case about my grades and wanted me to dump these new friends, because they thought these friends made me act strange, nervous and sneaky, and caused my lousy grades. I couldn't stand the fights any more, so I just bolted.

I found a piece of sidewalk near the bus station and panhandled enough each day to keep me in beer. I had a lot of big plans: a job, maybe construction, find a room, and get a huge refrigerator for all the beer I wanted. I'd even get a girl.

These big dreams went down the tubes when I was picked up in a stolen car. I can't remember exactly what happened. One minute I was in the bus station, and the next the highway patrol pulled me over in this car, about 200 miles from home. In about one minute, I changed my mind about my parents.

My father convinced the authorities to let me go, and I went back home. I knew that I was a real mess, but I didn't know why. Drinking wasn't the problem — I was. Because I was scared of being on the street again, I stopped drinking. I went back to school, and there were times when I thought I was going crazy — I didn't know what I was scared of. Everything was too much, and I just wanted to die. I remember feeling very, very lonely.

I got invited to a party by a kid my parents liked, the kind of kid I had been before. His parents allowed a lot of booze at that party. I'd been feeling so rotten that I thought "a couple" wouldn't hurt. They'd only help. They did. I laughed, danced and asked a girl out. She and I got real close,

and I became a new man. Her friends were my friends, and they asked me to their parties.

We drank when parents weren't there, and we drank when they were. Nobody cared — if we didn't drive. My parents were so glad that I had new friends, they didn't notice that I had started drinking again.

Drinking at parties wasn't enough for me anymore, and I was so sick the next day that I tried to get a few beers down first thing in the morning. Soon I was drinking 'round the clock. My parents caught on and practically carried me to our family doctor. He put me in a detox where I got over the shakes and heard some people from A.A. talk about themselves.

It was strange to hear older people talk about the things they did drunk. One said that his son was in A.A. and was just graduating from high school. Inside of me, for the first time, I thought, "Maybe if I don't drink, I won't want to kill myself and I can graduate." After the A.A. meeting, the speaker gave me his telephone number, and told me to call him the day I left the detox.

Well, the day I got out, this guy took me to an A.A. meeting, and I was amazed. This was a young peoples' A.A. group, and there were all the kids that I was always scared of — and that means everybody.

There were jocks, and guys with long hair and headbands and torn-up jeans. There were country-club girls and biker girls. Here were all the cliques I couldn't fit into in one room, and everyone fit together. I felt for the first time that I might fit in, and that these people wanted me to be there.

I've been going to meetings ever since, and I have not had another drink. I had a lot of confused feelings and ideas about myself and others. But in A.A., I'm staying sober and learning how to live. I'm doing the best I can each day, trying not to be discouraged when things don't work out my way.

MYTH:

A.A. makes you give up drinking for the rest of your life.

FACT:

A.A. doesn't "make" us do anything, and we don't swear off drinking forever. We just stay away from one drink—the next drink—for one day at a time. Just for today, we're not drinking. Who knows about tomorrow?

Julee
She joined A.A. at 16

“I hated myself terribly.”

I was a teenage alcoholic, a 14-year-old girl who desperately wanted to become a woman. I despised authority, ran from the pain of my childhood, and sought thrills no matter what the cost.

I aspired to be every boy’s fantasy and every girl’s best friend. I wanted to be the best—the prettiest girl, the best dressed, the best basketball player. Instead, I found a skater boyfriend, lost my virginity, and skipped tryouts to drink cheap wine with the girls in the neighborhood.

Those first few drinks brought me peace and a feeling of belonging to the human race. I sold my soul to alcohol, threw away my dreams, and broke all promises to everyone, including myself. When I drank, the boys liked me, I had more confidence, and I feared nothing.

Quickly, though, my newfound solution became my worst nightmare. When I drank, I blacked out and came to with people I didn’t know, came to in backyards and in strange homes on the other side of town. I was sexually assaulted a few times as a result of being so intoxicated.

I started taking other drugs. I was worn out, and at 16 attempted suicide. Finally,

my family put me through rehab, which is where I first learned of A.A. I went through the same treatment center three times that year. I was too young to be an alcoholic, I thought. But soon I realized that every time I put alcohol in my system, horrendous things happened.

I began to see how I had destroyed my life. I hated myself and decided to try this A.A. thing. I went to meetings with some other 16-year-old sober girls. Eventually I got a sponsor, and she took me through the Steps. I found a home group, which I am convinced to this day is what saved my life. I had to stick with the winners, as some of the young people were starting to go back out and drink. I started doing service, and one day I realized I did not want to die anymore, that I did not want to drink anymore. I learned that if I did what the people in A.A. told me to do, I would probably stay sober.

I just turned 30, and I have thirteen and a half years of continuous sobriety. Sobriety has given me my life, and it has given me that inner peace. I was told at my first meeting to expect a miracle, and I am glad I believed that, because it happened and continues to happen for me.

Andrew He joined A.A. at 17

“A moment of clarity made me willing to listen.”

I started drinking when I was 12. When I drank, my feelings of being different and inadequate became unimportant. At first, I was an occasional drinker, drinking when the opportunity would arise. As time went on, I worked at making sure the opportunity to drink occurred on a more regular basis. By the time I was 13, if I failed to arrange things so that I could go out drinking at least one weekend night, I became irritable and discontent.

At 14, I entered high school and started hanging out with kids, some who were older, who knew how to get alcohol.

I thought that people who used drugs were out of control; then I started doing them. I thought that people who got drunk on school nights were out of control, until I started doing that, too. My last line to cross in high school was when I started drinking during school. I still managed not to flunk out and in fact finished in three years (though I was drunk at my own graduation ceremony). That proved to me that I did not have a problem with alcohol and drugs.

I entered college when I was 17, where, with the added freedom, I started drinking

and using all the time. The wheels started coming off very shortly, and I dropped out of school to avoid flunking out.

As part of dropping out, I agreed to go into treatment for drug and alcohol addiction. On entering the treatment program, I had a moment of clarity. If something didn't change, I was going to drink again; and if I drank again, I would be right back where I started. This moment of clarity made me willing to listen to some of what I was told in the treatment program.

The program was an introduction to the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. I was told to go to A.A. meetings and start reading the Big Book. I started doing both, though I still felt uncomfortable in my own skin, and was still obsessed with drinking. I wasn't sure I wanted what the folks in the A.A. meetings had, but I was sure that I didn't want what I had.

It finally hit home when I read the part in the Big Book where it suggests that, if you have any doubt about whether you are an alcoholic, go out and try some controlled drinking. This sent a shiver down my spine. I knew what would happen if I drank: I would get drunk. If something didn't change, I was going to drink again; and if I drank, I would get drunk. I was powerless over alcohol. I was also more than willing to admit my life was unmanageable. I had taken Step One.

I started working the other Steps with a sponsor. I balked at the God stuff and at taking my inventory, but I went ahead anyway. I was desperate. Slowly, things started to change in my attitude and the way I felt

on a daily basis. The obsession with drinking took a while to leave, but it eventually went away. I started participating in my own life.

I have been continuously sober since my first A.A. meeting, and that was over 20 years ago. I now teach at a university and enjoy life immensely. I still go to A.A. meetings on a regular basis. Alcoholics Anonymous has given me an excellent life.

MYTH:

I'm a bad, weak-willed drinker.

FACT:

We learned that alcoholism is an illness, not a moral weakness. Like most other illnesses, it can strike anyone. Alcoholism can't be cured; it can only be arrested. Instead of taking medicine, we participate in the A.A. program.

Pamela
She joined A.A. at 17

“Alcohol transformed a sweet child into a daily blackout drinker.”

I grew up in an affluent Jewish family in the New York suburbs, and attended top-notch private schools. My future was full of opportunity ... that is, until I drank.

I was introduced to alcohol by my older brothers and their friends when I was 12, in the basement of my parents' house. I wanted to be accepted, and my brothers thought it was cute to see their little sister getting drunk. Alcohol made me feel important, attractive, and unafraid.

By the ninth grade, alcohol had transformed a sweet, innocent child into a lying, cheating, and self-destructive daily blackout drinker. I tried to maintain appearances to avoid being called on my drinking. And, in fact, I got decent grades, performed in a dance company, and was even president of my class. Meanwhile, I was losing most of the friends I had known since grammar school, and could no longer keep straight the lies I was telling my family. At one point, at age 15, doctors thought I had an eating disorder because I weighed only about 85 pounds. The truth is, I didn't like to eat because it was easier to get drunk on an empty stomach. I had horrendous hang-

overs and would vomit almost every morning. I also started using many “dry goods.”

My school was a closed campus, and I was often caught sneaking off the grounds to drink and use drugs. My grades started to drop, and it was getting harder to keep up a good front.

I changed schools, thinking that might help, but it did nothing to tame my drinking. In fact, it became much worse. A school administrator suggested that I attend a few A.A. meetings, but I was not ready for the solution.

The summer after my junior year, I went to Switzerland on an exchange program. It was the first time in my life that I could drink legally. The summer began as a series of blackouts and ended with a moment of clarity. I was sitting by myself in a small outdoor café, getting drunk. There was nothing unusual about this day. No catastrophes, no sirens, just a girl full of fear and full of desperation who knew she needed help. It was at that moment that I wanted more than anything to go to Alcoholics Anonymous and get sober.

Back at school in September in my senior year at age 17, I started going to A.A. meetings. I worked with a sponsor who guided me through the Twelve Steps. I went to lots of meetings and developed a relationship with a Higher Power. A.A. became for me a way of life, and restored my hope in a life that I once thought was lost. It has been over 17 years since that moment of clarity that allowed me to open myself to the gift of Alcoholics Anonymous.

John

He joined A.A. at age 18

“A.A. was showing me a way of life that was far better than the one I was living.”

I am the youngest of 11 children from an alcoholic family. We moved around quite a bit, and my parents divorced when I was nine. There was a lot of abuse in the family, and I was really shy and timid. I always ran to my mom for security when I was scared of getting beaten by my dad.

I first got drunk at 11 years old. Drinking took away fear of people and insecurity, but it led to trouble. As a teenager, I made numerous trips to treatment, halfway houses, and juvenile correctional centers. I never finished school. The first time I read a book cover to cover was while I was in jail. I tried to con everyone, and quickly learned to say what adults wanted to hear so they would get off my back. Still, I felt very alone because I saw my problems as unique.

There were some periods of sobriety to please others, but they didn't last, and life continued to be unbearable.

My last period of drinking continued for about a year. After my last drunk, I found myself in jail for three burglaries and an assault. I hope I never forget; I wanted to crawl into the corner of the jail cell and

die.

I was sent to a regional correctional center, to treatment and another halfway house. This was when I started to reach out and find freedom through A.A. I did not know whether I wanted to be sober, but people at A.A. meetings kept saying, "Keep coming back!" It was really nice to hear. A.A. was showing me a far better way of life, and how I could face life's everyday problems and not feel alone.

I know I have a long way to go, but with this program and God, I know I can make it, though I still have bad days.

But I have had the opportunity to share my experience, strength and hope at a couple of correctional facilities. I feel more a part of the program and this is very gratifying. With God, I can learn how to live "happy, joyous and free" and stay sober one more day.

Bob

He joined A.A. at age 18

“I don’t wake up in the morning wondering what I did the night before.”

By the time I was 18, I drank or drugged daily. My pattern was to wake up in the morning and head for the liquor store. I’d buy whatever I had drunk the night before to try to get over a sick stomach and the shakes. Then, I’d drive out into the country and take a drink and throw up, and continue doing that until I could keep enough down to stop shaking.

I fantasized about being born 150 years ago, when I could have been a cowboy—the buffalo-hunter type, off on my own. I spent a lot of time on the back roads of the Oklahoma Panhandle, in my pick-up truck with a jug of whiskey. I thought this is what all the kids my age we’re supposed to do.

I did have one friend that didn’t drink. He talked subtly about his “program.” I had no idea that the program was Alcoholics Anonymous. He simply talked about what he was doing: that he just wasn’t drinking for today.

I started wanting to do something about my drinking. I went to some A.A. meetings; though I couldn’t listen, I did pick-up some of the simple things: “One Day at a Time,” “Keep It Simple,” and “Easy Does It.”

I knew I needed to slow down. I've always been a 50-yard man in a 100-yard race, and never completed anything. I started A.A. the same way. I wanted to get it, but I didn't really want to hear it from anybody. I wanted to get it my way. I did hear "Let the alcohol level get below the ears and then you can start hearing." At the A.A. meetings, I met people who had been sober for 20 years, and people who had just walked in drunk. I was no more or less important than anyone there.

Sober, I don't get that gut-wrenching feeling when I meet new people. I don't have that constant fear of the outside world. Whenever the world seems crazy, I need to see that I'm crazy, not the world.

I don't think that I could ever show people how I really felt about them. Today, I have the freedom to show I care. It's great to be alcohol free, and to feel love as never before.

Most important, I don't wake up in the morning thinking about getting high and where the money is coming from. Describing sobriety is impossible. It's being free. Sobriety is the greatest gift—a gift that I never wanted, but I'm glad to have.

Carmen
She joined A.A. at age 20

“No longer a campus wheel.”

At 17, I had a “model daughter” image and lived up to it by winning a four-year college scholarship.

Still, I entered college with a full-blown case of rebellion against authority. I was drinking at parties and on weekends. I was elected to several student-body and organizational offices. But because of low grades and having been caught drinking on a university-sponsored trip, I was removed from most of these honors—and lost my scholarship.

That summer, my parents decided I needed a vacation. My dad and I had fought about the heavy drinking he did, and about my engagement to a black-leather-jacket guy; so, to restore family peace, I went to Atlanta. I began daily drinking at a country-club pool with other vacationing students. Here drinking all day and night seemed to me nothing but social drinking.

I returned home unwillingly, afraid this new way of drinking would have to stop. Since I was made to go back to school, I decided to react maturely by flunking out. My sophomore year saw alcoholic drinking take over my life. If I drank before class, I was embarrassed and ashamed to attend.

But then I started drinking in order to attend class, to date, to go to games or parties. At the end of my sophomore year, now 19, I flunked out.

On New Year's Eve, I really noticed how I drank: gulping to hurry that plateau of self-confidence and freedom from loneliness, fear and guilt. And when I reached it, I could not stop drinking.

The next day, I attended an A.A. open meeting, where I heard a woman begin her story with her teenage drinking. It sounded familiar. Perhaps I might become an alcoholic, I thought. Perhaps I might already be one.

So I joined A.A. But, at 19, I felt too young. I told myself and others, "I can't have fun without liquor. Life's passing me by. I'm missing out." I drank again, and my fear, loneliness, guilt, remorse, and misery increased.

Yet I returned to school, and one October weekend I had a date that ended with me blacking out. The next day, I was hung over and filled with self-hatred and disgust. With my first hangover and second blackout went two of the excuses I used to convince myself I wasn't an alcoholic. All day I thought, "I'm never going to drink again." Then I'd think, "That's what those A.A. people said, and it just kept getting worse."

That night, I caught a plane home, and arrived just in time for an A.A. meeting. I wanted to change. I wanted freedom from fear, loneliness, and lies. I wanted self-confidence. This time, I believed self-confidence came with sobriety. I had a new attitude: if other members think I'm too young,

that's their problem. I plan to stay!

This new way of life began just the week before I was 21. I returned to my university and campus activities. After a year in A.A., I was elected a student-body officer — again.

After two years, I received two degrees and acceptance to graduate school.

Once, I was afraid social activities would be inhibiting if I didn't drink. Now I have grown less self-conscious about not drinking, and fun and friendship have increased. The program's principles opened new doors for me, giving me new hope, and a fuller enjoyment of life.

MYTH:

I know I have a problem. But I can beat it.

FACT:

If you are like us, the chances are you can't beat it alone. Alcoholism is a progressive illness; and if an alcoholic keeps on drinking, the illness will always get worse.

Joyce
She joined A.A. at age 20

“I decided I was simply going crazy.”

I had a beer at 13, and wine once in while in high school. I graduated from high school young, and with honors. I married at 17, intending to go to college while my sailor husband was overseas. Eight months later, my marriage was finished.

This was a time of confusion and despair; and for the first time, I became intoxicated. I felt ten feet tall, released of all fears and tensions. I hated the smell and the taste of liquor, but oh those wonderful effects!

I drank as often as possible, seeking intoxication and that relaxed, happy glow. The drinking produced several hangovers and lapses of memory, which I attributed to depression and emotional disorders. On a few occasions, I also had uncontrollable shaking. This I assumed to be my heart — at the tender age of 18!

I returned home, and at mother's insistence, I sought psychiatric help. Naturally, I never mentioned drinking to the doctor. Because I was certain that all my problems were a direct result of my parents' divorce, I talked to him only about my preschool years.

Resentful at family interference, I de-

cided to move. My father lived in Missouri, and I was accepted at a college in his town. I had high hopes of attending college and working part-time, with booze to relax tensions until I could straighten out my mental disorders.

Somehow, the drinking took up too much time, so I gave up school for another semester. My “high and happy” drunks began turning into suicidal depressions. After trying two more psychiatrists, I decided I was simply going crazy. Some day, I knew, I would break completely.

I did not have the courage to commit suicide because the damning, fearsome God I pictured would not tolerate such an action. But surely He could not hold a mental breakdown against me. My blackouts became welcome, since they were only a sign that the end was near.

But my mental breakdown wasn't arriving rapidly enough, so the next year I sought still another psychiatrist. He mentioned alcoholism, and spoke of the courage, strength, and support A.A. people derived from one another.

Me an alcoholic? Absurd! To alleviate family pressures, though, I attended an A.A. meeting. The friendliness, sincerity, and open honesty impressed me. I listened to members' stories of jails and D.T.s, and decided I'd join if I ever got that bad!

When I began to drink again on a vacation, I sought A.A. again. But I felt I did not belong here any more than anywhere else. A generation — sometimes two — stood between me and the others. I never felt close to anyone, refused offers of friend-

ship, listened with a closed mind, and followed suggestions only haphazardly. I still believed my problem to be mental, not alcoholic. So I began drinking again.

Finally came a cheap hotel room, pills, wine, vodka, and gin, and a 20-year-old girl in the middle of the floor throwing up in a shoe box, too sick to make it to the bathroom. And this time, the D.T.s. But with the help of a nonalcoholic female resident of the hotel, I returned to A.A.

After five years of continuous sobriety, my step is a little lighter, my heart a little easier. How does A.A. work? I don't know. Only that it does.

Many of my A.A. friends are older, but there is no barrier. A.A. is big enough for all.

MYTH:

A.A. is for bums and old people.

FACT:

The illness of alcoholism strikes people of all ages, races, and economic situations. A.A. can and does help people from all walks of life.

AI

He joined A.A. at age 21

“I knew why I was going to college — to have a good time...”

At 14, after a school dance, I drank and had my first blackout.

The next seven years, my drinking got progressively worse. I drank whenever the opportunity presented itself. I got phony proof when I was 15, so I could get served in bars.

I gained admission to a very good college. I knew why I was going to college — to have a good time and get a degree. I joined the best fraternity and measured success in school by the number of parties, dates, and the times I got drunk. I never did any more work than necessary. The blackouts increased, which I saw as a sign that I had enjoyed myself.

My Freshman year, the proctor called me to his office. A friend and I had gone to a secretary’s apartment after the bar closed, and we stole half her belongings. She reported us, and we received a warning.

In the spring, the fraternity president warned me that the brothers thought I should cut down, that I was giving the fraternity a bad name.

My junior year was by far the worst. I went back early, and for a week I never

drew a sober breath. Most days I made no attempt to attend class.

In December, I was again called to the proctor's office, and sent to a psychiatrist. The doctor told me that I would have to leave school to do something about my drinking problem. I was shocked. What drinking problem? I said I would stop if allowed to stay, but he stressed that I had lost control. I left school that afternoon.

The day after Christmas, I entered a psychiatric clinic. I felt confused, about what had happened and what was going to happen. When someone tried to talk to me, my only response was to cry. Later, I was able to talk to the doctor quite freely about my drinking. Eventually, I admitted that I might be an alcoholic.

After six months, I was discharged from the clinic. My father attended A.A. meetings and my mother was a member of Al-Anon (for relatives and friends of alcoholics). I had attended many meetings in the past with my parents. Yet I made no attempt to contact A.A. when I left the hospital. I stayed sober for two months, and then picked up the first drink.

I drank for two months, and got progressively worse. Finally, I was convinced alcohol had the best of me. I went to my first meeting that night, and have not had a drink for two years, one day at a time. The understanding of people in A.A. was the first thing that impressed me. They were not shocked by my drinking history; they knew what I was talking about.

I went to meetings every night, and,

after two months, I asked a man to be my sponsor. He proved to be the biggest help, providing the answers and encouragement necessary for me to make this program work.

Being young bothered me at first. But the old men who came in, and stayed with the program, gave me incentive.

A.A. has given me my life and my sanity. I am now back at the university, and will probably be on the dean's list this term. I try to balance studies, A.A., and other things I enjoy. All this is mine by staying away from one drink, one day at a time.

MYTH:

A.A. means people telling me what to do.

FACT:

To join A.A., all we had to do was decide we wanted to be members. No forms to sign. No dues to pay. "The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking." We also found there are no musts in A.A. People give us suggestions on how to stay sober, which are based on their own experience.

Brian
He joined A.A. at 22

“On the Fourth of July, I was graced with independence from alcohol.”

In grade school, I was an altar boy and a Boy Scout. I received an award from the district attorney for citizenship, and was generally very “un-cool.” In high school, I began to drink at least every weekend. I immediately got a part-time job to pay for my fun. I decided I never wanted my drinking money to be at anyone else’s discretion, and I have never been unemployed since. Suddenly, after a lot of drinking and some fun, I was “cool.” By my senior year, I had very cute girlfriends, and went to lots of parties and rock concerts.

My grades got worse, though, as my drinking increased, and I no longer participated in sports or school clubs. And although I worked 25 hours a week, I never had any money. I drank and/or used some drug every day.

I enrolled in college but rarely went to classes. In just a short time, I realized I would never do the work required. I left school and landed a clerical position at a bank, where I soon found the party people. It didn’t take long before I was partying before work, during lunch, after work, and at night at the local bar. Some nights were

fun, but not as frequently as they were in high school. In drunken stupors, I would do things that hurt or embarrassed myself and my friends. Waking up (sometimes the next afternoon) I was overwhelmed with shame and guilt that could only be calmed with a drink. Alcohol was getting me into more and more bad situations. I started to think that I was insane and drinking was holding me together.

I worried about being thrown out of my house, losing my girlfriend, or losing my job. Friendships dwindled; sometimes I would be in a nice quiet bar by myself when someone I knew would walk in. I didn't want to talk. All I wanted was to drink, but I would act like I was glad to see them because I didn't want them to think I had a drinking problem.

I fantasized about living on the beach in the Virgin Islands, drinking rum till I died.

I finally sought help for what I thought was insanity. I figured I would end up in a straightjacket. The psychiatrist asked about alcohol and drugs. I wanted to talk about my other problems, but he kept asking about alcohol and drugs. Finally, he convinced me to try an A.A. meeting.

My age and lack of a low-bottom story helped my denial. I looked at people in A.A. and thought that maybe, if I was older or was as bad as they were, I would stop. I said "Easy for you to say stop drinking, but I'm only 22."

I sat in meetings and compared, thinking, "I never drank scotch in the morning, or I never had trouble with the police. See, I'm not an alcoholic." A.A.s explained that

some bottoms were lower than others, and that it was not how much I drank that mattered, but how it affected me. If my bottom was low enough for me, then it was low enough for A.A. “The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking,” they told me. So I decided to give it a chance, not sure I was an alcoholic, but definitely “sick and tired of being sick and tired.”

I started making meetings regularly. I knew I didn’t need to be an alcoholic to attend A.A.; I just needed a desire to stop drinking. I made phone calls and accepted some suggestions. It felt great to understand that I wasn’t bad or weak-willed; I was sick. Finally, on the Fourth of July, I was graced with independence from alcohol.

My career has blossomed, from a bank clerk to officer of a major brokerage firm. And although my relationships are not perfect or painless, they are no longer devastated by drinking and drugs. Today, I am foremost a member of A.A., dedicated to recovery, service and unity; but I am also now free to become whatever else I choose.

Grace

She joined A.A. at age 24

“The empty space inside me has been filled . . .”

I always felt different, and in many ways I am: I’m a Hispanic living in a white neighborhood. I was adopted and my father was an alcoholic. Fitting in wasn’t easy, but I tried very hard. I changed my personality, my clothes and my accent. When I took my first real drink, I was trying to fit in with my co-workers.

After graduating from high school, with good grades, I found an apartment and secretarial job with a large accounting firm. I was very excited about working for such a well-known company, having a weekly salary and the opportunity to follow my dreams. I planned to earn a college degree and become a social worker.

But I was scared that I wouldn’t fit in with my sophisticated co-workers, that my Hispanic accent would turn people off, and that I might fail as an executive secretary.

On my first payday, some other secretaries invited me to lunch. We went to a nice place, and they all ordered drinks—I got the idea that they did this a lot. The only alcohol I ever tasted was diluted wine at home, and I knew I shouldn’t order “one diluted wine, please;” so I mimicked others

and asked for a gin and tonic.

I loved it. I became tall, blond, glamorous and very relaxed. After that, I went out after work regularly—eventually every night. I drank at lunchtime every day. My high tolerance surprised me. I drank more than the others, and although they might get sick, embarrass themselves, or have hangovers, I never did—at first. In A.A., I learned that a high tolerance for alcohol often signals real trouble ahead.

As much as I enjoyed drinking, I started to develop inner conflicts because I didn't have money for night school; dates gave me a hard time when I didn't want to do more than just drink; and my old friends stopped including me because I always put drinking first. Within two years, all I did was work and drink.

But my drinking changed. No more wonderful “high” from the first few. I felt sick all the time and tried different drinks — whiskey, beer, wine, vodka — trying to get that “high.” All I got was a dull, aching feeling — and paranoia.

I kept the same job, but just acted my way through. Everything caused terror: the telephone, my boss, bus stops, traffic, things that moved and things that stood still. I never thought my mental state was connected to drinking. I drank for two years in the same pattern — every day during the week and at weekend parties, always with other people. While my drinking didn't change, I did. I did things I swore I'd never do. I hated myself. Life seemed meaningless.

I started to get very drunk on very little. Even my drinking friends seemed embar-

rassed to have me around because I started loud arguments, took my girlfriends' guys home, or passed out in ladies rooms. Occasionally, I'd think drinking caused my personality change. But mostly I just thought I was going crazy. I promised myself: I'd put money aside for school, find some interests, see some movies, take a vacation, and make new friends. Forget it. I just drank and hurt.

I might hear an A.A. radio announcement, or see some books on alcoholism and wonder, "Is that what you are, Grace, an alcoholic?"

But I knew I wasn't. I was still working, too young, and female. But those announcements and books must have planted a seed, because the word "alcoholic" started working on me.

My company launched an employee assistance program with meetings and brochures about how any troubled employee could get free help. I needed help, but for what I didn't know.

My boss caught on that something was wrong, and it showed in my work and attitude. I respected him, and when he talked to me about inconsistent work and mood swings, I felt really angry and humiliated. But because I liked him and needed to keep my job, I agreed to try the EAP.

The EAP woman made things very easy. She had a very gentle quality and, as angry and defensive as I was, something deep inside me still responded to kindness. After asking me a lot of questions—but also really listening—she said, "Tell me about your drinking, Grace." I just fell apart.

This lady called a woman who became my first A.A. contact. I spoke with that A.A. member, and her wonderfully warm voice said, "The worst is behind you, Grace." I cried with relief. I hoped she was right.

That night, I attended an A.A. meeting with that woman and, as scared as I was that I wouldn't make it, and wouldn't fit in, I felt real acceptance in that room. I don't remember what people said; I just remember I felt at home and I wanted to stay.

At first, I didn't think I could stop drinking, because I had not been sober in six years. But in time, I saw that I could stop drinking, one day at a time. I went to all kinds of meetings: open, closed, beginners, young people, and meetings for women, and enjoyed them all. I love the cross section of people in A.A. And I especially love the sharing of all kinds of people who are using the Twelve Steps to recover from alcoholism. There are as many ways to use the Twelve Steps as there are A.A. members, and this is beautiful to me. I am finding my way.

I have been sober for three years. My life and feelings about myself have improved immensely. I have more friends than ever. The empty space is filled, and in A.A., I have finally found acceptance, of myself and other people. I feel really lucky I am bilingual and can help Spanish-speaking newcomers. At last, I have money to go to school at night, and in a couple of years I should have my degree in social work. It is so thrilling to make plans and be reasonably sure that I will carry them out. Entering A.A., all I really wanted to do was stop hurting. Today, I want to keep on living.

Jeff
He joined A.A. at age 25

“A safe haven . . .”

When I stepped off the bus into the New England snow, my mother gave me a big hug and a kiss, and introduced me to her A.A. friend, an older guy, whose car we got into. Slightly stiff from sipping the bottle of booze now hidden in my weekend bag, I demanded to know where Mr. A.A. was driving me.

I didn't kick or scream when they opened the door of the local detox for me; I was too smart for that. I clung proudly to my boarding school and college education. I'd humor mom for five days of treatment, then hop the bus back to the city. When I saw the head nurse, I ducked into the lavatory for one last gulp of booze.

Most of the people drying out were older — wandering through rooms dressed in white bathrobes and paper slippers. There was a toothless old man named Joe: “Alcohol gave me the wings to fly, then it took away the sky. . . .” “Yeah, right, Joe,” I said, looking at the scars on his face. Checkers and television helped to kill the time.

After being discharged, I refused mom's suggested follow-up at a rehab in Vermont; my girlfriend was waiting for her sober hero. I promised to go to A.A. meetings.

On the bus ride back, I admired the jewelry I had stolen from my mother. She always said I would get some of it when I married, so I figured it was mine to take. I didn't want to get a job to support myself or my live-in girlfriend. Jewelry could be pawned to pay for booze, not rent.

My girlfriend worked nights as a dancer, and so evenings were free for A.A. meetings, which I attended to get her off my back. A smoky church basement was not my idea of a Saturday night, though, and I nearly jumped out of my seat when some old duffer tapped me on the shoulder, "Hi, my name's Al. Hold onto your seat, because you're in for the greatest journey of your life — just don't pick up the first drink, come to meetings, and it gets better." When he got up, he said, "Just bring the body and the mind will follow," in a way that made me squirm. Here I was in school again with know-it-all teachers to lecture me.

The word God in the Twelve Steps, hanging like a sacred scroll, made it obvious that I didn't belong in this Fellowship of disappointed souls. Let the old folks find a replacement family and religion in A.A.—their consolation prize for losing out in life. I'm too young to swear off booze forever, or be put out to pasture.

I chose to drop out of A.A. rooms and live in my girlfriend's apartment, drinking and watching TV. I would look out the window at normal people going to work and hate myself.

I resented the easy money my girlfriend made from tips, and helped myself to it to buy beer to get me through the morning, to

a bottle of the hard stuff in the afternoon, which led to drinking around the clock. Once, at midnight, angry at being awakened from a drunken sleep, I plunged my fists through the glass French doors of her bedroom. I drank in the emergency room before the surgeon put 38 stitches in my hands.

One night I stayed up drinking in anticipation of checking into a sobering-up station. The attendant gave me a bed in the ward. Alcoholics moaned and retched into their buckets. In a moment of clarity, Old Al came to mind, "It's easier to stay sober than to get sober."

I finally made my way back to A.A., where I attended the suggested 90 meetings in 90 days. They told me if I still wanted to drink, my misery would be refunded. I did drink after 90 days, but the seed of A.A. was firmly planted.

Now, one day at a time, I don't pick up that first drink, and I depend on A.A. as a safe haven from bars and liquor stores. Newcomers learn they don't have to drink. It was tough to ask for help, and I didn't for a long time; but I kept showing up for meetings. I noticed young people sitting in the front row with me. When old timers told me how very fortunate I was to get the A.A. message young and to save myself all the "yets," I stopped condemning, criticizing and complaining, and got some gratitude in my attitude.

Score-it-Yourself Quiz

- | | Yes | No |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. Do you lose time from school or work because of drinking? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2. Do you drink to lose shyness and build up self confidence? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3. Is drinking affecting your reputation? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4. Do you drink to escape from study or home worries? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5. Does it bother you if some body says maybe you drink too much? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 6. Do you have to take a drink to go out on a date? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 7. Do you ever get into money trouble over buying liquor? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 8. Have you lost friends since you've started drinking? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 9. Do you hang out now with a crowd where stuff is easy to get? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 10. Do your friends drink less than you do? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 11. Do you drink until the bottle is empty? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 12. Have you ever had a loss of memory from drinking? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 13. Has drunk driving ever put you into a hospital or a jail? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 14. Do you get annoyed with classes or lectures on drinking? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 15. Do you think you have a problem with liquor? | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

THE TWELVE STEPS OF ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.

2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.

3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.

4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.

5. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.

6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.

7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.

8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.

9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.

10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.

11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.

12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

THE TWELVE TRADITIONS OF ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS

1. Our common welfare should come first; personal recovery depends upon A.A. unity.

2. For our group purpose there is but one ultimate authority—a loving God as He may express Himself in our group conscience. Our leaders are but trusted servants; they do not govern.

3. The only requirement for A.A. membership is a desire to stop drinking.

4. Each group should be autonomous except in matters affecting other groups or A.A. as a whole.

5. Each group has but one primary purpose—to carry its message to the alcoholic who still suffers.

6. An A.A. group ought never endorse, finance, or lend the A.A. name to any related facility or outside enterprise, lest problems of money, property, and prestige divert us from our primary purpose.

7. Every A.A. group ought to be fully self-supporting, declining outside contributions.

8. Alcoholics Anonymous should remain forever nonprofessional, but our service centers may employ special workers.

9. A.A., as such, ought never be organized; but we may create service boards or committees directly responsible to those they serve.

10. Alcoholics Anonymous has no opinion on outside issues; hence the A.A. name ought never be drawn into public controversy.

11. Our public relations policy is based on attraction rather than promotion; we need always maintain personal anonymity at the level of press, radio, and films.

12. Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our traditions, ever reminding us to place principles before personalities.

I am responsible...when anyone,
anywhere reaches out for help, I want
the hand of A.A. always to be there.
And for that, I am responsible.