

ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS COMES TO ILLINOIS

It is 1937. A desperate father in Cuyahoga Falls, Ohio heard about a couple of men over in Akron who claimed to have stayed sober and who had defined a program that they and a small group of friends had followed to stay sober. This was staggering news. He had a son who the family had for years been trying unsuccessfully to keep sober. Each time the son would visit they would try yet another attempt, including taking away his shoes and pants, to no avail. His son had been banished from the family business and was living in Chicago. The father told the son of two friends who were sober and invited him to return to Ohio to talk with them. The son told his dad he would try his own method first; that being he would drink nothing for a month and after that would drink only beer. Several months later the son admitted that he was licked. He wanted to know more about these men. His name was Earle Treat.

Earle went to Akron with a different attitude. He wanted to know more about this unusual "program." His father arranged to have a man named Howard to come to their home and talk with Earle. Howard explained that he felt that alcoholism was a fatal illness; continuing to drink would only lead to either death or mental breakdown. He explained that he had developed an allergy to alcohol and that he had a mental obsession which could only lead to further problems if he continued to drink.

The next day two other men came to Earle's home and talked to them of their experiences. Then the next day two other men came. They explained the need for a psychic change which could lead to peace and serenity, something that Earle had not had for years. The next day two other men came to talk with him. Then they took him to a meeting at Dr. Bob's house. After two to three weeks trying to absorb as much as possible of the program and the philosophy he returned to Chicago with the hope that he could start a group. He couldn't find anyone of his so-called friends or drinking companions who wanted to stop drinking. He called on hospitals and clergymen with the hope of finding another drunk to work with. He continued to go back and forth to Akron to have his spirits renewed. At one time he got discouraged and decided "To heck with it" and went out to get drunk. It took a friend two days to sober him up. This experience showed him that he had to place the program first regardless of the circumstances in his life.

In the summer of 1938 a man with whom he was working and who knew about the program asked him to talk with one of his salesmen who was drinking heavily. Earle went to the sanitarium where the man was and was surprised to find that the man was interested. They met for several days and then the new man went to Akron for a couple of weeks to learn about this new way of living with Dr. Bob and the Akron bunch. When he returned they met almost daily. Then another man who had heard about the program in Akron moved to Chicago and there was member number three. A.A. had come to Illinois!

In the spring of 1939 the Big Book was printed and the subsequent inquiries for more information which came from the Chicago area were passed on to Earle. He had found the spiritual answer to his problems. In August of that year he was asked to visit a woman who was in a hospital and was being treated by a doctor who knew about the handful of people in New York and Akron who had worked out a technique for arresting their alcoholism. This was Sylvia Kauffman who was the first woman to join the fellowship.

In September of 1939 with a nucleus of six persons the first official group meeting was held in Sylvia's apartment in Evanston. In October of that year there was an article about the fledgling group of recovering alcoholics in the Cleveland Plain Dealer which brought more requests for information. In January of 1940 Bill Wilson visited Chicago and a group of 40 people welcomed him. In May of 1941 Sylvia had her personal secretary Grace Cultice supervise establishing the first "Intergroup Office" which handled the growing number of calls for information about Alcoholics Anonymous.

Gradually the men and women who supported that early Chicago "Chapter" as they were called (the larger areas were called Sections) either moved or through other means enabled the small group to expand throughout the area. Ken S. moved to Sterling and started the first group outside the Chicago area in 1943 with Rockford following soon after. In 1945 chapters were established in the Quad cities of Rock Island

and Moline in Illinois and Davenport and Bettendorf in Iowa with one Intergroup Office serving all four cities. In 1946 the Fox River Valley groups of Aurora, Crystal Lake and Elgin were established.

In 1950 the first International Convention of Alcoholics Anonymous was held in Cleveland. Among the business discussed and ratified was the acceptance of the long form of the Traditions and the proposed General Service Conference which would make certain that the members would share responsibility for the fellowship with the Trustees of the Alcoholics Foundation. To do this Illinois was sectioned into three "Delegate Areas" - Chicago being an area with its nearby suburbs, Northern Illinois which included the outlying suburbs and extending West to the Mississippi River, from the Wisconsin border on the North, and a line roughly following I-88 to the South, and Southern Illinois covering the rest of the state. Delegates to the Conference were elected for a two year term in a rotation which corresponded to the Area's odd or even number. Chicago was Area 19, Northern was Area 20 and Southern was Area 21. Delegates were elected from alternating areas until 1974 when it was decided that each Area would elect their own.

From the '60's thru the '70's A.A. continued with an explosion of growth seldom seen in any type of fellowship. Both men and women were achieving sobriety through the use of the 12 Steps. The fellowship has been recognized throughout the world as successful for most alcoholics. Illinois in general, and Northern Illinois in particular has been exceedingly grateful for the examples given us by the pioneers in this program.

Earle Treat's story is printed in the Big Book under the title "He Sold Himself Short." To read more about Sylvia Kauffman, see her story under the title "The Keys of the Kingdom." For further information about A.A. in Illinois you can go the NIA website at www.aa-nia.org and read "An Alcoholics Anonymous History in Northern Illinois Area 20."

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