

## Alf J - His Story

"I was drinking to live; living to drink. I couldn't eat and I couldn't sleep. I'd wake up in the middle of the night and have to have a brandy. I used to wake up in the morning and literally crawl to the bathroom, put my head in the pan and vomit for an hour and a half in a cold sweat. At the end of it all, the only thing I wanted was a whiskey."

Jock, a small and quietly spoken 77-year-old, recalls the horrors of alcoholism in a far off and detached way like others of his age might recall the horrors of a war. It's been 35 years since Jock's war with drink ended and although many of the details have faded; he will never forget the havoc that alcohol wreaked on his life. In a small and meticulously neat kitchen, Jock pours the first in a long line of cups of tea and begins to explain the unlikely beginnings of his life as an alcoholic.

"My father, a parson, was a leading light in the temperance movement. One of my earliest recollections was going to numerous Band of Hope meetings and signing countless pledges vowing that I would never touch alcohol - so many pledges that I could have easily papered my wall with them. Being a parson my father didn't drink and he didn't smoke. He didn't keep a drop of alcohol in the house and yet I was drunk by the time I was 16."

At 12, Jock was sent to a boarding school in the South Island where every night before bed he and his fellow students were sternly lectured on the evils of smoking, drinking and women. Not surprisingly, he left school at 16 without ever having had a drink. Only a few months later, at an old boys' reunion, Jock became drunk for the first time.

"One of the problems," he explains, "was that being a good piano player, I was always in demand for parties and dances which meant I was always well-catered for as far as alcohol was concerned. Why, I can remember many times having the piano completely covered with glasses all for me. Whenever I went to a party I always had a few drinks beforehand just in case they didn't have enough there. After all it was never any fun going to a party sober."

Alcohol soon became an essential part of Jock's life. He would use it as a crutch which invariably let him down. At 17 he went to school to try for his matriculation exams, but his infamous drinking habits only resulted in expulsion. Eventually, he made it to university and qualified as a dentist. Jock maintains the reason he "behaved" at university was that he had very little money with which to misbehave. The few times he managed to get drunk went by almost unnoticed because "that's what everybody at university was doing."

Jock pours another cup of tea, chews thoughtfully on a biscuit and tells me how, at that stage, he almost managed to end his dependence on drink. "It was my last year at varsity and I stayed at Knox College. I can remember before I was let in the principal called me into his study and agreed to take me on

condition that I bring no alcohol into the place." Jock pauses as the grandfather clock in the hall behind him strikes midday. "I kept my word."

But then something happened which pushed him over the brink again and sent him running for his prop. Jock explains, "When I was just a 21-year-old I was appointed dentist to all the psychiatric hospitals in New Zealand. It was a terrible experience being in those places and having the responsibility of a job like that when I was only 21. I remember constantly having hellish nightmares and I drank heavily to cope. I stayed a year at that job before I was expelled. They found me with a cupboard full of empty whiskey bottles."

"The trouble with my drinking was that I would always start off with the firm resolve to keep it seemly but inevitably I lost control and ended up in hospital. Several times I was even sent to Great Barrier Island where there was no way I could get it."

The "obsession" with drink grew and with it the realisation that he had a problem. But it was hard to get anyone to understand. "In those days there was no distinction between being drunk and being an alcoholic," says Jock. "I'd never even heard of the word alcoholic. All I knew was that my drinking was somehow different from other people."

"I remember once drinking with a friend in Wellington at election time. He said: "We better go and vote. We'll show the government that they can't take our booze away from us." It was my very first vote but I didn't vote for continuance, I voted prohibition and I've voted prohibition ever since. I knew then that there was something wrong."

In desperation Jock turned to Buddhism and read countless books on psychology. But there was no answer. His wife, "an incredibly patient woman" suffered and so did his dental practice. Patients would ring up to ask how he was and appointments would sometimes be postponed to compensate for his drunken bouts.

"The funny thing was that all those patients stuck with me," says Jock with a disbelieving shake of the head. "I'll never understand why."

"I'd be sober for weeks or months but when I started drinking, I'd go on for days. If I left my rooms one day, I didn't return. I would go into a hotel in town with the determination to catch a certain ferry back to the surgery but I was always chucked out at closing time."

"I remember once I got enough money to buy a case of whiskey." His eyes light up behind the heavy, black-rimmed glasses and a smile creases a not very wrinkled face. "I couldn't keep it home so I had to keep it in my rooms. I decided a great place to hide it would be in the ceiling. I had a bench in my room and by putting a chair on the bench and a stool on the chair I could reach the manhole. Every time I wanted a drink I had to get up on the bench, on to the chair and on the stool, teeter up there and get my whiskey. When I'd finished, I'd go through the whole process in reverse."

"But that didn't last long", he adds with a chuckle. "The back of the manhole cover was very sooty and you could tell every time I had had a drink. There were tell-tale black fingerprints all over the ceiling."

The mood changes as, over yet another cup of tea, Jock recalls "the most miserable 10 years of my life", that time when, due to pressure from family and friends, he gave up drinking completely. He hung tenuously on to sobriety until one day one of his more "social" friends persuaded him to pick up another drink.

"He said to me, "Surely if you haven't had a drink for 10 years you would have it under control." I said, "Surely I must." and started meeting him again for drinks again. For quite a while I actually managed to limit myself but at some stage I just lost control."

"It just gained momentum. Each day was a little bit worse until it eventually ended in a crisis. I became too sick to drink, too sick to even eat. I remember thinking when I was 43 that if the Good Lord would spare me until I was 50 I would be prepared to pack it in."

It was at this stage that Jock's wife, at her wits end called on her brother-in-law for help. He was a doctor of some standing and knew that conventional treatment wasn't enough to help Jock. Instead He wrote to a man in Nelson called Ian who, a year earlier, had made contact with a radical new group in America called Alcoholics Anonymous. (When Ian and Jock met several weeks later they discovered they had been in the same class at school)

Ian, who at that stage had not shared the AA philosophy with anyone, happily sent his copy of the 'Big Book', the textbook of the AA movement, up to Auckland. Jock continues the story, "That was when my brother-in-law kidnapped me. He came over to my house and literally demanded that I return with him to Titirangi. I went through to the bedroom to get dressed and while he was waiting I finished off a bottle of sherry I had hidden in there - the whole bottle. I came out in a terrible state."

"A condition of my going to Titirangi was that I could take a suitcase full of grog with me otherwise I wouldn't budge." Jock never drank that grog. He was bundled into a car and taken to Titirangi where his brother-in-law literally threw the big book at him and said, "See what you can make of that."

"I read that alcoholism was a disease," says Jock. "I remember the tremendous sense of relief that I felt that at last somebody knew what I had been fighting all my life." And from the look on Jock's face, it's obvious that the relief is still fresh in his mind 35 years later.

"I read the book and the obsession with bottles of alcohol was simply taken away from me," he says, "It's something I will never be able to understand or explain."

Soon after Jock's brother-in-law arranged a meeting between Jock and another alcoholic. Although reluctant, Jock agreed to meet the man and today thousands of alcoholics can be very glad he did. The two "just seemed to hit it off" and it was from that first encounter that Jock dreamed up the idea of regular meetings between alcoholics using the principles contained in the Big Book.

In 1947, the first meeting began in Jock's Auckland home with about four or five people "all looking for answers"

As the group gathered pace and numbers, it became increasingly popular. People from all over the country, some suicidal, wrote to Jock desperate for an answer to their alcoholism. "I'd write back, suggest that we meet to talk about it and that's how the meetings gradually grew," says Jock. "Those meetings were tremendously successful -so many of those first ones stayed dry."

Today AA has a New Zealand membership of about 5000 with a further 1.5 million worldwide. The format is much the same as it was 35 years ago and, as then, the only criteria for membership is the desire to stop drinking.

Membership comes from all spheres of society; included in the ranks of AA are housewives, labourers, doctors, lawyers, even priests and judges. About one third are women and the number of teenage members is skyrocketing.

Jock is still involved in the organisation although not as actively as in the past. He is proud of the way it has developed but maintains that it represents only the tip of the iceberg.

"There are thousands more alcoholics out there" he says, "I can see them everywhere. A person always knows in his heart of hearts whether or not he is an alcoholic. I know."