

Walking the talk

After more than 49 years in the fellowship of AA, this recovered alcoholic is still attending weekly meetings and helping the alcoholics who still suffer

At an early age, I picked up my first glass of booze and it changed my life forever. You know, this disease of alcoholism, it never ever gets better, always worse. Twenty six years, I guzzled booze and the type that I associated with were my type of people, the big actors, the big spenders, the big romances, and the highly intelligent dum dums - and I finished up living on the banks of the Avon River. I lived in Christchurch, married with four children but I'd lost my wife and family and that's where I finished up.

My last glass of booze was at the Lancaster Park Hotel and I didn't even think that I'd be able to make it there. I thought I might have to crawl a part of the way. I had two hands round a jug. I couldn't even pick up a glass. And my brain was telling me - I can't take any more. This is it! Finished! I more or less collapsed. I was taken over the road to a little doctor called Dr O'Brien and he recommended I go out to Ferguson Clinic in Sunnyside, which is a mental institution.

A drinking mate of mine took me out there and his wife - she was a fairly big sort of a lady - and she knew that I was going to some sort of hospital. She knew that I never had any pyjamas so she gave me a pair of hers, and they had the little twinklets and frills on the bottom of them. So I arrived out at Ferguson Clinic with an old brown suitcase, and in the suitcase was me shaving gear and a pair of woman's pyjamas.

That was the 13th of March 1975 - forty-nine years ago on 13 March 2024. In three month's-time I'll be ninety years of age. And I'll be forty-nine years sober just one day at a time. I can't believe it. You know, not many people get forty-nine years extra life.

I was in Ferguson Clinic for about a month, and then I was transferred over to Mahu Clinic - the rehab for alcoholics. At that stage, I couldn't even function outside a mental institution. I suffered from DTs, hallucinations, and I took a lot of turns.

And this little fella from Alcoholics Anonymous, Wee Davey, he came down on a Thursday night and he took me to my first AA meeting. I just followed behind like a little puppy dog. He could have taken me anywhere. But I do remember those five beautiful words that he said to me. And I guess it's a big part of the message of Alcoholics Anonymous as we know it today: Those five beautiful words, "I know, I know how you feel." And you know, no one had ever said that to me before. And I believed him.

So he took me up to that AA meeting. I think it was about thirty or forty there that night and they didn't even want to know my second name. They didn't want to know if I had any money, or whether I worked. You see, they love me, because I'm an alcoholic. And I seen the word God on the banners and I thought 'that's me finished.' But what I didn't see was, 'as we understand him.'

It was an open meeting, and I was squatted between two nuns, and they were hanging on to me, because I wasn't a shaker, I was a vibrator. And I'll never forget this little nun, Sister Hilda. She said to me, she says, 'God works through people.' And I've never ever forgot that. Never forgot it.

I was so desperate! I went to meetings, and I hung on to that first step, like grim death. And that's all I did. And I did it for myself because there was no-one left for me to do it for. All my relations and society - they wrote me off for being what I am. The chairperson would ask me to share and I would lose communication from my brain to my mouth. And I would just go on a blank. I couldn't even talk. But they didn't laugh. They knew what I was going through.

I was back at work. I was a chain slaughterman at the freezing works. It was a miracle that I still had me job, but we had a strong union in those days. And this particular day, I'm taking one of these turns, and I'm lying out in the locker room, and I'm staring up at the ceiling. And I knew then, there had to be something. There had to be something greater than me, because I was beyond any human aid whatsoever.

And I remember hearing something at a meeting where this little nun, Sister Ignatia, she helped our co-founder, Dr. Bob, in the recovery of four thousand sick alcoholics. And this one particular guy, he couldn't stop drinking and he was desperate. And he said to the little nun, 'Hey sister, will you pray for me?' And the wee nun says, 'you pray for yourself because God likes to hear strange voices.' And when I cried out for help, by gosh, my voice was strange, but I was heard. I was heard. I really was.

Highs and lows

In my sobriety, there has been sadness. Real sadness. But with the support of the fellowship, I didn't have to pick up a glass of booze. I never ever thought it would get better, but I hung in and I'm a slow learner but I'm still here. I'm still here. And at the Dry Dock Meeting 28 in Christchurch, I was sober about two years and this lady was over from America and she was touring around New Zealand with her hubby. And it was about 30 or 40 at the meeting that night. And after the meeting she come over to me and I reckon I would have been the most morbid, miserable fella she'd probably ever seen. And she gave me this little card and I've carried it around in my wallet, wow! 47 years I've carried this card around. It's getting a bit tattered. And it reads: 'Please Lord, teach us to laugh again, but God, don't ever let us forget that we cried.'

Now I put that in three parts. Never ever do I underestimate the power of prayer. And I never underestimate the power of humour. And the last part, I must always remember that I'm only one drink away from a drunk.

In sobriety I have been in a lot of clubs and organizations which I thoroughly enjoyed - country music, electronic organs, ukulele groups, and all that. I find that there's a lot of things I can't do now, but I'm so grateful that I actually done them without having to pick up a glass of booze. You know, for that I'm so, so grateful. Because I tell you now, I would have been well gone. I would have been well gone.

There's been a lot of highlights in my sobriety, but my biggest highlight today is seeing a sick alcoholic coming through our door, and him and her staying and getting on the programme and watching them recover. That's my biggest highlight.

Then I did get the spirituality of the program, Step 2 and Step 3. My will is an absolute disaster. So I turn my will and my life every morning over the care of God, as I understand Him. And I'll tell you who's been a great help too. Frankie Sinatra, when he's singing, 'We'll do it my way.' That's a great reminder. It really is.

I'm back at work and I bought a car. It wasn't that flash, but it did the job, thank you. And I said to Wee Davey, I said, 'How long have you been sponsoring Sunnyside?' And he said, 'Oh, about 12 or 13 years.' And I said, 'Right, I'll take over now. The recovery will go up in this place.' So seven and a half years, I did that for, and I didn't get anyone sober but I stayed sober meself. And all I did, I took them to meetings, Tuesday and Thursday night. In fact, I was pumping AA right down their throats and I was actually sicker than them. So, that doesn't work.

Father Joe Martin was getting around that time with his Chalk Talks. And he had a chalk talk out at the prison at Paparoa, and we used to go out there and support the meeting. And this particular afternoon, he had his chalk talk, and when he was talking, he was looking straight at me - I'll never forget that - and he said, 'you don't talk the talk, you walk the talk.'

And it suddenly dawned on me - all the yappin and thunder jawin was finished. Action! Action! Action! And that was a start.

It's been a great journey, just one day at a time. They were talking about this 'one day at a time' at my early meetings, and I thought, well, I'll never get that, because I lived in the fantasy world of the alcoholic, always living in the past, and then I'd be days, weeks, months, years ahead. So I put it in two halves. The first half: yesterday's sorrows and tomorrow's fears. And those unknown, ungrounded fears I have replaced in a power greater than myself whom I choose to call God.

I had a lot of trouble sleeping at nights in my early sobriety because the hatred and the revenge and the resentments were still in my head. And the golden oldies in the fellowship, they said to me, you pray for the people (who you hate or resent). Wow, that's one of the hardest things I've probably ever done. And I will admit, when I did pray for them, I won't repeat the words I used, and they're certainly not in the dictionary. But it works. And even after all these years, if I get a resentment, I pray for that person, or I pray for those people immediately. Not tonight, not tomorrow, or the next day. I pray for them immediately.

Over the years, I've met some lovely, lovely people. And they're still lovely people that I've got to meet yet. When I was guzzling booze, when I made mistakes I didn't learn from them. I just kept on making mistakes. But today, in sobriety, I have made mistakes. But the main thing, (is) I have learned from them. I really have.

I left my small hometown in 1957. And the local police force here, they branded me as a chronic society nuisance. Now I've been back in that town for 22 years. And not one policeman's come round to see me. They don't even know I'm back. I'll tell you now, I feel really rejected.

And I always maintain, if I ever thought about picking up a glass of booze, I would be absolutely insane. And the fastest way for me to become insane is lose track of the fellowship, stop going to meetings, get off the programme. And I'm very, very aware of this - that my defence to that first glass would weaken.

There's things I want, but I don't get them. Today I have what I need. And in my early sobriety, I never ever thought that I'd ever get well, and I clobbered up with a Dr. Barney in the fellowship, and he was at the meeting on a Saturday night down at Saint Michael's Church and I thought 'he'll be able to tell me when I start getting better.'

So after the meeting, I approached him and I said, 'Barney, when do you reckon I'll start getting better?' And he looked at me and he says, 'how long were you guzzling booze for?' And I said, 'twenty-six years.' And he said, 'well, it won't take that long', and walked away. That's the answers I used to get. But they kept telling me, they kept telling me, 'it gets better.'

Back in my early sobriety this particular day, I really didn't think I'd get through. So I rung this fella who'd been in AA for about 12 years, and I'm telling him over the phone, where I wouldn't be able to make it. I couldn't make it. And he said to me, he says, 'Get out there. and see another sickie. Someone worse off than yourself'. And by gosh, I didn't have to go very far. In fact, all I had to do was go to an AA meeting and listen. And after all these years, that still works for me. If I'm still having a bit of a downer, I go out and I see another sickie and it really works.