

Young People and AA

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

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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Revised 1989, 1992

Young People and A.A.

Too young?

We all felt the same when we came into A.A. — that we were too young to be alcoholics. Some of us hadn't been drinking that long. Some of us didn't drink hard liquor. Some of us didn't fall down or have memory lapses.

“Just sit down and listen,” we were told. “You can always go back to drinking if you want. But first try some A.A. meetings, because you wouldn't be here at all if you didn't have a drinking problem.”

Soon we heard that it doesn't matter how much you drink, where you drink, what you drink, or how old you are — what matters is what alcohol does to you inside. 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; whether alcohol is interfering in your life. (The questions at the end of this pamphlet may also help you decide.)

All of us felt strange about going to A.A. But we've come to see that A.A. saved our lives and gave us a new beginning — it is the best thing that ever happened to us.

Myths and truths about alcohol and A.A.

Myth: I'm a bad, weak-willed person because I drink.

Truth: Alcoholism is an illness, not a moral weakness. Like most other illnesses, such as heart disease, diabetes, and cancer, it can strike

anyone. The illness of alcoholism can't be cured. It can only be arrested. We don't take medicine to arrest this illness. Instead, we go to A.A. meetings.

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

Truth: Alcoholism is a progressive illness, which means that if an alcoholic keeps on drinking, the illness will always grow progressively worse.

Myth: But I can take one drink and get away with it.

Truth: All of us can sometimes take just one drink and not drink again that night or the next day. But sooner or later, in a week or a month or a year, if we have this illness, we'll drink again to excess. Just the attempt alone to control our drinking is a sign that there is something wrong.

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

Truth: Some of the stories in this pamphlet are about young people who kept on drinking even though their stomachs protested. They became alcoholics.

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

Truth: Some of the stories in this pamphlet are about young people who had large capacities for alcohol. They also became alcoholics.

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

Truth: Most people do not have blank spots in their memory when they drink. These blank spots, where we walk and talk and act normally but can't remember doing so, are called "black-outs." Blackouts are not normal, and are considered a symptom of alcoholism.

Myth: A.A. is for bums and old people.

Truth: The illness of alcoholism strikes people of

all ages, races, and economic situations. Most alcoholics are from the mainstream of society.

Myth: A.A. teaches you to give up drinking for the rest of your life.

Truth: In A.A., we don't swear off drinking forever. We don't go on the wagon for six months. We don't take a pledge for a year. We just stay away from a drink — the next drink — for one day at a time. Just for today, we're not drinking. Who knows about tomorrow?

Myth: A.A. means rules and regulations, and people telling me what to do. I've never been a joiner. Forget it.

Truth: 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 were told. And, "There are no musts in A.A." People did give us suggestions on how to stay sober which were based on their own experience. These suggestions were like road maps — they pointed out how to travel to a new life.

Myth: A.A. is a religious organization.

Truth: Some of us in A.A. do have a strong faith; others have none; many are still searching. But we all share the feeling that our way of doing things didn't work.

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

Truth: Most of us find that we are very comfortable not drinking. And we find that we can laugh and have fun for the first time in ages. For now we have found people who understand!

How do we stay away from drinking?

We go to A.A. meetings as often as we can. There we hear personal stories like those you will read in this pamphlet. From hearing the stories, we realize we are not unique — that others have been through much of what we have been through. We learn not to compare the outer facts of our story with those we hear, but to identify with the feelings of the speakers. In many communities there are young people's groups so we won't feel different. (Directions on how to find A.A. meetings are given at the end of this pamphlet.)

We also read A.A. literature like this pamphlet, two other pamphlets for young people, and the booklet *Living Sober*. (Other A.A. literature is listed at the end of this pamphlet.)

We change ourselves, gradually, day to day. We help other alcoholics. And, by helping, we stay sober, sane and happy. For the first time in our lives, we've found real freedom. For we have broken out of the dim prison of alcoholic drinking that was closing in around us. Now we are free to discover who we are, who we hope to become, who we were meant to be.

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

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. There were a lot of problems in our house; my parents didn’t get along, there was hardly any money to feed us four kids and I guess that when my mother and father got fed-up, they drank. Then, they would fight and my brother and sisters and I would be real scared. I used to pray that they’d quit drinking and fighting but they never did.

When I was eleven 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 where it was quiet and safe. Grandmother was also taking care of some of my younger cousins and when I went to live with her it was the first time I ever met them. There was also a cousin around my age and I liked her. She was in the same class at school and had a lot of friends and they let me hang around with them. One of these kids gave me my first drink, a can of beer.

I remember we were at this kid’s house, after school, and he took a six-pack out of the refrigerator. Some kids had done this before but my cousin and I had never had a drink before. I was scared to take a beer but I was scared to say no, so 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. They were high too. I felt so good, and I didn’t even know that I felt bad before I drank. But this was great. My cousin and I spent a lot of time at that kid’s house after that;

just about every day after school, we'd drink beer. At first, I would be scared to go home because I knew I was drunk and tried to act sober in front of my grandmother.

Sometimes she'd say "Gwen, you're in a world of your own," but she didn't know I was high. She just knew I was acting different.

I never liked school very much because I wasn't very smart. It was hard for me to read and I always had a hard time doing homework. My cousin used to do it for me. But when we started drinking she'd get too high to do my homework anymore, so I was in trouble a lot with my teacher. I hated being in trouble and hated anyone being mad at me.

Things started to change for me when my grandmother got a job and made me and my cousin come home after school to babysit for the little kids. For a whole year I had been going over to some kid's house and 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 I had to watch. One day, my cousin saw a neighbor up the block with a big bottle of beer and she got him to give her this whole big bottle. We finished it. That day I blacked-out. I didn't remember what happened, but I couldn't find one of the kids that I was supposed to watch. 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 nobody could find him. It turned out alright and he was okay but that really scared me. It also got me mad, because I didn't think that it was fair that I had to come home after school and babysit. 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 over whose turn it was to steal some beer and hide it. She didn't like being in trouble with my grandmother so she drank less, but I couldn't stop.

When I was thirteen, 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. There is about two years I hardly remember at all because I was high most of the time. 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. When I look back, I know I was very lucky because nobody killed me.

One day, I saw a newspaper on the kitchen table in a house where I was staying. I was real hung over and sick to my stomach and was opening a beer so I could calm down. I looked at the date on that newspaper — May 5th. That was my birthday; I was fifteen. I started to cry and I couldn't stop. I got the beer down and felt better, but I couldn't stop 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 couldn't even remember my own birthday. That day, I didn't do anything about my 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 of the kids I lived with. I don't remember being brought into the emergency room and when I woke up I had casts on both legs. One of the nurses told me that I was very drunk when I was brought in and that I was lucky to be alive. She also said that I should think about the reason that I was in the hospital.

I said "I'm here because I was in an accident." She said "Maybe you wouldn't be here if you didn't drink." The hospital would keep me just for a couple of days, she said, so I better start thinking about what I'd do when they sent me home with my legs in casts. This nurse was very straight with me and I liked that. But, I didn't like it, if you know what I mean.

A lady came to visit me that night and told me that she used to get into accidents all the time because she was drunk 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. Did I want to go?

I wanted to get out of that hospital ward so I went to the meeting. There were a few patients there but mostly people that looked like visitors to me. A man who looked about 30 asked me “How old are you?” and when I said “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. I told him I’d think about it. 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 was very nice to me and said that she’d stay 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. Grandmother said “Gwen, all anybody can do is try.” When I was discharged from the hospital, a neighbor of Grandmother’s drove 200 miles to pick me up and take me back home. I left the hospital on crutches and with a telephone number of an A.A. person that the nurse had given me. 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 pick me up and take me to meetings with them and 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 more teenagers in A.A. and that really helped a lot, to stay sober with people like me who dropped out of school and were trying to get it together, sober.

I go to a lot of A.A. meetings and one thing that was very important for me was to make being sober the most important thing in my life. Because if I’m not sober, I don’t have anything — friends, a place to live, a high school diploma or anything to look forward to. And, I haven’t forgotten my own birthday in four years.

Chris He joined A.A. at age 16

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

I picked up, or actually was given, my first drink when I was 12 years old. After feeling the effects of alcohol for the first time, I was sure it was the answer to my problems. Alcohol was the missing ingredient in my life. There was some sort of hole in my life until I picked up a drink. My family life was difficult and depressing. There were eight kids in the family and I was the fifth. My brothers ahead of me drink regularly and seem to suffer from the same disease I have. I always felt out of place as a kid, like I didn't belong anywhere. Though I seemed to know everyone, I felt very alone, even at a young age. 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 vodka, whiskey and Scotch, to get drunk. But when I look back on my drinking, I drank what was available. I almost always drank it straight from the bottle and usually carried a flask, whenever possible. When I was out there drinking I never thought it unusual to steal liquor, or to drink in the morning, or to drink alone. At first, alcohol was a saviour, but very rapidly my alcoholism began to humiliate me and make my life miserable. My life steadily got worse and 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 found I couldn't keep that pleasant buzz; so I drank more quickly, and was soon passed out or throwing up. I remember vomiting a lot. It caused a lot of recrimination if I drank alone. When I was 15 years old, an incident in school got me in A.A. I had been drinking a lot of whiskey and wine and had the bottles in this gym

bag I always carried around. As usual, I was quite drunk and stumbled through the school halls and ran into a vice principal. He took me to his office and it's hard to remember but I must have spoken to him about the problems in my life. He looked at my state and 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; it was 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, as I was still feeling the effects of drinking that day.

After the meeting a neighbor who had eight years sobriety and 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. I didn't want to face my family or myself. Detox made me very uncomfortable; they insisted I face myself.

After I left detox I attended A.A. meetings but refused to believe I was powerless over alcohol. I would admit my life was screwed up but I wouldn't admit defeat from alcohol until six months of slips and depressions convinced me of my need to surrender to the A.A. way of recovery. I remember in those six months of drinking and misery telling people that now famous remark, "I'm too young to be an alcoholic." I also had a million other excuses why I didn't belong in A.A. and when people suggested ways of using the program, I insisted on doing it my way. It didn't take long to find out that my way didn't work. In fact, it could mean death if I continued to work things my way. The day after my last drunk, I was at a meeting and a sort of realization came upon me. One of the problems I had with the program, besides feeling too young to belong, was the attitude that I couldn't recover because A.A. didn't work. But, the more meetings I went to I saw evidence that A.A. worked and worked well. Even better, I began to identify with others' sto-

ries. So, being convinced I was powerless over alcohol and needed help, I came to believe I could recover through A.A. Over the last four years, the tools of the program and the fellowship it offers have enabled me to do many things I could not do for myself. 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 many different ways of working this program, like drinking and going to meetings, not drinking and not going to meetings — but the best way by far is not drinking and going to meetings.

Sobriety to me is not just quitting drinking but changing the attitudes that will make me more susceptible to getting drunk. The Twelve Steps of A.A. are changing me and even making me useful to others. For years, I felt useless — 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.

This program works if you work it. I take suggestions for my recovery, like getting a sponsor, someone who will know me well, making a meeting every day, and getting involved. The alternative is drinking and a miserable existence. Today, I have a choice and I choose not to drink and get to a meeting.

Norm He joined A.A. at age 16

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

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

I drank every chance I got and liked everything about it — the way that beer tasted and especially the way it made me feel. It wasn't always easy to get the stuff in the first place — usually, I counted on some other kids' older brothers to buy it. And those guys were my heroes — 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 twelve years old I thought I'd be a cop or a teacher when I got older. 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 hungover and shaky every morning, I started having trouble in school. I couldn't keep my mind on anything. 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 I'd made, because they thought it was the new crowd that was making me act strange, nervous and sneaky. They blamed the other guys for my lousy grades and kept coming up with lists of things I couldn't do. "You can't go there," "You can't go here." I couldn't stand the fights any more, so I just bolted. All I wanted was to feel high and the only thing I knew to do was keep drinking.

I thought I'd be able to move in with another guy; one friend's older brother had his own place in town and I planned to stay there. Well, this guy had plans of his own and I guess he didn't need some drunken kid hanging around and told me to get lost. That's when I got really scared. I thought I could count on these guys and I couldn't. I couldn't count on myself either, but I really didn't know that then.

I found a piece of sidewalk near the bus station and panhandled enough each day to keep me in beer. Believe me, the places where I'd buy a few cans didn't care if you were three or thirty. I had a lot of big plans: I'd get some kind of work, maybe construction, find a room somewhere, 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 still can't remember exactly what happened. It seems like 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. All this about three years after I picked up my first drink. In about one minute, I changed my mind about being around my parents.

My father managed to convince the authorities to let me go and I went back home. By then I knew that I was a real mess but I didn't really know why. Drinking wasn't the problem — I was. Because I was scared of being on the street again, I stopped drinking for a while because my folks watched me every minute. I went back to school and there were times when I thought I was going crazy — I didn't know why, 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.

Somehow, I got invited to a party by the kind of kid my parents wanted me to hang out with, the kind of kid I had seen before. And this guy's parents let him have a lot, and I mean a lot, of booze at that party. I'd been feeling so rotten without a drink that I thought "a couple" wouldn't hurt. They'd only help. They did. They helped me laugh, dance and to ask 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 the parents weren't there, and we drank when they were. Nobody cared about the drinking — just so we didn't drive. Somebody's folks would always drive us home. My parents were so glad that I had new friends that they didn't notice that I had started drinking again. They trusted me and stopped waiting up for me to come home, stopped smelling my breath and stopped asking me anything.

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. Within a couple of months I was drinking at night, in the morning, at lunchtime and after school. By then 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 these people, a lot older than I, talk about the things they did when they drank. But, one of the speakers said that his son was in the A.A. program and was just graduating from high school. Something important was going on inside of me then, because 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. He gave me a couple of pamphlets but I couldn't read them. I still couldn't concentrate too well.

Well, the day I got out this guy took me to an A.A. meeting and I was amazed, I was just 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 because I was scared of everybody.

There were jocks and guys with long hair and headbands and torn-up jeans. There were girls that looked like they belonged to country clubs and girls who looked like bikers. I felt that here were all the cliques that I could never fit into. And they were all here in one room and everyone fit together; everyone matched. I felt for the first time, ever, that I might fit in and that maybe these people wanted me to be there; they weren't trying to get rid of me. This guy was sitting next to me and he was about my age. He asked me to go to the coffee shop after the meeting and he said "I know how you feel." I couldn't believe someone knew how I felt. No one had understood while I was drinking because even though my friends drank a lot, they never really got into trouble.

I've been going to meetings ever since that night and I have not had another drink. Staying away from the first drink, one day at a time, was not nearly so hard as learning how to live.

I had a lot of confused and mixed-up feelings and ideas about myself and about other people. But in A.A., I'm finding a way to not only stay

sober but to learn how to live. One terrific thing I have learned in A.A. is that even though I don't always feel so great, I can take some action. There are things I can do like going to lots of meetings. I have some great friends — including my parents. They really are my friends today. I'm doing okay in school and school can be tough sometimes because I missed a lot. But I'm just doing the best I can each day and trying not to become too discouraged when things don't work out the way I wanted them to.

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 eighteen I was a daily user of alcohol or some other drug. My pattern was to get up at 9:30, or whenever I would wake up — depending on the night before — and go to the liquor store at 10:00 when it opened. 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 take a drink and throw-up, and continue doing that until I could keep enough down so that I would no longer be shaking.

I had the fantasy that I should have been born earlier, that I should have been born 150 years ago when I could have been a cowboy, the buffalo-hunter type so that I could go off on my own and people would never know me. And so, I spent a lot of my time on the back roads of the Oklahoma Panhandle, driving the river bottoms — just me and my pick-up truck with a jug of whiskey. I was justifying this to the point that I thought “This is what everybody does, this is what all the kids my age do, this is what we're supposed to do.”

I did have one friend that didn't drink and he'd let me hang around with him, even though I might

be drunk or passed out. I'd pick him up in my truck and we would go out into the fields in the Panhandle and to the river bottoms where the Indians had lived. My friend was open-minded about me and cared for me. He talked a lot about what he called his "program" but not in a direct manner. I had no idea that the program he was talking about was Alcoholics Anonymous. In very simple terms he would just talk about what he was doing. He didn't say that he quit drinking, but that he just wasn't drinking for today; that he didn't drink one day at a time; that there was so much enjoyment in these experiences of being with nature now that he wasn't drunk. He shared with me that my perception did not have to be altered so that I could really feel what I wanted to feel and to be a part of something. It was around this time that I started "bottoming out" to the point of wanting to do something about my drinking.

I did go to some A.A. meetings but at the time I really couldn't listen. However, I did pick-up some of the simple things: "One Day at a Time," "Keep It Simple," and "Easy Does It." Simple statements like this started hitting me. I knew I needed to learn to slow down. I've always been a 50-yard man in a 100-yard race and never completed anything. And I took off in A.A. in the same way. I wanted to get it, but I didn't really want to hear it from anybody. I wanted to get it on my own, 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 attended I was eye-to-eye with people who had been sober for 20 years, and people who had just walked into their first meeting, drunk. I was no better and no less than, and I was just as important as anybody there. And, at the same time, I was just as unimportant as anybody there — I was okay.

Now that I'm sober, I don't get that gut-wrenching feeling when I meet new people. I don't think, "What are they thinking about me?" I don't have that constant fear of the outside world like I used to. Whenever the world seems like it's starting to get crazy to me, like it used to, I need to look at myself and see that I'm getting crazy and it's not

the world outside.

I don't think that I could ever show people how I really felt about them and that I did love them and did care for them — regardless of my actions at the time. Today, I have the freedom to care and the freedom to show it. It's a great freedom to be alcohol free, but it is also a great feeling to feel love that you've never felt before.

I don't wake up in the morning wondering what I did the night before. I don't have to call anybody up to find out whether or not I had a good time. I don't have to worry if I drank from anyone's glass that wasn't mine, who had a disease, or if I smoked anyone's animal tranquilizers. And I don't wake up — this is very important to me — I don't wake up in the morning thinking about getting high, when my first drink is going to be; and where the money is coming from. To describe what it is like being sober is impossible. It's just a feeling of being free. Sobriety is the greatest gift that anybody ever gave me, a gift that I never wanted but I'm glad that I have.

Carmen She joined A.A. at age 20

“No longer a campus wheel.”

As a 17-year-old senior in high school, 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 all school authority and any other authority. Primarily, I was drinking only at parties and on weekends at that time. 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 by the end of my freshman year, I had lost my scholarship, too.

That summer, when I was 18, my parents decided I needed a vacation. My dad and I had

fought over his heavy drinking and my engagement to a guy in the black-leather jacket set; so, to restore family peace, I went to Atlanta, Georgia. There I began daily drinking, sitting around a country-club swimming pool with other vacationing students. In this atmosphere, drinking at 10 a.m., all day, and into the 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. This sophomore year saw alcoholic drinking take over my life. If I drank before class, I was embarrassed and ashamed to attend. But after living awhile with these fears, I started drinking in order to attend class, in order to date, to go to games or parties.

No longer a campus wheel, I joined the hippie crowd. I did not want to be around former friends; guilt and shame made me uncomfortable with them. But I didn't fit in with the hippies, either; I had snubbed them the previous year. With both groups, I was on the outside looking in. At the end of my sophomore year, now 19, I achieved my goal; I flunked out.

In the fall, I visited Alateen (for teenaged children of alcoholics). But alcoholism was Daddy's problem, I thought. Later, I grew worried, because I began to feel more kinship with the A.A.s than with the Alateens. So I quit attending altogether.

On New Year's Eve, I really noticed how I drank: gulping to hurry and reach that plateau of self-confidence and freedom from loneliness, fears 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 was “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 came back to A.A. Again, I thought I was too young, sought out A.A. members who agreed with me — and went back to drinking. Fear, loneliness, guilt, remorse, and misery increased as my alcoholism progressed.

Yet I returned to school, and one October weekend I had a date at another university for their homecoming game and celebrations. I left the dorm early to get away from the other girls in the sorority house and go for something to drink. Coming back just in time for my date to pick me up, I talked him into going out for a few drinks. Game time neared, and I talked him into staying at the beer garden to drink, rather than going to the game. Then I blacked out and did not remember signing in at the dorm.

The next day, I panicked; but the good friends I was with assured me that I had done nothing too embarrassing. Still, I was sick, hungover, filled with self-hatred and disgust. Getting dressed, I couldn't stand looking in a mirror; my vanity took a beating.

I had had my first hangover and my second blackout — and there went two of the excuses I had used to convince myself I wasn't an alcoholic. All that day I kept saying, "I'm never going to drink again." Then I'd think, "That's what those people in A.A. said they told themselves — 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 my way of life. I didn't want to be a drink-dependent atheist. I wanted freedom from fear, loneliness, and the need to masquerade. I wanted self-confidence. This time, I believed the A.A. members when they said self-confidence would come with sobriety. This time, 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. It made possible a return to my university and a reentrance into campus activities. After a year on the A.A. program, I was elected a student-body officer — again.

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

Once, I was afraid that my social activities would be inhibited if I didn't drink. Instead, as I have grown less self-conscious about not drinking, the fun has increased, and friendships have been made possible. The principles of this program have opened new doors for me, given me new hope and a fuller enjoyment of life.

Joyce **She joined A.A. at age 20**

“I decided I was simply going crazy.”

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

This period of my life I look back upon as a time of great confusion, mixed-up thoughts, bleak despair, and the start of my alcoholism. For the first time, I became intoxicated, and I felt ten feet tall, released of all fears and tensions, as if I had found the secret of success in life. I hated the smell and the taste of liquor but oh, those wonderful effects!

I drank as often as possible, always seeking intoxication and that wonderful, relaxed, happy glow. If I needed to leave a good impression, or the supply was not great enough for the desired effect, I simply did not drink at all.

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!

Realizing I was getting into a rat race, relaxing morals, spending money on “entertainment” that should go elsewhere, I tried to hide my fears in a faster pace of drinking. My job was in jeopardy,

and my mother, 2,000 miles away, was sending me threats to come home or else. So 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 what I felt was family interference, I decided to move. My father was living in Missouri, and I was accepted in a college in his town; so with misgivings my mother helped me pack. Blessings upon blessings! My father enjoyed drinks before and after dinner and was willing to serve me. I had high hopes of attending college, working part-time. And here was 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. During these months my "high and happy" drunks began turning into suicidal depressions. I assumed I was not drinking the right brand, so I kept experimenting with anything that contained alcohol. But I continued to get sloppy, crying, lonely, stinking drunk. My fears increased, as did my memory lapses, and my "heart condition" became worse.

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, which I considered an unforgivable sin. The damning, fearsome God I pictured would not tolerate such an action. But a mental breakdown? Surely He could not hold that against me. My blackouts became welcome, since they were only a sign that the end was near. My biggest problem was getting enough booze, pills, or both to tide me over until the collapse.

But my mental breakdown wasn't progressing rapidly enough, so the next year I sought still another psychiatrist. If only he would help me just until I turned 21 — a whole year and a half away! I stayed with this doctor because he gave me free pills. Without his knowledge, I had other supplies. Then came the awful day when he told me, "These

pills are not habit-forming to the average person. But they are to you, with your addictive personality.” He had previously mentioned alcoholism, and now he talked of the courage, strength, and support A.A. people derived from one another.

The thought of my being an alcoholic was, of course, absurd! However, for fear of having my free supply of pills stopped, and in order to alleviate family pressures, I attended an A.A. meeting. The friendliness, sincerity, and open honesty of the people impressed me. I listened to their stories of jails and D.T.s, and decided I would certainly join them 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 thought. I would listen to their tales of years of hard drinking, stories of a war I had read about in history, bootlegging days I had also read about, and other times and problems that did not concern me. The women tried to be friendly, but invariably started mothering me. At times I felt like screaming, “Talk to me, damn you, not as a child but as one of you!”

(Several of them have told me since that I seemed so young and confused that they were afraid of saying the wrong thing, so some just said nothing. Now I understand. I know of a 14-year-old and, believe it or not, even a nine-year-old in A.A. And at 25 I find my own maternal instinct showing when I talk to them.)

I never felt close to anyone, refused offers of friendship, listened with a closed mind, followed suggestions only haphazardly. I still believed my problem to be mental, not alcoholic. So I began drinking again.

With my own room, close to work and bars, for two months I lived in the old depressions, anguish and sickness. I watched others in the cheap joints and silently, desperately screamed, “No! I am not an alcoholic, I am not that bad!”

Finally came a cheap hotel room, pills, wine,

vodka, and gin. 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. Once more, the silent cry for help. And this time, the D.T.s. But, with the help of a nonalcoholic female resident of the hotel, I eventually returned to A.A.

After only eight months of sobriety, I married an A.A. member. I have been blessed with the birth of two sons, and another child is due in the very near future.

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. I have a chance to rebuild a whole life, one day at a time, not just live out a remaining few years.

Many of my A.A. friends now are a generation or two older, but there is no barrier. A.A. is big enough for all. Each generation contributes its own gifts, talents, and thinking to A.A. Each brings its own ideas and beliefs. We each bring our common disease of alcoholism, our free will, and the right to work the A.A. principles as we understand them, through a Power greater than ourselves.

I believe in God, the goodness of people, the perfection of the universe. Most of all I believe I am an alcoholic who, for this day, by the grace of God, can walk the earth sober.

Al Joined A.A. at age 21

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

My drinking resulted in trouble from the very first. I was a sophomore in high school when I went to my first prom. We brought the girls home early and then went to one of the guys' homes. His parents happened to be away that weekend. We all did some very heavy drinking, finally winding up by taking it straight from the bottle. That night, at the age of 14, I experienced my first blackout.

The next seven years, my drinking and trouble

got progressively worse. All through high school, I drank whenever the opportunity presented itself. I managed to secure phony proof of age when I was 15, so I could get served in bars. At 16, I bought my first car and began to mix drinking and driving, with the usual results.

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. If I got an education in the process, then that would be a fringe benefit. I got into the best fraternity on campus. Most of the brothers were athletes; the remainder, party boys. Since I had little athletic promise, I joined the ranks of the party boys.

Success in school was measured by the number of parties I went to, the dates I had, and the times I got drunk. I never did any more work than was necessary to stay in school. Anything more than just passing was wasted effort and could have been better spent on having a “good time.” The blackouts were becoming more frequent. I never paid any attention to them except to note that they were probably a sign that I had enjoyed myself the night before.

At this time, the proctor called me to his office. A friend and I had gone to a secretary’s apartment after the bar closed, and had not been treated with the proper respect. Just to show her, we walked off with half her belongings. She reported us to the authorities, and we received a warning. This was in my freshman year.

My sophomore year, I brought a car to school. I could now have more dates, go away on weekends to other schools. In the spring, the president of the fraternity warned me that the brothers thought it a good idea for me to cut down, as I was giving the fraternity a bad name on campus. It was none of his business, I told him; they were jealous because I was having all the fun, while they had to work to stay in school. Shortly thereafter, I was called to the proctor’s office again.

My junior year was by far the worst. I started out by going back to school a week early, and for a week I never drew a sober breath. The progres-

sion had really set it. After school started, most days I made no attempt to attend classes.

In December, I was again called to the proctor's office, and sent to the mental-health clinic to see a psychiatrist and take some tests. 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 drinking if they allowed me to stay, but he tried to impress upon me that I had lost control.

My bubble had burst. All of a sudden, the party had come to an abrupt halt. I left school that afternoon.

The day after Christmas, I was admitted to a psychiatric clinic in Manhattan. My condition could best be described as confused, about what had happened and what was going to happen. When someone tried to talk to me, my only response was to cry. As time went on, I was able to talk to the doctor quite freely about my drinking. The time came when I was finally able to admit that I might be an alcoholic.

After six months, I was discharged from the clinic. My father had gone to his first A.A. meeting years ago, in 1959, 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, looking for the "good time" I was missing.

I drank for two months, and things got progressively worse. The day finally came when I was convinced alcohol had the best of me, and I needed help. I went to my first meeting that night, seeking an answer to my problem. That was over two years ago. I have not had a drink since, one day at a time. The understanding that people in A.A. showed was the first thing that impressed me. They were not shocked by my drinking history. They just nodded; they knew what I was talking about.

Two things that I caught on to right from the start were: constant attendance at meetings, and sticking with the winners. I went to meetings every night, and tried to attend midnight meetings as often as possible. 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.

Being young bothered me at first. But the men who came in when they were old, and stayed with the program, gave me the incentive to do the same. I thought a man of 60 or more faced the same problem as I, only at the other end of the spectrum.

A.A. has given me my life and my sanity, two things I hold dear today. It has been a slow process of building a new life, one I never dreamed existed for me. I am the product of many people's devotion of time and effort, and I always welcome the chance to pass on what I have to someone else.

I am now back at the university, and will probably be on the dean's list this term. My concept of what a "good time" is has changed considerably. There is a balance in my life today between studies, A.A., and doing other things I enjoy. All this is mine by staying away from one drink, one day at a time. I probably have one drunk left in me, but I'm not so sure I have another recovery left in me.

Brian
He joined A.A. at 22

"On the 4th of July I was graced with independence from alcohol."

I was born and raised in a very strict Irish-American family. I have never received a DWI, and on only one occasion drove a car under the influence of alcohol. I have never lost a job, or a marriage and always had plenty of friends and drinking buddies. I was not on the Bowery and did not look even close to it. This is what my

denial told me. I rationalized the problems in my life as being either my father's, my girlfriend's or my boss's fault. 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."

When I was 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 "uncool." When I started drinking I soon found a group of kids my age to party with. We did a lot of experimenting and had some fun. In the beginning of high school I began to drink more frequently, 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. In other ways alcohol had already begun to affect my life. My grades in school were getting progressively worse as my drinking increased. I no longer participated in sports or in any of the school clubs, and although I worked 25 hours a week I never had any money. My focus had shifted from healthy adolescent hobbies to drinking. I drank and/or used some drug every day, was experiencing blackouts, and had begun to hurt some of the girls I was dating.

After graduating from high school I went on to college, and once I located all the local pubs I rarely went to classes. In just a short time I realized I would never do the work which was required of me here. I left school and began working in a clerical position at a major New York bank. With the increased income my drinking increased. At work I soon found the people who partied like I did. It didn't take long before I was partying before work, during lunch, after work before the train home, and after dinner at the local bar. Some nights were fun, but the fun and games were not as frequent as they were in high school. In drunken stupors I would do things that hurt or

embarrassed myself and my friends. Upon arising (sometimes the next afternoon) I was overwhelmed with feelings of shame and guilt that I felt could only be calmed with one thing, a drink. Alcohol was getting me into more and more situations I didn't want to be in. I was starting to think that maybe I was insane and drinking was the only thing holding me together. Threats of being thrown out of my parent's house were constant. It seemed nothing mattered. I would be worried about being thrown out, losing my girlfriend, or losing my job — yet my focus was on getting drunk. My circle of friends was shrinking; sometimes I would be standing in a nice quiet bar getting drunk by myself when someone I knew would walk in. I didn't want to make conversation. All I wanted to do was drink but I would act as though I was glad to see them because I didn't want them to think I had a drinking problem. Much of my time I spent trying to act so others could not see the effects of alcohol on me. Alcohol was depressing me. My fantasy had been to live on the beach in the Virgin Islands (ever since I started drinking I had never been out of my hometown). It was now to live on the beach in the Islands and drink rum till I died. I thought this sounded tragically romantic. I hoped I would get a fatal disease so I could drink the way I wanted to and no one would bug me about it because I was dying anyway. Little did I know my alcoholism was a fatal disease and could kill me in time.

I finally sought help from what I thought was insanity. I figured I would end up in a straightjacket in a padded cell. The psychiatrist I went to asked about alcohol and drugs. All I wanted to talk about was my other problems; he kept asking about alcohol and drugs. Finally, he convinced me to try an A.A. meeting. My denial held onto my age and lack of a low-bottom story. I sat in meetings and compared, saying to myself "I never drank Scotch in the morning, or I never got into a lot of 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. I soon concentrated on identifying with the emotions and overall situation of the speakers instead of comparing details. 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. Although I wasn’t sure I was an alcoholic I was definitely “sick and tired of being sick and tired.”

I started making meetings on a regular basis. I held onto the fact that I didn’t have to be an alcoholic to attend A.A. meetings. I had the desire to stop drinking just for today. I used some of the phone numbers and accepted some of the caring that was given to me by other people in A.A. It felt great to begin 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. I made 90 meetings in 90 days and got a sponsor. I made plenty of beginners meetings, this was a new beginning. I followed all the suggestions that I could and became active in service. My career has blossomed, from a clerk at a bank I am now an officer on the trading desk of a major brokerage firm. And although my relationships with my family, friends, and co-workers are not perfect or painless they are no longer devastated by the effects of drinking and drugs. Today I am first and foremost a member of A.A., dedicated to recovery, service and unity, but I am also now free to become whatever else I choose without the hindrance of alcohol.

Grace
She joined A.A. at age 24

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

I always felt different from other people, and in many ways I am: I’m a Hispanic in a WASP 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, too — this time, with my co-workers.

After graduating from high school, where I got good grades, I found my own apartment and took a 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 make my dreams come true. I planned to continue my education at night and earn a college degree and eventually become a social worker.

But, I was as scared as I was excited. Scared that I wouldn't fit in with my sophisticated co-workers, scared that my Hispanic accent would turn people off, scared that I might not "make it" as an executive secretary.

On my first pay day some other secretaries invited me to join them for lunch. We went to a nice place and they all ordered drinks before lunch, and from what they said, I got the idea that they did this a lot. The only alcohol I'd ever tasted before this was diluted wine on special occasions at home and I knew I shouldn't order "one diluted wine, please," so I asked for a gin and tonic because that's what the others were having.

I loved it. I became tall, blond, glamorous and very relaxed. After that, I went out after work with the others regularly — at first, just one night a week and eventually every night. I drank at lunch time, not just pay day, but every day. It really surprised me that I had a very high tolerance for alcohol. I always seemed to have more than the others and although they might get sick sometimes, act out in embarrassing ways, or have hangovers in the morning, I never did, at first. Later, when I came into A.A., I learned that a high tolerance for alcohol is often a sign that real trouble is ahead.

As much as I enjoyed drinking and the way it made me feel, I started to develop some inner conflicts. Because I spent so much money on drinking, I didn't have any to put aside for night school; some of the guys I was dating were giving me a hard time when I didn't want to do more than just drink; my old friends from high school

stopped including me in their plans because I always put drinking first. All of this happened very quickly and within two years, all I could do was go to work and drink.

But my drinking changed. That wonderful “high” from the first few was behind me. I felt like I had the flu all the time and started drinking different things — whiskey, beer, wine, vodka — trying to get that “high.” All I got was a dull, aching feeling — and paranoia.

I kept the same job all this time but just acted my way through it. When the telephone rang or my boss wanted to talk to me, I nearly hit the ceiling with terror. Bus stops, traffic, things that moved, things that stood still, all scared me. It never occurred to me that my mental state was connected with my drinking. Over the next couple of years, my drinking continued in the same pattern — every day during the week and at weekend parties, always with other people and never alone. But although my drinking pattern didn’t change very much, I did. I did almost all the things I had sworn I was never going to do. I hated myself for the things I was doing and for the things I was not doing. Life seemed meaningless and I felt empty inside. I didn’t know what was worse, living or dying.

The time came when I lost my tolerance for alcohol and I started to get very drunk on very little. Even my drinking friends seemed embarrassed to have me around because I started loud arguments in public, took my girlfriends’ guys home with me, or passed out in ladies rooms all over town. Once in a while, I’d think the drinking was the cause of my personality change. But most of the time, I just thought that I was going crazy. I made a lot of promises to myself: I’ll put some money aside for school, I’ll find some interests, I’ll see some movies, I’ll take a vacation, I’ll make new friends. Forget it. I couldn’t do anything except drink and hurt.

Once in a while I’d hear an A.A. announcement on the radio, or see some books on alcoholism in bookshops and I’d wonder “is that what you are,

Grace? Are you an alcoholic?” But I knew I wasn’t. I was still working and I’m too young and I’m a female. But those radio announcements and book-covers must have planted a seed because the word “alcoholic” started working on me.

Around the same time, our company developed an employee assistance program and there were all kinds of employee meetings and brochures about how great it was that any employee who was troubled by anything could go and see someone and get some free help. I sure felt I needed some kind, but I didn’t know what I needed help for.

My boss did, though. He caught on that something was wrong and it was showing up in my work and my attitude. I respected him a lot and when he talked to me about the inconsistency of my work and my mood swings, I felt really angry and humiliated. But because I liked him and needed to keep my job, I agreed to talk to the EAP people and get some help of some kind. But I still didn’t know what kind — a mental hospital, pills, a college tuition loan, a decent boyfriend? What?

The EAP woman I spoke with made things very easy. She had a very gentle quality and, as angry and defensive as I had become, something deep inside me could still respond to someone who was kind. After asking me a lot of questions — but also listening, really listening — she said “Tell me about your drinking, Grace.” I just fell apart.

This lady made a phone call while I was with her, to a woman who was to become my first A.A. contact. I spoke with that A.A. member then and this wonderfully warm voice said “The worst is behind you, Grace.” I cried and cried with relief. Somehow, I hoped she was right.

That night, I attended an A.A. meeting with that woman and as scared as I was — scared that I wouldn’t make it, that I wouldn’t fit in — there was a feeling of real acceptance in that room that I will never forget. I don’t remember what people said, I just remember how I felt. 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 came to see that I could stop drinking, one day at a time. I went to all kinds of meetings: open meetings, closed meetings, beginners meetings, meetings for young people and meetings for women, and enjoyed them all. I get really excited about the cross section of people in A.A. And I especially love to hear the sharing from all kinds of people about how they are using the Twelve Steps to recover from the disease of alcoholism. There are probably about as many different ways to use the Twelve Steps as there are A.A. members and this is beautiful to me. We are very much the same, but we are individuals, too. I am finding my own way to be myself.

I have been sober in A.A. for three years now. My life and the way I feel about myself has improved immensely. I have more friends today than I have had in my whole life. The empty space inside me has been filled and in A.A. I have found what I have always been looking for: acceptance, of myself and other people. I feel really lucky that because of my Hispanic background I am bilingual and can help the Spanish-speaking women who are new in A.A. At last, I have been able to put some money aside so that I can go to school at night, and in a couple of years I should have my degree in social work. It is so thrilling to be able to make plans today and be reasonably sure that I will be able to carry them out. When I first came to 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 Trailways 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 breath made clouds in the cold air. Slightly squiffed from a bottle of booze hidden in

my weekend bag, I paid little attention to Mr. A.A. and demanded to know where he was driving the car. My mother's house was in the opposite direction, but he just ignored 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 the fact that I was educated at boarding schools and at college. I would swallow my pride for the five days of treatment to get my mother off my back, then hop the bus back to the city. When I saw the head nurse, I quickly ducked into the lavatory for one last gulp of booze. My *modus operandi* was to hide my drinking no matter what.

Most of the people drying out were older than I — wandering through rooms dressed in white bathrobes and paper slippers. There was a toothless old man named Joe who bent my ear with his "war stories." "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. We ate a lot of cookies, drank a lot of coffee and watched a film called "Chalk Talk," all about a blackboard and a priest showing how the ingestion of alcohol affects the body.

After being discharged, I reassured my mother that follow-up treatment at a rehab in Vermont was out of the question — I wasn't about to hang myself up for three weeks! My girlfriend was waiting to welcome her sober hero back home. I promised to go to A.A. meetings in the city. On the bus ride back, I admired the jewelry I had stolen from my mother's jewelry box. She always said I would get some of it when I married, so I figured it was mine to take. The truth was I didn't want to get a job to support myself or my girlfriend even though we lived together. Part of the jewelry could be pawned to pay for booze, not rent. I guess my whole rationale towards life was that the world owed me a living.

My girlfriend worked as a go-go dancer at night clubs so my evenings were free to go to A.A. meetings, which I did for her sake to get her off my back. A smoky church basement was not my idea

of how to spend a Saturday night. 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 some awful kind of school again with know-it-all teachers to lecture me. The big trouble with this school is you don’t graduate. Just one glance at the word God in the Twelve Steps, hanging on the wall like a sacred scroll, made it obvious that I didn’t belong in this Fellowship of disappointed souls. Let the old folks find a new family and religion in A.A. to replace the ones they lost. They need some sort of consolation prize for losing out in life. I’m too young to swear off booze forever, to be put out to pasture. It was impossible for me to identify with the story of the speaker who lost his family and career to alcohol because, as far as I could see, my life hadn’t even started yet. I had big plans, a lot of living to do, places to go, people to meet. Sure, things were on the back burner while I learned how to drink safely, but all that would soon change when people recognized what a great guy I was. Old Al spoke of alcoholism as a killer disease — scary words that went in one ear and out the other. For every seat in that room, including mine, there were countless people out there killing themselves with alcohol.

The truth is clear in hindsight: I knew in my head that I needed the A.A. program, but in my gut I didn’t want it badly enough. How could I never go to another party? Booze enabled me, or so I thought, to be everything to everybody without having to look at who Jeff was. Rather than quit drinking forever, I wanted to live life in the fast lane, die young, and leave a good looking corpse for everyone to weep over at my funeral, if it came to that. I chose to drop out of A.A. rooms and live in my girlfriend’s dark apartment, drinking and watching TV. Parting the curtains, I would look out the window at normal people

going to work and hate myself.

It seemed normal to steal food at the supermarket and to lie to my girlfriend that I bought it. I resented the easy money she made from tips and helped myself to it to buy beer to get me through the morning and a bottle of the hard stuff, which led to drinking around the clock. Once, at midnight, in a burst of anger 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 on duty put 38 stitches in my hands. One night I stayed up drinking in anticipation of checking myself into a sobering-up station, a nonmedical facility run by the city. The attendant gave me a bed in the ward. Alcoholics moaned through the night while others retched into their buckets. In a moment of clarity, Old Al came to mind, "It's easier to stay sober than to get sober." One morning, after a nightmare of withdrawal without any medication, I heard the voices of a choir at the church across a courtyard which sounded like a chorus of angels singing at the Pearly Gates. Five days later, a counselor sat me down in his office to give me the hard facts about discharged patients. Out of 35 the statistics showed that 34 would be back drunk. My attitude was, I'll show them that I can lick this thing once and for all. I'll be the one who doesn't come back to this hellhole. But when they let me out I did just what he said I'd do: I bought a bottle to celebrate. My girlfriend lost trust in me soon after that and asked me to move out.

Fortunately, they say God loves children and drunks and there was a place for me to stay. My father insisted I go to A.A. or else he'd get me a job with a tough construction gang. I attended the suggested 90 meetings in 90 days. They told me if, at that time, I still wanted to drink, my misery would be refunded. Even though I did go out and drink some more after 90 days, the seed of A.A. was firmly planted.

One day at a time, I didn't pick up that first drink and came to depend on the rooms of A.A. as a safe haven from the treacherous city streets

lined with bars and liquor stores. I tried not to compare my young age or my own story with the other members. The only requirement for A.A. membership is a desire to stop drinking. I tried to identify with people's feelings as they shared their experience, strength and hope in order to stay sober themselves. The newcomer learns that he doesn't have to drink anymore. It was tough to have to ask for help and I didn't for a long time, but I kept showing up for meetings and people started to miss me if I didn't go. Nowhere else could I get so much attention and even applause for sharing how bad it was to be drunk. I began to notice people my age and younger sitting in the front row with me. When oldtimers told me how very fortunate I was to get the A.A. message young and to save myself all the "yets," I began to stop condemning, criticizing and complaining and get some gratitude in my attitude. Life has gotten so much better than I could have ever hoped for as a newcomer. The message is: A.A. works!

John
He joined A.A.
in a correctional facility at age 18

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

My name is John and I am an alcoholic. I came out of an alcoholic family. I am the youngest of eleven children. Our family moved around quite a bit. My parents got divorced when I was 9 years old. As a child, I was really shy and timid. There was a lot of abuse in the family. I always ran to my mom for security when I was scared of getting beaten by my dad.

The first time I got drunk was when I was eleven years old. Drinking took away my fear of people and my insecurity, but it led to a lot of trouble. For a long time I blamed my parents for the way I was, even though I was the one who was skipping school and breaking into places.

As a teenager, I was sent to treatment four times and to halfway houses three times. There were also several trips to juvenile correctional centers. School was not important to me and I never finished. The first time I read a book cover to cover was while I was in jail. I tried to con everyone, convincing them that I was not the problem, 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 but this was to please others. During my last period of sobriety I did not apply the A.A. program, so 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 don't know if I can describe exactly how I felt, but I hope I never forget the feeling. I wanted to crawl out of my skin and go 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 to A.A. It was there I began to 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 way of life that was far better than the one I was living. These people were showing me how I could face life's everyday problems and not feel alone any more.

The more I step out of the way and practice doing the will of my Higher Power, the better my life becomes. I know I have a long way to go, but with this program and God I know I can make it without hiding or running away. Freedom comes from applying the Twelve Steps to overcome my problems. Each day God gives me new "opportunities" (which I call life) so I can bring the Steps into my daily living. I still have bad days, due to self-will, but Step Eleven tells me to do what I know to be good for me and to resume meditation as soon as possible. It also shows me that this program is about making spiritual progress. Lately I have had

the opportunity to share my experience, strength and hope at a couple of correctional facilities where I had been a resident. I also had the opportunity to be of service through the A.A. service structure. In doing these things I feel more a part of the program than at any other time in my life. This is very gratifying. With God, I can learn how to live “happy, joyous and free” and stay sober one more day.

Where do I find A.A.?

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

And we learned that, 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 visit G.S.O.’s Web site: 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 such as the ones in this pamphlet.

Closed meetings are limited to those who have a drinking problem themselves (or think they may have). Here, we are free to speak up and ask questions. Here we get practical suggestions on how to stay 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 peoples groups. However, young members also attend other meetings, for, as our stories have told you, a bond of understanding links alcoholics of all ages and circumstances.

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 somebody 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 non-professional, 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.

A.A. PUBLICATIONS Complete order forms available from
General Service Office of ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS,
Box 459, Grand Central Station, New York, NY 10163

BOOKS

ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS (*regular, portable, large-print and abridged pocket editions*)
ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS COMES OF AGE
TWELVE STEPS AND TWELVE TRADITIONS
(regular, soft-cover, large-print, pocket and gift editions)
EXPERIENCE, STRENGTH AND HOPE
AS BILL SEES IT (*regular & soft cover editions*)
DR. BOB AND THE GOOD OLDTIMERS
"PASS IT ON"
DAILY REFLECTIONS

BOOKLETS

CAME TO BELIEVE
LIVING SOBER
A.A. IN PRISON: INMATE TO INMATE

PAMPHLETS

44 QUESTIONS
A.A. TRADITION—HOW IT DEVELOPED
MEMBERS OF THE CLERGY ASK ABOUT A.A.
THREE TALKS TO MEDICAL SOCIETIES BY BILL W.
ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS AS A RESOURCE FOR
THE HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONAL
A.A. IN YOUR COMMUNITY
IS A.A. FOR YOU?
IS A.A. FOR ME?
THIS IS A.A.
IS THERE AN ALCOHOLIC IN THE WORKPLACE?
DO YOU THINK YOU'RE DIFFERENT?
CAN A.A. HELP ME TOO?—
Black African/Americans Share Their Stories
QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ON SPONSORSHIP
A.A. FOR THE WOMAN
A.A. FOR THE NATIVE NORTH AMERICAN
A.A. AND THE GAY/LESBIAN ALCOHOLIC
A.A. FOR THE OLDER ALCOHOLIC—NEVER TOO LATE
THE JACK ALEXANDER ARTICLE
LETTER TO A WOMAN ALCOHOLIC
YOUNG PEOPLE AND A.A.
A.A. AND THE ARMED SERVICES
THE A.A. MEMBER—MEDICATIONS AND OTHER DRUGS
IS THERE AN ALCOHOLIC IN YOUR LIFE?
INSIDE A.A.
THE A.A. GROUP
G.S.R.
MEMO TO AN INMATE
THE TWELVE CONCEPTS ILLUSTRATED
THE TWELVE TRADITIONS ILLUSTRATED
LET'S BE FRIENDLY WITH OUR FRIENDS
HOW A.A. MEMBERS COOPERATE
A.A. IN CORRECTIONAL FACILITIES
A MESSAGE TO CORRECTIONS PROFESSIONALS
A.A. IN TREATMENT FACILITIES
BRIDGING THE GAP
IF YOU ARE A PROFESSIONAL
A.A. MEMBERSHIP SURVEY
A MEMBER'S-EYE VIEW OF ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS
PROBLEMS OTHER THAN ALCOHOL
UNDERSTANDING ANONYMITY
THE CO-FOUNDERS OF ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS
SPEAKING AT NON-A.A. MEETINGS
A BRIEF GUIDE TO A.A.
A NEWCOMER ASKS
WHAT HAPPENED TO JOE; IT HAPPENED TO ALICE
(Two full-color, comic-book style pamphlets)
TOO YOUNG? *(A cartoon pamphlet for teenagers)*
IT SURE BEATS SITTING IN A CELL
(An illustrated pamphlet for inmates)

VIDEOS

A.A.—AN INSIDE VIEW
A.A.—RAP WITH US
HOPE: ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS
IT SURE BEATS SITTING IN A CELL
CARRYING THE MESSAGE BEHIND THESE WALLS
YOUNG PEOPLE AND A.A.
YOUR A.A. GENERAL SERVICE OFFICE,
THE GRAPEVINE AND THE GENERAL SERVICE STRUCTURE

PERIODICALS

THE A.A. GRAPEVINE (monthly)
LA VIÑA (bimonthly)

