

CarryTheMessage.Com- The NA Way Magazine Volume 15, Number 3 reprinted by permission of Narcotics Anonymous.

Interview with Dave F.
Plymouth Meeting, Pennsylvania
Jan 19, 1974

Q. What was NA like when you found it in 1974?

A. There was a local rehab here, and it was a very enlightened rehab in that it opened its doors to addicts. It treated alcoholics for five or six years, and in the late sixties began treating addicts. The director believed that the same principles that worked for alcoholism would also work for addiction.

So there was NA on the ground at that time. There were two NA meetings a week and there had been NA off and on in Philadelphia, but mostly on since about 1969. There's a quick, interesting little story...

Q. Do tell.

A. It has to do with the importance of literature. An addict from this area had gone to an AA convention in California in 1969, and he met some people who said, "Look, there's NA out here." And they handed him one—one!—copy of the Little White Book. He brought it back to the rehab and showed it to a friend of his who was a therapist at the rehab and they started an NA meeting. All they knew about NA was what they got from the Little White Book.

Q. That was enough, I guess.

A. That's right. And from that, people who went through the rehab started meetings in their own communities, so by the time I came in in January 1974, there were about a half-dozen meetings in the Delaware Valley, which is Philadelphia and the surrounding suburban communities.

Also about that time—the late sixties, early seventies—the drug problem was growing. A lot of drug rehabs were starting to spring up that were modeled more on the Synanon approach, which was therapeutic communities [advocating long withdrawal from society]. A lot of them never addressed the problem of alcohol in the life of an addict.

Then here was this Little White Booklet and meetings that made it very clear that alcohol was a drug. That was a radical minority view at that time. There were rehabs that, after you were there a year, would try to teach you how to drink socially. They would take you out in the evenings and try to show you how to have one or two beers.

Q. We've come a long way. How about the Twelve Traditions? Did the NA community in Philadelphia follow them? Did you talk about them?

A. That's a very interesting topic because everybody went to AA. Nobody would have even attempted—it would have been viewed as foolhardy and half-stepping—to try to stay clean solely on NA meetings. [NA members] simply didn't have the clean time. I remember my first home group. It was a big meeting because it would have something like twelve or fifteen people, and that's really about all the addicts that were going to NA.

Q. And that was a huge NA meeting in Philadelphia in 1974?

A. Huge. And there was someone down there who was rumored to have three years. That was an extraordinary amount of time. So we all went to AA, and that's something people in the fellowship today have a hard time understanding. We read AA literature at the meetings.

So with the exception of our relationship with AA, I'd say we followed the traditions. There was a meeting in a treatment center, and [the staff] insisted that addicts [from outside] have a urine test before going to the meeting. So what we called the "Intergroup" then voted not to support that meeting because it was a violation of traditions.

Q. That's a controversial issue even today.

A. But we never viewed ourselves as a "little AA." We had our own personality from the beginning. We went to AA to learn spirituality and about the steps from alcoholics who had more experience with them.

Q. Would you say that NA language played a role in developing NA's identity?

A. I don't think so at all. We had a very clear identity. We had our own activities. We had our own Intergroup. We had our own public relations committee trying to get the message out, I'd say even more aggressively than now. We had a hotline in Philadelphia, and it rang in an addict's home. So I'd say the identity as a separate fellowship from AA predated the whole focus on NA language. That didn't hit here until the early to mid-eighties.

Q. How did that affect the fellowship in Pennsylvania?

A. It caused a lot of problems. A lot of people who were very involved in NA no longer go to NA because of it. This wave of "correct-speak" drove people away. But that wasn't the first thing. We had a major exodus when The NA Tree came down.

Q. Oh, really?

A. Yeah, it was disseminated in about 1977 after it was passed out there in California. A lot of people were very resistant. It turned out to be a minority, but it was a strong, vocal

minority who resisted adopting the service structure that—we felt—was being foisted upon us.

Q. What was your service structure before that?

A. Pretty much like AA's. We had an Intergroup.

Q. I'm not sure all our readers are familiar with AA's structure, so would you elaborate on that a little bit? What did Intergroup do? Did a representative from every NA group go to an Intergroup meeting?

A. Yeah, and it was done really well. The meeting was moved around to try to encourage interest from other areas.

Q. That's great. Did it provide any services?

A. Yeah, we had public relations. We had a literature committee. We did our own literature here. As I understand it, the First Step out in California read "...powerless over our addiction" in the early sixties, and it probably read that way in the Little White Book that landed here in 1969. But somebody here decided that it should be "...powerless over drugs." It was that way for quite a while, and it became a real controversy here. Meetings were reading it with "powerless over drugs," and when The NA Tree took hold, people went out to these meetings to tell them they weren't NA. Also, we were always trying to contact California and we never got a response. There was no viable fellowship in New York then. There was no viable fellowship that we knew of anywhere else. That's when a lot of people who were instrumental in early NA here just left.

But as many stayed as left, and they got their rewards. It's been tremendous to watch the growth of the fellowship. It takes compromise. I will say that [the NA language controversy] has tempered over the years. People can come into meetings and talk any way they want without causing a negative response.

Q. What else has changed?

A. Yeah, I'll tell you something else you'd never see in a meeting today. We had fifty-fifty raffles. [Editor's note: In a fifty-fifty raffle, tickets are sold for a certain amount and the pot of money is split between the organization conducting the raffle and the person whose ticket is drawn.]

Q. In meetings!?!

A. Can you imagine trying to get away with that today? There'd be a shoot-out.

Q. What other wild and crazy things did you do back then that NA doesn't do anymore?

A. Smoke in meetings. It was coffee, donuts, and cigarettes at every meeting. Nobody gave any thought to non-smoking meetings.

Q. What else?

A. People knew that if we wanted this thing to take off, we needed newcomers. Somebody sick with their ears open was a precious commodity. Also, relapse was viewed a little differently then. One could almost get the feeling that relapse today is just another day in recovery. I've heard people say in meetings that relapse is good and some other pretty absurd things. Relapse was taken very seriously, and it was something to be avoided.

Q. Do you think that's due to people coming in with "higher bottoms" these days?

A. I don't know. I think people are afraid to give each other direction today. It's not hip to tell someone, "hey, you're making a mistake." We've gotten to be this "we'll accept anything you do" thing, and that's bullshit. People need direction once in a while. The old-timers when I came around would get in your face if they thought you were doing something wrong. I was in a meeting a couple of weeks ago, and this guy was sharing about how alcohol wasn't really a problem for him and he could drink. I interrupted and said NA's a program of total abstinence and he really shouldn't be sharing here. People got upset with me for saying that.

Q. In your view, in what areas does NA still have some growing to do? What's the next step for NA?

A. I think we need to get the message of NA out to the public again, in terms of getting our phone number and meeting lists out there. Basically, I'm pretty happy with the way things are. I love the interest in history that's occurring. I think the next big move is that every region should record its history. I think the conventions are great and incredibly well-organized. Thank God so many addicts have the talent for putting those things on. I'd also like to see us recognize the NA Fellowship in New York that existed back in 1949, 1950, etc. I have a copy of the articles of incorporation of Narcotics Anonymous filed in 1951. I also have an original copy of "Our Way of Life—An Introduction to Narcotics Anonymous," published in 1951 in New York. I just think we need to be more objective about our history. It doesn't diminish in any way the contribution of the people in California. I owe my life to that Little White Book ending up here on the East Coast. I don't think it diminishes Jimmy K one bit to talk about the contributions of Danny C and Houston S. I think we should explore the connection between the fellowships in California and New York. There may have been some contact between them. Another thing I'd like to see is us somehow luring back the people who may have been put off by the intransigence of the mid- and late eighties. They have a lot to give—and they also have a lot to get here.

You can get clean here and never walk into another fellowship's meeting today. I've seen it. It's that strong. It's that big. We don't have to be afraid anymore that we're going to dissolve into some other fellowship. We're not going anywhere.

The NA Way Magazine presents the experiences and opinions of individual members of Narcotics Anonymous. The opinions expressed are not to be attributed to Narcotics Anonymous as a whole, nor does publication of any article imply endorsement by Narcotics Anonymous. The NA Way Magazine or Narcotics Anonymous World Services, Inc.

The NA Way Magazine (ISSN 10465-5421), The NA Way and Narcotics Anonymous are registered trademarks of Narcotics Anonymous, Inc.