

INTERVIEW WITH BOB B.

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Bob B. has 36 years clean in Narcotics Anonymous. His story, "Something Meaningful" can be found in the back of the NA Little White Booklet. His humility and earthy humor belie his spiritual wisdom, understanding and tolerance. He was and is an integral part of the history of NA. He was the first manager of the World Service Office, and his list of accomplishments in unselfish service to Narcotics Anonymous can never be understated. He truly lives the NA program and is a shining living inspiration for any addict struggling to find hope in their lives. We spoke to Bob at his home, and he allowed us a glimpse into some of the exciting early days during the infancy of NA, as well as some of his views of recovery and the Fellowship today.

NANL: How does it feel to be at a World Convention of Narcotics Anonymous during the main meeting countdown, and be the only person standing up in front of thousands of screaming, insane, recovering addicts, for the most continuous clean time of anyone in NA?

BB: That's something that's very hard to explain. You don't get over it. It's scary in a way, exciting and nostalgic. You're grateful and sometimes think back about all that time, all those people, how far you've come. It's very humbling.

NANL: How did you find the program?

BB: My old lady, she found Narcotics Anonymous. I happened to be not a willing participant at the time, as far as that was concerned. It was a kind of a strange affair—a strange relationship. I had nothing, presented nothing, with nothing to offer, and she wanted to get married. We addicts have this very special knack for finding people who want to take care of us. What it is, we look so miserable, so pitiful, that people just want to help. So in a way, you think you've scored, because you've got some place to go, a place to get out of the rain, to survive so to speak, or a means to allow you to play in the street while this relationship takes place. But it was no relationship, really, it was just convenience. A place to go and something to do, something to take care of in the midst of this madness going on called addiction, and it was her idea to clean up, it wasn't my idea. I had thought about it probably, off and on, between jail stints and so on. You know how we sit around the table and "I'm going to quit tomorrow—this pain's killing me", you know how we play that game, usually when times are hard, the dope on the street's been dried up, you're runnin' like crazy, or everything's falling apart. It already fell apart, but you don't know it. It's always, "Soon as I use this bag up I'm gonna quit, but not until then." Or "As soon as this is over with, then I'm gonna quit." Always gonna quit tomorrow.

So, she found out about this Narcotics Anonymous, and I sent her to check it out, find out what was going on, you know. And since there was no places for addicts to go anyhow, besides Lexington and Ft. Worth, and a couple of private programs they had that cost you an arm and a leg to get into. There was another program they were trying to start, some doctor thought he had found the cure, the cure for dope fiends, and he was doing that over at Hollywood Hospital, Dr. Knox. So I went over and talked to him and he told me the big story, if you've got two or three thousand dollars you know, we can help you. Just come right on in here and we'll change your metabolism, and we'll bop de bop de bop...you know. So they said this Narcotics Anonymous didn't cost anything, so I said let's go check this out. So that's when I went out to the Valley and I ran into Jimmy. Jimmy K. was holding court with about four or five other people, sitting around this table, and they were talking about...recovery...and staying clean, and the language was clean and sober. Because you have to realize, at the time there was one meeting, and you had to supplement it with something else; you'd go to meetings that would tolerate addicts being in their company without any big fanfare—as long as you didn't go in there and get too bad, too out of line, they'd let you stay. As long as you'd keep your mouth shut you'd do OK. This was in AA, about 1959 or '60.

So anyway, I went to this NA to check it out, and they seemed to be sitting around this table, not knowing what they were doing, talking about funny steps and shit, didn't mean nothin' to me. I wasn't impressed. It seemed like they might have some idea of what the game was about, but I didn't think they came from the streets like I did, or they didn't have to do the things that I did in order to maintain a habit. So you could see in my attitude what was going on in recovery, and it was nothing. I could tolerate it, share my long history of drug addiction and great knowledge about dope fiends around the world. I don't know what that had to do with recovery, but that was part of my spiel, and then, I'd go to meetings loaded anyhow! I'd get me a half-pint, polish off about half of it before I got to the meeting, and check 'em out. I could run my mouth then. "Who's got a problem?" "Bob's got a problem." Bob always had a problem, and I wanted them to fix it for me. Twelve steps? Shit—that's it? You got to do these twelve steps and you've got to do this, and do that.....I wasn't impressed.

But they still tolerated my being there, me doing what I had to do, thinking I could get away with things. But when it catches up with you—Gotcha! The easier softer way is a hard seat to sit on. So, going out to see Jimmy, being loaded, that's all they'd do is keep telling me, "Keep coming back" So every time I'd get out, or come around, or wake up or think about it I'd go out to the one meeting. Then we had a floater meeting about the same time it we went around to different places. You had to be at the meeting before to know where the floater was going to be, all of us weren't fortunate enough to have telephones. But my wife had a telephone, and that was it—two meetings.

Then there was a meeting at Shryer's Dryer, which moved to Rhodes and Moorpark at the Unitarian Church. And so that meeting started to grow, more people were finding out about NA, more people were coming out of these here, like the North Hollywood Clubhouse and so forth who had drug problems. And

the people from NA were going to these other meetings around, and they would let them know that's where they were going. So the message was getting out, there was an exchange of things going on. And I'm still going, when I was out of jail. When you're ripping and running, you're going to jail. So I was in that rotating door. But some of the things that happened during that time were very important. You're introduced to a way of life through whatever means, you're carrying that book around in your pocket, you're hearing the Steps on a regular basis, you're seeing or talking to people who are staying clean, and there's a certain common impression that they're making on you by doing what they're doing. Or you identify with something, like "...yeah, I done that!" "...that happened to me!", or "that's the same thing that I feel!"

So it's kind of these strange things that we come with that gets us here, and some of the things that they told me were going to happen were happening. The same crazy shit was getting worse, and I wore out welcomes most every place I'd go. And some way or another you get to that place where you've gotta make that decision, "I better give it a good try." The penitentiary helps, you attempt to get shot helps, you know, it really get your attention. And so I was in the penitentiary, I made a decision, and I got very involved with the committee there, in terms of NA there. We were affiliated there, we had an NA/AA meeting, with a big plaque: NA/AA. (HA HA HA HA)! So we started having meeting inside of meetings. It was part of what was called a prescription program at this particular institution, Tehatchepi; you had to go to so many meetings before you didn't have to go. J.P. Lloyd was the Superintendent up there. It was for the first seven weeks called the Indoctrination Period, before they'd assign you to jobs and tasks and programs. And I got kind of busy about doing the NA Dance, so to speak. Because you keep hearing the same things, with the same people doing the same things, that come from the same places and telling your story. You get some sense of being a part of something.

I didn't believe the Steps were going to work either, but I was willing to try them to see what happened. Why not? It's just an exercise, you do this and that—oh, you don't have to do that; nobody demanded that you do any of them. It was a mix and match going on. And there's a whole attitude change that comes about as a result of making a true commitment to doing something, that you recognize, like, "Wow—Where'd that come from? "That's not my thinking!" So you start doing the work, start doing the writing, start talking about what you think the problem is. You don't know where they're going—I had no idea as to what journey I was on. It was just, let's try this thing, and see what happens.

The attitude changes, even first denial from the (Parole) Board, it was understanding what that denial was. It was like, "You've been there before, Bob, that's the game you played all the time to get out." You stack 'em up with all these 'nice' things you've been doing. Madden, used to be the narcotics chief down in L.A., who was on the Parole Board now, and he knew dope fiends in and out. He said, "You're a good prisoner, you're just not good out on the street—You're gonna have to get your street game, not your jailhouse game going!" And, "We want your stay-out game, not your get-out game." And Damn—the kind of realization like, 'Wow, I never thought of it like that before!'

So there starts a new journey, so to speak, in terms of participating in NA with a true clear mind of what's going on, and with a certain commitment of trying to stay out. The result was my journey of recovery. It's been slow at best in so many ways, not like I wanted it to be, but it's been swift enough to be at the speed it's supposed to be. Cause addicts like myself, we've got this built-in thing of wanting it yesterday, or why haven't I got mine? Just the addict thinking, it's still there sometimes in life today. Of course, I know the difference today. I might take a 'leave of absence' up here, and not do the work that's necessary to accomplish what I want. The whole idea of, "I can get away with this, I've got the right flag", but the flag was a bum flag! So we have to pay the consequences.

NANL: Did you get a sponsor?

BB: Yeah, Jimmy was my first sponsor. He remained my sponsor for about four or five years. But he seemed to be in a sense, out of my ballpark, in our lifestyles and otherwise. And Jimmy was off-and-on very sick, and Jack Waley happened to come along, and he was on the outside like I felt on the inside. Kind of like, that was the person you wanted to be like. He was very able to act it out; very verbal, gregarious, even arrogant sometimes. So we had a great exchange—an understanding of where we were at any given time. We kind of interchanged, worked as each other's sponsors at times. We lived almost the same lifestyles, we had the same amount of kids, the same kind of old lady, and we just sort of fit together.

NANL: Wouldn't let you get away with anything?

BB: No, he wouldn't bite his tongue about anything. He'd tell you right off the top, "You're a damn liar, full of shit..." you know. So he was able to talk to me, not only wouldn't let me get away with anything, but he could out-talk me. Cause I was good at talking, I could rationalize, justify, and had the game down—like if I threw you a question, I knew what response I'm gonna come back with. I had it all manipulated.

So we have these people who come into our lives, they act as guides so to speak. And there's people that you hang out or associate with, that you can grow with. And I've had a number of those tutors around that I've been able to learn a lot from. Jimmy was one of those; his manner was so low-keyed in some ways, that you'd get lost in the philosophical exchange. I thought I was a philosopher, but he had outdone me, education-wise. He had a knack of knowing that you had missed the point. He would take you on so many tangents, weaving around, so it was sometimes hard to communicate, although over the years we were close and remained very close.

NANL: Do you still have a sponsor?

BB: Sure, my sponsor has a little less time, but I've known him over thirty years. A person who you trust and respect, that's what it amounts to. That's one of the

keys; it has nothing to do with time per say, hopefully he has some experience along the way, and there's a number of people who I could choose in that category. Because I've come to that place, through different types of life experiences, where I trust and respect people. That took a long time for me. Because often, time is not the key to where a person is.

NANL: What was the attraction of Jimmy? How was he able to succeed in building this coalition of societal misfits, fugitives, renegades and gunslingers where no one had been able to accomplish this before?

BB: He was accepting and never demanding. It made no difference where you came from, or who you were; he treated everybody as equals. He didn't downplay or upstage anyone, even though he had his biases. One thing he talked about was that he hated Communism. There were a couple of books that he used to hate; one was L. Ron Hubbard's Scientology. He'd get very upset. Once he left town, went to Santa Barbara because Khrushchev was coming to town. And where he ended up, Khrushchev arrived in Santa Barbara! Isn't that kind of strange? What we try to avoid we usually have to face in one way or another.

Jimmy wouldn't let NA mix traditions with any other organizations. We had people who came from the AA traditions who called AA the "mother group"; they didn't want to change the language or alter it to fit our organization or our philosophy, They tried to add 'ism's' on it, focused on the substance rather than just deal with the disease.

But Jimmy kept getting back to the greater concept of disease, not isms, because isms just confused the issue. Those were the things that made for difficult times in terms of the split, people wavering back and forth, wanting to stay with the 'mother ship'. The feeling was, you can't think for yourself, don't change those things.

But addicts grew from a different place, they started from a different place, it had nothing to do with age—then again, it does have something to do with age. An addict arrived in NA, they had a certain place in maturity that was very low. Most alcoholics had a lifestyle before they got to the end of their using, so they had some history about doing certain things, being responsible. Addicts, by in large, don't have that history, and so they've got to grow from a different place. They don't have to do double the work, but they have to realize that's just where I am and that's where I have to grow from. So it was important that we have a place or atmosphere where we're all growing at the same rate.

Maturing takes time. Addicts don't have much patience; we want it done yesterday. We think different, because of where we're growing from. It's not that we can't accomplish things while we're growing, but it's very important to have people around us while we're growing—I'm talking about 'one teach one'. The danger is we sometimes have a tendency to be selfish, and often it becomes, "If I got mine, you gotta get yours."

NANL: When NA began, members were almost exclusively heroin addicts, there was a bias against anyone who used any other drugs ...

BB: We came strictly from the streets, if they used anything but heroin, we didn't think they were addicts for real. Cause our definition of an addict was that person who stuck that spike into his arm. You smoke weed, too much weed, aw shit—cut it out, nothin' to it! Takin' them pills? Oh man, just don't drop them pills, you'll be aright!

NANL: In spite of that bias, there must have been an insight, a feeling far below the surface that we were dealing with the disease and not a specific drug, that inside we were the same. Since most people who had experienced any recovery came out of Alcoholics Anonymous, it would have been natural to call this new fellowship Heroin Anonymous. But they didn't. There was even an early attempt made to name it Addicts Anonymous

BB: They tried, but it (the initials) was too closely associated with AA. For one thing, most heroin addicts were subculture. The pillheads, a lot of them were coming from the doctor's office, they had three or four doctors. So we didn't think we were in the same boat, at first.

NANL: Not many people are aware that at one time NA was involved with starting a recovery house, and you were closely associated with this effort.

BB: It actually started around the mid sixties, when Bill B., an NA member, came back from starting one of the first residential treatment programs for drug addicts, called Chrysalis, in the San Francisco area. The program was funded by the county and Bill and several other addicts went up to help them out. Bill had a knack for organizing and starting programs, but he had a hard time dealing with authority, so to speak. Well, at this time we had lots of addicts coming to meetings who were strung out with nowhere to go. Too many to put up in our homes, and no real inpatient facilities available unless you had money. So I found this old barn in the San Fernando Valley, and we filled it with beds and started putting addicts from the street there. It was in many ways a forerunner after which many programs today are still modeled. We would hustle in the day for food and money, and in the evening we would take the residents to meetings. And a lot of addicts began to find recovery through this program, called Reprieve (as in, 'daily reprieve).

NANL: Why didn't the program last? Was it due to conflicts with the Traditions?

BB: The city shut us down 'cause we were in violation of every ordinance in the book! We were condemned. But out of that program some people got funding for another program, called Impact, and out of that eventually came Cri-Help. In fact, that's where the CRI in Cri-Help came from—Chrysalis, Reprieve, Impact. And out of the programs that followed, although they were not associated with NA,

they funneled a lot of addicts into recovery, and into the Narcotics Anonymous program.

NANL: One thing I see that disturbs me, is that often, as people get time in the program, they seem to disappear.

BB: And there's a number of reasons for that, one is the feeling that, if you don't want me, I won't be here.

NANL: Does the Fellowship put out that message?

BB: In a way, yes. We're always fixing things, even things that aren't broken. And we go into a frenzy fixing things that are already working, placing things that are already in place. The wheel is already there—don't have to remake it. But addicts get busy about doing things with this wheel; we've got to embellish it in some way to make it beyond the wheel. And come to find out, you've got to go back to the wheel!

It's frustrating to sit on the side and tell them what they're doing, because you know they're denying it. But over the years you've seen it happen over and over again. When we first wrote "The Tree" everybody said, "What are you talking about, it can't work!" They're still talking about "TWGS"-Temporary Working Guide, it's been 'temporary' forever—and it's still working. It's this kind of thinking that's frustrating. People get started working on things, and then they want to start over again. So we find ourselves in a trap, thinking "We did that yesterday, now are we gonna do it again, and again tomorrow until forever?" When is that going to stop?

NANL: So what happens to these people with experience, strength, and hope?

BB: They begin to back out of the fight. Because we have a diminishing number of those people, who have been in service for long periods of time. And it becomes more frustrating as you talk about group conscience, when what we really have is an uninformed group consciousness. We need to educate the Fellowship! That's our task now, to keep them informed from all levels as to what's going on. The Fellowship is not aware, and somewhere along the way, we've dropped the ball in keeping them informed.

Sometimes the representative brings bad information back to the group. With bad information, how can you make a valid decision, even if the group has steering committees? It was the same problem with the CAR last time, I found out how uninformed the Fellowship is, even those in service. They're uninformed of how this whole thing works! And the information is there, it's not being hidden. The World Service Office issues bulletins as to finances, activities, where issues come from. It gets to the region, what happens at the region? The only person who reads it is the region Chair, or does he read it at all? Does he pass that information on to the RSR's, to the GSR's, so they can pass it on to the groups? Moreover, the information has got to be correct. If you're supposed to be a message-carrier, just carry the message.

I'm busy, but I can't blame Joe if I'm not doing it. All I can do is all I can do. And I try to inform those around me, they must do the same. The people that I sponsor, I keep them informed so they can inform the next one down the line. Know what's going on, be involved, and learn how to listen.

NANL: You're an exception, maybe stubborn. You're going to be here regardless...

BB: Nobody's going to run me off, I ain't going nowhere! (Ha, ha, ha)

NANL: But the others, the ones with the wisdom and experience who got frustrated, how do we get them back?

BB: Invite them back in. Just look around you very often, those with time and service, they have not been invited back in. Why? Because we may have to change our ideas as to how to get something done. But we want our right to be wrong. But that's the key, we've got to invite them in. I did a tape at some old-timers group in San Francisco. Big room—no one in the room had less than five years. Old-timers pretty much stand on the wall and watch the rest of the world go by, and that's what they were doing, observing their children, their flock. I couldn't get anyone to volunteer, to put their hand up. I said, "Now who is an old-timer, where does it start—10 years, 15 years, 20 years?" It's an interesting question. And the people with less time in the room, hey, don't let them stand on the wall. Go ask them some questions. Put them to the task. Ask them to help you to get through something. Invite them in to be a participant in your life. We learn from each other. Very often I can ease your journey in participating in whatever you're going through. And usually, I come out enriched, is what it amounts to.

And yeah, it's a pain in the ass a lot of times. I don't want to get up or go or do, because it's not in sync with what I think I ought to be doing. I see the value after the fact, but initially I don't want to budge.

You have to know when to say no, too. Soon as they find they can get you to say yes, they'll wear you out. You become their mother and father, and that's what they're looking for. But that's not my job.

NANL: What do you think of the Guide to Working the Twelve Steps in progress?

BB: There's nothing wrong with it, but I think there are things that are more important. I think they've got to have a project, so they create a project, rather than look at what needs to be done. They need to change the whole literature process; that's what they should be working on.

NANL: What about the literature process?

BB: It served us well when it was first formed; we wanted everything to come internally, then out to the program. One of the reasons for that was, we didn't

want any radical introduction of things at the time, so we participated in and approved all recovery materials that came out. We've come to another place in the road where we have a enough people in recovery that have good ideas and information that could be shared, that could help us in this journey. Not only that, it would help them, in terms of furthering their ability to write and to help people. We would have another resource for literature, another source to reach society at large! We could publish and distribute our own recovery material from all different angles.

We need to change the process of how literature is presented to the Fellowship. It's not that it shouldn't be approved by the Fellowship. But I think that now, what is produced, rather than being created by the entire Fellowship, is created internally. It's sent out to the Fellowship for one year or whatever, as to a yes or no—not to rewrite or alter it—just take it or leave it! And if they leave it, great; then they find another source for the material. They've done that already in about three or four pieces, the NA Way and Sponsorship as examples.

NANL: Can you explain the business of NA?

BB: There is the part of NA that that is concerned with recovery. The other part, we have to think of as a business. Somebody has to pay the rent, the salaries, upkeep, and all the things that have to be taken care of. And we have to inform people about what's going on in this area. And all of us, as a Fellowship, have to learn how to give and let it go. It's not about giving something and then tell him how they should use it. Then you haven't really given it—you've still got possession of it. Those are the things that as addicts, we still have to learn. We normally gave and expected something in exchange—You gimme something, I give you something, huh?

Our very livelihood comes from what we have to sell, so to speak. Trying to rely on the groups to pay for the services is not working. They've got a bad idea as to where the money goes, what services the money renders. So we must inform the Fellowship as to what's going on.

I try to get all the people I sponsor, and I submitted the idea about 7 or 8 years ago for the 'Penny-a-day' concept. If every addict in recovery were to contribute one penny a day, we wouldn't have a financial problem. Cold concept! Penny a day—can you commit to a penny a day? No, we think in five hundred thousand, billions... So I try to get them to send 365 cents to the World Service Office or Conference every year. Just to get them into the idea that it can amount to something over a period of time. These services that are rendered, that are so wide reaching, somebody's got to pay for them. And are you grateful enough to contribute to the job that needs to be done, instead of complaining about what's not being done? They always blame the WSO; can't find anyone else to blame so they blame the WSO (Heh, heh)—they're the only ones who are free-standing, out there by themselves, that they can throw rocks at. They can't throw them at the Conference, and the WSO does what the conference tells them to do. They don't understand that. "Who told them to do that?" Someone told them to do that; they didn't do it on their own. But they've got the idea that there's a

great hierarchy up here that's holding the Fellowship back. Not really, but the Fellowship doesn't know that. They think it's coming from on high somewhere—it's not, it's down here on low. So our task is to inform the Fellowship the best we know how. If they want references to these things, they're available; nobody's hiding anything from them. See where the money goes, find out how much is going into translations, distributions, helping people to get things started or get them off the ground!

And how many of groups around the country have these great big, what they call prudent reserves—which is called excess—they're sitting on, for a party. Not for service, they're sitting on it for a party! And they've got all the right words to go with it too. They call it 'giving it back to the Fellowship'—we're going to throw this big party and invite everyone over. No shit! Or in the meetings, with the zu-zu's and wam-wams, French pastries, not the regular shit, they want the heavy-duty stuff. We're talking about all the things we do in our addict thinking that's very consistent. I'm not saying that I've always been on the straight and narrow, because I think we all have a bit of that attitude within us, that might pop up at any time. But if we work in force and make a certain commitment about doing something, we have to do that too. And when I talk about collectively, now we have to do it individually. We stand up and pound tables, you know. They tried to get me to address the Conference, but they couldn't get two-thirds vote. But I understand the addict's thinking, see.

Very often, most of the people who are complaining about things, one thing I ask them is, "Have you got a better way?" They feel anything that comes from someone else is not valid, and everything that comes from them has to be valid. They're so entrenched in this exercise of fight, fight, fight, they don't see the value of giving up the fight. Look for the solution, that's the only way of dealing with the problem.

NANL: How much time do you have?

BB: Why, is that a measure? (Ha, ha, ha). I came around over thirty-seven years ago, almost thirty-eight. My birthday is August 12. But I've got thirty-six years on this journey of recovery, as I call it. It has many roads, many sidetracks, ups and downs, it has climbing and it has falling. But it's an unending journey, where sometimes I discover things that are fascinating. Like, 'Wow, where'd that come from?' 'How'd I get there?' 'What made me think that I could do that, or want to do that?' After all this time, it becomes kind of an adventure, 'Let me go out here and try this—shit, why not?'

NANL: Do you have a home group?

BB: Yes, I have a Wednesday night home group that meets in Culver City, because there were very few regulars. I felt that I could serve a purpose by being a regular. It's not a high profile group, it just seemed to be...

NANL: ...A meeting that needed help?

BB: In a way it needed help, but I needed them too.

NANL: In spite of all these things that would lead us to believe that we're going in the wrong direction, we still seem to be guided by this 'force'....

BB: You stay around long enough, and you see the path that it's following, has been to the good. Growth takes place, slow. But we have to be a part of it. As far as our development process, we're still in our adolescence, with a long way to go to maturity. We have more people involved than have the know-how. It's hard to explain it, they might have the academic know-how; they need to develop some other kind of know-how to go with it. In other words, we've got people that know how to do things, how to write, type, computer—professional. Just because they're professional doesn't mean they're mature.

And that maturing is coming along, maybe at a faster pace. Because I see more of that, more of those people involved today. Where yesteryear, out of fifty people involved in doing service, maybe ten had any knowledge as to which end was up, myself included! I had certain skills accumulated over a period of time, organizational skills, but as big as Narcotics Anonymous has become—not a clue. I knew what needed to be done; I just didn't know how to get it done. And that's the dilemma still today, addicts know what needs to be done, they don't know how to do it—and they don't want nobody else to do it! That's where the thing is. It's called, "No, no, no, no, don't interfere. We'll do it ourselves!" We're like kids. "I'd rather do it myself, mother." That's what we're hollering, rather than ask, "Will you show me how to do this?" We're leaning a little more towards that in some ways, because we're beginning to ask those questions. We don't run the show, but we can alter how the show is performed.

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