

Interview
Jack B.
January 24 1988
(By Lee M, the N.A. Way Magazine)

LM: This is a tape made January 24, 1988, an interview by Lee Manchester, a WSO employee, with Jack Bernstein. Jack, do you have any objections to taping this interview?

JB: No, not at all. As long as I get royalties.

LM: Right; I wish I got royalties! What do you got there? [JB Is leafing through a file folder.]

JB: There's a letter informing what was then called the General Service Office of the San Fernando Valley [an area of the city of Los Angeles just north of the L.A. basin] forming its own area. The property that I refer to is technically I guess the World Service Office's, is a set of by-laws--or a blank set of by-laws--forms that I was supposed to use to incorporate the World Service Office. The first attempt at incorporating the office occurred as a result, I believe, in 1974--at any rate before the World Convention in Anaheim at what was then called the World Service Conference. This was usually just a business meeting conducted at each World Convention. There was a motion passed to incorporate the World Service Office and to elect--and I use the term "elect" very loosely--to elect a Board of Directors, or at least officers for the board, and at that time ... I only remember the chairperson and the vice-chairperson elected: myself, the chairperson, and Nolan Warner, the vice-chairperson. There was also a secretary and a treasurer elected, but I don't know what that was.

LM: This was '74?

JB: I believe it was definitely the 4th World Convention in Anaheim, I think that was in '74. The reason why I say [that] I use the term loosely is there was a prominent member of our fellowship at the time who had some influence over the residents of CRI-Help--not referring to myself [JB at the time of the interview was Executive Director of CRI-Help, a long-term residential treatment facility for drug addicts in North Hollywood, California]--but since I was nominated for the chairperson's slot, this other individual went around to some thirty, thirty-five residents of CRI-Help who were in attendance at this so-called World Service Conference and told them to vote for me. So I got thirty votes. Not knowing what the outcome of the votes were, I don't know whether that effected the vote or not. I know it didn't hurt ft.

LM: That's pretty wild!

JB: At any rate, out of that there was four officers elected to the World Service Office, whose main charge was to incorporate the World Service Office. We had

several meetings. None of us knew a damned thing about incorporating anything. I mean, I had some idea of how by-laws were put together, and as a result of my involvement with CRI-Help, of how to actually go ahead and fill out corporation papers and all that. None of us knew a damned thing. I knew enough to go to a stationery store and buy the set of corporation papers that I still have, that still haven't even been ... The seal hasn't even been cracked! Really the main outcome of that effort was that it got me personally involved with the World Service Office. While we met at different locations and discussed, the four of us, how to go about doing this--what it did for me was it got me to go down to what was then the World Service Office, which at that time because of Jimmy's [Jimmy Kinnon] health for the most part wasn't in Jimmy's hands at all. As a matter of fact, it was down on Highland Avenue [Hollywood, California], a little office that we rented for \$50.00 a month. Bob Barrett was the one who was basically manning that, pretty much by himself at that point. Then I started going down there every Saturday, helping him with mail, answering mail, sending out orders of White Books [the booklet, Narcotics Anonymous], and little by little I got involved. I think Bob found that a welcome involvement, because he was little by little, he stopped coming down on Saturdays, and as the chairperson of the board it seemed that the responsibility was then shifted. Which was okay, I enjoyed going down there, I enjoyed discovering that Narcotics Anonymous was more than California. Most of us in California thought then--and I suspect still think ... It was interesting. I enjoyed it, like I said, if nothing else just finding out that, which might sound ludicrous now, but finding out how large the fellowship was.

LM: How large was the fellowship at that time--say in '74 and '75?

JB: As far as numbers of groups, I wouldn't even want to attempt a guess. What I did know is that New Jersey, Pennsylvania had quite a few groups, seemed to have a structure going...

LM: Was that mostly around Allentown or Philadelphia?

JB: Philadelphia. Primarily Philadelphia. Arizona, at that time, had a service structure going in Phoenix, and had quite a few groups. They eventually fell apart.

LM: I've heard the story of that.

JB: I'm sure. There were other groups in the East, on the East Coast, and a few other places. But finding out that there were groups *anywhere* was really, you know, was nice, it was nice to discover. I got a different sense of the fellowship at that time. At the same time, while I was doing that, I was also very active in the San Fernando Valley Area Service Committee, and may have also been chairperson of the Valley at the time.

LM: At that time the ... What kind of service structure was that? Except the Board of Trustees and the Board of Directors for the WSO. Was there any difference between the Board of Trustees and the Board of Directors?

JB: Yes. I wasn't on the Board of Trustees at that time. As a matter of fact, I wasn't eligible for the Board of Trustees at that time. In '74 I had three years clean. Personally, I had no understanding or knowledge of where the Board of Trustees fit in anywhere at that time, in spite of the fact--and maybe because it was the closeness of having recovered in the midst of and alongside of the members of the Board of Trustees--they never seemed to me to be anything other than some people who had more time clean than me. What their involvement in the service structure was was never apparent to me. It may have been to others, but it was never apparent to me, and I don't think the Board of Trustees particularly functioned as anything at that time. That, you know, a great deal ... Outside of their individual efforts as members of the program, I don't think the Board of Trustees influenced the program in any way, shape, or form--at least I couldn't see it. And I can't see it now. I know when I went to my first Board of Trustees meeting as a Board of Trustee [sic-it is common at the time of this interview among some to refer to individuals on the WSB and the WSO Board of Directors as "Boards of Trustee" or "Boards of Director"] I had the same sense: "What are we doing here?" I drove all the way down to Orange County to attend the meeting, and we sat around and listened to some letters read that were answered by the chairman, and we got to listen to his answers. I really don't know that the Board of Trustees *had* a significant role outside of their individual efforts as members of the program. As a board I don't think they really had a significant impact on the fellowship at that time. And I don't think it really began to--and I guess it's debatable whether they have since--but if the board as a whole has had an impact, or as a board on the fellowship didn't begin to occur until whenever the tremendous change in the conference took place.

LM: '82 or '83?

JB: About that time.

LM: So was membership on the Board of Trustees basically just a way to give a little bit more credibility to some senior N.A. members?

JB: I think it was simply ... I don't know. I don't know that they didn't play a role before I came around. They may have been significant in some ways before I came around. They may have been significant and I can't see it. When I was relatively new--in my first few years. I don't know. One of the things that was real difficult to adjust to as a Board of Trustee, because of my perception of board members, not ... I never looked up to board members because they were on the Board of Trustees. I never placed them someplace other than being a member of the fellowship. When I was on the board and the board's role was changing, it was difficult to adjust to try to keep in mind that the rest of the fellowship doesn't seem to see, or there's a lot of the fellowship, a significant part of the fellowship,

that is looking to the board for some direction, is viewing us in a different way than I ever did. That was kind of difficult. I know when I was elected to the board, which was still on the old basis to life-long term, commitment, to being elected from a pool that the conference nominated but that the board themselves--similar to what the World Service Office board now does--the Board of Trustees themselves would select those that were nominated to the pool. When I was elected, when I was nominated first, and then second eight or nine months later, maybe a year later that I was elected to the board by the existing board, I saw it as nothing more than an acknowledgement of my involvement in the fellowship and an acknowledgement of the time clean I had and my commitment to service to date, to that point. I took it as a pat on the back, and probably accepted it more from ego than anything, than dedication. That may not be really all that accurate, but it's probably equally, 50% ego, 50% that this seemed to be the next thing that I'm to be involved with. Because of my perception of them not doing a whole hell of a lot, I didn't see it as really a task that I was taking on at that time. That quickly changed. At the time I was elected I just primarily took it as a pat on the back, an acknowledgement of the fellowship in a sense of having been involved in service continuously for eight years at that point, and very involved in the fellowship and a pat on the back.

LM: You talked about In '74, the San Fernando Valley Area Service Committee forming?

JB: No, the San Fernando Valley, I think, had formed before that. But I think In '74 ... We formed sometime probably in mid-'73 or so. We notified the General Service Board and the Southern California Regional General Service Office in December of '73 that we had formed the group, or the area. At that time that was the first, to my knowledge, the first area service committee anywhere. It certainly was the first area service committee in California. There was a lot of, as usual when new things are done, there was a lot of animosity towards us, breaking away from ... Because at that time there were basically two areas or regions or whatever you want to call them In California, Northern California and Southern California. The Valley decided to go off on Its own. Not that we broke off our involvement in Southern California. We continued membership.

LM: The general service reps from the San Fernando Valley all still went to the Southern California Service Committee?

JB: At least one-- don't remember if they all went. I don't remember. It's possible they all went for awhile. It didn't take that long before other areas started to follow suite. But for awhile ... At that time we had the General Service Office at a location on Santa Fe Springs that eventually moved because of the money. I'm not clear what the either the GSO or the San Fernando Valley involvement, but somewhere they moved over to, somebody moved over to Suicide Prevention Center in Los Angeles. And because of whatever I was, however I was involved in that, I had an opportunity to move the World Service Office over there, and

have a totally separate office with a different address so we wouldn't have to be "World Service Office in care of Suicide Prevention Center." I knew enough about the traditions that didn't seem to be the wise thing to do. I have to laugh now, because the reason I was looking to make this move really was because we could get this office for \$1.00 a month. The exorbitant \$50.00 [rent at the Highland Street location] was a little difficult to make.

LM: Santa Fe Springs--that's a road?

JB: Yeah, that's a street.

LM: What town is that in? [Los Angeles County is taken up to a great extent by the City of Los Angeles Itself, within which are certain districts identified by their own town names. Other cities also exist in L.A. County, some completely surrounded by the City of L.A. but separately incorporated and governed. The town known by Angelenos as Los Angeles is the area surrounding downtown L.A. close to the old mission settlement.]

JB: In Los Angeles. That's where the General Service Office was. It may have also moved about the same time.

LM: Is that [Santa Fe Springs] the location off Highland? [The interviewer is confused. At this point in the interview, he is not aware that the World Service Office and the Southern California General Service Office were at that time--and are today--two different entities.]

JB: No, Highland is in Hollywood.

LM: Yeah, so this was before or after Highland?

JB: It was at the same time. Highland was going on then. At that time, I had the opportunity to get the office at Suicide Prevention Center, and eventually accepted it. I moved the Highland office over into Suicide Prevention Center. We had a separate phoneline there, a separate address, but it stirred a little bit of shit, being located at Suicide Prevention Center,

LM: Because of the appearance of affiliation?

JB: Yeah.

LM: I think I might be a little confused here. Are the World Service Office and the General Service Office two different things?

JB: Yes.

LM: What was the General Service Office?

JB: The General Service Office was equivalent to what we now know as the Regional Service Office.

LM: Okay. Thank you. So, what year was this?

JB: The very end of '74, possibly early '75. And it was very painful, I remember it was very difficult making the decision because I knew of the possible ramifications of the affiliation. The one I went to for advice, whether to do it or not do it, was Jimmy [Kinnon]. He wouldn't tell me to do it or not do it. He told me, when I explained that it may receive a lot of negative input from the fellowship, he told me if I didn't do it I would receive negative input from the fellowship, if I did it I would receive negative input from the fellowship. He told me, "if you're involved and you're going to make decisions and you're going to be doing things for the fellowship, then you damned well better be willing to accept criticism. Because whether you make a left turn or a right turn it won't matter. There will be those people who think you should have made a left, and those people who think you should have made a right. Depending on which way you go, you're going to receive heat from those who think you should have gone the other way. So you'd definitely better expect that and learn how to deal with that and live with that. If you're going to be involved in service that's going to be a given. You make the best decision for the fellowship that you can make, and that you make it because you think it's best for the fellowship, not because you or any small group of the fellowship think it's best." And I've tried to operate that way ever since then, and I made the move on that basis. The only people who could have ever known that was in Suicide Prevention Center or people locally who had the opportunity to know that that was going on. Unless someone told somebody from out of town there's no way they'd know because first of all in those days any communication was made directly from the office. The mail outside of using the post office box. [?] If the phone rang, it rang--if it was answered, which was probably rarely, it was answered, "World Service Office of Narcotics Anonymous." I didn't think there was any affiliation or involvement. How self-supporting we were?

LM: \$1.00 a month rent...

JB: We did pay rent, and that was the reality of the financial situation of the World Service Office. Eventually, and probably not more than six months later, an office became available in Van Nuys [the largest centrally located town in the San Fernando Valley], and I again moved the World Service Office. That was primarily done for accessibility. At that point some more people started getting involved; most of the people were from the Valley, and it made it easier to go to the office in Van Nuys. And that also started getting Jimmy started coming over to the office again [from his home in the town of Sun Valley, in the northeast San Fernando Valley]. I found the role reversed. Bob Barrett was glad to see me getting involved and he little by little started to ease on out. I guess the same thing happened as I got Jimmy back involved; slowly, little by little, I eased on

out. Probably within six months Jimmy had moved the office back to his house. So I would say probably by early '76, possibly late '75, the office had gone from Highland to Suicide Prevention Center to Van Nuys back to Jimmy's.

LM: Did It stay at Jimmy's house until it moved to the location on Panorama City/Van Nuys, the storefront?

JB: It stayed at Jimmy's until around '82 or so when the conference when the conference became a lot more active. Jimmy moved it to another location in Sun Valley, and then to yet another location in Sun Valley in Sunland. It was a lot bigger by then, there was a lot more than could fit in just his house. So It moved to a location in Sunland in '81.

LM: When was the work begun on The NA. Tree, how did that start? What was the reason for that to get going? The World Service Conference had been a business meeting at the World Convention each year since it had started [in 1971]. How did the Tree start growing?

JB: My guess is ... Either I don't really remember ... I remember attending a lot of meetings, I remember getting together with Northern California and Southern California people at a meeting in between on the Tree. I guess as the Tree... First of all it was formed out of the need to have something in writing on what our structure was--something in greater detail I should say, because there was something. When I came to the fellowship in '71 I saw a structure. It was two pages, a two page thing that was available at the Southern California General Service Organization meetings that Jimmy used to have that outlined the service structure of Narcotics Anonymous. In those two pages it went far beyond where we were at at the time. It was an ideal.

LM: A very general model?

JB: It talked about area service committees, something that didn't exist at the time. It talked about regional service committees in a different outline than existed at the time. It talked about one person wearing one hat rather than people serving as chairperson on twelve committees, which certainly didn't exist and didn't for a long time. It talked about [clean-]time requirements for various positions. We were lucky to have someone clean serving in those days, let alone having the whole ninety days or six months required. And that's true, I literally mean that. I don't really remember ... I think it was two pages. I remember that when I looked at It at the time, I said, "You've got to be kidding, we'll never be able to do this!"

LM: Was that statement of structure a projection of Jimmy's personal vision, or was It the product of a committee?

JB: I don't know for sure, but that's my guess. My guess is that, as best as my involvement was at the time ... Maybe that's why I don't remember, maybe I just wasn't involved in the real formation of the Tree. I think that by the time most of us got involved, their basically was a form. I do remember that I thought that, on one hand with the original draft of the Tree either wasn't really brilliant or perhaps was real brilliant because what It did was outline what N.A. was at that point. It had already grown and formulated what the original draft of the Tree was. It may have been some more Ideals I was not able to even see that went beyond what we had already succeeded in bringing about, what the fellowship had evolved to. When I say "we" I'm talking pretty much about California--by that time Southern and Northern California had evolved pretty much to the point the Tree outlined.

LM: By "the first draft," do you mean the first published edition?

JB: Yeah, pretty much. But even before that, by the time it came to the majority of the fellowship involved in meetings to finalize the Tree, I think that was basically Greg's, Greg's and Jimmy's. But basically I think the original draft of the Tree was Jimmy and Greg's doing. What I remember of the rest of the work on the Tree was like any other committee work that still goes on today. Two opposing views going on and people arguing and bickering over possibly petty areas of ... At any rate, there was lots of arguing and bickering, and naturally it was Northern California arguing with Southern California.

LM: Did Northern California really have a radically different vision of wh ought to be? Or was it really not terribly significant stuff?

JB: I don't recall It being radically different. I just think it was...

LM: Just some of the kind of details we argue about today when we're talking about service?

JB: Exactly.

LM: What kind of ... I don't want to get into the details, or try to pin blame for anything, but how did this go out to the fellowship at that time? Was it approved by the service structure or did it go back to the N.A. groups that existed at that time, or...

JB: I don't even remember what approval process it went through. I believe it went to one of the conference meetings at the convention for approval. Whether it went to the groups I really don't know.

LM: There are a couple of other lines I wanted to track down. The NA Tres was in, what, '75? How many from outside of Northern and Southern California were taking part in these business meetings at the conventions?

JB: Probably not more than half a dozen, and probably four or five of them came from Arizona. That's my recollection.

LM: Do you recall any attempt to either borrow from A.A.'s service structure in the Tree or to deliberately stay away from it?

JB: I don't...

LM: Or was that just not an issue at all?

JB: I don't think it was an issue in those days. First of all, I think we all accepted the fact that we had borrowed the steps and traditions from A.A. I think I have to presume, I know for myself--that when I got involved in service and started asking questions about the structure and about various different things I was referred to A.A.'s World Service Manual, which I read.

LM: So it wasn't a big deal, it was just assumed...

JB: It was definitely ... Matter of fact, it was apparently ... I hadn't thought about this, but in reading our letter to the Southern California Regional General Service Organization of N.A. about the Valley forming, in the letter it refers to A.A., to give what we did credibility: "in accordance with the Twelve Traditions of N.A., the ideal General Service Structure of N.A. as provided for by conference on April 30, 1969," which apparently must refer to that two page document that I talked about, apparently was approved at a conference in 1969, "and guided by the proven experience of Alcoholics Anonymous have banded together to form the San Fernando Valley Area Service Organization. 0 So apparently still in '73 there was tremendous credibility given to A.A.'s structure in some way, shape, or form since it is quoted in this letter.

LM: When did A.A. structure come to be seen as something we did not want to model after?

JB: I really don't know. What I do know is that when the World Service Conference first started at Valley College [in Van Nuys in 1978] instead of at World Conventions, my first involvement with the World Service Conference was on the Policy Committee. One of our tasks involved the service structure and I don't remember the specifics of it. What I do remember is constantly asking this committee--which ironically was made up of ... I don't know if it was made up of primarily Southern Californians but because of the state of finances in those days and the Policy Committee meetings taking place in Southern California, the only people in attendance were from Southern California ... But the question I found myself asking--and to some degree still find myself asking--is why we continue trying to reinvent the wheel. That was the feeling I had then, that's the feeling I've had many times since: "Why do we keep trying to reinvent the wheel?" My perception of our infatuation with hating A.A. has to do with our dissatisfaction

with how our fellowship has grown in light of knowing that so many addicts are in A.A., and the realization that if all these people who probably belong in Narcotics Anonymous rather than Alcoholics Anonymous were in Narcotics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous wouldn't have struggled as much as it has and might have become bigger faster. That's my perception of the primary problem. I guess there are other people who have more significant, more esoteric reasons for being angry at A.A., but A.A. never did a damned thing to us. We've done what we've done to ourselves.

LM: Apparently the worst thing that A.A. has done to Narcotics Anonymous has been to open its arms to drug addicts.

JB: And then again, A.A. hasn't done that. Members of Alcoholics Anonymous have done that, and members--by my involvement in going to A.A. meetings in the early '70's--which I'm not sorry for. I don't know if I'd be here today if I had to have depended on Narcotics Anonymous in 1971. Meetings were not what they're like today. A big meeting would be ten people--a tremendously huge meeting--and out of ten people you would be lucky to have five clean ones. Out of the five clean ones, you'd be lucky to have more than one with more than sixty or ninety days. So...

LM: This may seem like a stupid question, but why were the five dirty ones there? Were they referred by the courts?

JB: The word of N.A. was getting out. The courts were beginning to some degree to send people. Addicts were finding their way there, I don't know how. I would assume primarily the court and word of mouth. They were finding their way there. There weren't treatment centers in those days, there was a handful--two or three, four--of recovery houses, only two in Southern California existed then which sent their people to N.A. anyway. Anyway, the reality is that I'd say about half of the people were loaded and/or dealing at meetings. N.A. wasn't exactly the most stable place to find recovery in those days, and we were not welcomed in A.A. We weren't welcomed in A.A. We just told them, "Fuck you!," when they told us to get out. We didn't understand. I know I've talked about this a lot, and maybe they tried to explain it to us, but I think they were so intimidated by us as dopefiends, looking like the slime-buckets we were, that all they did was tell us that we didn't belong there and fuck you, so we felt unwelcomed. Being addicts we keyed in quick on the loopholes--like the Third Tradition--we didn't know--and this is what I mean by they didn't explain--we took it as one in the same. "We're drug addicts and we're all suffering from the same disease, and their primary purpose is to open their arms to us and to carry the message to us, and we had a desire not to use, not to *drink*," and therefore they couldn't do anything about it. That was the posture that a lot of us took. And there were many meetings--I mean, I didn't like A.A. meetings. The only thing I liked about 'em was pissing 'em off by being there, because it was real clear in those days that we were not welcomed in most meetings. Being the sick motherfuckers that we were, most of

us probably sat back and took satisfaction in seeing the oldtimers grind their teeth. They would get up, and they would talk about ft, but the thing is, even later on I don't really remember them ever explaining to us that alcoholism and drug addiction were two different things. They didn't explain to us what their primary purpose was. That may not be true, because I may not have heard ft. And even if they didn't and would have, I still may not have heard ft because I didn't understand that, and I certainly didn't have the fucking spirituality or principles going for me to do that. I'm sure my defiance was a lot stronger than my spirituality--it was probably stronger than my desire to stay clean at the time.

LM: And ten years later it was about the same for me.

JB: I don't know that anything could have been done and I don't know that it's anybody's fault. If anything, it's just that dope-fiends are different than alcoholics. A lot of us that are involved in N.A. come to believe and recognize. Maybe some dope-fiends are not that different than alcoholics, and that's why they find they're comfortable and find a home in A.A. I think we need to stop worrying about that she, and stop worrying about whether something we are going to implement has been borrowed from A.A. or not. It's irrelevant. There is nothing unique or new about anything Narcotics Anonymous has done. There is nothing new or unique about what Alcoholics Anonymous has done. Everything they have done they have borrowed from somebody or someplace else. For us to continue thinking that we're so fucking unique is what's killing us. Everything that we do in the fellowship can be directly related to what we do as individuals. All the pitfalls that we as individuals find coming into the fellowship to find recovery are the pitfalls of the fellowship itself. To the degree that we as individuals apply the principles of the program, that's how we grow. To the degree that the fellowship applies the principles, it too will grow, To the degree that it applies its ignorance and denial, it will decline and fail.

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