

## Fifty Years, a Day at a Time

To the thousands of people whose lives the organization has saved, the 50th anniversary of Alcoholics Anonymous, which will take place on June 10, commemorates one of the banner days of history. Said a member in Washington last week: "The press covered the anniversary of V-E day very heavily. Well, to a lot of people, the founding of Alcoholics Anonymous is an equivalent milestone." Small wonder. The loosely knit group, which now comprises more than 1 million people, one third of whom are women, has firmly established itself as the most effective way for alcoholics to stay sober - and alive. One study estimates that 34% of those who join beat the bottle.

A.A. was conceived in Akron, when Bill Wilson, a stockbroker suffering from an uncontrollable drinking problem, got in touch with Surgeon Robert Holbrook Smith, a total stranger and also an alcoholic. Wilson's desperate idea: apply the buddy system to the problem of quitting. Since then A.A. has grown steadily. Participation in the organization, which defines itself simply as "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," has doubled over the past ten years. Explains Cathleen Willis, director of Alcoholics Anonymous of Chicago: "Alcoholism is increasingly recognized as a disease. People are more aware of what's wrong. A lot of employees are not tolerating alcoholism in the workplace, and a lot more famous people are coming out of the closet - people you wouldn't

normally identify as having a drinking problem."

Anyone with a desire to stop drinking can join A.A. (There is no absolute definition of an "alcoholic.") People in the organization make themselves available to counsel and sponsor members. Alcoholics Anonymous is open to all ages, faiths (including atheists) and races. Says one member of the New York City branch: "People think A.A. is some monolithic kind of thing. But there is an awful lot of shading. Some groups are very spiritual. Some are very social. For example, over on the East side of Manhattan, meetings are packed with yuppies who talk like they have just swallowed their Apple computers, the jargon and the technical talk is so thick. But our theatre group has its own particular problems related to the stage industry. Regardless of the group, along with the differences there are the bonding similarities of the central problem: alcohol. "Some assemblies are dominated by a single profession. In Washington, for example, one, made up almost entirely of IRS employees, calls itself the "1040s," Another "911" consists of policemen. "Birds of a Feather" is a gathering for airline pilots.

Typical meetings last for one hour. A volunteer usually acts as a moderator, speaking for half the time on "experience, strength and hope." Usually the talk explains what life was like for the person while he was drinking and how it has changed for the better. Later the moderator opens the floor. He or she might ask: "Did anyone want to drink today?" Members respond, frequently dealing with personal

issues. The groups have no regimen per se, only the so-called twelve steps that include such basic tenets as admitting one's powerlessness over alcohol and acknowledging the existence of a higher power than oneself.

Attendees are, of course, anonymous. They introduce themselves by first names only when they address the assembly and often follow their name with the almost liturgical, "I am an alcoholic." Anonymity protects them from the

social stigma of the disease, but it also serves a subtler function. A.A. succeeds in part because it insists upon self-sacrifice. Members find themselves paying attention to other sufferers. Meetings stress togetherness and constantly reinforce the principle that self-pity and guilt over alcoholism are destructive. "It's a feeling that you've finally arrived and have found a home," says one A.A. member. "Mutual support is the whole thing."

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