

QUAD A HISTORY

Quad A Chicago is AA for Atheists and Agnostics. It is an AA group with a specific focus for humanists and those people with a secular point of view. Quad A is an active member of Chicago AA, support the Chicago Area Service Office, and the General Service Office as well. Quad A invites any person with a desire to stop drinking, whatever their religious or spiritual views, to attend our meetings.

A Different Road: **Quad A Offers Help To Alcoholics Who Don't Buy Into God**

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By Lawrence Rand. Special to the Tribune.

Six o'clock Saturday night and the drunks are having a party.

This is news?

It is when the party is in Chicago's Second Unitarian Church on Barry Street. The drunks are sober, and the party is to commemorate the 20th anniversary of a controversial 12-step recovery group-Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) for Atheists and Agnostics, known in AA circles as Quad A (AAAA).

"Some friends of mine here are shocked that some of us agnostics and atheists have been working a program for 20 years that they think is dependent on God," says the founder of Quad A, Don W., a wizened 67-year-old Unitarian with a cigar in one hand and coffee cup in the other. "Tonight they said to me, 'This isn't AA,' but it actually is. The first two As, for Alcoholics Anonymous, are far more important than the last two in AAAA, because a 12-step program will work for anybody who works it, regardless of religious belief, understanding, or refusal to understand.

"Everybody who works a program works a different program, so it's really not a case of Quad A versus 'the rest of AA.' There is resistance to us-somebody back in '79 didn't want to insert the explanation of AAAA in the Chicagoland meeting directory, for example-but some of the very first people in AA were agnostics."

The church's sanctuary has been turned into a dining room, and the people seated reflect the North Side and suburban locations of Quad A meetings-mostly, but not completely white, middle class, and middle age (though Quad A's range in age from early twenties to nearly 80), with a significant gay and lesbian contingent, few Hispanics or Asians, and a larger percentage of women than in many AA groups.

That Quad A meets at churches may seem ironic, but it is the result of Don's Unitarian Universalist faith and work. "I had given a talk in the 2nd Unitarian pulpit, 'An Agnostic in AA: How It Works for Me,' and was invited to give it at several other churches. A Universalist minister on the South Side, Lee Hubbell, had some parishioners who were having trouble with the religious language of AA, and he encouraged me to start a meeting for agnostics and atheists, which was held on the seventh of January, 1974.

"For the next four years, if I didn't show up there wasn't a meeting, because the group varied so greatly from week to week. It wasn't until the Chicago Area Service Office listed us in the 1979 AA Directory with the explanation that we were for atheists and agnostics that we began to get inquiries and referrals and the Monday night meeting really became a group.

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"What happened over the 20 years is that 200 to 300 recovering alcoholics came to our meetings and a door was opened for them. Most of them move on to the larger AA fellowship once they have worked out their semantic difficulties with the word 'God,' which is always what those difficulties are." Some stay in Quad A; the first speaker Don introduces is a shy German-American woman who explains why: "I was going to traditional AA meetings because I knew I would die from the disease of alcoholism if I didn't, but when they talked about God I gritted my teeth. People told me that if I didn't get on my knees and pray to God, I would go out and drink again, which scared me and made me angry." While she didn't drink before finding Quad A, she dates her "real recovery" from her first AAAA meeting.

While Alcoholics Anonymous was helped in its infancy by the Oxford Group, a Christian organization, and stresses a spirituality based on a belief in "a power greater than ourselves," the group is careful to embrace no specific religion. Jews and non-deists have held high office in AA service organizations, and a Quad A member was recently elected chairman of the North Side's Midtown district.

A reason for the acceptance that Quad A has gained among more traditional AA groups is its record of perseverant service over the years.

"Groups that are a little out of the mainstream tend towards extremes in district participation," explains John G., an officer of Chicago area AA. "They either don't participate at all, or they pitch right in with a lot of energy. Quad A was sending a service representative to district meetings right from its beginning."

Among the Quad A dinner speakers, a humorous tone predominates; a vibrant woman reads a witty Dorothy Parker poem called "Resume," about avoiding suicide; it concludes, "Guns aren't lawful, nooses give, Gas smells awful, you might as well live." Jan M. explains why she found AAAA attractive: "Quad A is more matriarchal than regular AA; I think traditional AA is part of the patriarchy. Many women feel that their disease of alcoholism was a gift from 'Him.' A lot of us had dads who were alcoholics or significant others who were, and got there by copying our fathers or becoming codependent on our lovers and then using the drug ourselves. Because there's less insistence on waiting around for your higher power to take care of you in Quad A, there's more room for a feminine approach to alcoholism.

"In basic AA, you're told a lot that you have to give up your willfulness and submerge your ego. But that's just the problem for a lot of women alcoholics—they have no will and they submerged their egos for so long that they don't know who they are. When you go into a program completely trashed and then are told you're still too willful, it isn't helpful.

"Quad A is more tolerant of a feminine point of view. Some people get mad when I talk like that, because we're not supposed to discriminate by sex, but men and women are raised differently, have different self-images and suffer alcoholism in different ways."

The talk is irreverent

Bill R., a 70 year old who has combined playing blues piano and architecture in his colorful career, delights in revealing that he was initially warned off of Quad A by other AA members who complained, "All they ever talk about is God!"

When the new district chairman is asked for a comment, he reveals how he was first elected his group's General Service Representative: "I skipped a meeting, and they figured I couldn't refuse the job because I wasn't there!"

God or religion wasn't his reason for staying with Quad A, he explains, "I just like the bad attitudes."

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Irreverence is a cornerstone of Quad A, where meetings end with the secretary saying, "We'll close this meeting by not saying the Lord's or anybody else's prayer," and the late co-founder of AA Bill Wilson may kiddingly be called "Mr. Bill." But talk at the meetings is centered more on recovery and spirituality than on "God-bashing." AA recommends a Buddhist-like search for serenity, and in Quad A a panoply of spiritual beliefs, from pantheism to Taoism, is as common as a nihilistic rejection of God regardless of religion.

Anyone with a desire to stop drinking is welcome at Quad A. In fact, a woman representing the Oak Park Quad A's announced that she was attending the Unitarian seminary in Hyde Park, and that Quad A had led her to it.

After digging into appetizers, salads, lasagna, an exotic chicken and rice dish, and numerous desserts, the Quad A's are treated to music from a guitarist and two friends on bass and drums who romp through an hour of rockabilly and blues.

While a few people stay to dance, many adjourn to the basement smoking area where they can do what Quad A is famous for: talk.

While other AA groups strictly limit their meetings to an hour and begin promptly, Quad A meetings rarely start on time-"the Saturday morning meeting regards punctuality as a disease," Jan M. asserts.

AAAA also allows anybody the chance to comment-often two or three times-which results in meetings that can stretch on for hours. To some it's Quad A's least endearing trait, but it seems to result in dedicated and close-knit groups that foster close, long-term friendships as well as ongoing sobriety.

"These (12) steps are but suggestions," the early AA members wrote in *Alcoholics Anonymous*, dubbed "The Big Book" in AA circles, but inevitably a churchlike push for orthodoxy began in some quarters. Perhaps it was just as inevitable that a group for atheists, agnostics, humanists, free spirits and "bad attitudes" would be created for those who wanted sobriety without conformity.

A tale of two drinkers: Quad A members speak out

Don W:

"I was exposed to (traditional) AA in 1961 or '62, and after six months I was so put off I knew it wouldn't work for me. I was unable to work it, because of the religious language in which the 12 steps are couched.

In the middle of '70, I came back to AA, after trying to "control" my drinking, which almost killed me. I came back to AA because it's the only place you can go that has to take you in if you say you belong-the only qualification for membership is a sincere desire to stop drinking.

I needed Quad A because there were things that weren't available to me at traditional meetings.

I'm an agnostic. I think militant atheism is a reaction rather than a response.

Some of us are still militant atheists. For others, atheism or agnosticism is part of the stunting that goes in with alcoholism, and once around that they are no longer shocked by traditional AA meetings. Nevertheless, when the Lord's Prayer is said at the end of a traditional meeting, I choose to remain silent. Someone might be looking around, and I need to carry my message to whoever needs it.

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I attend an average of two meetings a week; there are times when I only go once a month. I have been relieved of the compulsion to drink after 24 years of sobriety, but what I need and get at meetings is an input of spiritual energy for my own spiritual growth, which boils down to self-understanding and the availability of self-use. I need being reached out to and reaching out.

The experience, strength and hope that Quad A has experienced over 20 years needs to be generally available to other alcoholics, so we're starting a newsletter. Over 20 years I have learned not just to not have a drink, but to have a life, and that's what I want other agnostic and atheist AA's to share.

Whatever the power greater than ourselves is, we all use it. It's not necessarily the traditional God-if that weren't the case, there wouldn't be 4,000 nuns and priests in AA staying sober one day at a time. They depend on the God of the cloister, but they come to AA for this power, which isn't available to them in church or elsewhere. I don't know what God is, and I don't know what this greater power is, but I know that it's everything, that I'm a part of it, and that I belong here."

Jan M:

"I had just gone through another lover, and I didn't want to go through it any more; I wanted to be dead. I went down to the Old Town Ale House and had a couple white wines and talked with the bartender, who steered me to a therapist who specializes in women with codependency, addiction and alcohol problems.

This therapist insisted she couldn't treat me alone, that it would be necessary for me to find an AA group and a sponsor. Well, excuse me at that point, I'm payin' you big bucks, babe! After a month of arguing about it, I went down to (an AA meeting) on Wells Street, and experienced agoraphobia and claustrophobia at the same time-it was the worst experience of my life. I left before the meeting was half over.

Since AA was unavoidable, I told the same bartender that I might as well drink-but she turned me on to Ron L., who was going to the Saturday morning Quad A meeting at that time.

What a relief! It was a small group, and they weren't doing ritual monologue chanting; it was a discussion group. We were actually talking about real-life problems that didn't have anything to do about God or Jesus, and working them out as a group, sharing information-more sharing than I had ever experienced. What really sold me was that nobody hugged me; they let me leave unmolested.

I kept going back; it took me about a year, but they let me get it for myself at my own rate. When I announced that the 12 steps were screwed up, and that I was going to rewrite them, they smiled and let me because they had all done the same thing!"

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The late Don W, founder of Quad A

OUR STORIES DISCLOSE:

“A Man of Distinction (?)”

By Don W.

Just after the 4th of July in 1970, I had my first-ever personal Independence Day; I walked into a meeting of nondrinking alcoholics who shared their experience of not drinking just for today. I carried from that meeting and into the next meeting the strength and the hope of release from my teenage generated and never-since-questioned belief that I was in the groove, a "Man of Distinction," accepted by a bunch of regular drinkers at the tavern into a fellowship of "real" people. Some of them even *liked* me, some just put up with me, but they let me be a part of the group.

This recalled the welcome I was given in my mid-teens by a young-peoples' group, part of the First Unitarian Church of Omaha, Nebraska, my home town. I joined this church free of dogma or creed, and have ever since shared in the music-making and the Sunday services of one or another Unitarian

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Universalist congregation. There was a difference in my response to the group at the tavern. I had always felt like an outsider, different from and unworthy of the acceptance of these Unitarian groups of spiritual seekers - "If they only knew what I'm really like"

In the tavern crowd, though, even the most glaring lapses of decorum, of acceptable limits of behavior, could be resolved so long as one brought money and a "hail-fellow-well-met" attitude back to the bar. For all the years that I was drinking, I felt that I belonged here with the other daily drinkers - and I *did* belong.

There's the love of the knight for his lady in white,
And the love of the child for his mother -
But the ultimate love, that's all others above
Is of one drunken bum for another.

This was true for me then, and it's true for me now, when the drunks I know and love, and who know and love me, are no longer drinking. The strength and hope we share is rooted firmly in the selfish desire in the heart of each of us for another day of freedom to choose sobriety, to say "No, thanks - I've had my quota."

In the autumn of 1974, I spoke from the pulpit of Second Unitarian Church of Chicago (known as **2U**) as "An Agnostic in A.A. - How It Works for Me." This message was shared with several other Chicago-area Unitarian Universalist congregations, and led to the first regularly-scheduled meeting of the group we called "AAAA" on the first Monday in January, 1975. This group, now known as Quad-A, multiplied (we are now five weekly meetings at 2U, 656 W. Barry) and spread (Thursday and Sunday at the Unitarian Church of Evanston, 1330 Ridge Ave. and Wednesday and Sunday at Gale House of Unity Temple (V.U.) in Oak Park at 124 N. Kenilworth). [*At the time of this writing- ED*]

The alkies who make up these meetings, and the many more who have passed through these groups into the wider fellowship of A.A., show me that the 12-step program will work for anyone who wants relief from the compulsion to drink, no matter what the state of one's belief, or lack of belief, or understanding of the nature of that *power greater than ourselves*.

Using the 12-step program as a guide on the path of a growing sanity, each of us can, to the extent of our willingness and readiness, find out who we are and how we can live today without drinking. We can live comfortably in the real world we come to know more fully each day we "practice these principles in all our affairs."

I don't know what God is, but I do know what grace is, for I have received the gift of grace in being given a life of meaning and purpose through sharing with other alcoholics "our experience, strength and hope" that helps each of us "solve our common problem and help others to recover. ..." •