**History of Young People’s Groups**

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We all know that Bill W. and Dr. Bob are the co-founders of A.A. Does anyone know who A.A. number three was? Bill D. How about A.A. number four? Ernie G.

The Big Book describes Ernie’s entrance into A.A. as “a devil-may-care young fellow whose parents could not make out whether he wanted to stop drinking or not.” (Alcoholics Anonymous, p. 158) Referring to this first “young person” to join A.A., co-founder Bill W. wrote in Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age: “Then from another quarter we turned up with a prize. I guess this was the beginning of A.A.’s young people’s department. This new one, Ernie, had been a terribly wild case, yet he caught on very quickly to become A.A. number four.” (p. 73) Dr. Bob and the Good Oltimers relays the story as follows: “There were several failures before Ernie G. became the fourth member, in late July 1935.” (p. 92)

A.A.’s fourth member was 31 years old and he became a member six short weeks after Dr. Bob got sober. Ernie was Sue Smith’s first husband. And of course Sue was Dr. Bob’s daughter. Also, Ernie’s story is in the first edition titled ‘The Seven Month Slip.’

Many of the early members were young people. And while they may not seem to be young by today’s standards back then anyone under 40 was deemed a younger member. This is verified on the early membership list that Frank Amos had. In mid-February 1938 Frank Amos, a non-alcoholic associate of John D. Rockefeller, Jr., traveled to Akron from New York City to investigate the yet-unnamed fellowship of ex-drunks for possible assistance by the Rockefeller charities. At that time Dr. Bob gave Amos a handwritten list on his office stationery of some 43 members, including their names, occupations, length of sobriety in months, length of drinking experience in years, and ages. Some 21 of the members were in their thirties at the time. This list was attached to the “Notes on Akron, Ohio, Survey” by Frank Amos and on February 23, 1938 was sent with a cover letter by Willard Richardson to John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Nearly half of the early members were under 40.

The book Alcoholics Anonymous was published in April 1939, but Bill W. started writing it in mid-1938. In the Fall of 1938 he wrote Chapter Three (“More About Alcoholism”), in which he presented an anecdote about a 30-year old man who stopped drinking, concentrated on business, retired at 55, resumed drinking and though “a robust man at retirement, he went to pieces quickly and was dead within four years.” Bill continued:

“Young people may be encouraged by this man’s experience to think that they can stop, as he did, on their own will power. We doubt if many of them can do it, because none will really want to stop, and hardly one of them, because of the peculiar mental twist already acquired, will find he can win out. Several of our crowd, men of thirty or less, had been drinking only a few years, but they found themselves as helpless as those who had been drinking twenty years.

“To be gravely affected, one does not necessarily have to drink a long time nor take the quantities some of us have. This is particularly true of women. Potential female alcoholics often turn into the real thing and are gone beyond recall in a few years. Certain drinkers, who would be greatly insulted if called alcoholics, are astonished at their inability to stop. We, who are familiar with the symptoms, see large numbers of potential alcoholics among young people everywhere. But try and get them to see it!”

The General Service Headquarters office (now known as the “General Service Office”) began distributing lists of A.A. groups on June 30, 1941. The first notification of young people’s groups appeared in the Cleveland Central Bulletin in October 1944:

“Youth Takes A Hand”

“Age is no barrier if you wish to participate in the meetings of one of the newest groups, organized in October. The group calls itself the Young People’s Group, and it was formed by several of the younger AAs who felt there was a great field for them in helping others of their age to come to their senses before they had lost all. They felt that prospects would be more impressed with the success of the program if they saw a majority of people their own age (the twenties and thirties) at their first attendance at meetings.

“But they stress the fact that they do not exclude ‘oldsters’ from their meetings – in fact, they welcome any visitors from other groups, for they value and solicit their advice and suggestions.

“They meet on Wednesday evenings at 8:30 in West Side Evangelical Hall, W. 38th and Bridge. The entrance is at the rear of the building on W. 38th Street.”

By the end of the 1940s, youth-oriented groups had appeared in Long Beach, Los Angeles, San Diego and San Francisco, California; Indianapolis, Indiana; Detroit and Grand Rapids, Michigan; Newark and Passaic, New Jersey; New York City (Manhattan), New York; Akron, Cleveland and Youngstown, Ohio; Portland, Oregon; and Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Some of them did not gain traction and faded away. The youth-oriented groups were referred to as “Young People’s” groups, “Thirty-five and under” (or “35 & Under”) groups, “20 – 40” (or “Twenty – Forty” or, in one instance, “Young People’s 20 – 40”) groups, “Young Men’s” groups or “Young Women’s” groups. They were no different than other A.A. groups during the 1940s: they were listed in national and local meeting directories, they contributed money to The Alcoholic Foundation and their local central offices, they participated in Twelfth-Step work and other A.A. service activities. Their right to exist was not questioned; indeed, for the most part, they were welcomed enthusiastically into the ever-burgeoning A.A. fold.

The International Conference of Young People in A.A. began in 1958 with the first ICYPAA held in Niagra Falls, NY and has met annually since that time. Last month the 55th ICYPAA was held in Phoenix, AZ with an attendance of over 4000.

Bill’s letter to the 12th ICYPAA

Rockefeller’s letter to the 1976 ICYPAA

Audio clip – referring to the story in the GV memorial issue on Bill, ‘Legacy of Recovery’ 1969