

# AA for the Native North American



## *Trails to Freedom*



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### **Do you have a drinking problem? You are not alone**

"When I was fifteen, I promised myself I would never stop drinking. Only alcohol could make my life bearable .... Today I enjoy life. I am in touch with spiritual values and it's thanks to A.A. that I am."

"Today I'm proud to be a Cherokee, and proud to be part of Alcoholics Anonymous. I don't have to drink. I have a choice today."

Some of us Native people still live on reservations. Many of us have moved to big cities. Wherever we are, we often feel torn between the Native way and the dominant culture way. Very often we seek escape from our problems through alcohol. As time goes on, we drink more and more. When we get into trouble through our drinking, we often just drink more. Some of us want to stop drinking, but when we try to stop, we find out we can't.

Then we ask ourselves: "Why can't I stop drinking on my own? Why do I drink again after making many promises? Whether I'm with or away from the white man's world, with or away from my ancient healing practices, I still get drunk. Why?"

The answer lies in the following medical fact: ***Alcoholism is a disease.***

The American Medical Association and the British Medical Association call it a disease. It is a disease that exists all over the world. And it is the No. 1 health problem of North American Natives.

But there is hope. It lies in Alcoholics Anonymous. Many of us Native people have quit drinking alcohol. We've joined A.A. and are living brand-new lives - free from alcohol.

Alcohol. We allowed it to overshadow our souls. When we got drunk, we went against all of our Native spiritual teachings.

In Alcoholics Anonymous, we were freed from the spell of alcohol.

First, we had to decide to ask for help.

### ***Thirteen success stories***

In this pamphlet, thirteen men and women, all Native people, will share how we successfully gave up drinking. We are now living fruitful lives as sober people. We are in A.A. and proud of our rich Native heritage at the same time.

This is not an accident. A.A. has a spiritual foundation. It respects the spiritual beliefs of each of its members. In fact, A.A. encourages each person's *free choice* of spiritual beliefs. A.A. wants to help the suffering alcoholic. That's all it wants to do, so it avoids having opinions on outside issues. It is not connected with any other organization. A.A. understands that alcoholism is a disease, which can afflict anyone, anywhere - no matter what a person's race, creed, sex or religion is. It reaches out to help *all* alcoholics. In A.A., there are no forms to sign, no census takers, no admission fees. There are no attendance records, and no formal courses of treatment. Nothing is forbidden in A.A., not even drinking. We have a choice.

### ***Trails to freedom***

Here is what Baba C., a Sioux/Blackfoot with seventeen years of sobriety in A.A., says: "Most of us believe in a Great Spirit. . . well, I didn't have to give up any part of my beliefs when I joined A.A. It was a great relief to find out I could believe in a Higher Power of my choice. I could live in the white man's world, but also retain all of my people's Native traditions, customs, and ceremonies. In fact, A.A. made my beliefs stronger. My joining A.A. didn't restrict me, it gave me more freedom."

This same point is expressed, in different ways, in the stories that follow. Here's a sampling:

Tony, of the Oneida Nation, writes that as he drank he "deliberately refused to take responsibility for my life." Now he believes that "my Creator has provided me with

everything I need to stay alive ... I am a sober father today. I am no longer what they used to call me ... 'a drunken Indian.' Today, I am living my life according to how my Creator meant it to be lived."

Michael, an Arapaho, when he was a soldier in Vietnam, liked to call himself the "roughest, toughest, meanest s.o.b." around. He now says that he has surrendered his drinking problem to Alcoholics Anonymous and that, "I am finally becoming a warrior."

Sandy, a Mohawk who started drinking at age 13 so she could "be cool," was afraid A.A. meetings meant she would "have to get religious, go without make-up, wear long dresses." She thought she would be bored. When she joined A.A., she discovered that, "Once I let them, they told me they loved me. These people were real. They seemed happy. They accepted me."

The greatest spiritual law of Native People upholds community over individual effort. A spirit of community is at the heart of Alcoholics Anonymous too.

But let us tell you ourselves what it was like, and how it is now.



## Michael

### ***"I am finally becoming a warrior."***

When I was a young boy growing up in Oklahoma City, I felt as if I were different. The feeling of being different was intensified by my being both poor and an Arapaho. Why was it, I often wondered, that the white kids had more things than I did? They would even call me "Poor Indian Boy." I was raised in a nonalcoholic household. But the only thing missing was alcohol. A lot of big fights went on all the time. I could hardly wait until I was old enough to be on my own. My father, whom I love dearly, did the best he could with what he had. My mother, whom I also love dearly, just tried to survive.

By the time I was twenty, I was already drinking a lot. I married my girlfriend because she was pregnant. Even though I loved her, the marriage didn't have a chance. My drinking got worse, and I was abusive to her. She wouldn't put up with me, and we soon separated. Our lawyers suggested my next move. Facing a jail sentence because I was unable to provide child support, I agreed to enlist in the U.S. Army so that my ex-wife and child would receive a monthly allotment.

I went through basic training and decided I was lean, mean and part of the "Green Machine." I was ready to go to war. In 1970 I left Fort Lewis, Washington, for Vietnam. Once again, alcohol became my lady, my love, and a way to escape my problems and my fears. I also had a good excuse: People were shooting at me with real bullets. I became hardened and was sure I had become a real warrior. I even had medals to prove it. Little did I realize that my drinking was making me into the hunted instead of the hunter.

After my tour of duty, I came back to the United States. As soon as I stepped off the plane in San Francisco, a woman came up to me and spit on my medals. She cried out, "Baby Killer!" There were other incidents. I became very embittered toward society, the Army, and the way my country treated Vietnam veterans. As in my childhood, I felt I was being judged by a society over which I had no control. First it had been because of the color of my skin, then because I was thought to be a mindless killer. I felt this was the last indignation. The only people who gave me a warm welcome home were my Native people. In my culture, veterans are held in very high regard.

My drinking became more frequent. Soon flashbacks and nightmares about Vietnam made things worse. I began to have fits of anger and despair. In time, I started to fear for my sanity. On three separate occasions, I held weapons to my head, wanting to end it all. I'd reached the end of my rope and was slipping fast. I knew how to kill the enemy. Could I now kill the worst enemy of all - myself? For some reason, I never had the courage to do it. But I continued to drink.

In 1979, in a treatment center for Native people, I was exposed to Alcoholics Anonymous. For the next four years, I was in and out of A. A. Then, five years ago, I was hospitalized because I was bleeding to death. The doctor said, "Mike, I don't care what you do, but if you don't stop drinking, you'll be dead in six to twelve months." For once, someone had said something to me that jived. For the first time in my life, I was aware of what I'd been doing to myself. I was also suddenly aware that my life was totally out of control. That unforgettable day was August 10, 1983. Through the Fellowship of A.A., I have not had a drink since then.

I now have four sponsors, A.A. members who help me in my recovery. I've become an alcoholism counselor. Ironically, I work at the same treatment center where I was first introduced to A.A.

Through the A.A. program, I have gotten in touch with my Higher Power. And, I have been able to take part in spiritual ceremonies with my Arap-aho people. I am a member of the Sundance Society and have been made a Ceremonial Grandfather for other Sundancers. I also take part in ceremonial sweat lodges. All of these help me to get in closer touch with my people and they help my sobriety. I also am an officer in the world's largest Native veterans association and work with a lot of alcoholic Vietnam veterans. I use Native healing methods, as well as Alcoholics Anonymous.

When I was in "Nam," the T-shirt I wore said, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for I am the roughest, toughest, meanest, s.o.b. in that valley." Today, my strength comes from surrendering. The war I'm fighting now is with alcohol. It's the toughest battle I've ever fought because the enemy is neither seen nor heard. Instead of carrying an M-16 automatic rifle today, my weapons are love, understanding, compassion, truth and commitment.

Alcoholism is a disease you can't fight with your fists or conventional weapons. You have to admit total defeat before you can win. And at thirty-nine I am finally becoming a warrior. Through progress, not perfection.



## Sandra

### ***"My first spiritual experience — in a sweat lodge."***

A lot of drinking went on in my home when I was a child. We lived on the outskirts of the Chehalis Reservation in British Columbia. Both of my parents were of the Coast Salish Tribe, and both of them were heavy drinkers. Other members of my family were, too. When I was ten years old, a baby died on my bed. Its mother was too drunk to notice what was happening. Kids on the school bus teased me. They said that they'd seen my uncle, the baby's father, passed out in a ditch.

The first real hurt I had was when I was twelve - my grandmother died. She didn't drink, swear, or smoke. To me, she represented goodness. That same year I experienced my first drink. I blacked out and ended up at my grandparents' house. There I drank some poison and slashed my wrists. I was taken to the hospital, where a doctor suggested I see a psychiatrist. The police also visited me. They told me that trying to take my own life was against the law. To this day I wonder what the charge against me would have been had I succeeded. The funny part is that I believed then that my suicide attempt would scare my parents into looking at their own drinking.

Until ninth grade I was a pretty good student. Then I got pregnant. I gave birth to a baby daughter when I was fifteen. I left home for a while, returned, and got pregnant again. My parents encouraged me to marry the father before the birth of my second child, a son. Everyone thought it was a good idea, except me. At my wedding, I think I was the only one sober. My mother, father, and the groom were passed out in a corner. Someone even managed to knock over the wedding cake. I stayed sober throughout the ceremony and reception. But two days later, I started drinking again.

The marriage soon broke up, and I returned to my parents' home. With built-in babysitters, I took to partying. I was out a lot, got drunk a lot, and sometimes stayed away for days. I began to do things, like stealing, for drinks. Eventually, I started to do some other, not very nice things, to get drinks. My parents were concerned over what I was doing with my life. So they sent me to Vancouver to complete my education.

I went to Vancouver, but left my children behind with my sister. I went to school, but I spent all my spare time in bars. Somehow I managed to obtain a college certificate and a job with a social service agency, but I kept right on drinking. I got into more and more relationships with men, none of which ever worked out. Around this time, my mother committed suicide.

With my mother's death, combined with still another bad relationship, my drinking went out of control. My employer arranged for me to go into treatment. For the next two years I didn't drink. I managed to get my children back from my sister. When I began yet another bad relationship with a man and started drinking again, my sister took my children back.

My employer gave me one more chance and I went to treatment again. I went to a treatment center for Native people. Something wonderful happened to me there. As a result of going into a sweat lodge (an old cleansing ritual adopted from the prairie people), I had what I think of as my first spiritual experience. It was the beginning of my sobriety. For the first time, I had hope that I could make something out of my life. As soon as I left treatment, I went to Alcoholics Anonymous, joined a group, and got a sponsor. I also became active in A.A. service work. That was six and a half years ago, when I was twenty-nine years old.

It hasn't been easy to stay sober. I've had to deal with a lot of other problems that I believe contributed to my alcoholism. But my life has completely turned around. I have a grandson and another grandchild on the way. I go to regular weekly A. A. meetings on the Masset Reservation in British Columbia, about 800 miles from Vancouver, where I continue to work in social services. I've learned to apply many things from Alcoholics Anonymous to my daily life. The Twelve Steps suggested for recovery are my most useful guide. I try never to turn down an opportunity to help another alcoholic. I believe that how you get sober is up to you, but one of the best ways I know to maintain sobriety is being a member of A.A.



## Roger

### ***"I put my Higher Power between me and booze."***

I am a Navajo who grew up on a reservation in Arizona. Many people have told me that my father drank a lot, but I don't remember. I do remember herding sheep 'from the time I was very little. Once, my older brother found me in the pasture and gave me two pints of wine. I got drunk, fell on a cactus, and lost half of my herd. Growing up on the reservation, I was lonely. When I was five years old, my parents sent me to a boarding school. Not knowing my religion, people at the school flipped a coin to decide what church to send me to: Catholic.

At boarding school, some of the big guys threatened to beat me up if I didn't go into town and bring them back pints of wine. At first I brought it back for them. After a while, I'd bring the booze back for me and my friends. The school kicked me out. I was sent to another school and got kicked out for the same reason. My father gave me a choice: "You can herd sheep or go back to school." I'd never liked herding, so I went back to school, this time on the reservation. I drank whenever I had the money to pay for wine. I didn't study, but managed to pass just by listening to the teacher. I was satisfied with **D's**. Suddenly I started getting straight A's in math. I took a test and was told I could be a good electrician. But I continued to borrow money between classes, usually from girls, until I had enough to run off the reservation. Then, I'd go to a bootlegging joint and stay drunk for a couple of days.

One day I was out drinking in the boonies with a girl. I got pretty drunk and was ganged up on by a bunch of Navajo toughs. They beat me up and raped my girl. The girl didn't know who had done it, but she'd been out with me, so I was charged with rape. For six months I fought my case. My mother pawned all of her jewelry and sold the horses and livestock to pay for my lawyer. I stayed in jail until they caught the guilty men. They got five years and I was a free man.

As soon as I returned to the reservation, I got drunk. I hadn't learned that I couldn't drink. Later on, I went to technical school in Oklahoma. My grades were pretty good, but I kept getting drunk. I got thrown in jail three times. So, in spite of my good grades, the school kicked me out.



I went back to the reservation again, where I lived for the next three years. I got married and worked at a store on the trading post. One time I got into a bad car accident, injuring some people in the car. The judge told me he would sentence me to five years unless I did something about my drinking. He suspended my sentence when I agreed to take Antabuse. Within three months I threw out the Antabuse and started drinking again. I moved to New Mexico with my family (by now I had five kids). I took up my studies again. The school there kicked me out as the others had, for the same reason - boozing. So I moved to another Arizona town and again went to school. After five years, I finally got my electrician's license. Now I had it made. I was into the union. There was big money ahead. My drinking got bad. I'd leave my wife and kids and work in a lot of different states. She was working too, plus taking care of the house and the children.

Whenever I came home, I got drunk. I was so bad when I was at home that my kids went to bed with their shoes on so they could run out of the house when my wife and I started to fight. Every time I got sober, I'd want to stay sober. But a new job would come along and I'd wreck it all by getting drunk. Mostly, I was on the road, stopping at motels that had bars. I worked to pay for my bar bills.

My wife started to drink. I guess I drove her to it. She was in an accident and was given pills for the pain. One day, she overdosed on pills and alcohol, and died. I didn't know how to take care of the kids, the house, or any of my responsibilities. I drank more than ever now. Eventually, I pawned everything. I left my kids and for the next three years drank on the skid rows of all the border towns of the Navajo reservations.

I wanted to do something about my drinking, and one day I went to see a medicine man. He told me not to drink for four days. But I did get drunk - and then I blamed him. I tried other religions. Nothing worked. The only time I didn't drink was in jail. One day, a doctor at a hospital told me I didn't have much time to live. I agreed to go to a rehab center and had my last drink seven years ago.

But even at the rehab center I put up a fight. I kept denying I was an alcoholic- After all, I had an education. I could get a job. But I was afraid, too. I knew if I went out the door, I'd get drunk again. What they were teaching me wasn't doing me any good. I needed to talk to someone about all the things I had done when drunk. I found a guy and told him.

It was like a confession. I felt relieved a hearing had taken place, and I realized I had found my Higher Power. From that day until now I pray to Him every morning. In the evening, I say thank you. I put my Higher Power between me and booze.

When I was released from rehab I went back to the reservation. I discovered there was an A.A. meeting there. There were only three of us - a white guy, a Hopi and me. They told me that if I lived by A.A.'s Twelve Steps, I'd be okay. I said to them: "I can put this all together in one night and be sober tomorrow." I was wrong. I'm still trying to put it all together. That Hopi gave me lots of trouble. Hopis and Navajos have always fought, and I wanted to kill this guy. But I kept going to meetings and, eventually, I asked him to be my sponsor. I promised him I'd call him before getting drunk. He said he'd get drunk with me if I could convince him it was worth it. I never have, and that's how I got rid of my resentment for Hopis.

I learned how to cook for my kids, clean house, chop wood, wash dishes. I got regular jobs as an electrician, came home every night. My kids could safely sleep without their shoes.

I depend on A.A. and thank God for this program. It has changed me. Not too long ago I was asked to translate the Twelve Steps into Navajo and put them on tape. It gave me a thrill to hear a Navajo tell me those tapes kept him sober.

I've moved to New York City where I do my best to work the A.A. program. I've learned patience and gratitude. I found out that in Navajo there's no word for "I'm sorry," a phrase I used all the time when I drank. By staying sober, I don't have to say it anymore.



**Jill**

***HOW = Honesty, Open Mindedness, Willingness***

Signs warning "No Dogs, or Indians Allowed" hung on bars and cafe doors when I was a young girl. My mother was Assiniboine, my father Gros Ventre. I was born into a family of ten children. I have a twin brother; we were nicknamed Jack and Jill. He became a leader of our people while I became an outcast, a hopeless drunk, separated from my children and banned from my reservation.

My first drink at the age of fifteen triggered a blackout, a memory loss. It lasted only a few minutes, but I remembered that high and searched for it the rest of my drinking life. So began my drinking career. I could not have known the horror the next sixteen years would have for me.

I drank all through high school. I was never confronted about my drinking because there was so much alcoholism in the community. -I can't remember any social drinking by anyone close to me. At eighteen I moved to California through a Bureau of Indian Affairs program called "Relocation." This was the first of many geographical cures. I immediately found the "Native Center" in San Francisco and all the Native bars in the Bay Area. Once again I fit right in with the crowd. On Thanksgiving Day 1969, my cousin and I were going out to Alcatraz to participate in the takeover. We stopped to check out the Native bars and recruit people to come along with us. We never did make it to Alcatraz. When it came to choosing a cause or alcohol, alcohol usually won.

I met my first husband in a San Francisco bar. He was non-Native and that soon became an issue. Because he did not understand what it was like to be Native, I blamed him for my excessive drinking. I took great pride that I could drink him under the table. I became completely isolated during this time. Unhappy with "living in the white world," I decided to move back to Montana to be with my own people. I was shocked at how much my parents' drinking had progressed, but it also took the focus off my behavior. I felt safe, for my behavior seemed normal in the insanity around me. Booze took its toll.

One morning when I stood in the bathroom shaking and sick, wondering how I was going to get through the day at work, my mother advised a morning drink. I couldn't see how a drink would make me feel better. I gave it a try and was immediately "well." So began the morning drink for me. Later, a friend prescribed a midday drink to ease the shakes. Even in the midst of that community with all the alcohol abuse, my drinking became conspicuous. My first trip to treatment began with my brother Jack buying me a fifth of whiskey to ward off the D.T.s and another brother, Chick, making arrangements for me to enter treatment at the state hospital.

I remember people coming up to the treatment center for A.A. meetings. Every time I heard them share parts of their stories I would tell myself, "I haven't lost my job because of drinking, I haven't had a DWI (driving while intoxicated) or been in jail, and I still have a husband." The next few years would find me in and out of halfway houses, jails, detox centers and on skid rows. Through it all I always found my way back "home to the reservation." My children were removed from my custody and placed with a brother.

Today I recognize that as a blessing. At least my children did not have to move with me and live the kind of life I was living at that time. I remember my daughter asking me, "Mom, please don't drink any more yellow water ". My son would look under the mattress to see if I had a bottle stashed there. My children were out of my care for the next seven years. I could never escape the despair I felt concerning them. Many, many times I would come to and think of them and drink again to forget. I would hear the voices of my mother and my aunts saying, "Even dogs take care of their own."

By this time I was drinking Lysol spray, aftershave or anything with alcohol in it. During a stay at a detox on my home reservation, I would look out the window and watch people on their way to work. I wondered if I would ever have a job. I wanted that so bad, but I didn't know how to get there. I decided to kill myself. I had an uncle who died after drinking bleach. In a drunken stupor, he mistook his jug of wine for a bottle of bleach. I decided that I would die this way. As usual, I was in a locked ward and couldn't get any bleach. I thought, "I can't even kill myself right."

The cycle of treatment to skid row, back to treatment and skid row continued. In June 1978 I returned to the reservation to visit my children. I had been drunk for weeks and couldn't sober up. I was afraid of the D.T.s so I just kept drinking. My family was having a reunion, and everyone became sick of my drinking. Finally my brothers and sisters got together and said, "You are killing yourself and we don't want to see it anymore. Leave, go die somewhere else." My brother was tribal chairman, and I was banned from my home reservation. I would be jailed if I returned.

A few weeks later I came to. Paralyzed with D.T.s, I lay there listening to a train race down the hall outside my door. I suddenly realized that I could not go home this time. That was my bottom. My last drink followed an alcoholic seizure on July 4, 1978. I had nowhere to turn except to a Higher Power.

The Creator had put many people in my path during the years I was drinking. One of them was a Native who took the time to carry the A.A. message to me when I lived in California. He picked me up for A.A. meetings even when I was drunk. Nine years after I finally got sober, I was able to find him and express my gratitude. Months into my sobriety I was notified that my young son had been adopted - I lost him! Hysterical, I called my sponsor who asked, "What are you going to do?" I answered, "I don't know, but I do know what I'm *not* going to do - I'm not going to drink." This was the first time I did not want a drink to ease the pain. I turned to my Higher Power for the strength to get through and went to an A.A. meeting.

One of my brothers died drunk in June 1981. Again I clung to the program and reminded myself, "No alcoholic dies in vain. They buy sobriety for another alcoholic."

That summer I regained custody of my two older children. They have had a terrible time raising me. The son that is adopted lives with my sister and knows me as his second mother. One of the greatest miracles of my sobriety is that I was granted this second chance with my children. They see a sober mother now. The Creator has blessed me with a baby girl. I completed college and now work closely with the Native community. I am an active participant in two cultures. Thanks to Alcoholics Anonymous, I fit in both. I used to believe that A.A. was "a white man's program," until one evening at a meeting I looked around the room and noticed that I was the only Native there - proof that A.A. is truly colorblind.

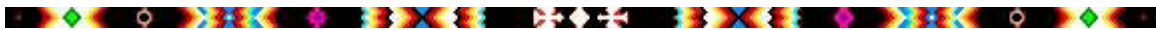
I am one of the founders of the Intertribal Alcoholism Campout held annually. One of the greatest experiences of my sober life was to witness an Honor Dance for Sobriety at the Flathead Campout. With the sacred campfire blazing and the resonating sound of the drum, the dancers gave thanks to the Great Spirit freeing us from alcohol. Tears were

streaming down the faces of many, but all held their heads high. No head was bowed in shame to alcohol.

Many times I have been told, "Those that God would use, He first reduces to almost nothing." I was almost nothing when I walked through the doors of A.A. I am grateful today that the Great Spirit has used me to speak His message many times.

I celebrated one of my anniversaries in a Sobriety Teepee on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation during their annual powwow. This was another first experience for me. There is no difference between an A.A. meeting in a plains teepee or in a church basement in the city. The words spoken and feelings shared are the same. Our common bond is alcoholism.

The trail from the "biggest drunk on the reservation" to sobriety has been long and difficult at times, but worth every step I have taken.



## John

### ***Life's lost dreams found in sobriety***

As a Micmac boy growing up on a reservation, I had alcoholism in my life early. My father died of it when I was thirteen. We were very poor and often didn't have enough to eat. During the next five years, eight other members of my family died. First my mother, then seven of my brothers and sisters. They all died of tuberculosis. Tuberculosis was dreaded on the reservation. So, I had to live for an entire year, after the last of them had died, alone in an old empty house. My only companion was a dog.

One day I heard some men talk about work at lumber camps in Maine. So I made up my mind to leave the reservation and hitched a ride on a freight train to a camp near the Canadian border. I stayed for four years, working as a dishwasher. Around my eighteenth birthday, a man told me that I hung around older people too much. He said that I should spend more time with people my own age. I took his advice and soon left

for Quebec, where I joined the Canadian infantry. I had big dreams of a successful army career. Even before, in that empty house, I had often daydreamed of one day owning a nice home, having a good job, wearing attractive clothes, owning a car, with a girl by my side. Those dreams made me feel less lonely. The army, I hoped, would fix things. But I was unable to read and write, so the army gave me a job. You guessed it, washing dishes! That made me feel more rejected than ever. I avoided men my age, never went out with a girl. I never went back to my reservation. I was ashamed of who I was.

I celebrated my discharge from the army by going into a bar, where I had my first drink. I was twenty-one. A lot of things happened that night:

Mainly, I felt good about myself, much less ashamed. I don't want to suggest that I am an alcoholic because I was born on a reservation, or because my father was a drunk, or because I couldn't read or write. But in those early days, when I got drunk, alcohol was a friend. It allowed me to do what my lumberjack friend had told me to do: mix with younger people. If that same friend had warned me that one day I would be barely scraping by on skid row, where I lived like a bum for seven years, I'd never have believed him.

I never was a social drinker. If I didn't fall down drunk every day in the beginning, it was because I was young and strong. Two years after my first drunk, I'd already begun to live like a bum. During my skid row years, in upstate New York, I wanted to live up to my dreams of becoming someone. So, I would always drink again. One day, I went to see a priest and offered to take the pledge for a year. That didn't work either. I made another attempt to stop drinking after attending services at the Mission. I knelt down, prayed and promised. But I was grabbing at straws. The next morning I was facing a judge again, a man who sentenced me about forty-three times. "You Indians are all alike," the judge said. "You come to this city, get a job and in one week you get drunk. Look at your record!" He gave me six months that time.

By this time I was ready for Alcoholics Anonymous. I was twenty-nine. I walked into my first A.A. meeting where a lawyer who'd been sober for thirteen years stood by the door greeting everyone. I was a mess, but this man grabbed my hand in his two hands and said, "I'm so glad to see you. Have a cup of coffee and sit down in front." I listened to three speakers and couldn't identify with any of them. But as I was leaving, that same

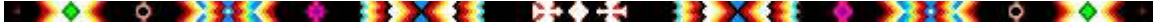
lawyer put his arm around me and introduced me to his friends. Everyone worked at convincing me I belonged there. I kept going back to meetings. What touched me was the understanding that *anyone* could be an alcoholic. I'm fifty-two now, with twenty-three years of sobriety, and I know that I was an alcoholic from the very beginning of my drinking days.

By the time I was thirty-five, I'd been sober for five years. But I still couldn't read or write and I still hung around skid row bums. I began to travel, taking odd jobs here and there, attending A.A. meetings wherever I went. One time, in a small Massachusetts town, thanks to an A.A. friend, I landed a job painting someone's house. Pretty soon, I got another painting job, then another. I was in business. One of my early house-painting jobs was for a lady who had taught school for forty years. I asked her if she would teach me how to read and write. Three months later, I was reading and writing, I was president of my own painting company and I had a driver's license! Not long after that I purchased a secondhand, eleven-passenger station wagon. Another dream come true! That same school teacher, by then a friend, told me I had a good brain. (I didn't believe her then. But a couple of years ago I was hired by a university to teach a course in the adult education program.)

I had a new business going, but I didn't like my boks because I'd lost a lot of front teeth in my drinking years. A dentist who was an A.A. member gave me a set of brand-new teeth. While driving a group of girls to a meeting I met my wife. I asked her to marry me on our first date. As the years passed, our family grew and we eventually had three daughters and three sons.

To this day I never miss attending A.A. meetings. Recently I was asked to speak at an A.A convention and I was filled with gratitude for the privilege. Anyone who has been fortunate enough to have spent time in our Fellowship has received its many rewards. One of my biggest rewards is gratitude for being what I am and for being able to give away the program.





## Kenneth

### ***"A.A. taught me to build myself up from within . . ."***

I grew up on the Acoma Pueblo Reservation in New Mexico where I learned a lot of the Native customs and traditions. I also learned a lot about alcohol. My dad was an alcoholic. By the time I was eleven years old, I already knew how to find him in the bootlegging joints he went to. I would drag him out and take him home.

I took my first drink when I went to a dance in my junior year of high school. Several of us pooled our money and got a six-pack. I remember the hot sensation going down my throat and I said, "This is it." Several weeks later, I tried to get the same great feeling again, and hoped for the courage to ask a gal to dance with me, but the feeling didn't come. I drank again on graduation night, but just enough to work up the nerve to dance a couple of times. For a while I left booze alone. My mother and sister were able to scrape enough money together to pay for the first quarter of my first year in college. I wanted to be an electrical engineer, but the money ran out; and when I turned eighteen, I joined the Navy.

After boot camp, I qualified for radio school, and became a radioman. My drinking career began then. With free weekends and nothing to do, and feeling a lot of peer pressure, I began to drink a lot and often. I didn't want the other guys to call me names. I competed with the guys I went to bars with, to see who could drink the most. Sometimes, I drank alone. When I finished school, I was assigned to a ship and sent to the Far East where drinking age didn't matter. As long as I could pay, I could drink. During my first nine-month tour, I hit a lot of different ports - in Japan, the Philippines and Hong Kong. I began to have blackouts, times when I couldn't remember what I'd done. My buddies would tell me what I'd done and I wouldn't believe them. Once, on home leave, I attended a dance and got so drunk I was thrown out. One of the bouncers hit me over the head with a tire pipe. I still have the scar. That was just one of many things that happened to me in blackouts.

During my Navy service I made several overseas tours, but I was always getting into

trouble due to my drinking. My drinking pattern kept getting worse. By the time my second enlistment was terminating, no one urged me to re-enlist. The only thing they told me was: "There's the gate - adios, sayonara, goodbye." After spending the next three months hanging around bars, I went back to the Acoma Reservation, where my parents lived.

In the town near the reservation, I'd hang around the different bars. We called it "going up the line" - because all the bars were lined up along this ten-mile stretch of road and we would hop from one to the next. But when I got the chance to take a two-year course at an electronic school in California, I managed to get through the course even though I drank a lot on weekends. I worked for various companies during the next few years. I met and married a Navajo gal. During all of this time I was drinking, but not too heavily. Still, there were enough times that I didn't remember how I had gotten home. My wife frequently locked me out. For several years, I think I slept more in my car than I did on my own bed. When my wife's sister got pregnant, the baby's father ran off and my wife and I decided to adopt the baby. I hoped that the responsibility of fatherhood would help me stay sober, but my drinking didn't change much. After I got used to the baby - a new toy - I went back to drinking with my buddies. Then I got fired from my job because of my drinking.

I went back to the reservation and started going "up the line" again. I'd get different jobs, but soon I'd be told to slow down on my drinking or I'd be fired. Each time I beat them to it, and quit before they could fire me. My wife finally couldn't stand it anymore and left. I was in bad shape, hardly ate, and lost 40 pounds. I began panhandling and then I started stealing things so I could pawn them. Then, I hit a turning point and I knew it. This was the last day I had a drink. There's a lot of things I can't remember too well, but I know I smelled like a brewery and looked and felt like a bum. I decided to go to a treatment center that had a two-week rehabilitation program for alcoholics.

That's how I got introduced to Alcoholics Anonymous. I learned how alcohol had affected me psychologically, physically, socially and spiritually. But even with my history of drinking I still didn't want to call myself an alcoholic. I didn't like admitting I'd had many blackouts. But I was hooked on A.A. I attending meetings regularly and started reading the literature. I went back to the Acoma Reservation, where I met another A.A.

member, a Pueblo, and together we went to meetings all the time. I wasn't working, so all I did for several months was go to A.A. meetings. My sobriety kept getting stronger and I never stopped going to A.A. meetings.

During the time I have been sober in A.A., I've earned a college degree plus a certificate in social work. I've started new A.A. meetings in my community and have remarried. My wife is an A.A. member too, and we work the program together. I have been able, over time, to pay back money I owed, and work out some of my other problems by practicing the principles of A.A. Today, I trust myself. And A.A. has taught me to keep building myself up from within - that sobriety is an inside job.

I now have fifteen years of sobriety and want to say that A.A. has been very nice to me. I really believe in the Fellowship and know it has kept me sober. My sobriety is number one for me. The A.A. principles are what I believe in, and I have found God again through A.A. It's my way of life.



## Esther

### *Friends everywhere*

I was born in a small village in the Ungalik region of Alaska, about 450 miles northwest of Anchorage. I am an Athabaskan woman who is a successful executive today. But a few years ago, I was unable to cope with everyday living.

In my early years I was raised by my grandmother, who instilled in me a lot of the Athabaskan tradition. I knew that I was different. When I was growing up and going to school in Anchorage, I was hit with racial remarks from other kids. There were not many Alaska Native activities so I had to survive in the best way I knew how. I decided that the easiest way would be to identify myself with white society. This was foolish because I have brown skin, black hair and features that are not Caucasian. I was only fooling myself. Deep down inside I knew this, but I went for the image. In my teens, I found out that alcohol made me feel better about myself. It made me

more confident and better able to communicate with others.

I worked in Anchorage with social and educational programs for Alaskans and American Natives. I felt "at home" among the mostly Native staff. I took a great deal of pride in helping other Native people obtain food, shelter and jobs. Seeing others worse off than myself took the focus off my drinking, which was getting worse. When my alcoholism was becoming more public I feared that it would threaten my job. So fear was important in my ending up on A.A.'s doorstep.

One day, I sat in my living room knowing that I couldn't live with alcohol or without it. I had been arrested for driving while intoxicated but I honestly believed that I needed to give up driving rather than drinking. My caring, patient husband finally said, "Go to A.A. or get out."

After praying to a God that I thought long ago gave up on me, I was given the courage to pick up the phone. I called Alcoholics Anonymous and was introduced to a white woman who had about two years' sobriety. This lady looked great. I could hardly believe she ever had a drinking problem. Her story was a lot like mine - she was always in trouble at home, at work or with the law.

My first A.A. meeting seemed so strange. People were so happy and looked so well, which was totally opposite of where I was. It helped to be told that I was loved, to keep coming back, and to get telephone numbers.

In my first year I got a sponsor and began working the Twelve Steps. After two years of sobriety, I visited my mother, who lives in a northwest coastal state. I realized the terror I must have caused in her life. I always telephoned her from Alaska when I was drunk, in the wee hours of the morning. Of course, I couldn't remember what I said, but I knew it was usually a crying jag. One morning at breakfast I told my mother I was in A.A. Since she is a Native woman who stayed close to her cultural ways, I wasn't sure of her reaction. Amazingly, she was glad. She knew about A.A. because her best friends were in the program and had told her about it. She said now she didn't have to worry about me when I traveled because I would have friends wherever I went.

I have seen many Alaska Natives come into Alcoholics Anonymous either through

treatment centers or on their own. Alaska Natives are taking more leadership roles in the A.A. program, and are staying sober using A.A. principles.

I don't hear the statement "I can't stay sober in A.A. because it's a white man's program" so often anymore because A.A. works for any color, nationality, or gender.

I try to talk to Native newcomers and introduce them to others. I am called on from time to time to contact a Native needing help. I also sponsor Native women because cultural issues come up that can better be understood by talking with another sober Native.



## Tony

### ***A brave new world***

I am of the Oneida Nation, which is part of the Iroquois Confederacy. Oneida, the town where I was born and raised, is in the middle of what used to be the Oneida Reservation in Wisconsin. I was ninth of twelve children, the first boy. I was treated as someone special, and at an early age I learned I could get my way by throwing a tantrum. During high school, I began to notice that other kids, parents and teachers (all European Americans) treated me differently. One time during a test, I could see the "white girl" next to me looking on my paper. That girl and I were the only two to correctly answer one question. The teacher made remarks which implied I had cheated. I also noticed that I could not keep a steady girlfriend. After the third or fourth date, a girl would tell me that her parents forbid her to go out with me anymore.

I asked my father about these experiences. He told me that some "white folks" didn't like "Natives." This was the start of an idea which is still not completely gone from my head. That idea is that "Natives" are no-good. While I was in the Navy, I had similar experiences. Whenever I competed with a "white guy" for anything, I was never the selected one.

In my third year in the Navy, I started drinking along with my buddies. I was almost twenty-two years of age. Drunk, I'm friendly and passionate. To my surprise it

seemed that when I was drunk the girls liked me. Anyway, it didn't matter because if I got dumped, booze was there to take the hurt away. After I was discharged I attended a university where I met my wife-to-be. Getting married was my way of showing the world I was human. And anyway, she asked me. I didn't ask her because I didn't want to be responsible for anything. In fact, I feared that anything I did would end up a mess.

As my drinking got progressively worse, I found myself gravitating toward the Native winos on skid row more and more. I would return home only when I was really sick, badly beat up or desperately hungry and broke.

My drinking got so bad that I left my family and moved to California. After two years in California, I made a decision to sober up. Since making that decision I've learned so much about myself, particularly about who I am and what I am. One of my more important discoveries is that I never grew up. As a child, I depended upon my parents, mostly my mother, for protection and guidance. I didn't realize it, but women had become authority figures for me. My sisters kept me from hurting myself and always kept me from getting into trouble.

In my struggle for sobriety, I asked a man, who had some twenty years in the A.A. program, to be my sponsor. Shortly after, I went out and got drunk. I rationalized that he wasn't going to be responsible for getting me sober. I drank for another year, until it looked like I was about to lose another job. After missing work because I was drunk, I asked my boss to put me in our employee assistance program. Arrangements were made and I spent thirteen days in a hospital alcoholic ward. It was no coincidence that at the very first A.A. meeting I attended in the hospital, my sponsor was one of the speakers. At the end of his talk my sponsor pointed directly at me and said, "There is a living example of what will happen to you if you don't practice the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous." I understand those words real well now. As my sponsor guided me along, he made me look at a lot of cultural principles. One of those principles was understanding why my Creator gave me life.

First I had to come to grips with the fact that my parents were co-creators with God in bringing me to this earth. The role my Creator played in my existence can be seen in other things of this earth. That Creator who I have come to understand is the same

one who created the plants of this earth. The plants create oxygen. That Creator is the same one who created the winds which bring the oxygen to me so I can breathe. That Creator is the same one who made the water. Not only do I need water to survive but water is the lifeblood of all living things on this earth. So you see, my Creator provided me with everything I needed to stay alive.

Today I am living my life according to how my Creator meant it to be lived. Both my parents are gone from this earth now, but from time to time I hear a phrase they used when I made them proud: "There goes my son."



**Sandy**

### ***A miracle***

I am a Mohawk, who grew up on a reservation in the United States. I went to Native schools, heard old Native stories and learned through Native views.

My mother died when I was nine, so I was raised by my grandmother, who wasn't a drinker. She may have had a drink when all the family gathered - usually just Christmas or New Year's Eve. I had a couple of sips out of her glass occasionally, but nothing that impressed me enough to remember, other than feeling I was getting away with something. I was pretty rebellious. I sought out friends with the same interests. Even though I knew there were kids on the reservation who did not drink, I didn't choose to hang out with them. The first I remember alcohol giving me a "feeling" was at twelve years old. It was a feeling of excitedness, and I liked it. I started drinking more at thirteen, but then it was to fit in, to be a part of. I wanted so badly to feel I belonged. I was an only child; there was only my grandmother and me. I felt I needed a group my age who understood me. Looking back on it now, I thought they were cool for drinking, and smart for getting over on their parents. And I very much wanted to be cool and smart. But I was also afraid. I loved my grandmother and didn't want to hurt her feelings. But I had to belong. I honestly believed the other kids were afraid too.

I quit school, got married and had a baby, all within a year and a half. Partying continued. I had no problem. I was fine. I allowed myself to become a very passive

person who knew nothing about anything. I was a periodic drinker. I could go months without drinking. That, I thought, was not alcoholic. Holding in my feelings and opinions during my dry months would result in a couple of weeks of steady drinking. Drinking gave me the courage to speak, to express my opinions and to relax. All the things I couldn't do sober.

When my husband went into a rehabilitation hospital for alcoholism, I began to celebrate. That was the best thing I could have ever done. All controls were off. Although my husband drank more often, I could drink almost as much and for just as long. I also experienced blackouts and couldn't stop drinking until all the liquor was gone. Could it be that I had a problem? I went into rehab. I listened and after two weeks I talked. At rehab I was encouraged to attend A.A. meetings, but I thought if I went to A.A. meetings I would have to become religious. Being religious meant no make-up, long dresses, thick stockings, boredom and no fun. When I got out of rehab I went to two meetings. After a year and a half of dry time, I drank again for six months.

I've never been arrested, other than picked up for running away from home as a kid. I've never had a DWI, never had an accident, never lost a home or family due to drinking. But that's not to say I wouldn't if I were to drink again. I did lose my self-confidence, self-esteem, self-worth. I lost myself, period. I didn't know who I was or why I was. I felt an urgent need to do something. The urgent need kept getting worse. I felt sick, confused, dizzy and tired. I wanted to scream, pull my hair out, cry. I wanted someone to hold me and tell me everything would be okay. And on again I ran. I ran to A.A.

Once I let them, the A.A. members told me they loved me. They hugged me and wanted me to come back. They seemed real. They seemed happy. They accepted me. They didn't think I was there to make trouble. I realized they didn't care if I were purple, green or orange. I was sick, hurt and confused. They offered help. They didn't know how it felt to be an Indian, but I did know my insides felt the same as what they talked about. Yet they were smiling. Their eyes were gleaming. I wanted that.

Now I've got it most of the time. I've become the person I used to have to drink to become. I can talk to people, express my opinions. I can let the walls down, let



people know me. All it took was an open mind, willingness to listen and to take action. But most important, to learn to do it for me, no one else. I am a Mohawk and an alcoholic. And real proud of both.



## Norbert

### ***Half Native, half white, half measures***

I was born in Ponca City, Oklahoma, in 1932. Dad was a Ponca Indian who served as a translator for American Natives in the First World War. Mom was German-Irish. Back then, white women didn't marry Indians. So it goes without saying, my mom's life was hard.

Our house had neither water nor electricity and we grew most of our own food. For a while we were a happy family. Then my dad, who worked as a butcher, started to drink. At first it was only on Saturday nights. I was the sixth child in a family of ten. Just the age to go out with him to make sure he made it home. I really thought it was great. We would go to a movie, then stop at a grocery store to buy candy and a newspaper. Then we would head for the beer joints. My father soon lost all control over his drinking.

In those days, nothing was known about the disease of alcoholism. I never started out in life to be an alcoholic. Being half Native and half white, I had the seeds of self-pity and resentment very early in my life. I can remember very clearly telling my mother that I would never grow up and drink like my father. I had dreams of getting more out of life than my parents.

In my late teens, drinking entered my life. Just a few beers at first. I can remember like it was yesterday. A few friends and I decided to get some wine. So off to Kansas we went. And did I get drunk! I got sick and swore off drinking forever.

In those days we ran around in small groups made up of school dropouts. About all we did was drink, smoke cigarettes and raise hell. Being the only Native in a group of teenage white boys, I was blamed for a lot of things that I didn't do. Stealing wasn't my bag, and that was to save me from reform school and prison. I had a job, so I had

money to drink when the rest didn't. Yet I was just as guilty as they were because I drank the beer and helped spend the money they had stolen. A police captain told me what was about to happen to the rest of the guys. So I joined the Air Force. They ended up in prison.

In the Air Force, drinking was a way of life. For eight years that's just what I did. It led to the destruction of my first marriage and my Air Force career. The military booted me out. All my dreams and goals in life fell by the wayside.

The years 1957-1967 were probably the worst years of my drinking. In that span of years I met and married my second wife, who is still with me today. They say that God acts in mysterious ways. He gave me the love of a woman. I conned her into believing that all I needed was to get drunk on weekends. She lived with this for years.

We had three children - two boys and one girl. One of our boys was killed in an accident at the age of three. If God existed in our eyes, he didn't after that. My drinking began to get worse, my wife decided to join in on all this fun I was having. Things only got worse Cussing, and arguments; the kids' lives were a living hell One day while I was reading the Sunday paper, a gust of wind blew open the pages under "Special Notices." They read: "Do you have a drinking problem? Contact A.A." There was a telephone number. I called that number and was told some men would come over and take me to a meeting. This was my first introduction to A.A., in 1967.

I began to understand that people could stay sober if their desire was great enough. This thought was quickly overshadowed by my built-in distrust of whites. They were probably wondering what the hell a Ponca was doing at an A.A. meeting. The oldtimers at my first A.A. meeting said, "If we can't show you a better way of life, then you can have back what you had when you came through those doors." My only regret is I didn't listen to what these wonderful men and women were trying to tell me. I kept drinking. It took all the mistakes and the banging of my head against a stone wall to hit bottom. Then and only then was I able to start climbing out.

Four years ago, after about a two-month drunk, I entered a treatment center. There I learned that alcohol was my main problem but *not* the only one. I was able to look at

myself as I really am and not the phony I had dreamed up. I can't explain the feelings that came over me, except to say that for the first time I understood what it was like to feel good inside. It was suggested that I start a newcomers A.A. group once I left the center. After a lot of praying, soul searching, and talking to others in A.A., the Park Place Newcomers Group was born. The original three who started this group with me had a little over 30 days of sobriety. For myself, it was time to quit talking about the A.A. program and start working it. Today, our group is still growing. With the guidance of our Higher Power and the spiritual foundations on which this group was built, may we always be here for the alcoholic who still suffers.



## AI

### ***"Today I'm proud to be a Cherokee."***

My drinking story begins in the 1940s when I was five years old, living with my family on the reservation in Cherokee, North Carolina. I was the last of fourteen children in a family of drinkers. My grandfather was a moonshiner. I remember the grownups getting us children drunk and enjoying watching us stagger around. I liked getting the attention. But very early I also felt hurt and the pain of rejection, though I was told Cherokees weren't supposed to feel that way.

One of the very few bright spots in my early life was my grandmother's efforts to teach me to let go of that pain and to trust in nature and the things around me. Most of the time as a child I felt less than a person, and very confused. My mother was an alcoholic. Everyone else got drunk, too. Very soon my attitude was that life centered around drinking. Already in grade school I drank. I thought it was okay to steal liquor because when I drank, I felt good.

My confusion about how I felt being Cherokee increased when my mother took us up North, where I also learned other people's attitudes about Natives. Once, I was watching a TV cowboys and Indians movie. During a scene in which the cavalry were shooting Indians, I heard my stepfather, a white man, say, "Kill all of them sons-of-bitches." He probably felt that way about me, I thought. I became certain that nobody cared, nobody even liked a little brown kid running around.

I returned to the Cherokee reservation and entered high school. But by then I felt pushed aside by the Native people themselves - so I started not liking them, as well. How come, I'd ask myself, though I'm a Cherokee, I feel different from everyone around? Only when I drank did I feel like somebody. I began to get into a lot of trouble, getting into fights, cutting people, even laughing when people got cut, and drinking more the next day to forget that I had felt that way. In school, my anger and resentment began to build. I hated it when the kids would make fun of my beat-up clothes, then I would drink and take out my anger on everyone. I was angry at my people, at the government, white people, black people, everybody. Later on, I learned I hated myself most.

I left the reservation and moved to Chicago, still a kid but sure I had to play the role of tough Native who didn't care, who was savage. I was into a lot of alcohol at the time, acting out my anger on other nationalities: Mexican, Puerto Rican, as well as my fellow Natives. The only side of life I ever saw was the inside of barrooms or the outside of homes where there was a lot of drinking. I got kicked out of school in Chicago for drinking. I returned to the reservation and again got kicked out of school. I got into trouble, was put on probation, and ended up in Chicago again. I was drinking all the time and living up to the image. I got busted by the F.B.I. for transporting prostitutes across the state line for illicit purposes, and spent the next four years in prison. But even there, I isolated and got drunk on potato wine.

When I got out of prison I tried to quit. But that was like giving up the only friend I had who could make me laugh. So I went back to drinking every time. I often asked myself where I fit in the world, since I didn't fit in either the white or the Native world. I drank more and more, dreading lying down at night because then I would have to think. Sometimes I had a vague memory of what Cherokee traditions and beliefs were. I knew that how I lived went against deep values, not just Native ones, but values I held as a human being. Full of confusion about my origins, I'd look down on my own peoples' beliefs, calling them superstitious. Still, I couldn't get those beliefs out of my mind. When I'd try to tell people about it, they were the ones who thought I was superstitious.

Finally, ten years ago, I went into treatment and joined Alcoholics Anonymous. Admitting I had a problem with alcohol was easy. Accepting the fact that I was an

alcoholic took two years. For me, A.A. and the Twelve Steps represented a lot of self-exploration. I had to learn the difference between what it takes to make a white man sober and what it takes for a Native to get sober. All the confusion I had experienced for years regarding my living in two worlds made me realize that, if I was ever going to gain quality sobriety, I had to rediscover my own Native roots.

At the same time, I practiced letting go of all the hurt, the resentments, the feelings of inadequacy. I didn't have to feel separate or ashamed because I was Cherokee. Through the practice of the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous, I addressed my own spirituality, as a human being and as a Native. Alcohol had been a false idol. I have learned that dependence on alcohol is not a Cherokee tradition.

Today, I'm proud to be a Cherokee, and proud to be a part of the Alcoholics Anonymous community. I don't have to drink. I have a choice today. I have my own belief in a Higher Power. I don't have to go to church to find him. I've been sober for ten years. But I know that if I don't keep practicing the Twelve Steps of A.A., if I don't keep working on myself and my own feelings, I'll probably get drunk again.



## Janet

### ***"I found the gift of love in A.A."***

(Translated from Montagnais)

I grew up in the northern Quebec town of Pointe Bleue, the fourth daughter in a Montagnais family of twelve. We were very poor. My father had a heavy drinking problem and I remember enjoying the taste of the wine he made himself. I started school at the age of six. My mother very much wanted me to go because there was not enough money to feed all of us if I stayed home.

When I took my first drink, I was about twelve. I was shy, full of resentments, and a racist. I did not like the white man. All my life I had heard from my father how the white man had taken our land. But when I drank, I felt much better. I also lost all fear, became aggressive, and loved to fight. I became the leader of my gang, stealing to buy them all drinks. By the time I was fourteen or fifteen, I had already been sent up a few times to prison.

When I was fifteen, I had a child. Because the child's father was a white man, I became

even more aggressive and resentful. I wanted to be loved, but felt no one loved me. I promised myself I would never stop drinking, because only alcohol could make my life bearable. One time I planned to kill myself by walking alongside some railway tracks. I expected to jump in front of a moving train. But I was more afraid of being crippled, instead of killed instantly, so I didn't do it.

When I was sixteen, I met a man, nearly twenty years older, and decided to marry him because he gave me things, like money, a car, new clothes. On my wedding day, I vowed at the altar that I would never quarrel with my husband, that I would be a good wife and mother. Well, the opposite happened. You've heard of battered wives? My husband was a battered man. We had many fights and I won them all. After I got married I wanted to drink all the time. I was filled with resentments and convinced that people pointed at me because I was a Montagnais. I couldn't see that maybe they pointed at me because I was drunk most of the time and kept getting kicked out of bars. We had been given a beautiful set of china as a wedding present. Every time I heard a neighbor say, "Look, the wild woman is drunk again," I would start throwing plates and cursing. We saw a lot of flying saucers at home.

My husband tried to help me, but I didn't want any part of it. Besides, I was convinced he had a drinking problem, too. I had two children and tried to be a good mother. I would feed them, but was unable to give them the most important thing - love. I also refused theirs.

I drank through twelve years of hell, until I was twenty-seven. I made five suicide attempts and also became hooked on pills. Medication was free, so I could have as much as I wanted. I was always sick, nervous, didn't eat properly, and weighed 175 pounds. One day my husband asked me to go to Alcoholics Anonymous with him. It was the first time I had heard that name. I was told it was a place where you learned to stop drinking. I told myself I was too young for that, I wanted to live and have fun. But I decided to go anyway, to please my husband. And I was curious. I told my husband I would go with him, since he needed it more than I did. I thought I would find only Natives there, but instead I saw all these white people. I was filled with resentment. I stayed in a corner and talked to no one. On the way home, I told my husband, "Those people are no good, they will not get me."

A week later, I got drunk again, and tried to kill my husband with a knife. Luckily, he was only slightly hurt. I had liquor bottles hidden all over the house and one day, suffering from

a terrible hangover, I decided to do the washing. When I turned on the dryer I heard all kinds of strange noises. When I opened the dryer, what I saw made me cry. All my bottles of liquor - broken! And my first thought was, "How can I save them?" That's how sick I was. After that incident, I decided to go to A.A.

I must admit I wasn't quite honest at the beginning. I stopped drinking, but continued to go to meetings under the influence of pills. I practiced the slogans, but *my way*. I felt people were staring at me, or pointing at me, and I resented it. When someone suggested I get a sponsor, I thought that a sponsor was someone like the godfather I had as a child; someone who would give me presents. I was wrong. Later I got a sponsor, a woman, who became my friend. Through A.A., which is a fraternity of love, I learned to be honest. Eventually, I did find a faith in God, the God who always loved me, who never had deserted me. Many people say that we Natives are very close to nature, that we deeply feel our spiritual experiences. But I think that without God, we can do nothing.

Today I am in touch with spiritual values and it's thanks to A.A. that I am. I have very few material things, but I am rich in terms of spiritual values. I enjoy life. Today I love people, whatever their race or color. I used to be kicked out of bars, but my A.A. brothers and sisters love me for what I am. Soon, I will celebrate my ninth anniversary in Alcoholics Anonymous, where I've learned to give love and to comfort others, but most of all - to forgive myself and my past.



## **"Wild Bill" (Chileowist)**

***"I love my life today; I love this second chance."***

I'm of the Methow Band of the Colville Confederated Tribes (Salish), located in North Central Washington State. I had my first drink when I was twelve years old. Then, I did not touch another drop until I was seventeen. This led to serious drinking which made a wreck of my life.

I had no control over my drinking. All because of my wild drunks, my first wife divorced me. She was a beautiful Native woman. We had four wonderful boys, a nice home, four different late model cars, two good radios, and one TV. I lost it all because of booze. All my folding money was spent on beer, whiskey, homebrew and mouthwash. I wanted to forget

my troubles and be happy, so I took to the bottle. Each time things pressed me real hard, such as bills, home and work, I would turn to the bottle. Self-pity told me nobody cared about me, nobody wanted me, and that my life was finished. During World War II, I had been on the front lines. Sometimes, I felt that because now the war was over, and there was no need for a fighting man, there was nothing left for me.

After a three-week drunk once, I had a mind to open a beer, and down two bottles of sleeping pills. I wanted to pass out cold, and never wake up again in this bewitched world. I was in jail many times for either drunken driving or just plain being drunk on the street. I'd do anything for a drink. I even pawned my high-priced cowboy boots. Once, after I made a down payment on a very expensive cowboy roping saddle, I carried it to the tavern and hocked it for two cases of beer. Luckily, I got it out of hock before I was thrown into the slammer. I even wrote some bad checks. When I was drunk, I was just too sick to care.

Many times I tried to stop these wild drunks on my own. But I would end up drunk as ever and in jail again. I even got down on my knees and prayed to God to help me stop drinking. I could not stay stopped. I'd end up drinking right after asking for God's help. I saw no way out of these wild drunks.

While serving time in the county jail for drunken driving, I heard about Alcoholics Anonymous. I wrote a nice long, nine-page letter to an A.A. member who had visited the jail. I begged him to accept me into his A.A. program. And I asked the question, "How much does this cost?" I wanted it, sobriety.

This A.A. member, who later became my sponsor, gave me the time and place of the A.A. meeting. I drove my car to his house, but when I got there, I didn't know if I should go in or if I should leave. I am a Native and very sensitive. I know how white people sometimes look toward us - stupid people and ignorant. But I did decide to go into the house and find out what this A.A. was all about. When the door opened, my sponsor shook my hand and all the other men and women jumped up to their feet as though I were an army officer! People told me, "Bill, we're glad you're here." And you know, they meant that when they said it. That made me feel good. I started to go to meetings every week, after that. I'd get dressed, cleaned up and go to the meetings and sit there and listen to the speakers.

I joined the Fellowship that weaned me from the bottle like a baby. I joined a group of men



and women who had the same problem I had. I wanted to stop, but I didn't know how to stay stopped. I knew it was wrong to drink, yet I drank. That's a touch of insanity! How can you do something you know is wrong, and yet you're doing it? I felt that I was two people in one. When sober, I am very careful how I act, dress and especially what I say. When I was drunk, I was another person. When alcohol came into my system, I just didn't care. If my words hurt you, it was too bad. Alcohol made me do things that I would never do sober. I like being sober.

As a Native, I am quite sensitive; I hurt easy. Deep down inside I feel the Native in me. For a long, long time I would walk into these great A.A. meeting rooms and my eyes would scan the crowd looking for another Native. I saw none. That hurt me. I told myself that in time, we will have Natives in the A.A. Fellowship. They're smart; they'll know where to come for help.

In time, my fellow Natives asked how I stopped drinking and I told them, "You just come with me, and we'll go together, and see how it's done." As time went by, we had enough people for two carloads. Someone suggested, "Why don't we have our own A.A. meeting?" So this was the beginning of our first Native group. I was asked to chair the first meeting. After I rented the meeting hall and invited the people, I ordered lots of coffee and eleven dozen donuts. Suddenly, I panicked with the thought "What if nobody comes?" I hadn't paid for anything! Of course, we had a great turnout and A.A. donations paid for the hall, coffee and donuts. Later, some A.A. folks said, "Bill, you sure stick your neck out. So, we're going to call you 'Wild Bill' from now on." I've been Wild Bill ever since.

I love my life today; I love this second chance. For the past sober thirty years, I've been growing; I've been learning. I've learned that it is not good to dwell too much on the past. I used to be quite resentful at white people. I thought they wanted to keep us Natives down by fencing us in reservations. I now believe that this was not true. Many Natives went away to school and learned to speak English. They got educated. This made the "white man head." As Natives, we need two heads - the "white man head" (education) and the Native head (wisdom and traditions) - to fit into the mainstream.

As a World War II veteran, I fought for this country so that my countrymen could enjoy freedom. During the war years, some of my countrymen made money hand over fist while I was in the trenches. This used to fill me with rage. I felt that the country owed me something.

Through the help of A.A. I was able to change this attitude. I came to believe that if I want something, I can work for it and be proud that I can earn my own keep.

At the beginning of my sobriety, I used to think that there's got to be more to staying sober than just "one day at a time." Yet that's exactly how I grew. Just one day. In the Lord's Prayer, we say, "Give us this day our daily bread . . . ." Not one word is mentioned other than this day. I like that. Everything comes back to this day. This moment. How very simple. In my drinking days, I paid for my freedom. Everytime I reached into my pocket I was buying my way out of jail. Today is given to me free. I am not afraid anymore. I don't serve time anymore. Time serves me, and I don't pay for my freedom anymore. It's mine. Today, when I woke up, I didn't ask for the day. It was given to me free. This is my day. I can do what I want with it.

Five years ago, the Methow elders honored me by giving me a Native name. They gave me the name "Chileowist" which was my grandpa's name meaning "teacher.." That's one of the best things that has ever happened to me. To get a Native name is quite an honor. And, this name was given to me because I am a teacher of Native languages.

If anyone ever finds a cure for alcoholism, I don't think I'd go for it because then I would be by myself. I would miss the A.A. meetings and I would miss my big A.A. family. Every morning I pray and ask God to please give me sobriety for just this one day. And at night, I thank Him and tell Him that if it weren't for Him, I would never make it. It works. It must, because I'm still sober!

