

**Interview with Ed M.
Sunday 21 July 2013**

Ed M. is a pioneer in AA and lives in St Augustine. He got sober in New York and has been sober for 55 Years. He is a vital presence in the AA fellowship in St. Augustine.

Ed taped his story for the Intergroup Archives in 2013 and the following has been excerpted from that tape with his permission. (Interviewed by Kevin G. and edited by Charlie M.)

Interviewer: This is Kevin G. with Ed M. who is going to talk with us about his life.

I: Can you tell us a bit about your life, where you were born?

Ed: I was born August 30, 1933 on 168th Street in Jamaica, Queens, New York. I was the last of 4 children, I had 3 older sisters, a domineering Irish mother, a quiet father, until he got drunk. We moved to Long Island and then back to Washington Heights. I was born with a skin cancer so I think we moved back to Manhattan so that I could get treatment at the Cancer Memorial Institute on 110th street north of Central Park. They treated me with a liquid radiation via needles and after that everything was fine, the radiation killed it.

I was a kid in a tough neighbor and destined to be as tough as I could be. If you didn't fight in my neighborhood, you didn't walk around long. I learned to fight when I was nine. At about this time I went to a Franciscan camp, a free vacation, and one of the rules was you would participate in all activities so they put gloves on me. My mother kept a picture of my first award. When the war broke out the American Theatre Wing was formed to do things to support the troops. In '42 it was the war in Algeria, and North Africa. Soldiers were coming back wounded. We fought in hospitals and camps. The first 3 fights I had were in a fort right outside of Harlem. The guy in charge of the Police Officers' Athletic League in the 34th Precinct was part of the American Theatre Wing so they called in the fighters and would take them out for exhibition fights. Since we had recently gotten in trouble, we were closely aligned with the police and their activities. If you wanted to stay out of trouble you could either join PAL or got into more trouble. So I joined PAL and fought through all of 1942 through 1945. We'd go to hospitals and camps all over the New York and New Jersey area, even Connecticut. I remember we fought at the Governor's mansion. I don't know what the hell we were doing there. But we'd get out of school at 3, they'd pile us into buses, trucks, like SUV's, thirty guys and we'd put on 15 bouts over the course of a day, then again the next day, they'd take us all over the place. It was a great experience. I had bad eyes, so I was never a good baseball player. I could play football reasonably well, and no one played golf. We played stickball. I was a reasonable athlete but in boxing, I just happened to know how to do it. At 13 I was the champion of the New York Queens Police Athletic League. The coach, Barney F., became one of greatest referees in boxing. He was very good. It was the first time somebody came up to me and said, no - do it this way. I was 15. I got picked up by a professional manager, Jackie T., he was tremendous at anything he ever did. Football, he knew all about it, like boxing. He had his own gym. I'm still in high school. He would drink and I had started drinking at 12.

I came out of a neighborhood where everybody's father was a drunk. My father was. His death was an important part of my sobriety. Everybody's father was working, the war was on. It was the first time since the '20's that there was any prosperity in New York, or any place. Nobody's father missed the opportunity to screw up. Fights in bars and so forth. This was World War II, 1943 - 44. My father worked 60 to 80 hours a week. He worked 60 hours then spends 60 hours in a bar. It was a difficult time. He was a good man in many ways. He worked hard and during the Depression he was the only one working because my uncles and grandfather

were out of work. Two of my sisters were alcoholics. My aunt was an alcoholic. Alcoholic was a predominate factor in my early years. A way of life. You drank at wakes, you drank at weddings and you drank in between. My grandfather was also an alcoholic. He would take the curtains off my grandmother's windows to sell for drinks. In 1921 he took the pledge and stopped drinking, the only one who took the pledge in the Catholic Church and made it. He took a pledge not to drink. Back then at Confirmation they would take a pledge not to drink. He died in my home, my daughters thought the world of him. He died before 2 of them were born.

I remember drinking the altar wine, I was an altar boy. Jimmy and I would see the wine sitting on the side of the altar, and it was rationed then. We were trying to be holy. Jimmy said, let's taste the wine! I said, "oh, no!" So he took a chug so I did the same. This priest came down the hall in his loafers and we couldn't hear him and oh, boy, he nailed my behind all over the place. Then he said, clean your face and get out here, we're going to Mass! Father H. was something else! Clean your face and get to Mass. He was someone you never wanted to go to Confession with. He'd talk our ears off for half an hour.

We would steal drinks, hit liquor stores, cause a commotion in the middle of the store and at the end of the store was the cheap wine. We'd grab a couple of bottles, head for the hills, sit and drink the booze. We had a clubhouse in the basement of our apartment. I was a daily drinker by high school. I was in blackouts at 16. I was still boxing but quit at 19. I drank and smoked. I met Nellie when she was 14 and I was 17. We married when she was 17 and I was 21.

My drinking got progressively worse and it didn't take much alcohol to put me away. The difficulty was it changed my personality. As soon as I tipped over I went from a generally nice person to being a really mean-streaked, insulting, difficult, arrogant individual. You wouldn't know what would happen. Sometimes I was peaceful, other times I was not.

Nellie: You were NEVER peaceful.

Ed: I got thrown out of high school at the end of my sophomore year. I had been in a fight with the track coach and my mother got a letter from Monsignor W. to bring her son back on such and such a date. He was aware of my difficulties and turned to my mother and said, "he is just not worth the trouble". So he expelled me. My mother and I walked out and she was sobbing. I was the only hope in the family, our family had not been successful and she said, Ed will be a success. She struggled. We battled throughout my teenage years and she tried to keep me on the straight and narrow and I kept going off to the wrong place.

Father S. served as a priest on weekends at our parish and he was also a teacher. Father S. came to my mother. He knew her from the Altar Society, and he said, "Mrs. M. what is the matter?" I said, "I have just been expelled." He said, "Oh, my goodness! Let me go talk to Monsignor". It had to do with fighting, stealing books and selling them back to the kids I stole them from. I ran a gambling ring. I'd get in fights with the kids across the street. (They said, don't fight on your side of the street, and go across the street - so I did.) The last day of the school year I got in a fight with the track coach because he said I was making noise but I wasn't. I was trying to get the hell out so I could go to work. He came behind me and cracked me on the back of my head and I went head over heels. I came up out of that, he was about 6'6" and I grabbed him, knocked him down, they had to pull me off of him and I thought it was over, that was the last straw. Father S. goes in and tells my story and the Monsignor calls us back and says to my mother, "Father S. told me the other side of Ed M." He said, "Why don't you be that boy here instead of the one that gets into all that trouble?" He said he'd suspend the expulsion but that I would be suspended for 6 months. I went to George Washington High School

in our neighborhood, I met Nellie, and I got promoted 6 months early. So I came back to my mother and said, I am going to get out of high school a year early. She said, "No you are not". I went back to Catholic high school in 1950, finished the year, had to make up all the work I didn't do.

I still stayed out to 2 or 3 in the morning and get to school at 8:30. A lot of my life was gang fights and difficulties and it was not a good or peaceful life I had as a teenager. In fact, right after I met Nellie I couldn't take her to a movie below 81st Street. I had to stay in my neighborhood around 93rd. The gangs, I was dead meat if I wasn't with a gang. She hung out with the Spanish gang. She is Spanish, her name is Manuela, and I called her Nellie. We lived the West Side Story - the exact story in the movie. It wasn't far from the truth. So I graduated in the right time.

Ed: Life was difficult, my father got terribly drunk one night. My mother had a battle with him and I said - I won't say what I said - but it was screw you all, I am going into the Navy. I was 17. I enlisted in the Navy, I had to get their signature and they signed for me. I was assigned and trained as an electrician.

Going into the Navy was like life just began. There were no more limitations on me. My mother had tried to keep me in line. She thought I was something special. She was born in 1906 in New York City's Hell's Kitchen. Hannah M, was a sweet lady but as tough as nails; four foot eleven inches and full of dynamite. She and I would clash. One time she was hitting me with a broom and I grabbed it and held it over her head, and I said, no more, Ma! I am going to live my own life!

We went to Tampa and took the train to Jacksonville on December 8, 1951. I was stationed at NAS JAX. There was a technical training center, since closed. I fought in Jacksonville, I was the 6th Naval Champion and when I was sent to Norfolk, VA, I became an Atlantic Fleet Champion at 140 pounds. I was drunk the night before. We went off base and I was dead drunk when I came in a 6 a.m. and had a fight at 8 p.m. that night. For the most part, my entire career, I had enough talent to hold off even good comers. I didn't win them all, but I won more than my share. But those times were disappearing; the drink was taking them away. This kid fought me and beat the be-jeepers out of me in three rounds. I saw him throw a punch, but I couldn't get my hands up to stop him. I had only been knocked off my feet one time in 156 fights. And he knocked me down 3 times in that last fight. I walked out of the ring, I was 19, and I said to Jimmy K. "that's it, no more. I am not going to fight." He said, take a couple of days off, you'll be fine, but I never fought again. And it wasn't because I wasn't talented enough to fight, it was the only sport I had any talent in, so I enjoyed it. Until I got my head beat in and got knocked off my feet. I had a great record, a lot of championships, not big ones, but I enjoyed it and had special services in the Navy so I was treated properly. It was a good time.

In August of that year Nellie and I got married. She was almost 14 when I met her and we had waited 3 years.

I didn't stop drinking until 1958. I got out of the Navy and went to work for Grumman Aircraft doing the same thing I did in the Navy. Later I went with IBM and then Systematics. I was doing quite well in spite of the fact that I was still drinking heavily and getting into trouble. I got away with it because my bosses were all drunks. I got away with it because they didn't see how I was in the bar. I stayed with that company for ten years.

One night (March 1958) I'd been out drinking all night and went into an arcade to have breakfast. I turned to tell something to my friend and there was this guy standing behind me. Six years earlier I beat the living hell out of his brother. He had been waiting for me all these years and this was his time. He picked up a sugar bowl off the table and as I turned he smacked me across the face and busted my cheek bone, I thought my teeth were

going to fall out. When I woke up I was in the arcade, I had blacked out and a cop was there. He walked me 13 blocks to my house, up the stairs and scared the living hell out of Nellie. She heard the cop say, "I have your husband out here". That was the morning she packed my bags and said it was over. Get out. That was the day I knew the pain was so severe I couldn't go on. I stopped drinking then and my sister let Nellie and the kids stay with her.

I went to an AA meeting that night and then to meetings with my brother-in-law who later became my sponsor. But I thought it was a bunch of BS because it interfered with what I wanted to do. I did however stay dry for a while. Six months later I was with another company in California and still dry. We had a big party to celebrate a business success. The whole team and senior managers were there, the vice president of the company was hosting us. I walked past the bar at 7 at night and I saw three bottles of Scotch. I stopped. This was the night I took the drink at the bar, that first drink. I drank 2 bottles of Scotch and got into a coma. At 2 in the morning I found a food store, bought another bottle of Scotch and somehow found my way back to the house! Drank more, passed out, and upchucked all over the bedroom and a gold brocade couch. Nice thing to add to your resume.

I woke up and knew it was time - I never took another drink. It was September 3, 1958.

I wish I could tell you I was an outstanding AA member, I was not. I didn't like any part of the control factors, didn't like anyone telling me what to do, how to do it. I never violated the first rule - don't take the first drink. As long as I could stay away from drink I could be a normal person.

Ed: I met a Marine Colonel, a priest, he was in the program, he was teaching at one of the high schools in Los Angeles area. He was very active in the program and he kept his eye on me. At the time, I didn't like my sponsor, he was my brother-in-law. I didn't stay away from him but I didn't listen to him, either. But it was my excuse, I had a cover, had a sponsor but said, "Stay the hell away from me, don't tell me what to do." I was not miserable but I wasn't happy. We were having trouble in our marriage, we had 4 daughters and the only thing I contributed to that was making more money. I wasn't anywhere near the father I should have been, and certainly not anywhere near the husband I should have been. I was busy as hell, traveling all the time. I was considered the guest who came to dinner on the weekends. I took an interest in the girls, but not enough. Don't interfere with my life! Nellie was an outstanding wife, she did everything herself. Somewhere in my 10th year I realized there was more to this program than I ever wanted to admit.

One day the priest called me and said, "You are going to come in, you are going to see me once a week for the next 12 weeks." It turned out to be 12 because he took me through the steps. I didn't believe a word he said. But I learned. I'm not stupid. It started to work. I have to learn at my own speed. I can be brilliant one day and stupid the next day. When I was at IBM I got a zero on a test on computer electronics. My boss said, "We're thinking about sending you back to New York. He said, how could you get zero? I sat for a week and taught you!" I said, "I know."

Ed: The next week I took the test again and got 100%. He said, "How the hell do you now know everything?" I said, "I don't know how or why, but I do know it". I was about to be fired and it had nothing to do with drinking, it is just the way I learn. There are times when I can be a genius and other times I am stupid. I had a magnificent career since sobriety came in. I moved to other companies and I was a troublesome character because I was pugnacious, to say the least. But I was sober. I did not drink.

I finished the Steps with the priest but at the time didn't buy into them. I didn't apply them the way I eventually would. As years went by I realized how true the Steps are. I tied them into my faith; the church was telling me the same thing that AA was telling me, except in a religious vein. I could listen to a priest give a homily and a speaker at a meeting and they are saying the same thing. I began to assemble all those thoughts in my head and try to be a better person.

But I have to go back and tell about what happened 9 months after I sobered up. It was May of 1959 and got a call from my sister. She said, "Daddy has fallen, you'd better go take care of him." I went and found him; he had been drinking steadily for two months. I was dressing him when he went into a convulsion. I was scared to death. I didn't know what to do. I never saw a person convulse so I jumped on top of him until he slowed down. I called the ambulance and police and they took him to the hospital. In those days, they didn't take drunks into hospitals, they had sanitariums. He was turned away at the first hospital but had another convulsion while waiting there. At 2 a.m. they took him to another hospital in the Bronx, County Hospital and it took two hours to get him in, As they were wheeling him in he had a third convulsion and never came out of it. He died the next day. I saw me die that night. As much as I had difficulties with my father, we were the same personality-wise.

So I gave up the booze and was able to restructure a life that was worthwhile. Here it is, 55 years later and I had a great career. I was a mustang - do you know what that is? It is a lieutenant in the Navy who came out of ranks, not the officer ranks. I enjoyed being the blue collar who was going to be a boss. I have been the president of 6 companies. I had a career you couldn't duplicate today. Now I am 80 years old and it doesn't matter anymore. My kids are raised, I am extraordinarily proud of them, 2 girls married well, 2 married badly, and one is separated. I paved my own way all my life. Nellie is the most expensive date I have ever been on! (laughter) And worth every penny.

My father's death changed a lot because I realized I watched myself die that morning. My philosophy growing up was that no one was going to tell me how to do anything. That was a deeply embedded concept in my life and I did not take direction. I've never had trouble with people who worked for me. I always had difficulty with people I worked for because they would try to tell me what to do and I knew better.

After the priest I never really had a sponsor. My brother-in-law died. But I attend 5 meetings a week now. I am enamored with the program, I truly am a believer. I am a believer of the pages. I believe what it says.

I am amazed at how brilliantly they assembled the words to communicate to an entire world. It is incredible. When I learn, I learn it completely. I learn it internally. Once I know something internally I will never forget it.

Ed: It took me longer to assimilate AA. I didn't understand this program until after 10 years. There is hope when you recognized that, you have to stay with it. You have to wait until it clicks. That is how I was my entire life. The only certain thing I knew was Nell. We've been together almost 60 years. It was God working. Nell can be just like my mother, she's stubborn. She will tell me when I'm full of stuffing. Guess I have to go to Confession this week!

So there you have it - from the guy who said to his sponsor, "Get the heck away from me" to 55 years sober and 5 meetings a week. As I said, I am a believer!

I: Thank you Ed.

