

George K. is one of our A.A. pioneers and lives in St. Augustine, Florida. George got sober in St. Augustine on July 30th, 1976. He is a vital presence in the A.A. community in St. Augustine. George taped his story for the St. Augustine Archives in 2019 and the following has been excerpted from that tape with his permission. (Interviewed by LeeAnn K. and transcribed by Mykel M.)

LeeAnn: Can you say your name and your sobriety date?

George: E. George K., July 30th, 1976.

LeeAnn: Okay. What was life like before that day?

George: Painful, very, very painful. But it was painful long before I ever became alcoholic. Alcohol was my benefactor for many years. It gave me an opportunity to have lapses from the pain, but then again I began to get sicker to the point that I really just wanted life to end. It was never my enemy, it just stopped being my friend.

I have nothing bad to say about alcohol. I'm very grateful that it's still being made. I'm very grateful for the barrooms, for people like me to have that moment of relief from their cares and troubles and woes. And especially for those who are prone to have suicidal ideations to have that moment to get away from

that. So the only thing I realize now about alcohol is that it just simply kept me glued to my problems.

LeeAnn: Interesting. Glued to your problems?

George: Glued to my problems. Now, that sums up me in a nutshell what it was like. To go into the specifics would be...

LeeAnn: So what happened on that July 30th that brought you in? How did you find A.A.?

George: That's one of the great mysteries that I still ponder to this day because I couldn't tell you why I called A.A.. I had no thoughts of it, and I was just tired, and I just had enough. I am led to believe that it was the grace of God that said, "Okay. You've had enough. Now, here's what to do," without me recognizing that it was the grace of God or knowing that it was the right thing to do. I just did it.

LeeAnn: You picked up the phone?

George: Picked up the phone and called. Was told that there would be somebody to call me back in just a few minutes. Just a few minutes a woman came on the phone and she said, "Are you the one that called A.A.?" And I said, "Yes, I am." And she told me her name and she said, "My husband's in the shower. He'll be out in a moment, and we'll be there in about 15 minutes, can you wait that long?" And that automatically talked me

off and I said, "Of course I can wait that long." And I did and they came and she bounced out of the car and she says, "Are you George?" And I said, "I am." And she said, "My name is and this is my husband and let's go get a cup of coffee."

We went to what is now the Village Inn. In those days it was known as Black Sambo's or Sambo's and it had a little chubby man on the top of the roof at the time. And we sat there for several hours and they quizzed me about my life, about the reasons -- not in a pushy way, but in a genuinely interested sort of way. And I responded quite candidly and openly and that's how I was introduced to Alcoholics Anonymous.

From there I went to my first meeting. They were being held at Flagler Hospital which is where we are now, but we're in the new hospital and the old one was down on Marine Street. And we were in a little room, no bigger than a closet that wasn't finished. It had exposed beams, and there may have been 10 or 12 people, if that many, at the meeting.

In those days there was only one meeting in St. Augustine and that was the meeting I was at, the Oldest City Group. And attendance was between 15 to 18 people if we were lucky. And we had two speaker meetings a week and one discussion meeting. And the

logic being it's better to hear twice as much and speak half as much. Now, it's opposite. Now, it's very few speaker meetings and all discussion meetings.

LeeAnn: So what did you think of it when you first got here?

George: Quite honestly I had never attempted to go without booze, it never crossed my mind. I would wake up in the morning and would end up in the pool halls, then the barrooms at noon, and cocktails in the afternoon, and dinner and wine and cocktails at night, and it never struck me to not drink.

So away from booze and other sundry things I was good for about four or five days and then withdrawals like I have never known before set in. Twice in my lifetime I have nearly died from withdrawals and didn't realize how close to death I was. And the first time, of course, was withdrawing from booze and having no medication or no booze to come down quitely, I came down with a crash.

And the second time was when I quit smoking two years later and being used to smoking three and four packs of cigarettes a day. At the time my life's partner was dying from pancreatic cancer, and I associated all my mood swings to their impending death, but later when I attended a seminar at one of our noted

universities for the summer I learned the effects of alcohol and booze on the central nervous system. And it's the most horrendous cases of withdrawal that I could equate with it. So I knew how close to death I had come based on what I was learning.

I'm very fortunate though today to be able to say I'm grateful that I went through that because, like my life, I never want to go back to nor do I ever want to have to withdrawal again. I just don't want to do it.

As far as what I thought about the meetings and the groups, I'm convinced, based on what I know today, that when I came in I did the very best I could do with what I had to do with. As I also know today that most of the people that come through the doors do the same thing. I heard a speaker say one time at a meeting, "It's all right to come here sick, it's not all right to stay here sick." That there is recovery, and if you want to stay sick, that's your choice and if you want to recover, that's our choice.

So I took an active role in my own life for the first time devoid of other people and what other people wanted for me. I began to develop a life that I would like to achieve, attain, and live, and I have surpassed that over the years.

LeeAnn: So when you first got here and you heard these speaker meetings and here your mind is clouded and your newly sober, what was it like when you heard these people? Did you think, "I want this or I don't know what I want, but this is better than what I had." What kind of feelings did you have?

George: Well, of course the opposite of distrust is trust and at that point in time in my life all I knew is distrust. I had not had the opportunities and/or occasions and/or situations to warrant learning how to trust. My lifestyle put me around people that I knew that if I ever trusted that would be the biggest mistake of my life. Trust, like everything else, is...

I know today, it's not even the question of conviction, that everything I became I was taught. My guilt was not becoming sick, my guilt was being the performer of what my sickness caused me to do. And at that time I knew nothing about trusting. I really knew nothing about 12 steps principles.

Conversations in those days centered around much what it is today, not really what The Book says, but what I think, as opposed to what I really know. Very little has changed except I know I have and that's really all that I teach my men. It's not important what other people do, it's only important what you do. And

if other people want to stay sick, that's their right, allow them that privilege and keep progressing with your own life, which is what I had to do and did do.

The joy of acquisition is when I became convinced that my life was unmanageable and could readily recognize what my sickness caused me -- how my sickness caused me to live. I was full of, like The Book says about the Four Horsemen, and I had no way to rid myself of that. A label was put to my emotional state, hopeless state of mind and body, fear and bewilderment, all those negative emotions that had become my traveling companions. Wanting to rid myself of them did not rid myself of them.

What want has done and is still doing for me 43 years later is propelling me to continue on seeking, to continue on learning, and to continue on practicing. It's so much easier to understand sickness today than my capabilities when I came into the program.

I advocate to every person I work with, "Do not accept me as a bastion of truth, accept the Big Book as being truth and me as a purveyor of that truth, not me being the truth. I am the purveyor of it." I live the truth today. But again, you know, so many words are used so flippantly and especially by the old-timers, "Oh, this is a text book." And yet to really implement

and probably the reality of what they're saying, ask them if they're still studying it and how and to what level are they with it now. It would be a difficult question for them to answer. So again, it's not important to me what they do. I understand me and what I want.

LeeAnn: So when you first started doing the steps with your sponsors what was that like?

George: My sponsors never spoke to me about the steps, never, never. Never talked to me about principles. They were big proponent and their life denotes it, of gratitude. And every time I would speak with them they would say, "Oh, boy, don't you have something to be grateful for." I would tell them about a new revelation, "Oh, don't you have something to be grateful for."

I asked them one time why they never spoke to me about the steps. And the reply was twofold. "We don't want you to put all your eggs in our basket because we have clay feet, too. If you're in a meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous, you're going to hear about the steps. You're going to have different types of input from different people concerning the steps. You're going to have different degrees of expectations as to what the steps will do for you, and we don't want to



prejudice you with what we feel and how we feel the steps should be worked because to us there is no right way or wrong way to work the steps."

LeeAnn: So then how did you work the steps?

George: I lived the steps. And it's not a question of working, it was a question of accepting the steps. I hear that word "work" all the time and it's most daunting for me because it belittles the individual and it belittles the program of Alcoholics Anonymous.

LeeAnn: Right. Because it sort of says, do 1 through 12 and you're done versus this is a life long process?

George: Absolutely. And it countermand's all that these people love to gloriously espouse acceptance. Acceptance is the key to my program. Well, you can't practice a principle until you accept the principle. If you don't accept the principle, you haven't got the principle. And then there's no way you can practice it.

I spoke the other day, you know, on forgiveness. After I completed the 4th step, again went to my sponsors and told them and it did denote to me the argument of my symptoms. From an abusive mother, to an absent father, to sibling rivalry, to social condemnation, to all the things that created my sickness and kept me in bondage for so many years. And I was

very resentful and more resentful after really seeing it in black and white than ever before.

And I went to them and they didn't tell me anything, all they said was, "Well, it's sounds like you just might need to start forgiving." And that absolutely floored me, to forgive. How do you forgive? I didn't know how to forgive. Do you know how to forgive? How do you forgive?

LeeAnn: What I've studied for a long time on how to forgive. I've done a lot of work. I didn't just know automatically.

George: And I spoke on that very thing. I had to go to people in this program that I didn't like and yet I would hear them say something and it would be good and logical and even though I disliked them I liked what they had to say. And I would go to them and ask them about it. I would go to people I did like and did respect and ask them, "What does it do for you? How does it make you feel?"

Give me the very thing my sponsor said about the principles of the steps, I have used that formula in virtually every stage of learning. Never accepting one person, but learning the variants of how to get to Jacksonville when one person's only giving you one road there and you know there's many more. So I find that

fascinating today and I revel and, of course, today, again, because of the years of practice, and yet it's a nanosecond. It's a nanosecond.

Am I capable of having a resentment today, absolutely. That's part of your normal state of human psyche. My joy today is that just that as quick as it came in, it goes out. It doesn't take root and grow, and that's my joy.

Now, that's what took time, was the learning stamina, just patience, tolerance, understanding, kindness. Every time I had a resentment I had to practice each and every one of those in order for it to vacate. If I didn't practice or left out any, if I wasn't kind to myself I had a resentment toward me. If I wasn't patient with them I kept a resentment. If I wasn't capable of desires and becoming willing to re-enter their life in a helpful stage, stay away from them. These were things that took time.

LeeAnn: How much time?

George: Well, that used to be an old formula. The new formula today is hurry up and do it. Hurry up and do it. And an old-timer, Frank K., he used to say about working the steps, "How soon do you want to get well?" Well, when I first heard that I thought, "You dumb SOB, I wanted to be well yesterday. What the hell is the

matter with you, who wants to be sick."

But I understand today that any time I have been given a dose of medicine I have had to wait for the medicine to impregnate my body in order to do what it's supposed to do. And the same thing is very true about spiritual and mental evolution.

Exposure to does not mean instant grabbing, it just means exposure to. I was exposed to everything concerning recovery in the first 30 days, but it's taken me years and I'm still finding out and experiencing things that I learned and was exposed to in the first 30 days. I'm a big proponent of give time time because one of my sponsee's used to say, his favorite thing was, "It took you so long to go into the woods, it's going to take you the same amount of time to get out of the woods."

LeeAnn: So did you consider other people sponsors as well or did you just have the one set of sponsors?

George: Only had the one set.

LeeAnn: Just the one set?

George: Just the one set.

LeeAnn: And then you did a 5th step with them?

George: No. I did a 5th step with my friend Melrose George, I have never learned his last name, he's now gone. But I met him the first time and he came in

the room and he said, "My name is George. I'm on the 3rd step practicing the 11th step," and I liked that. I liked that. Because that really was what I know today, and every person does, when they come in the rooms and not realizing they're doing it.

They come in the rooms and recite The Lord's Prayer and recite The Serenity Prayer and hold hands and have a moment of meditation. And the 11th step simply says, "Continue to improve our conscious contact."

Steps 2 and 3 gets us in contact with that power and the intermediate steps are the ones that bring understanding and right to that power. They hardly claim to have been right to proclaim the power. I will not proclaim myself as weak, dumb, ignorant. I will not say, "I'm a bozo on the bus" or "I don't know." I question that I am still the same person I was, I can't do that and proclaim love for the power that I know exists within me. I can't do it. There are those that still use terms like, "A piece of poop," and a "dungheap."

And today if I make a mistake it's just what the last word says, a mistake. It's not an intent. I make many mistakes. If I have to, I am so grateful that making an amends is like forgiveness, it's a nanosecond. I don't have to wait until nighttime to go up to someone

and say I'm sorry. If I recognize that I owe an apology today, immediately as the Book says, "Immediately." I teach my men a very simple reality, "Don't put out any crap, you don't have to take any," and I don't. I don't.

There's so many paradoxes in this fellowship and so many realities for me that I can't equate with today what I could when I got here. When I got here I was willing to accept whatever anybody said as true because I didn't know what truth was. But as I begin to develop truth in my own mind and for my own life and what was really proving itself to be good for me I begin to understand truth.

There is another book that I read today, I didn't at the time, that offers a litany of various wonderful gifts and the gift of love. And we talk about The Prayer of Saint Francis that it is better to love than to be loved. I cannot, and to the degree I possess love for myself, convey any other degree.

So that's why it's so paramount for me to continually seek God's grace and glory and teaching me His love. And so when I learned His love and it becomes a part of me, it's certainly greater than the love that I had before. So we're not talking about seeking love for myself, I have no problem considering I have

received a whole hell of a lot of it and I love being that way. It's today and I love visuals. I'm a big proponent of visuals, one picture is worth a thousand words. And I'm not really so interested in what you have to say in a room as much as how I watch and see you interact in the room. If I see someone, and this was a lesson that I learned very early on and not from A.A..

I underwent gastric bypass surgery years ago and I was in the program at the time about three or four years. And part of undergoing a gastric bypass was in it's embryo stage and I was told that I had a 50/50 chance and to make sure that I had everything settled before I went there, which I did.

And part of the procedure was to undergo a psychiatric evaluation to see if you could develop a lifestyle that would justify having your stomach cut out. And there was this little rotund black woman and every day there were six or eight of us waiting. And every day she would have all kinds of nieces and nephews and family members come in and they would just hug her. And it was just such a delight to watch the love that this woman generated. And I marveled at that, and I hoped that one day I would know what that would feel like.

Before the operation we were in group therapy

and I ask her, I said, "Precious, tell me something," and she said, "What?" And I said, "Why do you really want this surgery, what's your real gut feeling for it?" And she looked at me and without hesitation she said, "God don't want no lazy soldiers in his army, and I was just getting too lazy." And I've never forgotten that, and sometimes when I reach a point where I think I've gone too much or done too much or haven't had time to rest, I finally accept the reality, I just want to be lazy now, and God don't want no lazy soldiers in his army and that motivates me.

I've had so many wonderful experiences outside of the program. In the third year of my program when I wanted so desperately to be convinced that not only had I turned my will and life over to God, but that God truly accepted it, truly accepted it. And I wanted that so desperately and yet everything in my world was falling apart.

The third year was worse than any year that I have ever had in my life. My life partner was dying, I had no job, I had no money, I went hungry, I was living in a truck, I wasn't homeless, but I had no money for motel rooms, was undergoing cancer treatment in Gainesville. And I would walk three miles to a meeting, and at the meeting they had a big bowl of popcorn, and I



would try to get there early enough to sit next to the popcorn so I could get something to eat.

And I was in a laundromat and my partner -- nobody wanted to go in the room because they were the first one to get radiation diodes and pancreatic tumors and I took their clothes down to the laundromat.

And I was hurting so bad and there was a black woman there and I had nobody to talk to and I looked at her and I said, "Please, talk to me." And she said to me, "Mister, wait a minute. Let me talk to Jesus first." And she walked around behind the dryers and then about a minute later she came back and she said, "All right, mister," she said, "Let's talk." And I told her everything that was going on, the pain I was in and she looked at me and she said, "Mister," she said, "You gonna be all right. I know you gonna be all right." And I ask her, I said, "Have you ever undergone anything like this before?" And she smiled and she said, "Mister, I had twin boys and I loved them dearly and still do," and she said, "They went swimming together in the coquina ponds and they drowned three months ago."

And I really broke down and then and I said, "I'm sorry, I didn't know that otherwise I wouldn't have talked to you." And she says, "Oh, no, mister, don't

worry about it, don't worry about it. And I said, "If they were back what would you say, would you say anything, or do anything different?" And she said, "No, sir, not one thing." And I said, "Why?" And she said, "Because every day of their life I told them 'God loves you and I love you.'" And I have never forgotten that and every man that I work with when I leave them, that's the last thing I leave them with "God loves you and I love you."

So you know fellowship is one thing, all my principles and all my affairs are different, different. I don't garner it total recovery in the rooms, nor do I bring total recovery to the world. I let the world do with me because that's how I'm directed by the God of my understanding. The Book says, "We stop fighting anything and anybody, even alcohol." I had no axes to grind with the churches, I had no axes to grind with the institutions, I had no axes to grind with the judicial system, just stop fighting all that and if I can get a Reuben sandwich on the outside I'll take that opposed to a peanut butter and jelly on the inside of the program. So that's how I look at life today and enjoy both of them and enjoy both of them.

LeeAnn: How many men do you sponsor now?

George: Quite honestly I don't know. I don't

know. I was thinking the other day I am truly blessed truly, truly. I have over eight men that still consider me sponsors that has over 30 years in recovery. They have men with 20 and 25 years of recovery. I received a phone call a week or so ago from a young man in Georgia thanking me and I said, "Son, I don't know you, and why are you thanking me?" And he told me that his sponsor, and I said, "Strange, you were never mentioned." But when we did talk and I, like I said, I would hear from him every year, but it was years and years ago and I never thought of him as still considering me his sponsor and yet I said, "Well, that's great." And he just picked up a 20 year medallion himself.

I teach the ripple effect. I teach the ripple effect, that one good deed begets another good deed begets another good deed. And so does one bad deed. So it's a just a question. Make a decision if you want to put out good deeds or bad deeds and it's your right to do either one. I do not believe in telling another human being what they should do or shouldn't do. I can only share my experience and my strength.

That's why in those rooms whenever I hear some bombastic know-it-all talking "we," "we do this," "we do that," "we feel this way," I cut them off because

he has no idea how I feel, and I have no idea about him. So his verbalization is just a mood issue, it's not what he went through or what he underwent or how he achieved or she or whatever the case may be. It is the "I think" syndrome not the "I know" syndrome. I don't deal in "I thinks." If I'm going to follow something I want to know that someone has done it before and that it is doable, not "I think" it is. I don't have that kind of time left now, and in the beginning I didn't want to waste that kind of time. Tell me what you know and I'll love you dearly. Tell me what you think and I said, "Well, that's your right. I wish you well with it." And then I resolutely dismiss it. It's not a proven reality, it's a theory to me.

LeeAnn: So what, out of this entire 43-year journey, if you had to encapsulate it, what would you say is, like, I mean, your whole life is this really, it seems to me. Is that accurate? That this became your life and you have an outside life, but this is in your outside life, they're not separate. Is that true?

George: Uh-huh.

LeeAnn: Yeah. That's how you appear to me.

George: My sickness, my inexperience and ignorance, lack of formal education, lack of encouragement and tutorship caused me to seek from

within me new ways to grow. I knew nothing about clothes. So I would go to the drugstore and read Gentleman's Quarterly and look at all the beautiful pictures. I couldn't afford to buy what they were selling, but I could afford to go to the discount stores and get look-alike's. And I begin to look the part even though I wasn't the part.

I became very successful in the clothing world, and I ascended to great heights with great respect and made lots of money. When I came into the program I came in not as an under-the-bridge drunk, but outside as an affluent, successful 39-year-old man.

In the late nineteenth century there was a prize fighter, his name was John L. Sullivan, and I loved him. And I emulated him because he was a street kid, he was uneducated, and he learned to fight very early to survive. And someone recognized his ability and began to promote him, and he became world-known, world-renowned.

And he made tons and tons of money and he got hooked on alcohol and he lost all his money and he lost and went down to the very depths of degradation and hell and he cried out in desperation as I did on the jailhouse floor. Hoping to change or let me go. Well, God intervened in his life, touched him, there was no

Alcoholics Anonymous to go to, but he became a temperance lecturer and he went around the country teaching and preaching about the evils of alcohol. And the title of his lecture is the very core of my existence today, "From Glory to Greater, to God.

LeeAnn: From Gloria?

George: Glory.

LeeAnn: Was that his mother's name?

George: No, no, glory. From Glory to Greater, to God, that was the title of his lecture. That's my program, that's my reality. That's, you know, I achieved in sickness financially, and recovery I have achieved ten times more gold than I ever did as a drunk and that's because of God.

LeeAnn: That's good stuff. Is there anything else you want to include in your story?

George: The one great lacking in my life and what I'm convinced is lacking in every alcoholics life initially is belief in self. There is a meditation tape on the line today that's really intriguing. It's titled "F all that stuff and Recover." And I love that. I don't mix words with people in the rooms and out of the rooms, I don't, I can't.

The joy of being true to self and on one of our medallions we say, "To thy own self be true," when

does that begin? For me it began the moment God allowed me the privilege of putting that drink down and then growing into the right to keep that drink away from me. Because I am protected today. I was then, but I didn't recognize it, it had no meaning. I do recognize my protection today it has every meaning to me and that's what I am more willing to fight for today than anything else in my life.

Above everything else in my daily prayers is the power to have no other guide before the God of my love and understanding. I had many God's as a drunk: the God of fear, the God of grief, the God of sex, the God of lust. All of those things I worship today, and today I only seek two things and the two things I seek cannot be torn down. They can only be rejected, but they cannot be torn down. Truth is perfect, love is power. The more I love you, the more powerful I was.

LeeAnn: Amen.

George: So anything else you'd like to know?

LeeAnn: That was pretty awesome. How many meetings do you go to a week?

George: Oh, today?

LeeAnn: Yeah.

George: Minimum of two. More than not three a day.

LeeAnn: A day?

George: A day.

LeeAnn: A day. Wow.

George: I've been to one this morning. I love the 7 o'clock meeting.

LeeAnn: I have heard that. I have never been to that; I heard it's great.

George: Well, it's the erudite meeting.

LeeAnn: Well, I would like that, though.

George: Well, it's the -- you go there, you see Mercedes, you see Lincoln's, you see, and they're all brand new. And you hear these old-timers that went to Dartmouth and became heart surgeons and computer experts.

And it's amazing, though, the one thing I have come to understand and I'm so grateful that I haven't bought into yet, is that they all seem to have reached a level of comfort and they have investing too much time or appear to be investing more time in accepting good when to me right across the street is the best and I keep walking across the street. So I don't know.

LeeAnn: So they're taking good instead of best?

George: I say it appears that way. I never said that...



LeeAnn: Like materialism instead of spirituality?

George: Well, I never see them at nighttime meetings and I know they're working with other people and doing marvelous jobs. However, the fact that age being it's own reward is you may not agree with me, but you have to accept the reality that I have 35 years, I have 30 years, so I have done something right, without saying I have done something right.

You don't achieve longevity in recovery by staying sick. You may take just enough medicine to get rid of the pain, but not enough medicine to get rid of the cause of the pain. When you go just a little further and just a little more medicine, you might just get rid of the cause.

LeeAnn: That's the whole key. Don't leave before the miracle happens, right?

George: I rest my case.

LeeAnn: All right. Is that good?

George: That's good for me.

(Interview concluded.)