

John R

DOS: June 10, 1985

John R began his sobriety journey in New York, but for the past 31 years has resided in St. Augustine. He shared his AA journey in December 2019 (Interviewed and transcribed by Sally F; edited by Mykel M).

**Let's start with your name and where were you born.**

My name is John R., and I was born in Freeport, Long Island New York on June 27, 1957. I don't remember much of my early childhood. My dad left when I was about three years old. I don't remember him ever being around after that, although I maintained a relationship with him. I was the youngest of three kids. I lived in a big two- family house with my two older sisters, my mom, and my grandmother lived upstairs. Mom was a German hausfrau, and everything had to be in order. For me, it was a bit too strict. My way or the highway. No wiggle room at all.

My stepdad came along.. I was real young. He was all right, not a bad guy. I recall what I missed most as a kid was that the families in the neighborhood would go to the beach, the movies, bowling, and do other family activities together. My stepdad wasn't into that. However, I went to Europe, Canada and San Francisco. He omitted all the little things, and we did big things, but I really think I would have preferred a lot of the little things instead of the big ones.

I did complain one time that I wanted to have a catch with him because I was into little league baseball. The first ball he threw was a fastball. It slapped me right in the nose and that was intentional, I believe. He was pretty strict too. He got the belt. You had to go in your room and wait for him. The wait was worse than anything else, but that only gave me more of an attitude like, "up yours".

When I was young, the family split up. My Dad's family was big. My Mother's side was not. Family came during the holidays. I first started seeing alcohol at the family gatherings. It was pretty much routine. The family gets together, and the bar is open. They drank various mixed drinks. I was probably eight years old. We all had chores. At gatherings, I was the bartender. . I don't know if I liked it, but I started sipping. That's how I knew if I made the drink right.

School was normal up until junior high. If I could get out of washing windows or weeding gardens, I played in the neighborhood. I was stuck around the house doing chores. It taught me discipline and responsibility, but I think I missed a lot when I was little.

My Bavarian grandfather went to Europe every year. When he came home, I got a beer stein.. I have a collection of steins. My first beer stein was two ounces. I was allowed to have two ounces of beer in that little stein on holidays. If you look at my beer stein collection, they get bigger with time. The last one was a two liter stein. It reflects the progression of my disease..

My oldest sister was a rebel. She became like a surrogate mom. There was a lot of stuff going on, divorce and whatnot, money whatever. I found safety at the foot of her bed. I would curl up like a dog there during thunderstorms, and I became very attached to her. We were carbon copies. My middle sister was the scholar

When I was 10 years old, I came home from school, and there was a note telling me to go play. You never got to play after school. You had homework and chores. My stepdad came home. He took my middle sister and I to dinner. That was way out of the norm. .

I always wanted to go bowling with him but that was never allowed, it was his night out with the boys. However, he let me go with him that night so it was very strange. Something was up. Around 11 at night, my mother came home and announced that she had put my sister on a plane to Seattle to live with our biological Dad. It devastated me. I found out thirty years later that I put a box around my heart. It hurt so bad. That was the only security I had. We didn't get to say goodbye or anything. Poof! She was gone.

I remember the first time I drank alcohol outside of family events was in junior high. We had a little sweetener bottle that had contained saccharin. Five or six of us took turns every day bringing that bottle home to hit our folks liquor cabinet. Whatever went in there, went in there We met in the locker room a couple of times a day, and got about four drops. We were in 7<sup>th</sup> grade, and we were cool.

By the time I was in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, I could buy beer at the stockcar races... I was into stockcar races, drinking beer and looking for girls. It didn't seem to be a problem. I had discipline issues with family and school.

I was a Boy Scout. I was a patrol leader. We had patrols -- The Broken Arrow, Bear, Flaming Arrow patrol and then you had Randel's Riots with a skull

and crossbones flag. That was my patrol. We were the guys who cut your tents down in the middle of the night and set fires in the fields, but we ate better than anyone else. I was known, and it was good. I learned a lot of things including survival techniques. However, before we went on camping trips, one scoutmaster would make me unpack my gear to check for booze. Boone's Farm was only \$1.07 a bottle. .One time some scoutmasters invited me to have a little of their apple wine (ironic). They didn't know that I had two quarts back at my tent. They could not understand how those two sips could trash someone so bad. I got a reputation. Scouts went from being good to it got me out of the house on Friday night.

With girls involved, it wasn't cool to be a Boy Scout. I wanted to be accepted, somebody cool. I wasn't fitting in anywhere yet and then, I moved on to high school. I like to say now that I misread the sign. I thought it said "Get High School" cause boy, did I take off when I got there.

I joined the marching band. We had uniforms with very high hats and you could fit a quart of apple wine in the hat. Baritone saxophone cases make perfect traveling bars. High school dances in 9<sup>th</sup> grade was two bottles of Strawberry Hill and head to the dance. Drink one before I went in, sneak one in and that very quickly turned into staying in the parking lot with these alumni guys. They would like to get me drunk and laugh at me. They bought me stuff like Hobos Wife, Brass Monkey, and all this premixed stuff that I never heard of and haven't seen again. But I was cool. I was a freshman hanging out with guys that graduated a year before, and I felt accepted. But it was more, "Look at him. Let's get him drunk and watch him fall down". And again, it got me out of the house.

### **Do you think you had a problem or was it just usual.**

I was too busy having fun. No, I didn't think I had a problem yet. It was not abnormal. My whole high school time was off the chain.

### **Where did you get sober?**

I got sober on Long Island. Freeport was the party--till- you- puke t-shirt place. Three guys rented a house. Animal house had nothing on us. It was crazy. There was a party for every occasion, even National Pig Day. Every day of the year. My sister gave me a birthday card which said "To the Man Who Only Drinks on Holidays." Inside was a calendar and every day of the year was some kind of

national holiday. National Pig Day or Tulip Day, something. I think she was trying to send me a message, but I wasn't reading it. I didn't hear it..

### **When did you see the light about drinking?**

After my second daughter was born, there was a DUI. It was not my first DUI but the ones in Massachusetts didn't count because they were out of state. When I started to see the light, I got a DUI. It wasn't my fault. They took my license. I had to go to a drinking driver program for 10 weeks to get my license back. The day came where they were calling everybody up and giving them their license back They called me up, and they told me I needed further evaluation.

I still wasn't convinced that it was me. We would go to the drinking driving program and afterwards we would go to the bar and talk about it. We were required to go to three AA meetings. I went with a guy, and we would be drinking and we would talk about the stupid drinking driving program.

I hit my bottom, I believe, on a Sunday. I had gone to work for four hours that morning, so it was in the morning. Anyway, I woke up and I did 80 milligrams of valium. The way the list went that Sunday was 80 milligrams of valium, a grain of codeine, one or two hits of yellow microdot, a case and half of Budweiser.

I was in the Dutch Inn drinking white Russians on somebody's American Express card. I have no clue whose it was. I was there until I passed out in my French onion soup, and they threw me out. I had a bunch of coke and I went back to my home. I was late again for work which wasn't unusual. It's funny I worked for one guy...I would be late for work so instead of coming in at 7:00, he would say "Junior, you can't get here on time so you come in at 8:00 from now on". So I would come in at 8:15, 8:30 and then it was 9:00. He finally said "Junior, before you know it, when you come to work, we will be closed."

It is Monday morning and I am late for work. I woke up and when I went to breathe, I couldn't breathe. I was like somebody was choking me. If I breathed really slowly, real shallow, I could get air into my lungs but I couldn't take a regular breath. So I rolled over and I shook my wife and I told her "I can't breathe. Get me to the hospital." She looked at me and said "I hope you die Mother Fucker". And she rolled over and pulled the blankets over her head. So the insanity of it all just called for desperate action, right? I need to get to the hospital. I sat on the edge of the bed. I twisted up a joint. I got in my old beat up station wagon, drove past the deli, got a quart of Budweiser and headed for the emergency room.

I walked into the emergency room, a joint smoking, a beer in my hand and I kicked the doors open . I went in where the ambulances go, and I said, "I can't breathe". And a guy with a white smock came over and he said, "let me have this and let me have that". He took my stuff away. Sat me in a chair and pulled out a little pen light and told me to open wide. His jaw dropped and he looked at this guy and said, "Joe, look at the size of the uvula". I went into freak mode. I started wiggling out because uvula sounded like a part of the female anatomy and I didn't know how it would up in my throat. Who was she?

They sent me to a throat specialist. That guy lanced it and sent me back for observation in the hospital. The end of that day, my wife appeared out of the fog and seemed very far away. I was laying on a gurney in the corner. I said, "did you call a lawyer." She said "Not yet." I said, "Call Mike". He was the guy who ran the drinking driver program. So she left, and she called Mike. Mike said "When they let him go, he is going to want to stop for coffee, and the answer is no. He is going to want to stop for cigarettes and the answer is no. He is going to want to go home and shower and change his clothes and the answer is no. You pick him up from the hospital and you bring him to me". And sure enough, I got in the car. I said, "I need a coffee". "I need cigarettes". "Can I take a shower"? He brought me to the place where we have the drink driving program, and there was another counselor there who had just started. Years later when I went in, I sat in his green chair, and he told me that either the program works or that green chair works. I thought you were dead.

Mike got me into a Catholic hospital for detox. There was a nun there in recovery. I did my detox. I went home for a weekend and when I got home, I could not put a sentence together. I sat in the middle of my living room, shaking, crying, and afraid that if someone knocked on that door, and wanted to go party, I would be out the door. That's when I realized that I didn't get beat up. I did this to myself.

### **Where was your first meeting?**

My first meeting was in Elmont, New York. It was that weekend. I got out of the hospital, and I was crying. I was a basket case. I went to a meeting, and I felt safe. They weren't going to get me there. They didn't want to catch what I had. I went home. I fell apart again. I went back to a meeting. It was okay. I ended up frequenting the hospital that I detoxed in.

Eve of Sobriety was my first home group in Rockville Center, New York. I lived right by the Belmont Racetrack. There were some neat meetings in the back

of the stables. That weekend I found AA. Now I had been brought to AA a couple of years earlier by a friend of mine. I got to AA and I heard about one guy sharing that he hid his bottle above the tile in a suspended ceiling so nobody would find it. Another guy hid his in the toilet tank in a bathroom. It kept it cool. He just went to the bathroom a lot. I didn't identify with anything. I compared which was my mistake. I did not hide my booze in the toilet bowl or anywhere; so I can't be an alcoholic. There was a time, prior to that, where it started to come in, every now and then, probably when I was drunk and feeling down, that I might be an alcoholic. If I was going to be an alcoholic, I would be a real good one. I would be the drunkest one. So that had started to play in mind too.

After that week, I went to a rehab, and one day, my wife was there with my kids. This sticks in my mind when they had to leave. My oldest daughter wanted her Daddy, and I had to stay behind the gate. That sticks in my mind today. That hurt because I wanted to be there for my kids. So, I did the rehab thing which my job had sent me to. I got out, and I jumped into meetings. I jumped in head first because I felt safe there.

Things were a little different in the group back then. You would sign up for speaker meetings and jump in the car with a handful of people and drive to another town. You would have a meeting in the car, a meeting at the meeting and then another meeting on the way home. I was so much about AA that if I had a billboard, I could have worn it and walked up and down in the middle of the road. I wanted to save the world.

I wound up volunteering at that hospital. I wanted to become a certified alcoholism counselor. I would get a pass from the nun to a guy in such and such a bed. I was twelve stepping people in the hospital, but I was working the graveyard shift and getting there at 8 o'clock in the morning, and I was getting in the nurses way. They were happy when I left the hospital.

I was very involved in AA. A lot of twelve step work. I remember detoxing people at my house with my family there. I found out that if a man wears boots and he passes out and you want to go to sleep, take one of his boots and leave a note on the other one because a man who wears boots, does not leave without them. "I have your boot in my room. If you are leaving, come and get it." Whatever I did in my twelve step work is what I needed to hear.

In the beginning, I did it all wrong. I would walk with somebody, sponsor them, whatever you want to call it and take them to a meeting every day. It got me doing 90 and 90 again. Early on, there was a guy. I didn't pick him up on the

90<sup>th</sup> day. I was going to let him get there on his own. He didn't show. I felt that I had failed. I had to learn that I can't make anybody drunk. I can't make anybody sober. I can carry the message. But just doing that kind of stuff keeps me focused on my recovery. So, there was a lot of twelve step, a lot of friends.

We had the families that got together. We started doing social things outside of AA but everyone was in recovery. On Sundays, we would get together at somebody's house and everybody brought a dish. We put together a white river rafting trip, things like that. Fortunately, that guy Mike was in the field of recovery counseling. He had written books. He was well known. Mike McDonald. He ran me through a bunch of tests, psychiatric and that stuff, and they put it in a computer. I found out that I would be good at being an administrator of a nursing home. But that is why I latched on to it. I spent a lot of times going to meetings. I submerged. It was work, home, meetings, work, home, meetings.

I still did justify, manipulate myself. For example, on Friday nights, my home group always had a meeting at the hospital. Sobriety allowed me to buy my first motorcycle instead of stealing one or borrowing one. So, I would ride the bike and after the meeting I would drive 20 minutes or so and ride over to the strip where I used to hang out. I would drive down there, and there was a guy standing outside the car, and I would stop and tell him all about the meeting and how good recovery was. He is the only one of my friends that came to me when I was detoxing. He wasn't sober by any means but he supported me.

### **What is your sobriety date?**

June 10, 1985. I cleaned up. I started at work. Somebody told me that I would be highly competitive in the white collar world, if I had an education. It is a long story about how I got my high school diploma. They withheld it because I didn't take gym class. So, I played chess for a couple of months, and they gave me my diploma. I started taking business courses. I went to SUNY. I went to Nassau Community College. I went to Farmingdale. I took mostly business courses because I had landed that job where the guys wanted to lose money. I politicked along that time and got myself into a job where I no longer had to wear jeans and t-shirt. I was wearing three-piece suits with a leather attache case, and I went into Manhattan. I went out and bought a 98 Oldsmobile with the pillow top cushions. I was a businessman. When I was in stores, I noticed how differently I was treated. I went in there thinking that I was something hot to being quite humble and looking different. People treated me different. I liked that.

### **Why did you end up in St. Augustine?**

I followed my career and it led me here in 1988. It was April 7<sup>th</sup>. It was my daughter's seventh birthday. I left on a Thursday night and headed for Florida. I remember looking at my wife. Neither one of us could believe we were doing it. I made a comment. "This seems like something we would have done when I was drinking. Pack up and leave late at night and not pay the rent." So, we packed up and left and there was a sense of comfortability. This was my higher power that I developed, not from a church. **I think the most important thing with AA, the most important thing that I have found, is to develop that higher power of your own understanding.** Too many people, in my opinion, adapt to their grandmother's belief of their religion. Spirituality and religion are two different things. They can be combined but I believe that they are two different things. It took me awhile to realize that. I can't define it for you. I can't draw a picture of it, but it started working.

I was three years sober when I moved here. I just knew I was going in the right direction. It was really weird but I was confident as heck.

### **Where was your first meeting here?**

144 King Street.

### **Would you tell me about that place?**

144 King Street. There was not a whole lot of meetings in 1988.

### **The Oldest City Group?**

The Oldest City Group, right. Perry and Alice. We ended up calling it the "Perry and Alice Show". They much pretty much hosted it and kept that meeting going. It was right next to Carmelas Pizza down on King Street. It was jam packed and smoke filled. We had the homeless wandering in. It was a smorgasbord of people of classes.

### **Do you remember the Shamrock Group?**

I was in the Shamrock Group. That was at St. Joseph's Academy. I went to the Shamrock Group. That was around. The Serenity Club. I didn't go there that often, and I really can't tell you why. I did not gravitate to it. I started at 144 King Street, and I had it in my mind that I would give it one week. I would get a sponsor. Temporary or not, I would have a sponsor. Perry was my first sponsor. I ended up hanging around with Big George, and he had a following.



We would go up to Penman Road. I had a van so everybody piled into my van. We would have a meeting in the van. We would go to the Homestead Restaurant where they served family style, fried chicken and all. We would have a meeting at dinner. We would go to the meeting and have a meeting. Then we would have a meeting on the way home. George K kept us on track. It was good. It was very good for my recovery. I was three years sober.

There was only one other place in town. There was a place called Twin Oaks. I think that was a rehab. They had just shut it down. There wasn't much, not like it is today. Now there are meetings all over the place.

Mike C became my sponsor. He was one of George K's, I hate the word, pigeons. I was standing outside 144 King Street. and I asked him to be my sponsor. We jumped into the 4<sup>th</sup> step, as he got it, which I believe was Hazelton's version with the 3 parts – Childhood, Adolescent and Adult. I was to do one question a night or one question a week. I was grateful for that because the Big Book 4<sup>th</sup> step study was too general. I needed more direction. I didn't know where to start, and it didn't have substance for me. I needed a lead and, so for me, that thing worked.

My 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> step, I did not spend much time at all on. I believed in something bigger than me all my life. I was raised with it too. So, 1, 2 and 3 were eminent. That is why I ended up in a rehab. If those steps weren't already done in my world, I wouldn't have gone. People today seem to be so anxious and a lot of sponsors bring their people through the steps right away. There is no right or wrong of how anybody does it. I didn't do my 4<sup>th</sup> step until I was four years in the program, and it took me a year to do it.

I hear now that some people do the steps pretty quickly early in recovery, and then they go back and do another 4<sup>th</sup> step. I was told that if I did my 4<sup>th</sup> step correctly, I would never have to do it again if I do 10, 11 and 12. I did a very thorough 4<sup>th</sup> step. It was very eye-opening when I did my 5<sup>th</sup> step because I had some things on there that I was going to take to the grave that would embarrass me if I shared them. And I did share with my sponsor.

I enjoyed the heck out of making amends. The first amends I made was to my mom but for her, I didn't have to do anything but be sober and honest which I started doing right away. A lot of the people I wanted to make amends to happened to be girls through my high school years before I got married. I had to research and find out where are they now That was a very rewarding step to do.

**You talked about some service work. Did you ever start a group or do anything like that?**

It was at the Serenity Club. It was Big John, Steve S and Mitch. They were involved in a lot of people's lives. We started the Foglifters Group. It used to be 10 o'clock on Sunday morning. I was a treasurer in New York for awhile and a secretary for a group at the Serenity Club. I don't remember what group that was.

I don't believe I have read anywhere in the Big Book that we are supposed to have a sponsor. I really don't like the word "sponsor". It is open to a lot of interpretations. What I have found is finding someone that has what I want, or seems to be content, smiling. I want those things. What happens is after a while, I build a relationship, and I find you don't know who is sponsoring who. In the beginning, it is very different. You got an issue. You talk to me. I talk to you. This is what I did. It becomes less of a priority to have the quote unquote sponsor.

Big John was my sponsor. It was very surprising to me. Big John was a gay guy. I had a wife and three daughters and the cat and the dog. Everybody was female. I was the only male in the house. It got to the point that it was not about putting the plug in the jug. It was about living life on life's terms. I would go to a sponsor, or to somebody in my support group for issues with my family, excuse my French, F the bitches. You can't live with them and you can't live without them. All this macho male ego stuff wasn't doing anything for me. Big John lived an alternate lifestyle. One time, he explained to me that everyone has a feminine and masculine side to them. Macho, egotistical men, they ain't in touch with their feminine side. I wanted to be in touch with my feminine side, not for sexuality but to deal with my wife and daughters. I know when people have PMS now.

Time does matter to me in certain ways, not to be bragadocious about it. It is difficult for me now to find somebody that has what I want, Or has the experience that I have had. I am trying not to sound egotistical. I can learn from somebody new in recovery, but I don't know how much I can learn.

One night, I was leaving Liars Paradise, and Jim was next to me. "Jim, I don't know if you know it, but you are my sponsor." He said, "I kinda figured that out". He is from New Jersey. He was a bar room drinker. He is a little older than me.

I could probably tell you that I have six sponsors if I wanted to or I don't have any. I have a support network. In the beginning, get a sponsor. I really

recommend that. In the beginning, I had to work the steps real hard. It wasn't easy. Or it was easy but it was hard. So you work them. Then you practice them. And then, all of a sudden, you realize, wow, I just practiced such and such a step. This is just happening automatically.

I started to trust my gut. I have learned that it is alright to want things. It is all right to pursue things. The difference in recovery is when I go after something now, if the door opens, I keep going. If I want to buy a motorcycle or a boat or something like that, buy a house, do something big, I pursue it. If it flows smoothly, I keep pursuing it until I wind up with it. When I have to start kicking the doors down and knocking hard or going around the back end, I have learned to stop. When I was out there, if I wanted something and I latched on it, I was getting it one way or the other. It didn't matter. A lot of people don't look at material things in recovery. I do. Somebody once told me that you can tell the duration and quality of a man's sobriety on his credit card balance.

I will give you an example. I never owned a motorcycle till I got sober. I stole them or borrowed them. I own a motorcycle now. I used to go to beach parties, get drunk and steal your boat. I own a boat now. Fear of financial insecurity has left, miraculously.

I look at what people pay for a drink today. \$8, \$12, \$20 for a drink. I drank 30 cent beers with a \$1 shot of tequilla. I would get hammered for \$5. Now you can't get a drink for \$5. So my priorities are so much different in recovery. I got a tattoo my first year. "Live and Let Live". Living the steps and principles are quite easy for me out in the real world. At home, it is very, very difficult. I have to watch it. I am the Dad. I was the bread winner. My youngest child is 31 years old, and I still want to tell her how to do things. "Live and Let Live". "Let Go and Let God". Those are the two most important or meaningful slogans that I carry with me.

Do that which will prevent you from picking up! Keep the fire from igniting. Don't wait and be ready to put the fire out. Don't let the fire begin.