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## ADULTS ANONYMOUS

### A Mutual Help Program for Inmates and Ex-Inmates

ALBERT EGLASH

The author is Ass't. Professor of Psychology in Washington College, Md. During several years, until the autumn of the present year he was a member of the staff of the State College at La Crosse, Wisconsin. During two years following August, 1954 he was a member of the Detroit Commission on Children and Youth.

He acknowledges his indebtedness to Mr. James O. Holmlund, for his encouragement and support of this program and of the author's efforts to continue it. As a LA CROSSE TRIBUNE staff writer, and as president of the La Crosse County Association for Mental Health, Mr. Holmlund has stimulated community awareness and approval of the program. Dr. Eglash has drawn upon Mr. Holmlund's feature article, "Principle of Mutual Help: Adults Anonymous Seeks to Help Jail Inmates," LA CROSSE TRIBUNE, June 16, 1957, Sec. 1, p. 2.—EDITOR.

Among other organizations Alcoholics Anonymous, Recovery, Inc., National Association for Retarded Children, T.O.P.S. (take off pounds sensibly), etc., have demonstrated that a mutual-help principle effectively leads troubled persons on the road from stigma (to be set apart, as marked or branded) to dedication (to set apart, for special service). The principle has been used also, in correctional work.

In Detroit, ex-inmates have organized Youth Anonymous, dedicated to helping juvenile delinquents and other youthful offenders (5).

In New York, Chief Justice Irving Ben Cooper uses ex-probationers to encourage and reassure new probationers (3).

In California's State Prison at Folsom, successful parolees return to lecture to pre-parolees. Associate Warden Bill Lawson explains, "The parolees tell the men the same things we've been telling them for months. But the difference is that the inmates listen."

#### THE PROGRAM

In La Crosse, a probationer who has been jailed 27 times helped initiate Adults Anonymous, a title chosen to indicate that the program, based upon the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous, is for all offenders. Since April 1957, meetings have been held weekly (with some omissions, and with extra meetings on holidays) in the lock-up of the county jail. The basic form of the meeting is a round-table discussion of the AA Twelve Step program.

On the Saturday when a reporter visited, eight

men participated. Others continued to sleep in their cells. We gathered around a table. "Let's open with a moment of silence."

Membership cards were distributed. These have the Twelve Steps on one side, and on the other, a well-known prayer, "Grant me the serenity to accept things I cannot change; courage, to change things I can; and wisdom, to know the difference."

We discussed Step 1: "We admitted we are powerless over our behavior and that our lives are unmanageable."

"Naw, not me. Drinking is just a recreation for me. I wouldn't say I'm here because of drinking. But I won't say I'm not here for that, either."

"It doesn't have to be drinking, that's what Al's trying to tell you. What difference does it make, drinking, cards, horses, pills—or young girls, like Dalton here? It's something we can't control, or we wouldn't be here. With me, it's writing checks."

On one occasion I brought a list of 20 questions, promoted by AA and by Johns Hopkins, each indicating a tendency towards alcoholism. One inmate replied "No" to all, and the others countered this denial of reality with an earthy "we're all in the same boat" humor which seemed to attack his resistance without arousing undue anxiety.

Q. "Have you ever been in an institution as a result of your drinking" (Or, "as a result of your behavior")?

Tom. (Checks "No") "Heck, no, I ain't never been in an institution."

Bill. "Hey, man, where you think you are now?"

Tom. "Oh." (erases his check mark, making a new one under "Yes.")

Some of these denials seem incredible:

Jim. "I've been at the State Prison, and I'd say 99 out of 100 are there because of women or drinking, maybe both."

Ted. "Yeah, every guy I talk to here is here because of drinking."

Jack. "Not me. Drinking doesn't have anything to do with my being here."

Ted (in disbelief). "Well, how can you say that? You're here because of drunk driving, aren't you?"

Jack. "Yeah, but I wasn't really drunk."

Steps 8 and 9 concern the offender's willingness to make amends to those he has hurt. In discussing these steps, we used both the usual discussion method and some role-playing.

George, on his way to the State Prison for passing checks, offered to play an offender who has served his time and is now on parole. Frank, an alcoholic with 40 years of skid-row etched on his face, asked to play the victim.

George. "You remember me, I'm the guy gave you that check. Well, I just got out and I'm sorry I did it. I was drunk when I did it."

Frank. "That's why you got drunk, so you'd have the nerve to do it. Where's my \$10.00?"

George (genuinely surprised). "Yeah, that's right, a person should make the check good."

Tom (interrupting the role-playing). "Not me, not after I serve my four years, I'm not going to make it good. I've paid my debt, they owe me."

Discussions have often gone afield from the Twelve Steps. The men discuss their bitterness towards family, friends, District Attorney, judge, parole officer, society in general; and their concern with material needs, especially groceries.

The following films have been shown: *One Day at a Time* (the founding of Alcoholics Anonymous), *Angry Boy* (a youngster steals and is sent to a guidance clinic), *Children's Republic* (France), *Children's Village* (N. Y.), and *This Charming Couple* (marriage and divorce).

#### INMATE PARTICIPATION

During the first portion of most meetings, some of the men tend to hold aloof, either remaining in their cells or sitting at the table without commenting. Those familiar with the program are asked to explain it to new inmates, and these explanations serve to endorse the program: "When Al first began coming here, I didn't have any

faith in him." "No one else ever comes in here." Usually all men who are awake eventually join in the discussion.

During the course of each meeting, an atmosphere of humor, fellowship, and sharing usually develops. Men frequently express appreciation for the meeting. At Christmas, I received a card from one inmate and a letter signed by all. This letter expressed appreciation for the program and gratitude to the sheriff for permitting it.

After discharge, few men make any further contact. An exception are those men who consider themselves alcoholics; some of these have continued to attend Alcoholics Anonymous meetings. None has maintained his participation in the Adults Anonymous program by returning with me for the Saturday morning meeting. Several have declared their intention, but after discharge, good intentions evaporate. One inmate, transferred to a nearby county, has asked for help in setting up the program there.

The men have discussed the possibility of an Inmate Fund, and have offered to donate money to it.

#### COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

Partly through the efforts and cooperation of the La Crosse TRIBUNE and the La Crosse County Association for Mental Health, the community has become favorably aware of the program. Invitations from local groups to speak on problems of rehabilitation are indications of this fact.

Another indication of community involvement is the active participation of individuals and groups. When the State Board of Health sent films, the State College supplied a movie projector and a projectionist. Two college students have made regular visits to the meetings. One of these students is interested in setting up a parallel program for juveniles. The other has begun giving leadership to the discussions, and has told the men that his father, a local minister, has served time in prison as a conscientious objector.

The Public Library now services the lock-up with current fiction and non-fiction. A drug-store proprietor has contributed paper-bound books. One citizen has donated cigarettes, another books. When an inmate was discovered painting in oils, an art instructor from the State College attended the meeting the following week, then returned later that same day with books and supplies. Members of Alcoholics Anonymous, often ex-

inmates themselves, frequently attend the meetings.

Since September 1957 the program has been under the sponsorship of the Mental Health Association, a Community Chest agency which budgets for the program as an expression of community concern for the inmates. Three agencies have expressed an interest in contributing to any Inmates' Fund which is organized.

The District Attorney has taken the initiative in forming an Advisory Committee for the program. This Committee consists of representatives from the local agencies directly concerned with law enforcement and correctional work: D.A., court, police, state parole office, sheriff's office.

#### CONCLUSION

Our greatest resource, largely untouched, to aid in the rehabilitation of offenders is other offenders. Just how this resource is to be effectively tapped as a constructive power is a matter for exploration. Perhaps Alcoholics Anonymous provides some clues. If one drunk can help another

to leave liquor alone one day at a time, perhaps one offender can help another to leave other things alone—one day at a time.

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