

■ Seniors in Sobriety Becoming a Focus

The issue of A.A. and the older alcoholic—both those in the Fellowship and those still drinking—has been discussed for decades. Nowadays, though, more attention is being paid to the subject.

Discussions revolve around two main points: how A.A. can be a resource for older active alcoholics, and how older A.A. members may have particular issues relating to their sobriety.

As an indication of growing interest in the subject, the First Annual Sober Over Sixty Conference took place in Kona, Hawaii, this past May. The four-day event had sessions on “Finding Sobriety After Sixty,” “Coping with Chronological Challenges,” and “Senior, Sober a While, Now What?” There is planning for a second conference next year and a third in 2008.

Attendance at the conference was 140, including 39 speakers. “We had nurses and other health care providers who were looking for information about A.A.’s program of recovery for patients who might have drinking problems,” says Marion B., who chaired the event.

“Sometimes it’s only after someone retires that the problems with alcohol come on,” says Marion. “I joined the program of Alcoholics Anonymous at the age of 61. In the past 17 years I have experienced the greatest joy, peace, serenity and happiness, despite coping with the challenges of being chronologically gifted.”

She and others active in this area of service bring A.A. meetings into retirement communities and assisted-living facilities. “We’ll start a meeting anywhere. People at the conference were hungry for information on how to get such meetings going.”

Marion points to the general denial surrounding drinking problems among the elderly. “Alcohol problems among older people are often mistaken for other conditions associated with the aging process. Uncle Joe is taken to the hospital with a broken arm, but nobody bothers to wonder whether Joe might have hurt himself because he’d been drinking,” she says.

“Some family members may say of their older relations, ‘oh, let them drink.’ But it’s a grave mistake to believe that older persons have little to gain from alcoholism treatment.”

Marion points to an A.A. member she knew who passed away at 89, after six years of sobriety in Alcoholics Anonymous. “He had shared that his years in A.A. were the best in his life.”

Marion, who started a sober over sixty meeting in the town where she lives in Hawaii, says that “people sober for many years may drift away from meetings when meetings don’t address issues they now care about particularly.”

Wayne G., an A.A. member in Sedona, Arizona, is the chairman of next year’s Sober Over Sixty Conference, which will be held in Sedona. “I am 65 and don’t consider myself old, though they say that old is always 10 years

ahead of where you are.” Nevertheless, he says, “the SOS Conference in Hawaii was very comfortable. There were people there from their 50s to their 80s. There are issues particular to those who are older in Alcoholics Anonymous. If you are retired, for instance, you have more time on your hands, and you have to acclimate.

“How do we deal with our mental and physical limitations as we get older, and how does that affect our sobriety? How do we ask for help, which is always difficult for some alcoholics, and it may get more difficult as we get older. Someone in a wheelchair at a meeting said he had a hard time asking when he needed someone to push that wheelchair.”

In both Phoenix and in Prescott, Arizona, several A.A. meetings for seniors in sobriety have recently been started, says Wayne, and “they are doing very well.”

According to the 2004 A.A. Membership Survey, 16% of A.A. members are at least 61 years old. Twenty-three percent are age 51 through 60.

Response to the growing interest in the subject of A.A. and the elderly is showing up in A.A.’s service structure. According to Michael M., an A.A. member from California who chairs a standing committee for Cooperation With the Elder Community for Area 9 (Mid-Southern California), evidence of this increased interest is undeniable.

“In addition to the Cooperation With the Elder Community standing committee (in Area 17 Hawaii), which was the first, there are approximately eight district-level Cooperation With the Elder Community committees within Area 9, and that number is increasing all the time,” says Michael. “Area 3 in Arizona just voted in an area level Cooperation With the Elder Community Ad Hoc committee. There are Seniors in Sobriety and Sober Over Sixty meetings springing up all over the country, from Colorado to New York to Florida.

“A large number of people at our area level believed that elders should come under the auspices of the Special Needs Committee. We said that the process of aging was not a special need but a ‘universal phase of life,’ with its own blessings and challenges. We believe we’re here to stay.”



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