

## **The 60th General Service Conference:**

### **“Practicing A.A.’s Principles – the Pathway to Unity”**

“It’s in your hands.” These words were repeated over and over after the close of the business portion of the 60<sup>th</sup> General Service Conference as the outgoing Panel 59 delegates gave hugs and handshakes to the first-year Panel 60 delegates. It was 11:45pm on Friday, April 23<sup>rd</sup>, and we had just completed a week in which we had worked together on approving thirty-seven advisory actions and developing over fifty additional committee considerations to provide guidance to our General Service Board. We had also participated in workshops and committee meetings, digested a wide variety of reports and presentations, built relationships with new friends, and strengthened relationships with long-standing fellow servants. It had been quite a marathon.

Many of the Panel 59 delegates had arrived at the Conference with trepidation, after an experience last year that sometimes tried their patience. I can speak for the Panel 60 delegates in saying that we had arrived with a mix of uncertainty and anticipation – uncertainty about whether or not we were up to the task, and anticipation that we would each enjoy a profound spiritual experience. By the end of the week, the Panel 59s had seen their spirits lifted and had been given the Conference experience that they longed for. And the Panel 60s had discovered that our experiences as members of A.A. – in our homegroups, through our recovery, and throughout our time in service – had prepared us well to serve A.A. as a whole. We also had felt a depth of spirituality all around us. For me, a sense of spirituality permeated the whole week, from the most profound moments on the Conference floor (such as the election of the first Native American to serve on our General Service Board) to the most unexpected encounters in the hotel lobby and hallways (such as my reunion with one of our nonalcoholic trustees, which I’ll tell more about later).

Among the most spiritual of all of my experiences was that startling moment when my friend Elizabeth M., Panel 59 delegate from Hawaii, hugged me and said “It’s in your hands.” And then another friend did the same. And another. The realization that the stewardship of the General Service Conference of Alcoholics Anonymous was now in my hands and the hands of my fellow Panel 60 delegates rose up in my chest and filled me with a profound sense of responsibility. I also have a deep sense of gratitude, because I have such trust and admiration for those other Panel 60 delegates. Together, I believe we can be effective in carrying out our responsibility to the Fellowship.

The theme of this year’s Conference was “Practicing A.A.’s Principles – The Pathway to Unity.” I saw and experienced many examples of the theme throughout the Conference week. In committee meetings I saw members respecting each other, sharing openly and honestly, and working together through a series of ever-improving compromises to reach substantial unanimity – one of the greatest expressions of unity that we have. On the Conference floor, I experienced the Conference taking its own 10<sup>th</sup> Step, collectively observing and learning from its own mistakes, and finding a way to get back on the beam. We practiced Step Eleven and Tradition Two, listening to the voice of a loving higher power coming through the collective conscience of our fellow Conference members. And I saw Step Twelve in action. Our Twelfth Step was evident in advisory actions that were passed that directly carry the message to the

still-suffering alcoholic, of course, but the spirit of the Twelfth Step was also present in simple acts of kindness that helped individual Conference members who were momentarily struggling with that lost-newcomer feeling to get back into the middle of our fellowship of the spirit.

I don't know if I can successfully convey to you the spirit of the Conference, but I will do my best. I want to share with you the experiences that I had, the affirmation that I felt that the Conference process works, and of course the actions that the Conference took on behalf of the Fellowship. I know that some of what I want to share will probably resonate most for our past delegates, because I now understand what a unique experience the Conference is. Some of what I share may seem trivial to some, especially those who are primarily interested in the business aspect of the Conference, but I hope you may come to see that the business would not go as well as it does if we didn't have the various pre- and post-Conference activities or the presentations and sharing sessions that flesh out the Conference week. Most of all, I want to share with you my enthusiasm for general service, in the hope that you may pass some of it along to your groups when you share with them about this report.

### **Thursday the 15<sup>th</sup>: Getting there – my spiritual road to the Conference**

I left early on the morning of April 15<sup>th</sup>, catching a 6:30am flight from Lindbergh Field. On the plane I read Butch's notes from the area assembly, which he had prepared for me within two days of the assembly. I felt waves of emotion as I read through the summaries of our discussion and the sense of the meeting that we took on the various items. I was especially moved when I noticed that in at least one case – the agenda item on improving *La Viña* – the sense of the meeting had been completely unanimous in favor. Although we strive for substantial unanimity, and we feel satisfied that we are doing what's right for the whole when two-thirds agree, I am delighted by those moments when we are able to reach 100% unanimity. I also reviewed Conference background material while I was on the flight (okay, I watched a movie, too – it was a *looong* flight), and was struck once again by the care and concern and the love for A. A. from our members as they engage in the Conference process.

Landing in White Plains, I ended up sharing a ride with a man from Denver who turned out to be in town for a psychiatric convention at another hotel. I shared what I was in town for, and we talked about the usefulness of A.A. in his field. He said he had referred many people to A.A. and had visited open meetings during his professional training. He was interested to hear my brief description of the Board, the Conference, and the process that keeps everything connected to the groups. I made sure that he knew about aa.org, both as a resource for referral and a resource for professionals.

Arriving at the hotel I ran into Leonard Blumenthal, immediate past chair of the General Service Board and past nonalcoholic (Class A) trustee. I re-introduced myself to him, reminding him that we had first met at the Native American Forum in Banning in 2006. He said, "Fancy that," and reached into the pocket of the fringed, beaded raw-hide jacket he was wearing. He pulled out his badge from that very event. It had been in the pocket of his jacket ever since. For nearly four years it had been there, forgotten. He had rediscovered it there on the journey that day to Rye.

Arriving in my room, I began to unpack. Glancing at the clock, it was 5:18. My sobriety date is May 18<sup>th</sup> – 5/18. I was struck by this sequence of several startling coincidences on my way to the General Service Conference – sharing a taxi with the psychiatrist who was, in a way, a friend of A.A.; my encounter with Leonard Blumenthal and the badge from the Native American Forum being in his pocket; my sobriety date appearing on the clock. Through this series of events, I was brought in touch with a sense of mystery and wonder. What a way to start this journey!

### **Friday the 16<sup>th</sup>: The journey to the General Service Office**

Although the Conference starts on Sunday, our area customarily provides extra funding so that the delegate can arrive early to visit the General Service Office on the Friday before the start of the Conference. Normally the Conference is held in Manhattan at a hotel on Times Square that is just a short subway ride from the General Service Office. This year the Conference was held in the town of Rye, about 25 miles north of Manhattan.

The journey to GSO required letting go of control. Thirteen delegates, some with spouses in tow, needed to get from the hotel to the train station a few miles away. There was only one van available, and it took two trips to get us all down to the train station. We were trying to catch the 9:32am train into Manhattan. I was with the first van-load, which left later than we had planned. As we waited for the van to return with the others, we realized we were cutting it close. There was some anxiety and doubt about whether the second van would make it in time, fear of separation, and selfishness on my part (let's ditch 'em). In the end, the timing worked out perfectly and we got to Harlem with about 50 minutes to get to GSO. There was again some confusion and hijinks, but we made it on time with the help of our bus driver.

On the Friday before the Conference, the 11:00am A.A. meeting that is held at GSO every Friday always moves from the upstairs conference room to a larger room on the main floor of the Interfaith Building to accommodate the delegates who come in early to attend. It was smaller this year than it was in either of the years that I attended as a guest with Marc, probably owing to the fact that the Conference was in Rye this year. There were a larger number of members attending "from the neighborhood," as they put it, than I remembered from my previous visits. I was really glad to see this, and I learned that many of them are regulars. This is great, because I think it makes it feel more like a regular A.A. meeting. I'm sure the GSO staff members are especially grateful for this, as I understand the meeting began when there was a realization that a number of staff members were so busy with their work for the office that they weren't really making it to meetings much. I'm acquainted with a number of the staff members, and I know that several of them are very active homegroup members at groups around New York City, but I'm sure that this additional meeting is valuable for their sobriety.

Melody T., delegate from California Northern Interior was asked to lead the meeting. The format is a fifteen minute talk in which the leader shares "what we used to be like, what happened, and what we are like now," followed by open sharing. I identified a lot with Melody – especially her sense of isolation while drinking and her sense of hopefulness today. My favorite sharing came later in the meeting when one of the neighborhood members, who had over thirty years of sobriety, shared this gem from his earliest days of sobriety. He said he had been talking with a man he wanted to ask to be his sponsor, and the potential sponsor asked, "Do you want to stop drinking?" His response was, "I don't know. I think I do now, but I don't know about five minutes from now." The sponsor said, "We don't care about five minutes from now." Such a great expression of taking it one day, one moment at a time.

After the meeting we ate lunch in the cafeteria and went up to the 11<sup>th</sup> floor for a tour of the GSO offices. Highlights included the shipping department (one of three around the country), the General Manager's office, and the Archives. My favorite part of the tour, though, was meeting Jim M., one of the two newest members of our GSO staff. Jim began working for us last fall, and his initial assignment is the corrections desk. He read us a letter that he had received the previous week. It was a follow-up letter from a man who had contacted Jim earlier and asked to have a Big Book sent to him in jail. Jim had sent him the book. The man was writing back to let Jim know he had gotten out, was going to meetings, had

selected a potential sponsor, and was so grateful. This new member wrote, “My children are happy now. Dad’s home.” Jim thanked us for the work that we do to make stories like this one possible. We thanked Jim for the help he had extended to the new man. It’s a great example of the joint effort between general service and the Fellowship at large. It took both to give this new man hope – a General Service Office he could write to requesting help; a book available to be sent for free because of our publishing arm; a staff member available to respond because of the contributions that the groups send in; and A.A. members in a homegroup reaching out their hands to this man when he arrived on the outside. Jim said he receives about 600 pieces of correspondence each month, and just like the letters that flooded the office in the early 1940s when word of A.A. first started getting out to the public, “each inquiry was painstakingly answered” (check quote in forward to 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.).

The rest of the day was spent running around Manhattan with two of my fellow delegates – Jeff J. from Central California, who I have served with closely since we were DCMs, and Elizabeth M. from Hawaii. It was a wonderful chance to bond with a couple of easy-going and loving fellow A.A. members.

### **Saturday the 17<sup>th</sup>: A visit with an early friend of A.A. and some Conference warm-up activities**

On Saturday the Pacific Region delegates went to Tarrytown to tour the Rockefeller estate. Our outgoing Pacific regional trustee, Madeleine P., arranged this trip because of the historic connection between the Rockefeller family and Alcoholics Anonymous. As many of us will recall, John D. Rockefeller, Jr., held a dinner for our fledgling society before our growth really took off and is credited with saving us from ourselves and planting the seed that grew into the 7<sup>th</sup> Tradition by only giving us a modest sum, rather than the great contributions Bill had hoped a meeting with Rockefeller might yield, saying “I think money will spoil this” (*A.A. Comes of Age*, p. 111).

The Rockefeller estate was beautiful – stately and tasteful, rather than ostentatious. According to our tour guide, Carol, the children of the Rockefeller family were taught to share what they had, so the main house on the estate is surrounded by sculptures out in the open air where they could be enjoyed by all, rather than hidden away. Carol also shared stories and quotes that helped to illuminate why the Rockefellers might have been interested in supporting a society that would help alcoholics to achieve sobriety. According to Carol, John D. Rockefeller’s father had been a womanizer and may have been an alcoholic. John D. and Junior both were devout Baptists, which meant no drinking – they didn’t even serve alcohol to guests. This tradition was unbroken until Nelson became the patriarch after John D., Jr.’s death.

More insight into the legacy of the Rockefeller family’s gift to Alcoholics Anonymous came as Carol explained that giving people a hand up rather than a handout was part of the Rockefeller way of doing things. Carol shared that John D., Sr. liked to give away dimes to people on the street, telling them to save as he handed them this modest offering. In the end John D., Jr. gave us a bit more than a dime, perhaps more than his father would have given us, but still not enough to spoil us. And we learned as a society to be frugal from the start. We also learned that the Rockefellers were kindred spirits with A.A. in another way. Carol quoted John D. Rockefeller, Jr., as having said, “Giving is not an obligation; it’s a privilege.” The same could be said about our A.A. attitude toward service.

We returned to the hotel in time for the Remote Communities meeting. Although not an official part of the Conference agenda, this meeting has been a valuable venue of shared experience for a number of years. The meeting began with a series of talks focused on three aspects of Remote Communities – geography, language, and culture. Elizabeth M., delegate from Hawaii, shared about the challenges of

being in an area made up of islands and separated from the mainland by a five-hour plane flight. In her sharing, it was clear to me that a focus on fellowship, such as sharing meals and camping together, was a key aspect in bringing the remote communities of her area together, and that in a way these sorts of activities turned the challenge of remoteness into a benefit. Monte S., delegate from Utah, shared about language. He shared that there is increasing success in his area in carrying the message into Spanish-speaking communities. He also took a detour back into the topic of geography, sharing about challenges with getting alcoholics into detox facilities in physically remote parts of his state, with A.A. members travelling 200 miles one-way to deliver wet drunks to the door of detox. Billy C., delegate from Nova Scotia, shared about the use of teleconferencing to reach geographically remote parts of his area, as did Marty M., delegate from B.C./Yukon.

Roundtables on the three key areas ensued. Key points that came out of the roundtables were the importance of meeting remote communities on their own level, and that telling people “you’re doing it wrong” if they don’t use the Lord’s Prayer or if they give feathers instead of tokens to mark length of sobriety isn’t helpful. Several areas reported challenges in carrying the message to communities of Asian immigrants (Hmong, Vietnamese, and Lao, for example) because of their tendency to keep problems within the family. It was pointed out that our Hispanic A.A. communities could be a valuable resource in helping us all to bridge this gap. In overcoming challenges of geography, there was sharing about the value in having groups visit other groups. How powerful a way of building unity would it be if some of our urban and suburban groups were to visit some of our more rural and remote groups on a regular basis (and vice versa)? There was a great suggestion that came from the roundtable on languages, which was to go to a meeting that is not in your language to gain an experience of the need and the challenge of reaching across language barriers. I have done this myself, and I have benefitted from it greatly. I’ll have to admit, the first time I ever did it I was quite resistant and more than a little scared, but over the years I have come to enjoy it. I think it has really helped me grow. A great quote that summed up the Remote Communities meeting was “Identify the needs, and then do whatever it takes to meet those needs.”

Saturday evening there was a delegate’s only meeting, where second-year delegates shared with first-year delegates, giving suggestions from their own experience about how to survive and enjoy the Conference week and about how we could all serve most effectively together. Some of what was shared is applicable, I think to all levels of service. “If you’re floored by how a vote comes out or by the comments of a member of the Conference, if it seems like the vote went the wrong way or the member is sharing in a way that seems outside of the A.A. spirit, get out of yourself, say a quick prayer, and get back into the moment.”

Carole B., delegate from Montana and chair of the public information committee, shared at the delegate’s only meeting about losing her sister to a drunk driver in February of this year. She clearly was on a roller coaster of emotions, but she was with us at the Conference to serve A.A., and she shared with genuine compassion about how she knows that the 33-year-old woman who killed her sister needs Alcoholics Anonymous. Carole was at the Conference, at least in part, to make sure A.A. is there to carry the message to the suffering alcoholic who took the life of her sister. Later in the week, I learned that one of Carole’s sponsees works in the facility where the woman who killed Carole’s sister is awaiting trial, and the sponsee escorts this woman to the A.A. meetings that are held inside.

Other great quotes from delegates’ only meeting: “I am just a string. The General Service Office is one tin can. The homegroup out in my area is another tin can. And I’m just a string, connecting one tin can to another tin can.” “Do your best; you can’t break A.A.” “I thank all of you, earnestly, for saying ‘yes’ when

Alcoholics Anonymous asks you to do something.” In this meeting I experienced the tremendous love for A.A. that is shared at the Conference, and the dedication and commitment of the delegates. We may approach things differently, and we won’t always agree or see things eye-to-eye, but we can still serve side-by-side.

As I journaled Saturday night in my room after leaving the delegate’s only meeting: “How am I feeling about being here? I have had some conversations with people who I have known for years and people who are new to me in which we connected eye-to-eye in a way that is powerful and filled with spirit. My higher power lives in the eyes of an alcoholic whose life has been transformed from a nightmare of despair to vision of hope.”

### **Sunday the 18<sup>th</sup>: The Conference begins!**

I woke up at 5:00am after only five-and-a-half hours of sleep. One of the loud-and-clear messages at the delegates’ only session the night before had been to get enough sleep when you can. I tried a breathing exercise that usually helps me to fall asleep, but when sleep didn’t come I remembered another suggestion from the night before: get some exercise! So, I got out of bed, did my morning meditation, and went out for a brisk walk to and through the park that is just north of the property. Spring had really sprung in Rye. Birds were singing, and it was beautiful. I showered, got dressed, and headed to the restaurant for breakfast. My Conference buddy, Tom, had suggested sitting with different people at every Conference session. I figured this could apply to breakfast, as well, so I just entered the restaurant and looked for the first welcoming face. Kathy O. from West Virginia gave me a big smile and a warm greeting. I sat with her and her guest, and we had a fun, spirited conversation over breakfast. A.A. has changed me from an awkward boy who was afraid of strangers to a man who isn’t afraid to walk into a restaurant, not knowing if I will know anyone, willing (indeed, happy!) to sit with someone who had been a stranger and start the process of becoming fellow travelers. By the end of the week, my new relationship with Kathy had become one of my most treasured.

I went to the 1728 meeting, an A.A. meeting held once a year at the Conference. It’s intended to give our nonalcoholic trustees a taste of the experience of being a member of Alcoholics Anonymous. The name of the meeting comes from our Twelve Steps, Twelve Traditions, and Twelve Concepts (12 x 12 x 12 = 1728). Madeleine P. spoke on Concept II, zeroing in on the word “delegate.” She shared a definition that was something along the lines of “being less senior,” and noted how prior to becoming delegates we often think of it as an elevated position, but once we do become one we realize that “we’re just the flunkies who’ve been sent here by the groups.” She went on to talk about the considerable responsibility that we would be carrying out during the week, because “Alcoholics Anonymous has been placed in our protection and our care.” She also reminded us to be patient with the Conference process, because we don’t do anything fast here. She told us all to keep in mind that taking things slowly is how it’s been since our earliest days in service: “Don’t forget, it takes an alcoholic thirty days to make instant coffee.”

After the 1728 meeting we had the official opening session where roll is called. Other delegates have reported feeling a great wave of emotion when their name was called. I simply felt happy to be there. Most people answered “Here” or “Present” when their name was called, but there were a few noteworthy exceptions. Phyllis H., general manager of the General Service Office, had a slip of the tongue and answered, “President.” Everyone chuckled. Kathy O., who had delighted me so much at breakfast, played off of Phyllis’s response and answered, “Vice President.” Allen W., delegate from Wyoming answered roll call with a resounding “Yee-Haw!” These good-natured breaks in decorum were

establishing a wonderfully light-hearted spirit that permeated the Conference week and reminded me of a passage from Bill's story about working with other alcoholics: "Our struggles with them are variously strenuous, comic, and tragic. There is, however, a vast amount of fun about it all. I suppose some would be shocked at our seeming worldliness and levity. But just underneath there is deadly earnestness. Faith has to work twenty-four hours a day in and through us, or we perish" (*Alcoholics Anonymous*, p. 16). We certainly had fun throughout the Conference week, but we also worked together in earnest.

Ward Ewing, nonalcoholic (Class A) trustee and chair of the General Service Board, gave the opening talk. Ward comes to us from the clergy, as have many of our great non-alcoholic friends, and it was striking to hear a clergyman say, "My staff are always grateful when I come here [to the General Service Conference] because I come back with my faith renewed." I certainly felt like I was having my faith recharged, as well. Our first official item of business was to approve the seating of Donna G. from area 33 Southeast Michigan because the area delegate had resigned. We also approved seating two trustees from Venezuela as observers.

Bill Clark, nonalcoholic (Class A) trustee, gave the keynote on the Conference theme: "Practicing A.A.'s Principles – The Pathway to Unity." He put a great deal of emphasis on the need to respect differences in order to achieve unity. He also noted that our differences can be a source of strength. He drew a connection between the ability to listen and humility, and humility was a major theme of his talk.

Next we had a Regional luncheon and then returned to the main meeting room for panel presentations on "Practicing these Principles in All Our 'Service' Affairs." There was an incredible feeling of good humor throughout this and all of the sessions I've been describing. It was clear that the Panel 59 delegates and the other Conference members who had been at last year's Conference felt like there was a breath of fresh air after the undercurrent of suspicion that had come from some Conference members last year. Jason C., delegate from Nevada, gave one of the talks, and ended it with a great prayer of his own "Higher Power, Good Orderly Direction, God, please help me to care for my body, mind, and spirit daily so I may be most available to my fellow Conference members and the decisions we make for the good of Alcoholics Anonymous." Ruben G., delegate from Chicago, did a good job of focusing us all on Step Ten (and on Rule 62, because he kept accidentally putting words in or leaving words out of his presentation that completely changed the meaning, such as "I hope to leave this year's Conference without making amends ... I mean, without *having to* make amends.") Betsy G. delegate from Southeast Texas, shared with great emotion about her sponsor, who had helped Betsy to rebuild herself by encouraging her to take service positions, using these words of encouragement: "I'll bet you'd be great at that." Betsy's sponsor challenged her to stretch herself in service, and as a result Betsy grew in spirit. You could really tell what a big heart she has. Gratitude in action and humility were majors themes of her presentation.

In the mid-afternoon I met with fellow members of the Conference public information committee for the first time. Members of the Trustees' public information committee also joined us. The purpose of this joint meeting was to hear a report from the Trustees' P.I. committee and to have the opportunity to ask any questions that we might have. In addition to sharing with us some about the items that were on our agenda for discussion later in the week, they also gave us additional information about some of the public information efforts of the board. All of our PSAs are on YouTube, and there had been some discussion about removing them. The trustees noted that it's important to develop a comprehensive public information policy related to electronic media, but they felt that in the meantime it was okay to keep the PSAs on YouTube. There was some discussion among the trustees about changing the current method for conducting our membership survey from random sampling to some kind of a self-selected

web-based tool, but they decided to stick with the current method for the 2010 survey in order to maintain statistical validity and credibility to the professional community. The trustees also let us know that the A.A. Videos for Young People will be streamed on our GSO website; they had just been waiting to inform us before taking the action to put them up. Finally, they let us know that an unsolicited video had been sent to them entitled “Am I an Alcoholic – 20 Questions” for possible use by A.A., but they took no action on the video because they felt it was overly diagnostic and not in keeping with how A.A. shares experience with those seeking help with a drinking problem.

The Q&A session after the report was a little bit stilted. One of the appointed committee members was quite vocal, but other than that the trustees were pretty tight-lipped. It seemed a bit odd, but when I asked our committee chair Carole about it later, she said the trustees keep their counsel because they don’t want to influence the delegates in our decision-making process.

Next came the opening dinner. Ward’s invocation made me cry. Jim Estelle, past chair of the General Service Board and nonalcoholic (Class A) trustee, gave a talk about Michael Alexander, another of our nonalcoholic friends who passed away this year. Michael was the last living link to the founding of the Conference. He had been a lawyer in Bernard Smith’s firm and had been present while Bernard and Bill hammered out the details of the Conference structure. Jim’s talk was so moving. He had had a personal relationship with Michael, and you could see how much Michael’s life had touched his.

At the opening dinner, many thanks were given to spouses. Marc had not been able to come along with me due to finances, as well as other obligations, and I felt his absence. Much of this report was written on site during the Conference week, and I couldn’t have done it without Marc taking the time out of his busy schedule to build me a laptop to take with me.

We concluded the opening dinner with an A.A. meeting. Five Conference members told their personal recovery stories. The most memorable for me came from Jim M., one of our new GSO staff members. He talked about the dangers of certainty by sharing a story from his drinking days. His fiancée talked to him one day and asked him to come home without drinking because she missed spending time together in the evening. When he came home drunk, he wasn’t really “there.” He could understand her point, so he said, “Yes, of course, dear.” But when the time came his alcoholic mind created the certainty that it would be best for the relationship for him *not* to do what she said. He rationalized that watching daytime television shows such as *Oprah* had convinced him that the worst thing for a relationship was when one person dominated another. If he came home without drinking, then he was allowing his fiancée to dominate him, and that would be harmful to the relationship. He became *absolutely certain* that it was *necessary for the health of his relationship* for him to get drunk before he went home. And that bout with certainty ended up costing him the relationship. This reminder of the dangers of certainty was great for us all as we prepared to begin the Conference week. We were going to need to be able to listen to others as if we had no opinion, and if we approached our work with certainty about what the outcomes of our discussion should be, we would have lost that ability to truly listen.

As I journaled that night before going to bed, I wrote: “I’m feeling good about how things are starting. I pray that our group conscience will be guided by the spirit of life and love, and that we will succeed in having a collective 11<sup>th</sup> Step together – realizing the knowledge of God’s will for us as a Fellowship and the power to carry it out.”

## **Monday the 19<sup>th</sup>: Rolling up our sleeves and getting the work started**

I woke up at 3:00am and couldn't fall back to sleep. I don't think it was anxiety or fear – just eager anticipation. I also wasn't sure I was fully prepared to participate in the committee meetings. So I sat up in bed and reviewed background material and the notes from our area assembly that pertained to public information items. I made notes for myself to consolidate what I had digested so far about full-face videos, anonymity in a digital age, public service announcements, and the other items that the public information committee would begin discussing in earnest throughout Monday morning. After completing my regular morning routines, I met my Conference buddy, Tom Z. from Virginia, to go to an A.A. meeting together.

We got a little bit lost on the way, but we kind of felt our way through the unknown streets and highways and made it to the 6:45am Eye Opener group in White Plains about five minutes late. The topic was the rewards of sobriety, so of course the meeting focused a lot on gratitude. I was grateful for my Conference buddy making it possible to be at a regular A.A. meeting out in the community. I was most grateful for the way the meeting closed – one of the most beautiful closing formats I have ever experienced. The secretary had apparently been keeping track of the names of all of those who were present, and after a few brief closing announcements he said, "God's love and blessings on Rich and Terry and Julio ..." and on down the line until he said the name of the last person. And that was the end of the meeting. No standing and holding hands. No group prayer of any kind. No chanting. Just a simple blessing extended by a trusted servant to every person present. Even to a first-time visitor, there was no doubt that the meeting had come to an end, and it had done so in a way that created a wonderful sense of fellowship.

Tom and I returned to the hotel with just enough time for breakfast, sharing more about our personal stories and our involvement in general service with each other. Then we took off for our respective committee meetings.

### **Public Information Committee meeting – a joyful experience**

The committee meetings last all morning on Monday and I found myself in the midst of the best service experience I have ever had. There was a real cooperative spirit among the committee members. Someone would express an idea, then another member would expand on it, the committee as a whole would rally around it, and the staff member who was assigned to be our committee secretary would crystallize the ideas. (Mary Clare L. was our staff member, and she is a peach. Such a big heart, and so responsive to our needs. In her former life, she was a nun. She has a face like an angel, flowing red hair, and a Jersey accent.)

We began by reviewing a new PSA, entitled "My World." It depicts prospective A.A. members talking about how alcohol is affecting their world, and ends with a message of hope. It is produced by the same company that made our most recent PSA, "I Thought," which is the one I received the most positive feedback about as I showed our PSAs during the Pre-Conference activities in our area. "My World" is in much the same style as "I Thought," and it packed quite an emotional impact while avoiding the use of full faces of the actors portraying the potential alcoholics. We agreed unanimously to recommend that the video be approved by the Conference. I look forward to showing it at one of our assemblies this coming fall.

We also recommended the use of a company to centrally distribute, track, and evaluate the PSA at a cost not to exceed \$35,000, in addition to the work of local P.I. committees. In considering the use of an outside distributor, we reviewed reports from the last time this was done, and the value of doing it was clear. Through the use of the distributor, our last PSA was successfully placed on major networks and on cable companies such as CNN. Over a six-month period, it was shown on 361 stations in 126 television markets and was broadcast 27,190 times, with over half of those broadcasts occurring between 6:00am and midnight (I've always had the impression that our PSAs get buried in the midnight to 6:00am timeslot, and it was good to learn that we get aired at all hours). The total value of the airtime was estimated at \$15,820,982. It was clear to us how worthwhile it is to use the outside company for distribution and tracking.

Through our analysis of the data provided by the most recent tracking study, we also realized that the placement of the PSAs in Spanish and in French on U.S. Spanish-language stations and Canadian French-language stations was inadequate, so we passed an additional committee consideration that more emphasis should be given to distribution in Spanish and French. This was one of the great examples of our committee working together and feeding off of each other. We had one French speaker on the committee, Richard B. from Northwest Quebec. As we were discussing PSAs, he said they never see them on French TV in Canada. Another committee member dove into the 2009 tracking report, and found the data to show that French broadcasts accounted for only 0.12% of the total number of broadcasts. Then someone else suggested we develop an additional committee consideration related to this. Then yet another member observed that the Spanish broadcast percentage was also quite low – only 3.31% of the total. So all of us working together developed an idea that was more comprehensive and more helpful to the alcoholic who still suffers than any one of us could have on our own.

We moved on to consider a suggestion that new language be added to the pamphlet “Understanding Anonymity” about the importance of respecting the anonymity of still-living A.A. members in obituaries, printed remembrances, and death notices. This suggestion grew out of a number of cases in which living friends of deceased A.A. members were identified by full name in the obituary of the member who had passed away. While there was agreement in our committee that the new language would be helpful, one member noted that it's kind of buried at the back of the pamphlet and doesn't fully address the underlying problem – many of us fail to educate our non-A.A. loved ones about anonymity during our lifetimes, and it's too late after we're dead. Another committee member took this comment and ran with it. She proposed that we suggest a new question be added to the Q&A section of the “Understanding Anonymity” pamphlet: “What should I tell my loved ones about protecting the anonymity of the A.A. members they may meet?” So we forwarded this idea to the trustees P.I. committee as an additional committee consideration, and we asked that they bring back proposed text in answer to this question for consideration by next year's Conference.

Monday's committee session ended with a viewing and discussion of a new video with the working title “Animation,” which is part of the A.A. Videos for Young People project. The video starts with the following disclaimer: “Warning: This film was made by a bunch of alcoholics.” That pretty much set the tone for a terrific piece that I think a lot of people will be able to identify with. Three A.A. members tell “what we used to be like, what happened, and what we are like now,” and their personalities and escapades are depicted with simple line-drawn animated characters. The desperation of active alcoholism comes through clearly, each member's introduction to A.A. is revealed, and the transformation in each of their lives comes through strongly, creating a message of hope. I identified with the member who shared about shoplifting alcohol when he was underage, the one who was scared

by spending a night in jail, and the sense of freedom that all three of them expressed in the end. Once again, I can't wait to be able to show you this video, and I hope we will find time to view it in September or November.

### **Area service highlights – sharing successes and challenges**

In the afternoon on Monday we heard two-minute area service highlights from the panel 60 delegates of two of the regions. These highlights give everyone the opportunity to catch the flavor of each area, the challenges that they face, and the success they are having in carrying the message. There were a total of three sessions of highlights on Monday: after lunch, before dinner, and after dinner. Highlights of the highlights included a great line from Ino F., delegate from Puerto Rico: "The A.A. message – powerful, uplifting, timeless." Chazz C., delegate from Vermont, described the districts in his area as "active" or "inactive," the latter being a much better alternative in my mind to describing some districts as "dark." He also mentioned that one of the districts in his area was "sleepy, but active on the local level." In addition, he shared a story from an old-timer in his area who had known Bill W. (remember that Bill was originally from Vermont). According to the old-timer, "Bill was a crummy fly-fisherman." Darryl D., delegate from Alberta/Northwest Territories, which is geographically the largest area in the Conference, shared that the diversity of his area is a blessing because it has provided opportunities for unity. Darryl and the other delegates from his region were introduced by Vic P., Western Canada regional trustee, who was celebrating his 20<sup>th</sup> A.A. anniversary that day.

### **General Service Board report – Ward Ewing**

Next came a series of reports. First up was our chairman of the General Service Board to give a board report. Ward talked about activities in the General Service Office, recent Regional Forums, and international activities. He noted the tremendous job that Phyllis H., GSO general manager, has done during her first year. There's a palpable uplift among the staff. He noted that recent Regional Forums have benefitted from a new orientation session for first-time Forum attendees. (That gives me the opportunity to plug the upcoming Pacific Regional Forum in Torrance, August 27-29. Registration is free! You won't want to miss it.) The 16<sup>th</sup> REDELA (meeting of the Americas) took place in Peru last October. Ward noted that Mexico and Columbia continue to exhibit strong leadership in the zone by sharing a wealth of experience and providing vital support. Ward said that he especially enjoyed attending the International Conference of Young People in Alcoholics Anonymous (ICYPAA) in Atlanta last summer. To quote Ward, "The spirit of these young people is remarkable – enthusiasm for A.A., joy in living, caring for one another, the brashness characteristic of youth, emotional highs and lows, and hospitality for the newcomer and the stranger, including me."

Ward also reported on a significant change that the board is making. During board weekends, there has been an Executive Session that some have criticized as being "secretive." Ward announced that the trustees wanted to dispel this aura of secrecy, so they decided to rename this part of the board weekend the "Trustees' Sharing Session." It will continue to be used as a forum where trustees can feel free to "explore new ideas, hear strongly held differences of opinion, and at times deal with personal conflicts." The principle of anonymity will allow this meeting to serve its purpose of fostering open dialogue, even about difficult issues, in this manner: "What we discuss in the Trustees' Sharing Session (principles) is open and will be reported; who said what (personalities) as well as truly exploratory ideas will not be appropriate to share as such reporting would damage the freedom of expression we feel is necessary."

A final item of note from Ward's report had to do with the trustees' subcommittee on vulnerable members in A.A. This subcommittee has been exploring whether there is a role for the General Service Board in protecting minors in A.A., as well as other vulnerable members. Because this issue touches on a concern that was raised by our area a few years ago, I will quote from Ward's report at length:

The subcommittee members agreed that the General Service Board in its position at the bottom of the A.A. service structure would not have a role in setting any behavioral policy or guideline for the A.A. groups or members in regards to protecting any vulnerable member including minors coming to A.A. The A.A. groups and A.A. services entities such as areas and districts are autonomous and direct and guide their own affairs. The General Service Board has no authority, legal or otherwise, to control or direct the behavior of A.A. members and groups. This was corroborated by legal counsel... .

The subcommittee members also agreed that it is the groups and individual members that need to ensure that all members feel as safe as possible in A.A. and that newcomers are provided with strong sponsorship and made aware that A.A. is a microcosm of society of the world outside the A.A. meeting room – that they may encounter a few members who do not have their best interests in mind about getting sober through the A.A. program of recovery.

The subcommittee concluded that it would ask regional trustees to speak with their delegates about addressing the safety of all members who are in A.A., as well as those who may be potential members. It is hoped that areas, districts and groups will discuss this important topic and seek ways through sponsorship, workshops and assemblies and committee meetings to raise awareness in the Fellowship and encourage the creation of as safe an environment as possible for the newcomer, minors and other members or potential members who may be vulnerable.

#### **Alcoholics Anonymous World Service Report – John K.**

Next up was the Alcoholics Anonymous World Services (AAWS) report from Northeast regional trustee John K. John reported that our General Service Office welcomed 1,513 visitors in 2009, each one able to take a tour like the one I took on Friday. A net total of 1,703 new groups were listed at G.S.O. last year, and each new group was sent a packet of literature and basic information to encourage the group to link with the local service structure and support Twelfth Step activities. We distributed over 2.2 million books in 2009, including over 1.2 million Big Books. Non-A.A.s accounted for 30% of total literature sales, mostly due to a large order from Hazelden prior to the July increase in literature prices. Also on the subject of literature, John was later asked how many languages the Big Book is published in, and he answered, "about 59."

John also reported on the Contributions online project, which is expected to go live in May. It will allow individual A.A. members and group treasurers to make secure contributions online through our GSO website, using credit/debit or electronic checks (more on that in a minute). John let us know that the Regional A.A. Directories will be printed in 2010, and also announced that Michelle Mirza (nonalcoholic) has been appointed the new GSO archives director. Michelle has worked in the archives department since 1999. Michelle and her staff are continuing their efforts to digitize thousands of groups records saved on deteriorating microfiche cards.

John closed by emphasizing the existence of teamwork among the board and GSO staff, and he thanked Phyllis for her contributions to improving morale in the office.

### **Contributions online – a new way of participating in self-support**

We were given a demonstration of how contributions online will work, and it seems like an easy, step-by-step process. It is user friendly and its features should be familiar to anyone who uses the Web regularly. It took four years of planning, from conception to implementation. The minimum contribution is \$2, and even though our General Service Office is charged a fee for each transaction, it is expected that there will be a net savings because of less labor in processing contributions and less cost to acknowledge contributions. I plan on making my birthday contribution this year through this new method.

### **A.A. Grapevine, Inc. – maintaining our meeting in print**

Dorothy H., general service trustee, reported on the A.A. Grapevine, Inc. She started off with page 122 of the new Grapevine humor anthology, "A Rabbit Walks into a Bar." She shared some historical context, noting that "the Grapevine was an AA woman's idea. In 1944, Lois K., a sober woman, had the idea of an AA publication for groups in the New York metropolitan area. She shared her idea with Mary M. and Pricilla P. and they shared it with Bill W. who encouraged them to go for it. Sixty-six years later our AA Grapevine is still here. As Dorothy put it, "We cannot possibly know how many lives the Grapevine may have saved." Dorothy talked about the purpose of the Grapevine, quoting "a 1946 letter to Royal Shepard, an attorney, outlining the key points for the Grapevine's Certificate of Incorporation for the AA Grapevine, [in which] Bill W wrote: 'Like the Alcoholics Anonymous movement it is to mirror, there will be but one central purpose: the Grapevine will try to carry the AA message to alcoholics and practice AA principles in all its affairs.'"

Dorothy examined Grapevine's finances, sharing graphs showing that although the profit and loss from the Grapevine has fluctuated, income has exceeded operating costs by \$350,000 over the entire span of its existence, and it has broken even or exceeded costs in 37 years. A chart on circulation shows that *La Viña* outperforms the Grapevine when viewed as a percentage of total members of the Hispanic community. Charts on the overall financials of each magazine show that net loss is increasing on both magazines over the last few years, however.

Dorothy attributes A.A. Grapevine, Inc.'s, current deficit to the following: "insufficient price increases, declining circulation of the print magazine, which has fallen from 120,000 to an average of 102,000 (FY '09) over the last 15 years, and the increased costs of doing business." And here's what she says we're doing about it: a strategic plan has been developed to "update the current website; explore digital delivery of the magazine; and institute a program to increase awareness and sales of the print magazine." A publishing consultant has been contracted to assess the viability of the plan and to make recommendations to maximize its success. The Grapevine Board is considering recommendations that could reduce the projected 2010 deficit and will report out to the General Service Board at the July 2010 meeting on the assessment of AAGV, Inc. I asked Dorothy later how many new subscriptions we would need to bring the Grapevine back into the black. She checked with the controller, Eugene O., and confirmed that we would need 15,000 new subscriptions to make it happen. Will you be the first of those 15,000?

Dorothy shared with us some of the new Grapevine items from 2009 (“A Rabbit Walks into A Bar,” “Voices of Long-term Sobriety,” and an audio version of “The Homegroup: The Heartbeat of A.A.”) and something to look forward to in 2010 (a special issue marking the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of A.A.; this issue will be the very first produced in all three languages of our General Service Conference – English, Spanish, and French). Finally, Dorothy addressed the question of our hope for the A.A. Grapevine. Here are her concluding remarks: “It was *Bill W.*’s hope that the AA Grapevine would always be here for the next generation of alcoholics. So I ask you this afternoon, what’s your hope for our AA Grapevine? To answer this question we plan to conduct a readership survey and a survey of the Fellowship, with your help, in the very near future.” I encourage you to participate in that survey when it comes out.

### **General Service Board Finance report – Where money and spirituality mix**

Next we heard from Terry Bedient, nonalcoholic (Class A) trustee and chair of the trustees’ finance and budgetary committee about the overall financial picture of the General Service Board. Terry started by saying, “One advantage of speaking later in the program is that you get to see the notes left behind by previous presenters. One of the notes here says, ‘God, please help!’”

Terry stressed that the spiritual value of contributing to G.S.O. comes from the sense of being connected to A.A. as a whole and the awareness that our A.A. dollars make needed Twelfth Step work possible, such as GSO support for the corrections correspondence service and literature assistance to A.A. overseas. Terry shared that GSO functional expenses were down in 2009, totaling about \$8.8 million, as opposed to approximately \$9.5 million in 2008. This shows that our board is being frugal in tough times. Terry told us that the cost of services per member in 2009 was \$6.46, so I calculate that we could fully fund services to the Fellowship through contributions if each of us would just contribute the price of a six-pack of domestic beer once a year (I haven’t bought one in awhile, but I looked up the price online).

Contribution history from 1982-2009 shows that the percent of groups contributing has declined, from nearly 60% to just over 40%. The total amount of contributions has increased steadily, but it was down in both of the last two years – the first time in many years that there has been a decline in two successive years. So far in 2010, contributions are on target to make budget, and Terry had the following to say about the positive trend so far this year: “I am sure I speak for everyone throughout our entire service structure when I say how deeply grateful we are for this support from across the Fellowship considering these tough times. We are grateful for every member who has sent in a contribution to help pay the bills of your General Service Office. A special word of thanks to all you delegates, and please pass our thanks along to the D.C.M.s and G.S.R.s who worked hard to make this strong result possible.”

In reviewing the numbers on publishing, Terry shared that gross profit on literature was about \$8.2 million in 2009, up from about \$6.9 million in 2008. He also really emphasized the gross profit percentage, which was 61%, compared with 56% in 2008. He said this was a positive trend, because there had been a decline in the gross profit percentage for many years. I went back through some old Conference reports, and I found that the gross profit percentage was about 50% in 2004 and about 47% in 1997. Terry was pleased by the improvement in this area, and recommended that the board establish targets for the future to maintain this improvement.

La Viña operates at a loss, with the funding coming from the general fund as a service to the Fellowship. The loss in 2009 was about \$54,000, an improvement over the loss of about \$76,000 in 2008. The Grapevine lost about \$132,000 last year, compared with a loss of about \$138,000 in 2008. The projected

loss of about \$245,000 for 2010 stems from declining circulation and increased costs due to the plan to turn things around for the Grapevine. As I reported in March at the area committee, that plan includes the following: projected costs of updating the website (\$55,000); reinstating the web Staff position (\$92,000); unifying (combining) the customer/subscriber database and outsourcing the online catalog (\$60,000); and a gift subscription program (\$44,000). These expenses are intended to help the Grapevine stem the loss of circulation, adapt to current changes in publishing, and make its stories available to alcoholics in new media as well as in print. It should be noted that the AAGV, Inc., has a budgeted profit of \$90,000 in 2011 and \$457,000 in 2012.

Returning to Terry's report, he shared some historical data related to Grapevine circulation and profitability. Terry made the following astute observation: "the Grapevine was generally profitable in periods when subscriptions were up, and generally not profitable when subscriptions were down. The key is subscriptions." For support take a look at the peak circulation years in the late 1980s and early 1990s (average circulation about 124,000 per year), when the magazine was clearly profitable (average profit about \$85,000 per year).

In spite of some financial struggles with A.A. Grapevine, Inc., the overall financial health of the General Service Board is currently good. In 2009, income exceeded expenses by just over \$1 million, and the 2010 budget projects income to be about \$700,000 greater than expenses. These excess revenues are expected to help stabilize the reserve fund. Terry then reviewed the reserve fund, which currently stands at about \$12 million, which is about 9.5 months of operating expenses. Current policy is to keep the reserve fund between nine and twelve months of operating expenses, so we are currently at the lower end of the acceptable range.

Terry shared the report of the independent auditor, which indicated that the reserve fund has short-term adequacy, but it lacks long-term adequacy. This is mostly due to pension and post-retirement obligations, which are now about 12% of annual expenses. The General Service Board has established a subcommittee to analyze the long-term inadequacy of the reserve fund and to come up with a plan to address it. In a question/answer session later, Phyllis H., general manager of our GSO, was asked whether we were looking into other pension plans, and Phyllis said that we will be.

Terry concluded his report with a reminder that put everything into its proper perspective: "Finance has no importance in and of itself. It is simply a way to carry the message to the still-suffering alcoholic."

### **Archives presentation – ROOTS in San Diego**

Our new Archives director, Michelle Mirza (nonalcoholic) shared some about the history of our archives – how they began with Nell Wing (nonalcoholic), Bill's secretary, combing the wastebaskets at the office after hours for discarded copies of correspondence that others saw as trash, but that Nell saw as history in the making. Michelle shared that those wastepaper scraps became the experiences that Bill would later solidify into our Twelve Traditions, and Nell Wing went on to become our first archivist. To illustrate how the stories gathered in the early years solidified our A.A. values, Michelle shared a portion of a letter from the archives about a group in the South that was a little off the beam. "The group's secretary sent us [the Foundation office] glowing reports about the phenomenal number of new members in this group. One of our traveling members stopped in for a visit and his letter to us was an eye-opener indeed. It seems that particular group was based on the theory that all alcoholic beverages were very bad for the alcoholic – except beer. This idea was carried out so thoroughly that beer was served at their A.A. meetings with the copious reading of the A.A. book. Oh well – the beer itself soon

cured that misconception.” I guess that shows how well alcohol itself enforces our Traditions, and A.A. police really aren’t needed.

Finally, Michelle shared a portion of a talk that Bill gave in San Diego in 1948 at the tail end of a trip throughout the U.S. and Canada in which he had been proposing the idea of the General Service Conference to the groups. Listening to our co-founder talk about unity while sitting on the Conference floor was an indescribable experience. At the time of his talk, the Conference was just an idea, and here we were living out his vision more the sixty years later. I hope he would approve of all we have done.

Monday evening closed with a “What’s on your mind” sharing session. During this session we learned that the Conference will return to the Crowne Plaza hotel on Times Square next year. Later I asked our Pacific regional trustee, Madeleine P., about this decision. She said that the move away from the Crowne had been because they wanted to raise the rates, but after losing us for a year they were becoming more reasonable. She also shared that the cost of bringing all of the staff to Rye had been greater than anticipated. Moreover, the logistics of bringing all of the materials needed for the Conference and the disadvantages of not being able to get to our General Service Office when unexpected needs arose had not been fully appreciated. Another focus of the sharing session was reflection on the concerns raised during the Grapevine report about the future of our meeting in print. I was surprised to learn that in many areas the Central Offices don’t carry the Grapevine and related items. It made me grateful for our own Central Office, where you can always find the magazine, as well as Grapevine anthologies like [The Language of the Heart](#). The reading at the end of the sharing session was, coincidentally, from [The Language of the Heart](#), p. 350.

### **Tuesday the 20<sup>th</sup>: Endings and beginnings**

#### **Morning session: Committee work continues, and comes to a close**

I slept in a little Tuesday – waking up at 4:00am instead of 3:00am like the morning before! I couldn’t wait to get back into our committee meeting to finish up our work.

First up on our agenda was a discussion of some revised wording for the “A.A. at a Glance” flyer about “What A.A. Does Not Do.” This flyer is widely used by public information committees, and it really is helpful to be able to inform the general public that we don’t do such things as keep membership records, make medical or psychiatric prognoses, or provide letters of reference to parole boards. A similar list of “What A.A. Does Not Do” is included in the service piece “Information on Alcoholics Anonymous,” which is also widely used in P.I. work. The two lists are slightly different, though, so our task was to review new wording that consolidated the two lists. The most significant change in the new wording was changing “provide drying-out services” to “provide detox services.” “Drying-out” is considered outdated, and “detox” is considered more current. There were some committee members who objected at first to the use of the term “detox,” since it also refers to detoxification from drugs, but when others pointed out that the list was a list of things A.A. does **not** do, the new wording seemed even more appropriate.

Next on our agenda was the potentially contentious issue of whether or not we need to develop a policy on the use of full-faces of actors portraying A.A. members or potential members in visual media. Up until this point, we had been engaged in a spirit of open and friendly discussion. Differences had arisen, sometimes strong ones, but we had successfully maintained a positive atmosphere. We had talked and worked through things until we had found solutions we could all get behind. Indeed, every one of our

recommendations and additional considerations up to this point had been approved unanimously, except for one in which there was a single dissenting vote. This near-total unanimity had not been a goal of ours – we had agreed that our customary two-thirds substantial unanimity would suffice – it had simply emerged as we worked together. Would we be able to maintain this spirit as we discussed an issue that some said would be the most controversial of the Conference?

Our chairperson, Carole, led us through this thicket brilliantly. She had already established a sharing-session style procedure, where we went around the table and had each person share their viewpoint on whatever item we were discussing. In this case, some of the members spoke passionately and at great length. Carole patiently allowed even the most long-winded to use all the time they seemed to need. With a relatively small committee of nine members, this worked out okay. After we finished going around the table on the full-face issue, Carole was open to a suggestion that we go around the table a second time before beginning a more free-flowing discussion. What emerged was that it was clear that we all believed a policy was needed, but that we would not be able to develop all of the specifics of such a policy in the time available to us. It also became clear that developing the policy wasn't what we had been asked to do – we had merely been asked if a policy was needed. I reflected on the discussion at our own area assembly and the questions I had asked during the sense of the meeting, and I saw the same thing reflected – we need a policy, but we don't have strong agreement on what it should say. So we developed a recommendation to return the topic to the trustees' P.I. committee. In our recommendation, we noted that more discussion and understanding of the Tradition of Anonymity is needed throughout the Fellowship, and we asked the trustees to develop a draft policy to bring back to us next year. At one point, a committee member proposed that the recommendation include encouragement that the trustees take into consideration the strong sentiment in the background material against the use of full faces as they developed the policy, but ultimately this member became convinced that such guidance was unnecessary. The background material had already been reviewed by the trustees and would be forwarded to them once again when they received our recommendation. It was best to leave the issue in their hands for now.

The discussion of this item was definitely challenging, and it could easily have harmed unity on our committee. There had been some consideration given to tackling it first on our agenda because of the expectation that it could be time consuming. It turned out to be such a wise decision to keep it where it was on the agenda. By the time we got to it, we had learned how to work with each other in a spirit of love and tolerance. If we had placed it first on our agenda, it could have created a storm that would have cast a cloud over all of the rest of our committee work.

The final item on our agenda was the suggestion to hold a future Conference on the theme, "Anonymity in a Digital Age." There was a great deal of sharing about the challenges with anonymity breaks on social networking sites such as Facebook. The concerns of our General Service Office staff really came through as well – they are at a loss about how to respond to situations where thousands of A.A. members are breaking their anonymity in public areas of the Internet. Some of our committee members were a little surprised that the item had landed on our agenda, rather than the agenda committee's agenda. Out of our discussion grew a number of additional committee considerations, including a request for the development of a section on anonymity in a digital age for inclusion in the pamphlet, "Understanding Anonymity," a suggestion that delegates encourage more discussion of this issue in their areas, and a suggestion that the "A.A. Guidelines on the Internet" be more prominently placed on our G.S.O. website. We also did recommend that a future Conference be held on this theme.

Our committee work complete, we held elections for a new chair. These elections are held using written ballots, and the chair and alternate chair are elected by simple plurality. Mel L., delegate from Western Michigan, was elected chair. Two of us were tied for alternate chair, so our names were thrown into a hat, and I was selected to serve in this position. Mel and I sat together at lunch, which was held immediately after the committee meeting. She is such a humble servant and a warm-hearted person. She had been a gentle but indispensable committee member. She was so effective at taking ideas that had been offered and crystallizing them. In short, she was able to listen for a loving higher power speaking through our group conscience, and she consistently gave voice to the group conscience in a way that all could hear. I have to admit that I had hoped I might be elected the committee chair, but I know that the committee chose the right person. I also am delighted to have been drawn from the hat to serve as the alternate.

One final word about our committee deliberations. We were given great assistance throughout our work by Mary Clare L., our staff secretary. She was able to synthesize our discussions in order to write the recommendations and additional committee considerations with clarity and accuracy. She never inserted herself into our discussions in order to influence or sway us, but she helped us out with useful background when we occasionally were stuck on some point and were unsure of how to come back together. She also brought laughter and love into the room, and she brought tasty and nutritious snacks to make sure that we had our energy needs taken care of. In appreciation, we gave her a card and a gift certificate to a book store, knowing how much she loves to read. Also, knowing how much our committee chair, Carole, feared speaking in front of large crowds, we bought Carole a catcher's mask to protect her later in the week when she would have to go in front of the full Conference to give her report.

#### **Afternoon session: reports and a workshop**

In the afternoon we had the final round of area service highlights, including those from the Panel 60 Pacific region delegates (including yours truly). There are only two men among the Panel 60 delegates from our region – the other six are women. As the other regions had given their highlights, the regional trustees had typically abided by a “ladies first” policy, even though the delegates were listed on the agenda in alphabetical order by state or province. Madeleine P., our Pacific regional trustee, broke the mold (as can be expected). In introducing our panel, she said, “The women of the Pacific region don't have to go first, because they have ovaries of steel,” and stuck with the printed order. First up was the only other man on the panel besides me - Loren U. from Alaska. I spoke fourth, and I succeeded in beating the red light with about five seconds to spare. Here is what I shared:

Come to the San Diego/Imperial Area, and you will find A.A. groups in large urban centers and small mountain enclaves; in remote desert towns and agricultural fields; around bonfires at the beach and under gazebos in county parks, and at all hours from 5:30am to midnight; women's groups, men's groups, young people's groups, gay & lesbian groups, doctor's groups; in English, Spanish, and ASL; and always in the language of the heart. Our 899 listed groups and approximately 26,000 A.A. members are served by twenty English-language districts, two Spanish-language districts, five central offices (two English-language and three Spanish-language), two Hospitals & Institutions committees, and three YPAAs.

A recent accomplishment is the growth of meetings with ASL interpreters. We now have at least one per day, so it is possible for deaf newcomers to do ninety meetings in ninety days. Our area accessibilities committee played a key role in fostering this growth. An ongoing challenge is

helping all members of the area to see general service as spiritual, relevant, and fun. And we're making progress on implementing ideas that grew out of our 2008 area inventory – the first inventory held at an area assembly (our previous inventories were done at the area committee level).

So far in 2010 our A.A. members have enjoyed ACYPAA (the All California Young People in A. A. Round-Up), a Traditions Breakfast hosted by the North San Diego County Intergroup, a district-sponsored workshop on A.A. and the Internet, and later we'll have a local Forum sponsored by our Spanish-language districts, and congresos and round-ups too numerous to mention. We are, I believe, a complete microcosm and true representation of A.A. as a whole, which makes serving as area 08's delegate a blessing and a joy.

After the area service highlights were done, we had another session of presentation/discussion topics. The theme this time was "Unity Through Inventory." One of the standout comments for me came from a talk by Stu E., delegate from Southern Wisconsin. Stu paraphrased a talk by Bernard Smith, former nonalcoholic (Class A) trustee, who gave a talk on "Unity and Continuity" at one of the Conferences in the 1960s. Here is Stu's summary of Bernard Smith's remarks: "He warned about excesses like the assumption of a 'proprietary right to serve,' about how essential it is to subordinate any of our individual desires to the greater good and to unity, and about the need for selflessness." This was so helpful to me, because at the same time that the Conference was shaping up to be one of the peak spiritual experiences of my lifetime, I was also experiencing some self-centeredness that was getting in the way of me being fully useful. Stu's talk snapped me back into the proper spirit.

Another great message came from that light of my Conference experience, Kathy O. from West Virginia, on the topic "What Happens After Inventory?" She did such a great job of capturing how important it is for us to have disagreement sometimes. As Kathy said, "I keep thinking about the phrase about our Traditions: hammered out on the anvil of experience. If any of you have ever watched metal shaped by hammering on an anvil, you will notice one thing: the metal must be very hot before the hammering will have the desired effect. Beating on cold metal will just wear your arm out." Her point was that we need the heat of lively disagreement sometimes in order to make progress. She also used another illustration about singing to show "the difference between unity and uniformity. When we sing in unison, we are all in uniformity on the same song page, same word, and same note. You can understand the song, but it may seem thin and weak. When we sing in harmony, the different voices or notes blend and weave together to bring out a richer sound than we can get in unison. It is the richer blended sound that we should be shooting for." These illustrations would serve the Conference well the next day as we moved into hearing committee reports and taking group conscience on advisory actions.

They also served us well in the workshop that followed on the topic, "Discuss the General Service Conference agenda selection process." For the workshop, we broke out into groups of about a dozen members and met in smaller meeting rooms. We talked about the "tried and true procedures for placing an item on the agenda in the most effective way," and there were experiences shared that were both positive and negative. I shared about how an item came through our area in the 1990s by starting at a group, making its way through a district, being approved by the area, and being adopted by the Conference, ultimately resulting in a new piece of literature to help newcomers identify – the pamphlet that is now titled "A.A. for the Black and African American Alcoholic." I also shared how another group took those same tried and true steps just a few years ago in an effort to have the Conference develop literature to help protect minors in A.A., only to have our area receive a letter from the trustees that

they had considered our request “and took no action.” I shared that the letter had seemed cold, and didn’t give us much insight into how to bring the item forward in a more successful manner. Others shared similar experiences, and some of them were pretty hot about it.

These shared experiences generated some valuable discussion. It was pointed out that communication is a two-way street. The trustees have a responsibility to share with the Fellowship when a suggested item doesn’t make it onto the Conference agenda, but the delegates also have a responsibility to investigate when an item doesn’t make it and to ask for further clarification when there is not enough information from the trustees about why the item didn’t make it. The delegates also have a responsibility to communicate the outcome effectively with their areas so that people will understand what happened. As luck would have it (another coincidence!) I was sitting next to Dorothy H., general service trustee, who remembered the item about protecting minors from our area because she had been at the board meeting where it was discussed. She was able to share with me that part of the reason why the item didn’t end up on the agenda was because the trustees were working on a subcommittee at the time to look at the issues regarding minors that our agenda item addressed. That subcommittee ultimately led to the report from our board chairperson, Ward, quoted on page 12 of this report. So the work that our local group did on the issue didn’t go to waste, because it became part of the discussion of the trustees’ subcommittee. I also believe the group’s ideas may be worth considering again as part of the discussion that the trustees have asked the Fellowship to engage in.

I think the most valuable thing that came out of the workshop, for me anyway, was the feeling among the trustees, non-trustee directors, and staff members in the session I attended that areas do their proposed agenda items a disservice when we wait until the January deadline to submit them. These fellow servants noted that submitting items in January makes it harder to give the items thoughtful consideration, and that it only gives staff two weeks to compile background before distribution. Based on this sharing, I want to encourage members and groups in our area to try to bring forward potential agenda items in the summer if possible, so that we can consider them at our September area assembly and submit them in time for consideration at the October board meeting. (Those who shared to this point at the workshop actually seemed to think that submitting items prior to the July board weekend is best, although I don’t see how that could work on a practical level for us if we want to have the area assembly consider potential Conference agenda items prior to submitting them).

### **Wednesday the 21<sup>st</sup>: An historic election and the beginning of committee reports**

#### **Pacific region trustee election**

The excitement really mounted Wednesday morning, as the first item of business was the election of a new trustee for our region. There were fourteen amazing candidates, and we all had the feeling that we could not go wrong. Regional trustee elections are held with all of the delegates of the region, plus an equal number of members of the Conference committee on nominating and the trustees’ committee on nominating. Since there are fifteen delegate areas in our region (quite large), all of the members of the Conference nominating committee and all but one of the members of the trustees’ nominating committee were needed to round out the group of electors. The names of the members of the trustees’ nominating committee were placed in a hat, and those who would participate in the election were drawn by lot. The name that was left in the hat at the end, the one and only member who would not be able to cast a vote in the election was ... outgoing Pacific regional trustee Madeleine P. The crowd let out a good-natured groan in empathy for Madeleine’s disappointment at not being able to participate.

The delegates then gave two-minute nominating speeches on behalf of our candidates. I had met with Jerry C., Panel 56 delegate from our area and our nominee, the Monday before I left for the Conference to have dinner, go to his homegroup, and see if there was anything he wanted to share with me to include in my nominating speech. He said, "Don't prepare anything, Joel, just speak from your heart." I shared with the Conference what a gift it had been to serve with Jerry when he was delegate and I was area chair, how he and I had talked on the phone nearly every week, and how he had given me thoughtful guidance without dominating. I felt so happy to be there at the Conference to offer Jerry as our candidate.

Ultimately, though, a higher power had other plans. Another candidate took an early lead, and by the third ballot we had a new regional trustee – Rod B., past delegate, panel 47 from area 69, Utah. Rod brings strong professional qualifications to the board. He has a B.A. in accounting and a Master's in Social Work. He works in the field of alcoholism treatment, and he serves as Vice-Chair of the Utah Association of Substance Abuse Providers and as Vice-Chair of the Utah Indian Health Advisory Board. Moreover, Rod brings something to our General Service Board that it has never had before; Rod is the first Native American to ever serve on the board, and I have no doubt that he will be able to bring a valuable perspective on how to reach out to the still-suffering alcoholics in this population.

Immediately following the election, Monte S., delegate from Utah, stepped out into the foyer with a group of us close behind and called Rod to let him know the good news. As Monte told us later, here was Rod's reaction: there was silence, an audible intake of breath, and then Rod said, softly, "Oh my goodness." After talking with Rod for a bit, congratulating him, Monte held out the phone so we could all give a shout-out of encouragement to Rod. I remember him from PRAASAs that I have attended in the past, and I think he is a kind and loving soul. I encourage you all to come to the Pacific Regional Forum in Torrance, August 27-29, so you can meet Rod.

Next up was the election of the Eastern Canada regional trustee. This one went five ballots, with one candidate inching forward ballot by ballot to be elected with substantial unanimity on the fifth ballot – Donald C. from Northwest Quebec. I don't know as much about Donald, but the Canadian delegates I spoke with later seemed very happy about the selection.

It was very interesting to observe and participate in elections that were held using the read-the-ballots-aloud method. It definitely added to the suspense and the whole spirit of the election. There were 30 voting members and fourteen candidates in the first election, and there were 20 voting members and nine candidates in the second election. All totaled, it took two hours and ten minutes to conduct these two elections, including the reading of election procedures and the nominating speeches.

### **Regional lunch: PRAASA 2014 selection**

The regional lunch was really joyful. We had just elected our new trustee. We presented Madeleine with a collage made up of pictures of all the people she had served with during her four years as trustee. I made a hard-sell pitch for our bid to host PRAASA 2014. There were two other areas that submitted bids, but we came out on top with eleven out of fifteen votes. I am so grateful to Mike S., Sallye M., Roy G., Gail N., and everyone who worked on this bid over the last few years. Our persistent efforts and our ability to demonstrate that we were getting the best deal that could be had to host in San Diego really paid off!

## Committee reports at last!

After lunch, there was another panel of presentation/discussion topics, but I guess it didn't make as much of an impression on me, because I have no notes on the presentations themselves. Maybe I was still on a cloud from winning the PRAASA bid, or maybe I was anticipating the beginning of committee reports. The only notes I have are about the unexpected farewell of the panel moderator, Rogelio Flores, nonalcoholic (Class A) trustee. At the end of the panel, Rogelio announced that he had to leave this year's Conference early. He had to fly to Spain at the request of the President of the United States to participate in an international conference on addictions. He seemed really torn and somewhat embarrassed that he hadn't realized the scheduling conflict when he accepted the invitation from the White House to participate. With tears in his eyes, Rogelio said that next to his wife and kids, we (A.A.) mean more to him than anything else.

Then the committee reports began. This is the most exciting part of the Conference, where we hear the recommendations and additional considerations of the committees, vote on advisory actions, and hear the initial presentation of floor actions. These committee reports went throughout the afternoon on Wednesday, all evening on Wednesday, all day Thursday and on into the late evening, all day Friday and into the night. Broken up only a little by a few last presentations, these were intense sessions filled with thoughtfulness, passion, and a realization that we were really working together on behalf of A.A. as a whole. The reports are not done in alphabetical order by committee, the way the handout that includes the advisory actions and additional committee considerations is laid out. The order is established by a random draw, with a little bit of tweaking to accommodate the need for availability of staff during some reports.

Things started about 2:00pm, and it was pretty low-key, with reports from treatment facilities/special needs/accessibilities and cooperation with the professional community. Both of these went fast, because there were no recommendations for advisory actions from these committees. Things heated up a bit with policy and admissions and their proposal to develop a plan for the Conference to take its inventory, as well as its recommendation for a procedure for Concept V minority appeals. The recommendation to develop a plan for the Conference to conduct an inventory of itself was approved, but the procedure that was recommended for minority appeals was rejected. The committee had done some good work, but the Conference seemed to believe that the committee's proposal wasn't ready yet. This committee finished right before the dinner break.

After dinner we heard from corrections, which had three recommendations, all of which went pretty smoothly. These recommendations were the ones we discussed at our area assembly that improved wording in pamphlets to encourage A.A. members engaged in corrections work to become well informed about the regulations of whatever facility they were entering. It was now 8:00pm on Wednesday, and we had finished four out of the thirteen committees. Not bad! Maybe we'll end this Conference on schedule, we were all thinking.

Next up was public information, and things slowed down as the Conference began watching and re-watching videos, and the lines at the mics started getting longer and longer. We got through only two recommendations in two hours – the "My World" PSA and the plan to use centralized distribution and tracking of this PSA. Conference members were concerned when they first viewed the PSA, believing that it had shown full faces of actors, which would have gone against last year's advisory action that had initiated the development of this PSA. On second viewing, people realized that the video techniques used in the PSA had been so effective that they had conveyed the full emotion you get from seeing full

faces without actually using full faces. Then someone become convinced that they had seen a shot of drug vials in an office worker's drawer in one of the scenes. Replay and freeze frame revealed that they weren't drug vials – they were airplane bottles of booze. With the Conference members' concerns allayed, we approved the PSA and the centralized distribution plan, and we closed the evening session just before 10:00pm with one of my favorite A.A. readings, p. 124 of Twelve Steps & Twelve Traditions.

### **Thursday the 22<sup>nd</sup>: A marathon day**

Thursday morning I was up early again so that my Conference buddy and I could return to the Eye Opener group that we had attended in White Plains on Monday. I was so grateful to be there and to hear a member share with joy about the fact that he was about to celebrate two years of sobriety. I also was touched by the desperation and hope of a struggling newcomer. As much as I loved being at the Conference, I needed this hour of regular A.A. to keep me grounded. The topic of the meeting was humility, and we heard a great experience from one of the members, a guy named Mickey who told of a conversation with another member who had the word "Humility" tattooed on his back, and who shared with Mickey, "I've been chasing humility the whole time I've been sober – ten years," to which Mickey replied, "It's tattooed on your back. Maybe humility has actually been chasing you, and you need to stop and let it catch up with you." The whole meeting got a big laugh out of that. Before the meeting closed, in that beautiful fashion I described before, someone read from As Bill Sees It, p. 143, "A.A.'s School of Life: Within A.A., I suppose, we shall always quarrel a good bit. Mostly, I think, about how to do the greatest good for the greatest number of drunks..." What a fitting reading before returning to the business of the Conference.

Thursday morning we resumed and spent the whole morning on public information. I was really feeling for our committee chair, Carole. As I mentioned before, she hates being in front of large crowds, and she was up there the entire morning. The Conference was starting to do one of the things we're cautioned against – editing committee recommendations from the floor. It really seemed like we were getting bogged down in minutiae, but the spirit was still positive. We were viewing the "Animation" video that was part of the A.A. Videos for Young People project. The closing of this video had two final frames, one saying "Go to [www.aa.org](http://www.aa.org)" and the next one saying "Search YPAA." Some Conference members were concerned about affiliation. Others strongly defended the use of the acronym YPAA. Some were concerned about what would happen if someone did a Google search on YPAA – would they end up at the site of some predator using the acronym for insidious purposes? Others shared that a web search on YPAA takes you to a helpful site that can be used to find young people's meetings around the world. WE were nowhere near a resolution of the concerns, but we stayed on schedule. Even though we were right in the middle of an issue that had us bogged down, it was time for lunch. So we took a break, and when we returned we heard more reports before returning to business. It was a needed cooling off period.

### **A.A. Around the World**

After lunch we heard reports on A.A. Around the World. Don M., trustee at large U.S., gave a presentation that focused on the reasons why we do international outreach and how we can improve what we do. He noted that "very early on, Bill foresaw the need and utility of establishing footholds for carrying our message of recovery to 'beachheads' all over the globe." He also reminded us that "our Responsibility Statement does not place geographic limits on where the hand of A.A. reaches out to still-suffering alcoholics. Instead, we use the words *anyone* and *anywhere*." He talked about how giving is a gift – that we enhance our own spiritual growth by reaching out beyond our own borders. He also made it clear that we are not missionaries. Regarding his own recent trips to Mexico and Japan, he noted,

“Each trip was to a place where we were invited, and in which an organized service structure exists.” He also let us know that the host countries participated in self- support by paying for part of the expenses.

While Don understands the reasons why we don’t proselytize, he also seems to want to see if we can push the envelope. He shared his concern for places where there is no A.A. yet, and he encouraged consideration of the possibility of our General Service Office doing international “C.P.C. /P.I. calls on embassies of countries where A.A. has not yet reached, and where we aren’t ‘attractive’ because we are absent.” It will be interesting to see if Don’s vision takes hold with the rest of the board. I’m sure we’ll hear more about it when he visits our area for our November area assembly, where he will give a report on the 21<sup>st</sup> World Service Meeting that he’ll be attending in Mexico in October.

Next up was GSO staff member Warren S., who shared that there are currently 180 countries with an A.A. presence, and 59 countries with their own autonomous general services offices. He gave us brief highlights of a few recent international visits he had made to some of those 59 countries, then he zeroed in on his trip to Cameroon for the Second Zonal Service Meeting of Central and West Africa’s French-speaking countries (RACO). Warren, who is African-American, shared that “never in my wildest dreams did I ever think that I would get the opportunity to be a part of the growth of Alcoholics Anonymous in the land of my ancestors. It was my first visit to the African continent.” He participated in a one-hour regularly scheduled health forum on a national radio broadcast, joined by Michele P. of the French GSO and Emily E., a local A.A. member. They were asked many questions about the A.A. program, and the entire hour of that week’s health forum was devoted to A.A. Thinking back to what I have read about A.A. in the U.S. in the 1940s, I recalled how radio broadcasts were a widely used public information tool. It was great to hear once again that this tool is being used in countries where A.A. is still in its pioneering stages.

Warren reported that later in the week, during the West Central Africa Zonal Meeting (RACO) itself, he learned that some of the participating countries had less than a dozen groups. The host country, Cameroon, was considered a ray of hope, because it has more than 40 groups. Some of the topics discussed at the RACO were “how to provide information to the general public, especially in Muslim countries where the use of alcohol comes with a tremendous amount of social ostracism, and understanding the concept of ‘sponsorship.’” RACO took a one-day break so that all could participate in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Annual Convention of A.A. in Cameroon, attended by more than 150 A.A.s and friends of A.A. Warren led workshops on the Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions. RACO resumed and came to a close, and all of the delegates were given a packet of literature made possible by the financial support of GSO France and GSO U.S./Canada. I am so grateful that some of my A.A. dollars and some Euros dropped in a basket by a French member mixed together to provide a little bit of literature to a delegate from a country where there are less than a dozen meetings in the whole nation. I feel connected with that anonymous French member who contributed a little, the anonymous African A.A. member who will carry that book, and the unknown African prospect, still suffering from active alcoholism, who might hear our message of hope.

### **The A.A. Grapevine – “Carrying the Message”**

Next came another panel of talks on presentation/discussion topics. The big emphasis here was on using the A.A. Grapevine, La Viña, and the French-language magazine La Vigne in Twelfth Step work. The standout message on this panel came from Mike P., delegate from Southern California, who made the point that we don’t support Grapevine/La Viña – it supports us! Referring to our magazines, Mike said “They are full of meetings ... and there is absolutely no way I am going to throw an A.A. meeting in the

trash... We have to pass it on. The easiest way is to take them to a meeting. I like giving mine to newcomers. A simple, 'welcome and this is for you...' I've just passed another meeting on." I think this is a great idea. I also thought about Mike's statement that there is no way he would throw an A.A. meeting in the trash, and I reflected on what we had heard earlier in the week about the challenges that our meeting in print faces in the near future. Will we allow the whole magazine to be consigned to the dustbin of A.A. history? Or will we give back the support that Grapevine/La Viña has given us over the years?

The presentation on La Vigne was an eye-opener. I had been aware of this magazine, which is a joint publication of the four areas in French-speaking Quebec. The four areas working together on a joint project on an ongoing basis provides great opportunities. As Alain D., delegate from Northeast Quebec put it, "What is better than a group of people who get together and have the same purpose?" He also shared that the magazine has subscribers around the globe, including in Africa. Maybe some of those A.A. members that Warren met in Cameroon hear the language of the heart through this French-language meeting in print.

The last presentation was followed by a coffee break. At the end of the coffee break I was informed that I had been elected chair of the delegates' PRAASA advisory committee, which came as a complete shock. I was only vaguely aware of the existence of this committee, and here I was the chair. I'm still not sure what I'm supposed to do, and it feels a bit like the A.A. railroad landed me in this spot, but I'm willing and available. More will be revealed.

### **Committee reports continue**

We jumped back into the heat of that same P.I. recommendation that had vexed us for most of the morning. An amendment had been made, probably too early in the discussion, and those of us on the P.I. committee knew that, while well-intentioned, the amendment was seriously flawed. Fortunately Phyllis H., who was chairing the session, allowed the Conference the flexibility to use friendly amendments to improve what had been suggested, it got us back on track, and we were able to complete the item that had occupied so much of our time by changing the two closing frames to a single frame that will read: "For more information search 'Young People' at [www.aa.org](http://www.aa.org)". With this change, the video was approved.

At this point, more flexibility was needed. Public information still wasn't done, but we needed to leapfrog to the Grapevine committee report so that we could (hopefully) consider recommendations from this committee before the afternoon was over. This was considered desirable so that Grapevine staff, who had come up to Rye that afternoon specifically to be a resource during the committee report, wouldn't have to stay past the dinner hour. The Grapevine Committee had two recommendations: a plan to begin bringing La Viña into spiritual parity with the Grapevine, and a plan to gather sharing from the Fellowship at large about the value of the Grapevine.

The plan to improve La Viña included going to 68 pages and getting rid of the staples, but staying with black and white for now instead of color. There was much sharing of concern over whether or not this really would achieve equality. The Grapevine committee chair shared that cost was a primary concern. If these two changes are made and circulation increases, we could go full-color in the future. It would cost about \$21,000 to take the measures they were recommending, but it would be an additional \$30,000-\$40,000 to go full color. Based on the notes that Butch had given me from our area assembly, I shared that some of our Spanish-speaking GSRs had actually suggested we do exactly what the Conference

Grapevine committee was recommending. Ultimately this item was approved as recommended, and so was the item about gathering input from the Fellowship on the value of the Grapevine. It took a little over two hours to work through these two recommendations. We were starting to run seriously behind again. After the dinner break, we were still going to need to go back and complete the report from the public information committee, including one more recommendation for an advisory action and several additional committee considerations. After that, we would still have seven more committees to work through in the remainder of Thursday night and throughout the day on Friday. Would we make it?

We resumed the public information committee report after dinner, considered the final item: a recommendation that the Conference agenda committee consider holding a future Conference on the theme, "Anonymity in a Digital Age." This came to a vote pretty quickly, and the item passed. Then a vocal minority was heard, raising concerns about the Conference process and one committee telling another committee (in this case, the agenda committee) what it should do. A vote to reconsider was approved, debate resumed, and the public information committee decided to withdraw the item as a recommendation and turn it into an additional committee consideration instead. Once again, the Conference was showing flexibility and doing things in a somewhat unorthodox manner. When the members of the P.I. committee decided to withdraw the item, Ward Ewing was unsure if it was okay to do things that way, but he seemed to sense that the Conference was okay with it. Just to be sure, Ward said, "If anyone disagrees, speak now or forever hold your peace ... oops, sorry, wrong script" (you'll recall that Ward is a clergyman).

Our valiant P. I. chairperson Carole, who hates being in front of large crowds, shared the twelve additional committee considerations that had come out of our committee meetings and concluded her report at 7:54pm on Thursday night. She had first taken the dais at 8:00pm the night before. What a trooper!

Literature was up next. With several exciting items that had stirred great interest, I was eager to see what we might accomplish during the remaining hours of our Thursday night session.

First we considered a recommendation to approve the draft of the pamphlet, "The A.A. Member – Medications and Other Drugs." We had been given copies of the draft for review the night before. This pamphlet has been under revision since Jerry was our delegate. My understanding was that last year's Conference was primarily unhappy with parts of the introduction. The problems with the introduction had been fixed, but many members this year objected to some of the old stories that had been retained. These members felt that some of the stories were poorly written and send confusing messages about our primary purpose through their focus on street drugs. A vote to approve the recommendation passed, and minority was heard. During this minority opinion one of my favorite moments in the Conference occurred. Adrienne B., GSO staff member and the Conference coordinator this year, left the dais to come down to the floor mics to share passionately against the recommendation. Her assistant, Yee Tully (nonalcoholic) had been manning the lights and the timing bell throughout the Conference. Well, Adrienne hit the red light, and Yee rang that bell on her boss! It was a great example of the egalitarian spirit of the Conference in action. There was eventually a motion for reconsideration, which passed, and a suggestion that we go back out to solicit new stories for the pamphlet. This was ruled out of order as being an amendment that fundamentally changed the nature of the committee's recommendation, which was to approve the draft of the pamphlet. A revote was taken to approve the draft, and it failed. Minority opinion had swung the Conference's group conscience.

We moved on to a motion to approve changes to the pamphlet, "Questions and Answers on Sponsorship." A revision had been recommended last year to update outmoded ethnic, cultural, and vocational references. Once again, we had received the draft the night before, and I had studied it pretty well. I was pleased to see the improvements, but I felt that in one case the committee had made a bit of a mistake, albeit a well-meaning one. They had added language to make the pamphlet more inclusive of the gay and lesbian population by noting in the section about the importance of sponsor and sponsee being of the same gender that some gays and lesbians purposefully choose an opposite-sex sponsor to avoid emotional entanglements. This was a good addition, I thought. Although it is actually somewhat rare, in my experience, it is a choice that some do make, so putting it in added useful experience to the pamphlet.

In another section, though, a related revision made it seem as though it was actually *customary* in the gay and lesbian community to choose an opposite-sex sponsor, and this just isn't the case. Most of us choose same-sex sponsors because of the need for identification and the increased level of honesty that most of us experience with people of our own gender and sexual orientation. I felt there was a danger in this other proposed change, because it might be viewed by the gay and lesbian community as the Conference telling the community that we needed to make a change in the way that we customarily do things. I double-checked my own perception by sharing about the issue with some other gay members of the Conference, and they felt the same way. So, I addressed this from the mic, and others chimed in. The literature committee accepted a friendly amendment that fixed the problem, and this much-improved pamphlet was approved.

Next came the recommendation to develop literature which focuses on spirituality and that includes stories from atheists and agnostics who are successfully sober in A.A. This had the potential to be an explosive topic. Several members made impassioned pleas for inclusiveness. A member of the Conference who identifies as an atheist said, "We're not a-spiritual." Members of the Conference literature committee shared that their own original reaction to the agenda item had been, "Heck no!" But then they read the background material, did research in their own area, and came forward with a conviction that the item needed to move forward.

I was personally torn on the issue. Although we didn't talk about it in our area this year, we had talked about a similar item last year, and our area had been divided on the issue. My own spiritual beliefs are somewhat outside the mainstream, and I'm a member of a church that is very tolerant of doubters. I have a sponsee who is far more spiritual than I am who is a non-theist, and I visited the "We Agnostics" group a couple of times over the last few months and experienced a group where there was clearly a Fellowship of the Spirit and a strong A.A. message. I've had experiences with people who nearly died because they were turned off by what they perceived as the religious nature of A.A. Yet, I also had some fears that developing literature like what was being proposed could be harmful to A.A. unity. I wasn't sure how to vote. I knew how I was leaning, because of the Third Tradition, but I wasn't sure if it was best, because of the First Tradition.

Ward, who is a clergyman, shared. It was the only agenda item he expressed an opinion on throughout the entire Conference (he was not chairing this session; Phyllis was). He said that it was very important that we not confuse spirituality with religious faith, and he supported the recommendation because he felt that it would broaden the depth of our understanding of different expressions of religious faith. Then Conley B., Southwest regional trustee, got up to share. He is a true good ol' boy. He was the last member of the Conference who I would have expected to share in favor of this recommendation, but that's exactly what he did. He said that literature like what was being proposed wouldn't speak to him,

but that he believed it was needed for others. He expressed his belief that most of the opposition for the idea springs from fear, "Fear of people who don't believe what I believe." And I had my answer to the unity dilemma. If a good ol' boy from the South who clearly believes in God could support developing literature with the experience of atheists and agnostics in A.A., then pursuing this project wasn't going to hurt A.A. unity after all.

The motion passed, and we completed our Thursday night session at 11:13pm, over an hour later than scheduled, with a reading from *The Language of the Heart*, p. 316.

I looked at Friday's agenda. We were scheduled to spend a total of four hours on Friday hearing committee reports and taking group conscience on recommendations for advisory actions, and we still needed to finish the literature committee report and recommendations and hear from six more committees. Clearly, we were going to go long. But would we go as long as the two previous Conferences, both of which went until after midnight on Saturday morning?

### **Friday the 23<sup>rd</sup>: Conference business concludes and delegates give their farewells**

#### **But first...The International Convention report**

Although we had a lot of business yet to do, our agenda showed that we would be hearing a report on the 2010 International Convention first thing Friday morning. We had agreed the night before that we would start half an hour early to help with our time crunch. Rick W., General Service Office staff member, gave a rousing report. We're in good hands with Rick as the coordinator of this event. He said that it's estimated that there will be between 45,000 and 50,000 people at this year's International Convention. As of the Monday morning of Conference week, registrations were at 37,163, about 5,000 ahead of where we were at the same point in the calendar in 2005. Rick shared that "members from 72 countries have registered, from Columbia to Kazakhstan and from Peru to Palau. All of the continents except Antarctica are represented, and there is yet time!" He let us know that 89% percent of the registrations have been done online, up from 35% in 2000 and 70% in 2005. He said there would be a special emphasis on announcements about anonymity throughout the Convention because of the challenges of maintaining anonymity in our digital age. The Reverend Sam Shoemaker's daughter, Nikkie Haggart, will be presented with a special copy of *A.A. Comes of Age* "in gratitude for the role her father played in the founding of Alcoholics Anonymous," and the American Medical Association will receive the 30 millionth copy of the Big Book. The theme of the Convention is "A Vision for You," and I know that Rick has a vision for us that will make the Convention truly special. For those who can't attend, be on the lookout for flyers or announcements about local showings of the opening flag ceremony, which will be webcast in an anonymity-protected fashion on the G.S.O. website.

#### **Back to committee reports**

We resumed committee reports at 9:00am. To help move things along, Ward announced that we would reduce the time for sharing from the mics when floor discussion was taking place from two minutes to one-and-a-half minutes. By my count, we had addressed twenty recommendations so far, and we still had eighteen to go, so Ward's suggestion seemed a reasonable one. It was another example of responsive leadership and flexibility being used to serve us well. Ward was such a gentle leader, having a perfect feel for when to inject a little bit of light-hearted humor. One of the running jokes in the Conference was delight at the way Ward said, "Hold your hands *high*," when we were taking votes, with an emphasis on the word "high," in his Tennessee accent, that made it sound more like a greeting: "Hi!"

The remaining literature items went pretty easily. The committee recommended revising the “A.A. and the Armed Services” pamphlet by adding updated stories and creating a section on veterans. Stu E., the delegate who had sent in the agenda item requesting a separate veterans’ pamphlet, made an impassioned plea, but even he ultimately voted in favor of the committee’s compromise proposal – it passed unanimously.

The committee also recommended that the booklet Living Sober be reviewed. There was much sharing on this one. Some people felt it was a historically important book that is as sacred as the Big Book, but others felt we should completely scrap it and start over. The publications director pointed out that what was envisioned was a very light edit, focused on outdated language such as references to ham radio. Ultimately, the Conference approved the recommendation. I had asked the publications director one-on-one about whether specific suggestions for changes should be shared from the floor, and she said it was better to send suggestions in for inclusion in next year’s background material. I was thinking of the suggestion to move the section on working the Twelve Steps from the back of the booklet to the front. As you may recall, this suggestion came out of our area assembly discussion in April. If I have your blessing, I will go ahead and draft a letter to send in with this suggestion.

A final item of interest under the literature committee was the suggestion to develop a book on early pioneer women in A.A. This was addressed under additional committee considerations, and the literature committee had decided to take no action because they felt there was no widely expressed need. Question came from the floor showing that some Conference members were disappointed that this item had not come out of committee for our consideration. The chair suggested that if any areas felt there was a need for this literature to be developed, they could write letters to support bringing the item back again in the future. I would suggest you talk with your groups about this if you feel strongly enough, and if any groups do want to bring forward a request I hope they will do so.

Literature wrapped up at 9:40am. Things went pretty smoothly for the rest of the morning and into the early afternoon, as we went on to report and charter, followed by agenda, and then the Conference committee on trustees. The only item of widespread interest throughout these reports is the Conference theme for the 2011 Conference: “We Are Responsible for A.A.’s Future – Let it Begin With Us.” The Conference is a year-long process, and the new theme really takes effect immediately after the annual Conference meeting, so if any districts are interested in doing workshops on the Conference theme, I would encourage the use of the 2011 theme.

Mid-afternoon we got a bit bogged down again. During the finance committee report we got hung up over the issue of the pie charts in the pamphlet, “Self-Support: Where Money and Spirituality Mix.” The finance committee had been asked to consider removing the pie charts, but they had come back instead with a recommendation to add one more that would be a sort of a fill-in-your-own-percentages type of pie chart. Areas that objected to the very existence of the pie charts didn’t see this as a viable solution. They would stand for nothing except the complete removal of the pie charts. Other people who liked the idea of adding the fill-in-your-own-percentages chart saw flaws in the specifics of what was being proposed. Flexibility came to the rescue again, as the finance committee chose to go back into committee to do some more work on their recommendation in response to some of the sharing on the floor. In the meantime, we moved on to hear from the only other remaining committees – international conventions/regional forums and archives. There were no recommendations from either of these committees, but there was interesting additional committee consideration that revealed that a digital archives exhibit is being added to the GSO website that will feature specific items from the archive collection.

The finance committee chair returned with some improvements to the committee's previous work at about 3:00pm, and although the committee had made a valiant effort things were still a bit bumpy with the Conference discussion of the pie charts (isn't that how it always is when alkie talk about money?). In the end, their recommendation was defeated, but I was baffled. This still left the anti-pie chart people with the same problem they had before we started, because the old pie chart would still be in the pamphlet without the additional improvement of another suggestion for how to figure out your group's contributions!

The recommendation to include information about the A.A. Grapevine in the Self-Support pamphlet passed easily. We also passed a recommendation to gather personal stories from the Fellowship that humanize the impact of the Seventh Tradition. These stories might be added to existing literature, or they might be used in future literature projects. We concluded our work on the last of the finance committee's recommendations and heard their additional committee considerations at 4:48pm. Our original agenda had us scheduled to reach this point at 3:00pm, so we weren't doing too badly.

But wait! We still had seventeen floor actions to consider. Throughout the sessions on committee reports, members can at any time submit a floor action by asking to be recognized by the chair, reading their motion, and getting a second from another member. Those items all go to the end of the business agenda. I hadn't been keeping track, but I knew we had heard quite a few. Most of them were items meant to keep an issue alive even though a particular recommendation had failed, so they definitely do serve a purpose. But how could we get through seventeen on Friday evening? And would we have time for the scheduled farewells by rotating delegates? I had heard that these talks, where each of the second-year delegates is able to share about their Conference experience for two minutes, are often among the most moving parts of the Conference. They had not been given during either of the last two Conferences, because the business went until well after midnight each of the last two years. I wanted my fellow delegates to have the opportunity to sum up their experience, and I needed to hear their strength and hope. Would we make it?

We plunged into the floor actions, beginning at about 5:00pm. A new procedure for how floor actions are heard was in place, and I think it cut down considerably on some of the chaos I had heard about from previous years. In the past, when the Conference begins to consider the floor actions, the first one would be read. If the first person at the mic wanted to make a motion not to consider the floor action, then he or she could do so. The Conference would then immediately vote on the motion not to consider, and if two-thirds voted not to consider, then that was the end of that. This created two problems, as it has been described to me. If the floor action had originally been made a day or two before, people sometimes couldn't remember the context in which it was originally made, and therefore couldn't consider the merits. Sometimes a worthy floor action would end up not being considered because no one could remember what it was about. The other negative consequence of the previous system was that you had to be the first person to the mic to make a motion not to consider. This resulted in chaotic jockeying for position.

The new system for hearing floor actions reduced the chaos and restored thoughtfulness to the process. The original maker of the floor action was given two minutes to speak after the motion was read, so that he or she could remind everyone of the context in which the floor action originally had arisen. Then the chairperson would ask if anyone wanted to make a motion not to consider. If someone did make that motion and it was seconded, then we took a vote, and the same two-thirds rule of the old system still applied.

We successfully dispensed with nine floor actions between 5:00 and 6:30pm. Noteworthy items were a motion that kept the development of a process for Concept V minority appeals alive for next year's Conference, and another motion that did the same for the revision of the pamphlet, "The A.A. Member – Medications and Other Drugs."

We were making progress because of that series of ever-improving compromises described in Concept IX, but we still had more to go. It was clear we weren't going to finish really soon, though, so we broke for dinner.

Off we went, and back we came. I thought we would plunge right back into the floor actions, but no! Before we could do that, we needed to follow up on a recommendation that had been approved earlier – the formation of a committee to develop a plan for the Conference to take an inventory of itself. The composition of the committee had been outlined, but the members of the committee hadn't been chosen. We needed to select representatives from each of the regions, and this was to be done by random draw. I was surprised and delighted to be pulled out of the hat to represent the Pacific region on this committee. Having greatly enjoyed participation in group and area inventories, I am really looking forward to helping to plan the inventory of the Conference. Next we had a surprise from the Riverside Drive players, who presented a skit on the International Convention. Were we wasting time with such moments of levity? I don't think so, because they helped to keep us in the right spirit; if others do find them frivolous, perhaps the Conference inventory will reveal that.

Only a few floor actions to go, but we were down to thorny issues and complicated procedures. There were three floor actions that were all related to the pie chart issue, and another three others that were all related to another issue that's just way too obscure having to do with wording of advisory actions and additional committee considerations in the Final Conference Report. In each of these two cases, the competing floor actions might cancel each other out, or they might best be dealt with all together rather than one at a time. But this would be a procedural nightmare. Once again, flexibility saved the day. Phyllis was chairing this session, and she asked the makers of the floor actions about the pie charts to meet together and see if they could consolidate their concerns into a single item. Then she asked if it was okay for us to take up the other set of related floor actions in different order from how they had been presented. It was all a little unorthodox, but it seemed fine to the makers of the motions, and it really helped to clarify everything for the rest of us.

The items about the Final Conference Report boiled down to an issue of trust. The publications department often makes minor editorial changes to advisory actions and additional committee considerations when it prepares the final report. These changes typically involve grammar and punctuation, but some delegates felt that some of last year's changes went too far. They acknowledged that none of the changes altered policy in any way, but they were still unhappy about them. The recommendation that the Conference ultimately passed called on the publications department to work cooperatively with the Conference committee on report and charter to ensure that the final report is accurate.

At last the pie chart issue came back. I listened intently, trying to understand the opposition to something that our area finds so useful, and I began to see what the problem was. In some areas, most of the active support for Twelfth Step work, including what we call H&I, is done through the area assembly. In addition, some of these areas have very active P.I. and C.P.C. committees that place lots of literature and staff lots of events for the public and for professionals. In areas like this, the pie chart recommendation that 50% of group contributions should go to central office/intergroup doesn't fit as

well as it does for us. In addition, as some delegates reported, the central offices in their area use the Self Support pamphlet and its pie charts as a way to tell the groups that the Conference says they are supposed to give 50% to central office, rather than it just being a suggestion. Now I know there are two sides to every story, and if we spoke with the central office in these areas we might hear something a bit different, but I heard from enough delegates who had shown themselves throughout the week to be reasonable, thoughtful people to realize that there had to be some truth in what they were sharing. And I really got in touch with the fact that I was at the Conference to serve A.A. as a whole. Defending the pie charts might be what was best for my own area, but looking for solutions that could work for all of us might be what A.A. as a whole needed. Ultimately, the Conference decided to keep this item alive for next year. I supported this decision, and I spoke later with some of the anti-pie chart delegates. I suggested that we work together some, reasoning that if people from areas that are on opposite sides of the issue can come up with something that we can agree on, that could be a beneficial contribution to next year's discussion. I hope I will have your support in developing ideas, sharing them with you, sharing them with my fellow delegates, and seeing if we can forge a reasonable compromise.

Final report controversy and pie chart mania behind us, we concluded the final item of business at 10:10pm – only seven hours behind schedule!

Allen P., delegate from Wyoming, approached one of the floor mics and said, "Madam chair, I would like to request a collective 'Yee-haw.'" Phyllis had no time to respond. We all burst into a spontaneous and hearty "YEE-HAW!" Our sense of accomplishment and our collective affection for each other, for our process, and for A.A. filled the room.

Although it was late, it wasn't near midnight. There was no question that we would do it. We would hear the farewell remarks of the rotating delegates. I was too tearful to write down much of what was shared, and I really wanted to just be in the moment with the experience, rather than writing it all down. But here are a few that touched me. From my friend Elizabeth M., delegate from Hawaii: "When I'm with you, I'm at my best." From my rival in the PRAASA bidding process, Monte S., delegate from Utah: "I haven't had this much fun with a bunch of drunks since I was in treatment." And from the light of my Conference week, Kathy O., delegate from West Virginia, a song from the McGuire sisters. Here are some of the lyrics:

May you always walk in sunshine  
Slumber warm when night winds blow.  
May you always live with laughter,  
For a smile becomes you so.  
May old heartaches be forgotten,  
May no tears be spilled.  
May old acquaintance be remembered,  
And your cup of kindness filled.

After the last of the Panel 59 delegates shared, Ward gave closing remarks. He admired how we had treated each other in a way that showed that we knew each person was of worth. He marveled that we had indeed improved methods of carrying the message to the alcoholic who still suffers. He mentioned some challenges ahead based on unfinished work – pie charts, the full face issue in our visual media, improving our outreach to young people, and being more inclusive of atheists and agnostics in our midst while avoiding potential dangers, such as straying too far into defining spiritual terms. He closed by saying, "It's an honor and a privilege to serve," and he cried tears of joy.

## **Saturday the 24<sup>th</sup>: Two servants say goodbye, and we visit a co-founder's home**

### **Closing brunch**

On the Saturday morning after the official close of the Conference, there is customarily a brunch, where rotating trustees give farewell talks. Madeleine P., outgoing Pacific regional trustee, and Bill Clarke, outgoing nonalcoholic (Class A) trustee, shared with us. Bill seemed to me a humble man who felt honored to have served. Madeleine wore her heart on her sleeve, as always, and concluded with her story about Palm Sunday. It's a great one. If you haven't heard it, she also used it to close her talk at ACYPAA this year, and you can listen to that talk online at [www.ACYPAA2010.org](http://www.ACYPAA2010.org) Download or listen to the Saturday Night Main Meeting.

### **A visit to Stepping Stones**

For those who cared to, a trip had been arranged to Stepping Stones, Bill and Lois' home in Bedford Hills. We filled one large bus and two small ones, and it was a lovely day. It is an amazing experience. I know that many people who have visited have shared how meaningful it was to them to sit at the kitchen table, the same table that Bill and Lois had when they were still back on Clinton Street in Brooklyn, the same table that Bill sat at when his old drinking buddy, Ebby, first brought him the message of hope. Others have shared how much they were moved when they sat at Bill's desk in his little writing shack, called Wit's End, up a small hill from the main house. What made the biggest impression on me was seeing the huge collection of books on shelves throughout the house – books on history, travel, biographies of great leaders, and religions from around the world. And in a glass case, a most interesting book. A Bible. Lois' Bible, opened to a page on which Bill had written notes to her in the late 1920s, apologizing for the chaos caused by his drinking and pledging never to drink again. The last of those notes was written five years before he took his last drink, so I guess he gave up empty promises long before he gave up drinking. Bill's notes to Lois in that Bible made such an impression on me that I completely overlooked another book in the same case. I was told by a friend later that the very first copy of our Big Book was also in that case. Guess that gives me a reason to go back and visit again sometime.

### **Final thoughts**

I began this report by sharing with you about the Panel 59 delegates putting the protection and care of Alcoholics Anonymous' general service structure into the hands of the Panel 60 delegates at the close of Conference business. My hands are not big enough to do this work myself. I'll join hands with my fellow delegates, and they will give me strength (they already have). But that's not enough. I need your hands as well. Please carry the message of general service into your homegroups. Please show them how the things that we do here complement and support their efforts to carry the message of hope to the alcoholic who still suffers. If you can, please show them that by participating in the service structure they transcend boundaries of language and culture and geography to make recovery possible for people they may never join hands with themselves.

My first sponsor told me that God doesn't have his own hands here on earth, so he needs us to be here to reach out to one another. Let's all be part of that chain of hands, guiding the suffering alcoholic from the darkness into the light.

Love and service, Joel