

SUCCESS PROVED

Court Probation Robbing AA of Its Anonymity

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Last December a Santa Ana judge sentenced a convicted burglar to 14 months in jail and 416 weeks of Alcoholics Anonymous meetings.

The only extraordinary aspect of the "sentence" to attend AA meetings was its length—eight years.

The case drew attention to the growing practice of sending law-breakers with drinking problems—and, in some cases, narcotics problems—to AA as a term of probation. The practice has spread dramatically in the last 10 years.

Although generally accepted by AA today, the involuntary presence at meetings of those sent by the court—often resentful probationers—still is viewed by some as a threat to the organization.

'Takes Away Second A'

One complaint is that it takes the second A out of AA—anonymous.

"Originally it was over their (AA's) dead body," one Los Angeles judge said of early AA reaction to the practice.

The initial objection was that the AA approach to alcoholism can't be shoved down anyone's throat if he doesn't have the desire to quit drinking.

"But now," said Municipal Judge Philip M. Saeta of Division 22, "the feeling in AA is that this program shows them where to come, even if they don't stay with it."

Yet there are some lingering doubts.

Anonymity is a revered tradition in AA. Members are known to each other by first names only unless they wish it otherwise. Even first names may be pseudonyms.

But persons sent to AA by the courts—usually with orders to attend from one to three meetings a week—must show proof to the judge each month in the form of signed cards, one for each meeting.

"My full name is on that card," one probationer complained at a meeting, "so I don't have anonymity here."

"Neither do I," said an AA member who signed the probationer's card—"now."

Anonymity Violated

The fear of running into an acquaintance at AA haunts probationers who doubt the guarantee of anonymity or who violate it themselves.

"I saw my former boss at one meeting," said a woman who had been ordered to attend three meetings a week as a provision of probation after receiving a suspended sentence and fine for a drunk-driving charge.

"I nearly fell over. I know he was sent there by the court because he was getting a card signed," she said. "Of course I'm not going to tell anybody."

"Without that loyalty the real AAs have, you could ruin your neighbor, your boss, your councilman. You see, you're already bitter when you go there."

She told of detecting some bitterness on the other side.

"At one AA meeting I went to, I heard a woman say, 'I hate to see these people come (from the courts) because they disrupt our meetings

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Court Probations Rob AA of Its Anonymity

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"I still resent it," said a probationer who had been going to three AA meetings a week for more than five months, depending on taxis or rides because his driver's license was suspended.

"It's a hardship, but it's

better than going to jail," he said.

Each meeting's format is the same. The person chosen to lead the session (AA has no officers) gets up and says, "Hi, I'm Joe (or George or Jane) and I'm an alcoholic."

Participants sent by the court often balk at that routine. "I was intoxicated when the cop arrested

me," a school teacher said at one meeting, "but I'm not an alcoholic."

The problem of who needs help for a drinking problem and who doesn't confronts judges daily.

"I hope I will discern the situation when a man stands before me," said Judge Saeta. "When he is in for the first time it's one thing, but when he comes back the third time . . ."

"We have their records before us to help with sentencing," said Municipal Judge Rosemary Dunbar who sits in Division 58, the "drunk court" beside the old Lincoln Heights Jail.

"We use a sort of code so

we can pick it up easily in our records," she said. "Maybe a defendant has gone six months without drinking (and being arrested) and you think attendance at AA might do some good at this point."

Last January 2,207 plain drunks passed through her courtroom. Some had been in and out on drinking charges as many as 200 times.

"For some," Judge Saeta commented, "just going through the court process is the best rehabilitation. For some it isn't."

"There's a whole new

breed of judges," said Rex (last name withheld in deference to AA's anonymity rule), an ex-alcoholic and drug user who is now AA's liaison man with the Municipal Court in Costa

Mesa. "It's wonderful. Before, we weren't treated as human beings. It was the drunk tank or the psych ward."

Rex is a graduate of Please Turn to Pg. 29, Col. 1

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both, including Atascadero and Patton State hospitals. For him AA worked and he became a pioneer in establishing a liaison between the courts and AA with the aim of rehabilitating rather than incarcerating drunks.

"At first the judges didn't want to talk to me," he said. "They remembered me (before his AA days) and kicked me out of their courtrooms. But I just kept at them and finally wore them down."

Rex helped establish Orange County's "court-honor classes," programs of weekly meetings held by the court, in the courthouse, for law violators with drinking problems. A judge, probation officer or other representative of the law attends the sessions which are run like AA meetings and count as such for card-carrying probationers.

The court-honor class format, originated by Des Moines Municipal Judge Ray Harrison in the mid-1950s, is not used in Los Angeles, mainly because the sheer volume of probationers makes it impracticable.

'Unhappy at First'

Popular with judges (and probationers) in Orange County, the court-honor class is usually the first AA "meeting" a new probationer attends.

"At first they're a little unhappy," says Thelma (an AA member who signs their cards at the Costa Mesa sessions), "but how lucky they are! Before this they ended up in jail." She says she has seen it "work" with court-sent cases in the two years it has been operating.

"They find out here how much AA people really care for one another," she said.

Another program growing in popularity with judges is a forum lecture format of four meetings in a medically-oriented context. Lectures are given by physicians, probation officers, public health officers, social workers, and AA members. The weekly talks, supplemented by a "shocker" film, are designed to head off the potential problem drinker before it's too late.

Bob Dailey, a senior health officer for the Los Angeles County Health Department, said probationers ordered to attend the lectures at the Alcoholism Rehabilitation Clinic at 5205 Melrose Ave. seldom try to hide resentment on first coming in.

'Under Duress'

"They are there under duress," he said. "They sit in the back row with their newspapers on their knees, making a point of ignoring the proceedings."

"But very often we make believers of them. After a while they start asking questions, usually about the second lecture. With

pre-alcoholics, this could make the difference."

This format is designed primarily for first offenders or those whom judges think can yet be diverted from the route to alcoholism. However, it is not limited to them.

"We feel a first offender, especially if he is still gainfully employed and still with his family, has a greater chance with therapy (than in jail)," Dailey said.

The same lecture format has been used at the Orange County Medical Center since September, 1967. To date about 3,000 persons have taken part in the program.

A Film Shocker

Part of the therapy approach is the showing of a film, "Verdict at 1:32," which includes a segment showing the dissection of two human brains—one showing the visible ravages of a life of alcoholism, the other young and healthy. Yet both died in a car crash caused by alcohol-slowed reflexes in the non-alcoholic.

"We've only had one person walk out during the film," said Harry Musgrove, who is associated with the program. "It's amazing how many people see the light."

Orange County Superior Judge Claude Owens, a pioneer in using AA in Southern California courtrooms, traces the lecture format to San Francisco Superior Judge Gerald Levin and former San Quentin Warden Clinton Duffy.

"Judges everywhere recognized the need for more than they were doing," Judge Owens said. "So they tried AA as a vehicle."

As yet no quantitative studies of results have been made, but more and more judges — and AA members — are aware that it works for some and the prevalent feeling is that one success outweighs all of the failures.

Story of 'Benny'

An example of such a success is Benny (Spanish surname) who was a drunk for 42 years and got to AA the hard way.

A year and a half ago he was in court pleading guilty to a drunk driving hit-and-run charge. Today he is on AA's speaker circuit, telling his story in two languages.

"I had been drinking and had just bought a car," he said, "so I went to a bar to celebrate. Afterward, driving on a side street I hit something. Of all the cars in California I had to pick that one. It was a police captain's car."

"But I was so drunk I

didn't even know it was a car that I'd hit and I drove away.

"When they got me (a few blocks away) they said, 'Start walking that line.' Hell, I couldn't see any line."

That's how Benny got to court and then to AA. He received a fine and a jail sentence, suspended for time served on weekends. His driver's license was suspended for six months. He was placed on three years' probation and ordered to attend three AA meetings a week. He went on a bicycle.

'Wonderful Things'

"It's the most wonderful thing that ever happened to me," he says now. "I had cirrhosis and bleeding ulcer. I would go weeks and weeks drinking without eating. Every time I went on a big drunk I had to go to the hospital to sober up."

"Right away I liked AA. I made up my mind right there. A lot of guys go for years and years and can't make up their minds to quit. You hear them say, 'How do I tell if I am an alcoholic?'"

"I say to them, 'Go ask your neighbors, they'll let you know.'"

"But now I'm sober. I

have to pay income taxes again but I am happy. Even the cat likes me now."

More than just problem drinkers are getting to AA via the courts. Some judges are sending younger narcotics offenders on the principle that the AA approach can work for them, too.

The AA technique—sobriety one day at a time—worked in still another way for one of the judges who sits in on the court-honor class in Costa Mesa. A few months ago he admitted to the class that he was using AA, too, to quit smoking.

Last month the alcoholics and probationers in the class, many of whom he had sent there, presented Judge Donald Dungan with a "first birthday" cake marking a year without a cigaret. It is a tradition in AA to observe each "birthday" anniversary of a rehabilitated alcoholic's sobriety.

The judge said: "It works."