NCADD
NATIONAL COUNCIL ON ALCOHOLISM AND DRUG DEPENDENCE, INC.

Anonymity: An Enduring Safeguard

In 1944, when Marty Mann first established the National Committee for Education on Alcoholism (NCEA), known now as the National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence (NCADD), the Fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) was only nine years old and still working its way through the trial and error process that would ultimately lead to the development of AA's Twelve Traditions, principal among them the concept of anonymity at the public level. Struggling with how AA as a whole might best publicize its life-saving work while maintaining the anonymity of its individual members was one of the most critical issues the fledgling Fellowship had to face in its early years.

For NCADD and Marty Mann, however, the struggle with maintaining personal anonymity at the public level was initially eclipsed by what Marty and others perceived to be the overall good they felt could come from getting the AA name in front of the general public and disseminating important information about alcoholism. Hence, Marty decided to forego her own personal anonymity and publicly acknowledge not only her alcoholism but also her connection with AA. While it was a decision supported by AA cofounder Bill W., it was a decision not without controversy, causing some measure of unrest throughout the AA Fellowship and some confusion in the eyes of the general public who found it hard to distinguish between Alcoholics Anonymous and Marty's educational endeavor which operated outside the province of AA itself. Marty struggled with this problem for a number of years, according to A Biography of Mrs. Marty Mann: The First Lady of Alcoholics Anonymous by Sally and David Brown, causing herself and AA considerable anguish.

The situation ultimately came to a head when Marty began soliciting funds publicly for NCADD. "She had a perfectly proper and legitimate need for money and plenty of it," said Bill W. in January of 1955. However, "since she was an AA member and continued to say so, many contributors were confused. They thought AA was in the education field or else they thought AA itself was raising money when indeed it was not and didn't want to....
"Seeing what happened," Bill continued, "my friend, wonderful member that she is, tried to resume her anonymity. Because she had been so thoroughly publicized, this has been a hard job. It has taken her years. But she has made the sacrifice, and I here want to record my deep thanks on

behalf of us all."

Difficult as it was, some long-term good did come out of Marty's early anonymity break, as it laid the foundation for other members struggling to maintain personal anonymity at the public level. As described by the Browns, "After 1946, Marty resolved her dilemma by keeping her AA life private and her NCADD one public and not mixing them.... Her final pattern is the one followed today by other public figures who are also in AA – that is, publicly acknowledging their alcoholism and recovery but not stating their membership in AA."

A Look Back

Alcoholism has always carried with it a certain amount of stigma and public misunderstanding and anonymity has often been described as a "cloak" or "protective mantle" with which AA members might drape themselves from the harsh glare of public scrutiny. As expressed in the book Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions in the chapter on Tradition Twelve, Bill W. notes "In the beginning, anonymity was not born of confidence; it was the child of our early fears. Our first nameless groups of alcoholics were secret societies. New prospects could find us only through a few trusted friends. The bare hint of publicity, even for our work, shocked us. Though ex-drinkers, we still thought we had to hide from public distrust and contempt."

In those early years, anonymity had a very distinct meaning; however, as the Fellowship grew and the concept of anonymity took root, it came to mean a great deal more than simply "hiding out" and keeping one's AA membership secret.

As described in its own literature, anonymity in AA fulfills three simple functions. The first, and most basic, is to protect the newcomer with as much anonymity as he or she desires. "AA's promise of anonymity may be the only thing that allows a sick and shaking alcoholic to feel safe enough to pick up the phone or walk into an AA meeting and take the first halting steps toward recovery," says About AA, a newsletter produced by AA's General Service Office.

Additionally, for many, the most important quality of anonymity is that it is the spiritual foundation of all of AA's traditions. Writes Bill W. in Tradition Twelve, "Anonymity is real humility at work. It is an all-pervading spiritual quality which today keynotes AA life everywhere. Moved by the spirit of anonymity, we try to give up our natural desires for personal distinction as AA members both among fellow alcoholics and before the general public. As we lay aside these very human

aspirations, we believe that each of us takes part in the weaving of a protective mantle which covers our whole Society and under which we may grow and work in unity."

The third aspect of anonymity comes from Tradition Eleven, which delineates the line at which anonymity is to be maintained – "at the level of press, radio, and films" – and offers a policy for public relations suggesting that a quiet adherence to AA principles is a better means of publicizing AA's good works than catchy promotional billboards and public relations campaigns. "We think AA ought to avoid sensational advertising," writes Bill. "Our public relations should be guided by the principle of attraction not promotion."

Success Spawns Other Anonymous Fellowships

Over the years, as AA and its spiritual principles began to solidify into a proven program of recovery from alcoholism, other fellowships of recovering people began to form and adapt the Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions for their own use (e.g., drug use, gambling, overeating, sex). According to researcher Ernest Kurtz, in the nearly 80 years since AA's founding some 258 fellowships have come to use the twelve steps or the name "Anonymous," with over 94 twelve-step fellowships currently in existence.

For these fellowships and their members, anonymity has played a key role. Fellowships such as Al-Anon (for the families and friends of alcoholics), Narcotics Anonymous (for drug addicts), Marijuana Anonymous (for marijuana addicts), Gamblers Anonymous (for gamblers), Cocaine Anonymous (for cocaine addicts), Sexual Compulsives Anonymous (for sex addicts), and many others have found protection and spirituality in the concept of anonymity. And it is not only these who find support under the "protective mantle" of anonymity, as the stigma of alcoholism and addiction impacts family members, friends, employers and associates as well.

In the early decades of Al-Anon – the first 12-step fellowship to evolve directly out of AA – most of the members were wives of AA members. Today, however, with more and more people concerned about the drinking of aunts, uncles, children, grandparents, friends and co-workers, Al-Anon's membership covers a far broader base, and in the Al-Anon Family Groups pamphlet "Al-Anon Spoken Here," one of the simplest benefits of anonymity is described: "Our free expression – so important to our recovery – rests on our sense of security, knowing that what we share at our meetings will be held in strict confidence. While each member has the right of decision regarding personal anonymity within the fellowship, the use of first-names-only reminds us that we are equals

in Al-Anon." On a broader scale, as well, Al-Anon asks its members to maintain their personal anonymity at the media level, which also includes the Internet, e-mail, and any other type of electronic media or communication vehicle accessible to the public.

In the NA Way, the magazine of Narcotics Anonymous (NA), one recovering addict describes the benefits of anonymity this way: "Through the practice of anonymity we become humble. Through our humility, we become even more aware of our need for one another. Through this, we become unified. We work together for our common welfare, laying aside personalities. We truly live the principles. In this way, our message is carried clear and undiluted. With a clear message shared at our meetings, the newcomer who sustains us does not get lost in a barrage of mixed messages. Thus, we fulfill our primary purpose and truly grow together as a fellowship."
And, in an article on Tradition Twelve from the Sexual Compulsives Anonymous website, one member shares that anonymity "is the mechanism which maximizes our focus and minimizes issues of 'money, property or prestige' and anything else which would endanger our primary purpose.... Indeed, anonymity is a powerful vehicle of transformation that allows the members of a group to experience healing through a collective consciousness."

Anonymity and the Media
While AA as an organization has sought from the beginning to elicit the help and awareness of the general public – writers, journalists, and other members of the media, especially – regarding AA's principle of anonymity at the public level, the responsibility for maintaining anonymity remains with each AA member.

Many people in long-term recovery, however, either in AA or some other anonymous fellowship, wish to speak out about their recovery as an important ingredient in maintaining ongoing sobriety and leading a fulfilling life. Speaking out in the community – in one's church or workplace in support of programs, funding and research for education, prevention, treatment and recovery – is an important responsibility for many individuals and families in recovery. In addition, for many NCADD and NCADD Affiliate volunteers, supporters or Board Members, being an advocate at national, state and local levels of government, in support of equal treatment and elimination of discrimination in housing, transportation, education, employment and health care, can create more opportunities for millions of individuals and families to get help.

For these, being an advocate for recovery while honoring the spirit of anonymity

can be done. As ultimately understood by Marty Mann and noted in the AA pamphlet "Understanding Anonymity," "AA members may disclose their identity and speak as recovered alcoholics, giving radio, TV and Internet interviews, without violating the Traditions – so long as their AA membership is not revealed... AA members may speak as AA members only if their names or faces are not revealed," the pamphlet continues, "They speak not for AA but as individual members."

Advocacy With Anonymity: Speaking Out in Support of Recovery

Since 1944, NCADD and our National Network of Affiliates have been outspoken advocates for eradicating stigma and eliminating barriers to recovery through increased public understanding and support for expanded access to prevention, treatment and recovery services. Given the concerns around issues of anonymity for many of our advocates, in 1998 NCADD developed an educational brochure with Join Together titled, Advocacy With Anonymity: How can we stand up for our RIGHTS while honoring the ANONYMITY tradition of our TWELVE-STEP groups? Over the years, the original brochure has been updated and reprinted through a collaboration with Faces and Voices of Recovery.

There are tens of thousands of men and women across our country just like you who want to speak out about their recovery experiences while honoring the principles that have worked so well for so many. The Advocacy With Anonymity pamphlet answers questions that people who want to speak out are asking as they think about how to share their experiences and make it possible for others to get the help they need.

Anonymity: An 'Enduring Safeguard'

Centrally positioned in Alcoholics Anonymous and other recovery fellowships, and supported as it is in organizations such as NCADD, anonymity is a concept so vital to recovery that Bill W. stated, in what was considered to be his final address to the AA Fellowship in October 1970, "If I were asked which of the blessings I felt was most responsible for our growth as a fellowship and most vital to our continuity, I would say, the 'Concept of Anonymity...'
"On the spiritual level, anonymity demands the greatest discipline of which we are capable; on the practical level, anonymity has brought protection for the newcomer, respect and support of the world outside, and security from those of us who would use AA for sick and selfish purposes.

"AA must and will continue to change with the passing years. We cannot, nor should we, turn back

the clock. However, I deeply believe that the principle of anonymity must remain our primary and enduring safeguard. As long as we accept our sobriety in our traditional spirit of anonymity we will continue to receive God's Grace."

With the experience of Marty Mann as its guideline, NCADD and our National Network of Affiliates continue to support the spiritual principle of anonymity at the public level and remain dedicated to fighting the Nation's #1 health problem – alcoholism, drug addiction and the devastating consequences of alcohol and other drugs on individuals, families and communities.

Select List of Anonymous Organizations

AA - Alcoholics Anonymous

ABA - Anorexics and Bulimics Anonymous

ACA - Adult Children of Alcoholics

Al-Anon/Alateen, For friends and family members of alcoholics

CA - Cocaine Anonymous

CLA - Clutterers Anonymous

CMA - Crystal Meth Anonymous

Co-Anon, for friends and family of cocaine addicts

CoDA - Co-Dependents Anonymous, for people working to end patterns of dysfunctional relationships and develop functional and healthy relationships

COSA - formerly Codependents of Sex Addicts

COSLAA - CoSex and Love Addicts Anonymous

DA - Debtors Anonymous

EA - Emotions Anonymous, for recovery from mental and emotional illness

FA - Families Anonymous, for relatives and friends of addicts

FA - Food Addicts in Recovery Anonymous

FAA - Food Addicts Anonymous

GA - Gamblers Anonymous

Gam-Anon/Gam-A-Teen, for friends and family members of problem gamblers

HA - Heroin Anonymous

MA - Marijuana Anonymous

NA - Narcotics Anonymous

Nar-Anon, for friends and family members of addicts

NicA - Nicotine Anonymous

OA - Overeaters Anonymous

OLGA - Online Gamers Anonymous

PA - Pills Anonymous, for recovery from prescription pill addiction.

SA - Sexaholics Anonymous

SA - Smokers Anonymous

SAA - Sex Addicts Anonymous

SCA - Sexual Compulsives Anonymous

SIA - Survivors of Incest Anonymous

SLAA - Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous

WA - Workaholics Anonymous

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:

NCADD - Advocacy with Anonymity