

100 yellow

BOB TERRELL

No Roll To Call

They sat around the rooms, talking in hushed tones and drinking coffee drawn from a large urn in the kitchen. An occasional burst of laughter punctuated the conversation.

Forty persons were in the house, all sober, and for them that was an extreme accomplishment, something of which they were exceptionally proud. They were members of Alcoholics Anonymous.

There were men and women, old and young, from all levels of affluence and walks of life, bound together with a common bond: a drinking problem of unmanageable proportion.

Some, recently weaned, fidgeted. Others sat quietly in the comfort of years of sobriety.

No one called the roll. There was no roll to call. All were members because they said they were. Each person was in the room for two reasons: to control his own drinking problem, and to help others control theirs.

This was a meeting of the Victoria Road Group of A.A., one of several active units in Asheville. More than 100 persons are members of the Asheville groups. There is an A.A. meeting in Asheville every night of the week.

Tragedy And Humor

One of the Victoria Road members rose to speak. He addressed the members from a rostrum in the corner of the living room, telling of his experiences in the gutter and of the long road back. From his words, the group gained strength.

Then others began to share their experiences. They talked of tragedy, and sprinkled it with humor — things they can laugh at now, like driving down the railroad tracks in a stoned stupor.

"It's wonderful to have a choice when you wake up in the morning," a woman said, "whether to take a drink. It's great to be able to say 'Good morning, God,' rather than 'Good God, morning!'"

A.A. is the single most successful combative force against alcoholism in the world. "Despite lay leadership," a member said, "or maybe because of it, A.A. has achieved more and better results than any other organization, including medical and religious. We can see the forest despite the trees. Maybe that's why."

This sharing of experiences, the telling of one's problems, focuses directly on the troubles of others, and the alcoholic realizes he is no longer alone, that others have joined together and are willing to help him. He finds strength in numbers.

But the program is based on personal honesty. He who hedges hurts only himself.

"All we can do," a veteran member said, "is show them how we stay sober. We can tell them what happened to us and if they want to they can get this far, too."



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Intergroup

Following the strength-in-numbers idea, A.A. groups in Western North Carolina came up with a new concept in the fight against alcoholism. At least the idea was new for this area. About 20 groups joined together to form a central office or Intergroup and located it in new quarters at 107 Parkway Office Building in Asheville.

Although traditionally each group is autonomous, the cooperative effort is aimed at providing better communication with the public and remembering an A.A. pledge that "When anyone anywhere reaches out for help, I want the hand of A.A. to be there, and for this I am responsible."

The Intergroup office is manned only part-time at present, but the telephone, 254-8539, is backed by a 24-hour answering service where the still-suffering alcoholic can seek help.

Intergroup started here with only a handful of A.A. members in July of 1973. Gradually it grew until 20 different A.A. groups from WNC had pitched in to help.

"It really caught fire," a spokesman said, "when a man from Hendersonville with 28 years of sobriety threw his weight behind it. He was a member of Intergroup in Akron, Ohio, and had seen what it could do."

Intergroup here is supported by group and individual contributions. And to date it has been worth its weight in gold to those who have dialed its number and asked for help.

The telephone rings constantly and Peggy, who runs the Intergroup office from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. Monday through Friday, answers each call with courtesy and a willingness to help, for she had been helped previously with her problem by A.A. and she knows what the helping hand means.

Uniting The Groups

"Intergroup," said Neil, who was one of the organizers and driving forces behind it, "is serving to unite the groups within WNC. It gives us a line of communication and therefore makes us stronger. I look around meetings in Asheville, Waynesville, Sylva, or wherever I may be, and see someone every time who made his initial contact through Intergroup."

"They call and say they want to do something but don't know what," Peggy said, "and that's when we try to help them through personal experience."

Usually, the procedure is to dispatch two A.A. members to meet with the person asking for help. They talk of personal experiences, tell the person what help is available, including medical, and assist with the drying-out process any way they can.

It isn't an easy task — and the one seeking help must be willing to shoulder the burden. An A.A. member went at 5 a.m. one morning to help a young man in Biltmore Forest who wanted to quit drinking. "He asked me to pour out his liquor," the member said, "and I told him to pour it out himself. I wouldn't do it. He did. He shook a little, but poured the last drop down the sink — and he was on the road to recovery."

Alcoholics Anonymous started in Akron in 1935. Its first two members were a former stock broker from New York and an Akron doctor. It has grown to encompass 450,000 members in the United States — a good-sized chunk of our population.

The only way that A.A. could have helped that many persons is through the unselfishness of its members. There are hundreds here in WNC who are willing and ready to give their time to help those with drinking problems.

All that's necessary to get help on the way is a telephone call to Intergroup.