

The roots: Al-Anon's early history intertwines with A.A.

Although Al-Anon is a separate entity from Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A.) and each has its own story, the history of Al-Anon is intertwined with that of A.A.

A.A. is considered to have begun in 1935, when Bill W. and Dr. Bob S. discovered the power of one alcoholic to help another stay sober. Bill W. was a Vermont-raised New Yorker who, despite what Bill called "a desperate desire to stop" drinking and short periods of abstinence, had been unable to achieve stable sobriety. His wife Lois was counseled that Bill would soon either die or require permanent institutionalization. In 1934, Bill was visited by an old friend, Ebby T., who had apparently overcome his own alcoholic drinking after being introduced to the principles and practices of the Oxford Group by another sober alcoholic, Rowland H. Rowland sought to find a spiritual solution to his alcoholism after being counseled by Dr. Carl Jung that only a spiritual conversion could "cure" him of his disease. Rowland felt he had found a solution in the Oxford Group, an evangelical Christian group that believed in working towards absolute standards of Love, Purity, Honesty, and Unselfishness; absolute surrender to guidance by God; self examination and acknowledgement of character defects; restitution for harm done; and carrying the message to others. Rowland in turn carried the Oxford Group principles to Ebby at the Calvary Rescue Mission in New York, run by Reverend Sam Shoemaker of the Calvary Episcopal Church, who later became a friend and supporter of A.A. Although Bill initially dismissed Ebby's proselytizing as, "last summer an alcoholic crackpot; now, I suspected, a little cracked about religion," Ebby's visit provided Bill with both hope and new thoughts. A month later Bill had himself admitted to the care of Dr. William Silkworth at Towns Hospital in New York for detoxification. During his hospitalization Bill experienced a "white light" conversion experience and remained sober from that day until his death in 1971. Bill and Lois joined the Oxford Group movement, and Bill tried to carry the message to other alcoholics. Several months later, although Bill had not succeeded at sobering up any of the alcoholics he had worked with, Lois pointed out that as a result of his work with others, Bill himself remained sober.

In spring of 1935, Bill W. traveled to Akron, Ohio, on a business deal that did not go as he had hoped. Alone and discouraged in the lobby of the Mayflower Hotel, Bill felt a desperate desire to drink, and as an antidote he sought to find an alcoholic he could help. Bill phoned local churches, asking the pastors to refer him to an alcoholic who needed help. Dr. Walter Tunks, rector of St. Paul's Episcopal Church, put Bill in touch with Henrietta Seiberling. Henrietta was an Oxford Group member and a close friend of Anne S., wife of Dr. Bob S. Dr. Bob was an alcoholic proctologist who had been unsuccessful at achieving sobriety despite his Oxford Group participation; Bob later became a co-founder of A.A. Henrietta and Anne arranged for Bill to meet with Dr. Bob. Dr. Bob reluctantly agreed to meet with Bill for 15 minutes; instead they spoke together for six hours. Bob had one relapse in June 1935; he remained sober from June 10, 1935, considered to be the founding day of A.A., until his death in November 1950.

Bill lived with Dr. Bob's family in Akron for several months. When Bill returned to New York, he left a small but active A.A. group in Akron. A.A. groups were started in New York and later in other cities. A.A. separated from the Oxford Groups and became a "spiritual not religious" program, although many of the Oxford Group tenets became incorporated into A.A.'s Twelve Steps. A.A. continued to grow in scope and numbers, and in 1939 the book "Alcoholics Anonymous" (often referred to as the A.A. "Big Book") was published. A.A. grew from two chapters and 100 members in 1939, to 360 chapters and 10,000 members in 1944, to over two million members and over 105,000 groups in 145 countries in 2007.



Bill W (right) and Dr. Bob S. (left),
A.A.'s co-founders

The beginning: Al-Anon Family Groups comes to be

Just as A.A. was founded on the power of alcoholics helping other alcoholics to recover from alcoholism, Al-Anon pioneers discovered the power of family members, friends and associates of alcoholics to help each other recover from the effects that alcoholism had on their own lives.

A.A. in its early days was a family affair. A.A. meetings were initially held in member's homes, and the family members (most often but not exclusively wives, and often including children) either joined the meetings with the alcoholics, or gathered together in the kitchen or other rooms and shared with each other while the alcoholics had their meeting. Later, when A.A. in New York acquired a clubhouse and began having meetings that were exclusively for alcoholics, family members would congregate together in another room, sharing their stories and experiences with each other. Members of these "family groups" often discovered they reaped personal benefits from living by A.A.'s Twelve Steps, including improvement in their family relationships, which often remained troubled even after the alcoholic became sober.

Bill and Lois were childless; Lois had suffered ectopic pregnancies and was subsequently unable to have children, and their application to adopt a child had been denied due to Bill's alcoholism. As Bill threw himself into working to help other alcoholics, Lois found their home perpetually full of alcoholics, some sober and some still drinking. One alcoholic guest committed suicide in their home after pawning Lois and Bill's clothes to settle his gambling debts. Much of the time that Lois had hoped to spend with her now-sober husband was instead spent at meetings or otherwise without Bill. Lois was grateful for Bill's sobriety and wanted to support him as she felt a good wife should, but she found herself frustrated, unhappy, feeling like she had failed at "her job" of sobering up Bill; and full of self pity, hurt pride, and resentment. Lois's "bottom" came when, in response to Bill's asking her if she was ready to go to a meeting with him, she threw a shoe at him and yelled, "Damn your old meetings." Lois realized that her own life had become unmanageable, and she realized she needed help. Lois made a decision to "strive for my own spiritual growth." In doing so, Lois used many of the principles of A.A. to change her own attitudes.

While grateful for what A.A. was doing for their now-sober loved ones, many family members experienced frustration that things were not as they imagined they would be when their loved one got sober. As family members shared their thoughts with each other, they discovered they had problems, feelings, and experiences in common. Some expressed their frustrations in letters to the "Grapevine," A.A.'s magazine. Some experienced what Lois called "the stirrings of their own regeneration" and embraced the principles of the A.A. program, trying to practice them in their own lives. They discovered that living by A.A.'s Twelve Steps helped themselves, often improved family relationships, and in some cases seemed to encourage an actively drinking alcoholic to engage in A.A. Informal "Family Groups" for wives and other family members began to form, often holding weekly meetings. Some of these groups met specifically to support an A.A. group by providing refreshments or other support; some met for their own spiritual development.

In 1943, Bill and Lois traveled around the U.S. and met with many family groups. Lois often spoke at open A.A. meetings and at family teas and luncheons, describing how personally beneficial it was for her to live by the spiritual principles of A.A. Anne S., (Dr. Bob's wife) did not travel as extensively as Lois, but prior to her death in 1949 she contributed to the foundation of what would later become Al-Anon Family Groups through her own work with family members.

In 1949, a California Family Group member, Ruth G., started a twelve-page monthly magazine called "the Family Forum," for family members of alcoholics. This formed the first connection between family groups in the USA and later abroad, and eventually evolved into Al-Anon's monthly magazine, the "Forum."

In 1950, Bill W. returned from an extensive visit with A.A. groups in the U.S.A. and Canada with the suggestion that Lois open a service office in New York to connect the increasing number of family groups. The office would allow family groups to register, receive literature, and become more unified, as well as provide a central locus for information dissemination and a place for desperate family members to go to for help. Lois was initially reluctant; she was around 60 years of age at this time, she and Bill had only recently acquired their new home, "Stepping Stones," in Bedford Hills, New York, and Lois wanted time to enjoy having a home and garden of their own. However, the idea grew more intriguing to her, and after the A.A. General Service Conference in 1951, wives of several of the delegates met at Stepping Stones for lunch with other family group members. After this, Lois decided to open a service office for Family Groups. She asked her close friend Anne B. to help her. Anne was the wife of a chronically relapsing alcoholic, and had sought release from her fears and personal recovery from the effects of living with an alcoholic by starting a Family Group in Westchester County, New York.

Although "family groups" began forming as early as 1936, Al-Anon is considered to have begun in 1951 when these groups became unified. Working at Stepping Stones, Lois and Anne rented a post office box, and in May of 1951 they contacted a list of 87 family groups and individual family members who had written to the A.A. General Service Office, seeking their input on unifying the Family Groups and on selecting a name. 48 of these

groups and individuals replied that they were interested in uniting in a fellowship and in having their own service office. Two Family Group pamphlets were written and printed, and periodic bulletins were sent to the groups. A meeting of local Family Group chairs and secretaries was held at Stepping Stones in 1951, and a service committee was elected to provide Anne and Lois with help and advice. In less than a year, the number of family groups grew from the original 48 to 200.



Lois W., co-founder of Al-Anon Family Groups and the wife of A.A.'s co-founder Bill W.



Anne S., one of the pioneers of the early "family groups" and the wife of A.A.'s co-founder Dr. Bob S.



Anne B., co-founder of Al-Anon Family Groups

Several of the family groups had developed Steps or guidelines of their own, but collectively the family groups recognized the strength of A.A.'s Twelve Steps, and requested permission from A.A. to adopt the Twelve Steps, changing only one word in the 12th Step ("carry this message to others" rather than "carry this message to alcoholics.") Permission was granted, and Al-Anon's Twelve Steps were born.

A.A. offered the use of a room at their club in New York City for family group volunteers to work, and in January 1952, the family group headquarters moved from Stepping Stones to the 24th Street A.A. clubhouse and became a "clearinghouse" for family group information. Al-Anon headquarters remained at this location until 1957, when it moved to 125 East 23rd Street. Members selected the name, "Al-Anon Family Groups" for their growing fellowship.

Al-Anon groups grow and flourish

The number of family groups continued to grow, as people noticed the positive changes occurring in members of Al-Anon family groups. Al-Anon membership also became more diverse, including more men, and more who were parents, siblings, children, or other family members besides spouses of alcoholics. As word of Al-Anon spread, Al-Anon also began to include more members whose loved ones were still drinking. Al-Anon members helped the A.A. prison groups by talking about alcoholism to the families of inmates.

As membership grew, committees were developed to oversee Al-Anon services. Local Al-Anon Information Service offices were established to help disseminate meeting and other information.

A request for Family Groups to support the work of the Al-Anon central office financially was initially met with mixed response. Donations came in, and the office was able to purchase needed supplies and develop additional literature. Henrietta S. in New York became Al-Anon's first paid worker in 1953, and later served as Al-Anon's first General Secretary.

In 1954, the Al-Anon clearinghouse was (for business purposes) incorporated under the name, Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters, Inc. An Advisory Committee, which had been instituted about a year prior to incorporation, appointed a Board of Directors. Tax exempt 501 (c) (3) status was applied for and received.

The Al-Anon movement came to public attention and Al-Anon began to receive publicity from mainstream media. Lois spoke on a nationally broadcast television show (without identifying herself or showing her face,) the radio program "Second Chance" presented a program about Al-Anon, and articles about Al-Anon were written in the Christian Herald, Life Romances, Life Today, and the Saturday Evening Post. Publicity from other well-known print media, television and radio shows followed. In 1962 columnist Ann Landers wrote the first of many items about Al-Anon in her advice column, which generated thousands of responses to Al-Anon headquarters. As word spread, Al-Anon Family groups continued to multiply.

Concern for the problems of the children surfaced as early as 1955 at the A.A. International Convention in St. Louis, where several Al-Anon talks were presented on "Children of Alcoholics." In 1957 the first Alateen group was started in Pasadena, California, by a teenage son of A.A./Al-Anon parents (please see the section on Alateen for more information.)



There was an increasing demand for literature about Al-Anon. The first official Al-Anon pamphlets were "One Wife's Story" and "Purposes and Suggestions for Al-Anon Family Groups." A third pamphlet, "The Family Groups" (written by an A.A. member) soon followed. Al-Anon's first World Directory was published in March 1952, with meetings listed in 36 states, seven Canadian provinces, and three additional countries. Al-Anon's first hard copy book, "Al-Anon Family Groups," was published in 1955; it had taken two years to write. Some of the early Al-Anon literature was written by non-members, and Lois and Anne developed a "recommended reading list" that often included literature from non-Al-Anon sources. This was recognized as a potential problem, as some literature was written from a political or religious perspective that was not consistent with Al-Anon's Traditions. In 1963, a "conference approved" process for approving Al-Anon literature was adopted for ensuring all Al-Anon literature is consistent with Al-Anon principles. In the 1960's Al-Anon literature began to be translated into other languages. "One Day At A Time In Al-Anon" was written in 1968 by Alice B, then chair of Al-Anon's literature committee (and has since

sold around five million copies.) Today, Al-Anon books and pamphlets are compiled by Al-Anon's Literature Service from the experiences and thoughts of Al-Anon members, and a large variety of pamphlets and literature describing the Al-Anon program and its various aspects are available.

Al-Anon evolved with the leadership providing ideas and choices but with the membership making decisions. Questionnaires were sent to groups to solicit their input on important decisions about the growing fellowship. Al-Anon realized from A.A.'s experiences that guidelines for maintaining unity would be necessary. The Al-Anon Twelve Traditions were approved for adoption by the A.A. General Service Conference in 1955, and were subsequently accepted at Al-Anon's first World Service Conference in 1961.

Al-Anon began participating in A.A. International Conventions in 1955. Al-Anon and Alateen workshops and speakers meetings were part of those events for the next 30 years. Al-Anon members present at the 1960 A.A. International Convention in California voted to have an annual conference for Al-Anon delegates that would be similar to A.A.'s. Al-Anon groups later affirmed this decision, and Al-Anon's first World Service Conference was held in New York City in 1961. It was attended by twelve delegates, the Headquarters staff, and the Board of Trustees. More delegates attended World Service Conferences held in each of the next two years, and in 1963 it was voted to make the Conference a permanent part of Al-Anon's structure. Today, the Conference meets annually and comprises Area Delegates from the U.S.A. and Canada; and the Al-Anon Board of Trustees, Executive Committee, Committee Chairpersons and World Services Office staff.

In February, 1978, the International Coordination Committee was established to maintain contact and worldwide unity with the Al-Anon groups that form in countries other than the U.S.A. and Canada. To help maintain "grass roots" connections within Al-Anon, the 1979 World Service Conference established Regional Service Seminars (RSS's) to be hosted by the six Al-Anon regions of the U.S. and Canada. The first was held in the fall of 1980 and semiannually thereafter. In 1989, the U.S. and Canada divided into nine Al-Anon regions. RSS's are now held three times a year.

On July 7, 1980 in New Orleans, Al-Anon delegates and observers from 16 General Service Offices met with the World Service Office International Coordination Committee for a one-day meeting intended to promote unity in Al-Anon worldwide. The first permanent International Al-Anon General Services Meeting (IAGSM) took place in September 1986, and has been held every two years since then.



There are three "Legacies," adapted from Alcoholics Anonymous, that serve as guiding principles in Al-Anon. These legacies include: 1) Recovery through the Twelve Steps, which encourage individual members to carry the Al-Anon message to others. 2) Unity through the Twelve Traditions, which protect the Al-Anon groups from influences that might distract or disrupt them from their common purpose. 3) Service through the Twelve Concepts of Service, which provide a guide for broad-scale service within the Al-Anon program. In 1968 the Al-Anon World Service Conference unanimously decided to develop its own Concepts of Service, and in 1970 the Twelve Concepts of Service were

approved by the World Service Conference. In 1984 the Twelve Concepts were accorded the same status as the Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions.

In 1996, the Al-Anon World Service Office moved from New York to Virginia Beach, Virginia, where it remains today. From 48 individuals and groups in 1951, Al-Anon grew to 1,500 groups in 1963 and over 24,000 Al-Anon/Alateen groups in 115 countries in 2007. Today the Al-Anon World Service Office has a budget in the millions and a large, salaried staff that includes members and non-members. Al-Anon's structure is set up to allow communication and direction to trickle up from the members, to the group, to the district, to the area, to the World Service Conference and World Service Office, and back down to the members through this same communication pathway. Al-Anon has grown and changed since its inception in 1951, but its purpose remains the same; to help those who are affected by another person's drinking. Al-Anon remains available as a support for the families and friends of alcoholics, and welcomes more newcomers to its meeting rooms every day. Al-Anon's co-founders and early pioneer members left a legacy that carries on today and into the future.

Alateen: Help, Hope and Recovery for children of alcoholics

In early days of A.A. and Al-Anon, teenagers often attended open A.A. meetings and family group meetings with their parents. Many found that learning about the disease of alcoholism and learning about the spiritual principles that formed the basis for A.A. and Al-Anon recovery was helpful to them. A.A. and Al-Anon began to recognize that the teenagers had special needs of their own. A special session for teenage children of alcoholics was included at the A.A. International Convention held in St. Louis in 1955. Copies of the talks given by teenage children of alcoholics at this convention were distributed by the Al-Anon Clearinghouse.

In 1957, an article was published in the A.A. Grapevine about a 17 year old teen in Pasadena, California, named Bob. Bob's father was an A.A. member and his mother was an Al-Anon member. Bob had found applying the Steps and principles of Al-Anon in his own life was helpful to him, and he formed a group with five other teen children of alcoholics. Bob also wrote to the Clearinghouse stating that he had formed a meeting for teenagers. He suggested forming a special division of Al-Anon especially for teenagers. Teen groups began to grow in number, and many young people wrote to the office requesting literature and/or help. In response, a new section of Al-Anon called "Alateen" was formed, and a pamphlet for teens titled "Youth and the Alcoholic Parent" was printed. The Al-Anon Twelve Steps were adopted verbatim for Alateen, and the Twelve Traditions were modified to meet the needs of this group. A pamphlet, "Youth and the Alcoholic Parent" was published in 1957. An Alateen Committee was formed in 1959, with Wanda R. as appointed chairperson. By 1962, there were 203 registered Alateen groups. Additional literature targeted to teens was developed. A requirement was made that Alateen groups have an adult Al-Anon member sponsor Alateen groups. The sponsor provided structure and support, while allowing the teens to run their own meeting.

Alateen groups began to receive publicity from the mainstream press, and as with A.A. and Al-Anon, as the word spread, membership grew. By 1960 there were about 100 Alateen groups, and by 1963 there were over 200. In 1961 the first conference just for Alateens was held in Philadelphia. Groups were established in other countries as well as in the USA and Canada. Alateen groups began electing group and district representatives to represent the Alateens at Al-Anon Assemblies. Alateen celebrated its 50th Anniversary in 2007. Alateen groups continued to flourish, and remain an important part of Al-Anon today.

