

AA History in Ocala, Florida Since 1975

At some point in our history in the last 10 years a case of information was even given to someone at Archives in North Florida Area or just plain lost. Ruth remembers a small suitcase of archival material being at Intergroup but believes that she gave it to Archives at North Florida. This being the case I will recall what I remember about the last 33 years that I have been in the program here.

I came to Ocala with four years of sobriety and of course was scared of what AA might look like in Ocala, Florida. I like so many others was very used to a certain meeting (my home group), the way meetings were run and of course familiar faces. The first contact I had was with the Serenity Group that had a small house on the corner of 10th Avenue and Magnolia. It was a little bungalow and the main living room dining area was the meeting room.

Much to my unbelief there was a chairman's table that had 4 or five seats and a group sat in the front of the room and the rest of the people sat in chairs facing them. I sat in my first meeting and listened. After the folks in the chairs got done discussing the topic, the four or five at the head table would tell exactly what they wanted you to hear on the subject and told everyone else this is the way it was. One man was Jim S., one Jack W., and a man called Dave. The other people that I met at that time were Bob from the Ocala National Forest, Georgia from Ocala, and Bob from Belleview.

I immediately went home called my friends at home to ask who I needed to call at the General Service Office to get these people thrown out of AA. They laughed and said everyone felt that way when they moved to a new area and I needed to go back and see what I could offer the group. What can I tell you, I tried a group in Belleview and they had one of the same guys down there, who chaired the meeting and told everybody at the start of the meeting, that if they wanted to speak to anyone else they needed to leave immediately, and have their own meeting outside.

I ended up at the Serenity House which met after having to move from the bungalow to a concrete building which was located behind the

Brahma Restaurant which sat on 441/Pine Ave and SE 17th Street. This was a great little place and the elder statesman had pretty much dissolved and we were free to have regular discussion meetings. We also had Step meetings and Big Book Meetings. We had a wall on each concrete block had the members Name, initial, and sobriety date. A few of the people that I recall during this time were Dave B., Bill C., Joan S., Harry J., Wayne C., John W., Jack W., and many more that escape my memory at this time.

At this same time The Ocala Group was at the Presbyterian Church and their was a very active Group at Grace Episcopal, Oxford Florida, and Belleview, St. Theresa's. I know also that my husband John was involved in a meeting that ended up later in Anthony, Florida, so I will have John fill in the blanks here, when we jot down his recollections.

By the 1980's the Serenity Group had moved to the voting building off of South Pine. We painted the blocks on the wall and started having the tapes for the Step Meetings on Friday nights. During this time I had met June C. who is sober like 30+ years today, Judy L., Dan L., Dave B., Bob C., John P., Janet R, Jerry from NY. The group grew and we had many meetings in that building. At sometime during this time Herminia was living in the forest and coming in to a day women's meeting, but that was the only meeting I met her at, at the time.

I would like to mention that at this time on Pine Street across the street from the shopping center on Pine was Jerry's Restaurant. There was a lot of AA history conducted over coffee and food at Jerry's. We had our meetings and then everyone met at Jerry's to hear the news and gossip.

During the 1982's we also started the 305 Club on Magnolia. Dave B. was instrumental in getting us in that building. It smelled liked liquor because it was an old liquor store. We had meetings, meetings, meetings. There was a lovely old man called Mitch who used to stay sober for practically a month at a time, then would get his social security check and you could see him on the square on a park bench for days, drunk and sorry. This pattern was repeated for years, until he died.

Ruth was going in and out of detox (what a miracle) that today she has

been a selfless sober member of Alcoholics Anonymous for so many years. Russell V. came up from the Little Club in Miami and was the first person that I remember in Ocala using the F--- word at meetings. He said he used it because everyone he knew lived on the street in Miami and we tried to point out our new way of life which doesn't include profanity but he would not have any of it. Love and tolerance was our code.

Many memories are rushing in right now, but I forgot that during the late 70's early 80's we would also attend a meeting in Citra, Florida at the white church on 441, that is where I met Peggy, who later became a member of the Ocala Group. Lady Boots Ala-non and of course Larry. Lady Boots even back then made the most delicious birthday cakes we ever had in AA, at least 4 layers high.

Moving right along from 1983 and for the next two years my own life fell apart in sobriety. My ex-husband drank after 10 years of sobriety and I made meetings at the 305 which later became the Lost and Found Club and tried to hang on in sobriety. Mary Jo came to town then and joined the Winner's Circle. I sold my house and moved to New York for a year. Just before leaving we met at the Winner's Circle in Anthony and established the Intergroup. Not an office but the By-Laws and initial plans.

The people who were there were Dave B., literature was stored at his house at that time. We had an answering service and a 12 Step list of people who took the calls and met the people at meetings. John P. was there, Ruth (the Chipmunk) who was the originator of the By-laws. Boots, Dan L., and many others. We met and discussed the need for a central location for literature for the groups and the possibility of raising enough for an office eventually. I want to emphasize that the 12 Step work was being done even though we didn't have an office as it is in many areas of the country still today in 2008. Our Intergroup does a fine job today but let us know lose sight of our primary purpose to carry the message to the suffering alcoholic can be done with or without a office.

When I was away during 1984-1985, Jim K. moved here with his wife Ann and Jim plowed in and actually got the office for Intergroup. He

was determined because he came from Washington, DC and that is the way they did it up north. Anyway we will try to fill in the details, Hermina was the first coordinator and they paid her mileage, as she was still living in the Forest and then Ruth came later.

I sat at my first registration desk at North Florida Area of Alcoholics Anonymous and spent the next 20 years involved in General Service Work and loved every minute of it. It was my greatest honor to serve as Delegate at our General Service Conference. I do stick with the Traditions because I believe that is the only way our Fellowship can survive. I get really upset when people with over 25 years in the program refer to New York as though our General Service Office was a separate entity working on their own behalf. Our General Service Office does the work of the Fellowship and the General Service Conference is the Delegates we send each year to vote our group conscience. Anyone who does not know about this should educate themselves about AA as a whole if they wish to stay.

During my time in AA in Ocala I saw the picnic start at the boat basin. Bill C. went to all the groups and asked for donations to buy the food. We did not pay for tickets back then. The groups contributed and we brought covered dishes and we had wonderful picnics. During that time John P. borrowed the grill from his employer and cooked for each picnic. Reminiscing with John I can remember a time that there was a young girl from Wildwood and her AA daddy had her on the circuit and she came with mic and all and sang "One Day at a Time," and it just didn't get much better than that.

Then John P., Judy L., Dan L., were on our way back from a Sowega Roundup in Albany, Georgia and we discussed and John P. and Judy L. with Kathy and Dan backing them up had the first Gratitude Dinner at Marion Community Hospital. Pat K. won the drawing four times in a row and we laughed and had a great time. Jim K. was the speaker.

So I lived in Sumter County for six years and we had many DCM's. Don C. from Dunnellon, John D., Sherry R., Charlie T., Monty, John from out on SR200, and of course Christopher who lit a fire for two years. Then our participation level fell off and thank God it is coming back again.

John P remembers:

John came to Ocala in 1980, sobered up in Jacksonville, FL., Oct 1977 moved to Atlanta 1978 and moved in Dec 1980 and started attending at the Serenity House which was located behind the Brahma off of Pine Ave. At that time members put sobriety put sobriety date on a concrete block located on the back wall of the Serenity House. Also attending meeting of the Ocala group which met at that time at the Presbyterian church.

I remember I mostly Bill C. , Dave B., Harry J. , Jim S. , Dick B. from Belleview, and Bob from the Ocala National Forest and Jerry H. In 1981 Serenity moved to the Polling Precinct on SW 3rd. Also at that time the Grace Group met on Saturday night at Grace Episcopal. I remember names but very few. Beebe and her husband John went to meetings at Grace.

Jack W. had a meeting that met on SW 50th by behind the Spur truck stop. Peggy went to this meeting and Bonnie got Jack W. as a sponsor when he first came into the program. Wayne C. was at all the early meetings that John mentioned so far. I also remember in the early 1980's the 304 Club on Magnolia which later became the Lost and Found Club that was on the corner of Jacksonville Rd and Magnolia. The Old 305 Club smelled like liquor because it was an old liquor store and the new Lost and Found was probably only total 600 sq ft but we packed people in every day.

We started the Winner's Circle in the early 80's. There were ten people that started it. John P., Homer B. (Boots), Vane B., Gerry B. , Jack W. , Chip H., Tommy H., one more we can't remember. The I do recall Harold R. and Bill who we called Telephone Bill, .During that time we had Don D., Mike B. and Margaret B., Boots and Larry, Lucy, Lynn and Richard who are now in Island Grove, Art came up there Norris and Randy B. from Belleview and Indian Paul and later Judy and Charlie S. landed in Anthony. We had meetings almost every night and the group kept growing. There was also Dennis and Lori, Hermina, Phyllis, Janet R. and -----then Mary Jo and Arliss and Ruth T. got sober and started washing the balls after Bingo. Ginny F. was

also in the Group Kathy W. and John W.. Wally also came into the program.

In 1982 the annual picnic was started by all the groups in the area. Bill C. went around asking for contributions. The Winner Circle group provided the cooker, the cooks who were John P., Boots, Vane and Jerry B. The picnics caught on and the groups provided money for the meat and condiments and people contributed money and brought covered dishes.

The Gratitude Dinner was started by John P and Judy L. and Ginny F. in Ocala at the Marion Community Hospital 1985. The dinner was well attended and Jim K. was the first speaker. Pat K. bought so many raffle tickets that she won the first four prizes. A good time was had by all and then became a tradition in November of each year to express our Gratitude and send the proceeds to the General Service Office in New York. Bill C. had to depart the area and I became DCM for approximately 3 years.

Mary T. came to Ocala in 1981 and her first meeting was at the Serenity Group that met at the old voting precinct off of Pine Street. Mary remembers Kathy P. and June C., but her first meeting she remembers only old men: Gene S., Don R., Bill C., Dave B., Dan L., Dan T., Wayne C., and then Judy L. came later after that first meeting. Mary was in her early 20's so all listed above seemed a lot older to her.

Then she met Judy L. at Serenity and she remembers Harry J. and Gene who she worked the horses with and then of course bent over Harry who was a member of Serenity and wrote and published a book about the Fourth Dimension. She remembers the old Ruth who we called Chipmunk Ruth because she gave out the chips at all the meetings. Mary came up from Miami, so all the meetings were different but she knew she needed to hang in there. Mary also remembers going to meetings at the Presbyterian Church where AA and Ala-non met for many years.

The meetings were 8:00pm until 9pm but they had been 8:30pm to 9:30pm in Miami. Jerry's Restaurant on Pine Street was the hangout and everyone went there for coffee or desert after a meeting. At that time Don R. put out the word that he needed volunteers to carry the message to the prisons. So Mary T. and Wanda V. started taking meetings to the Women's Prison at Lowell. Mary did this for nine years and even represented District 17 at Assemblies where she shared information about Corrections with other districts.

Mary also was very active and with the help of Dr. Joy Herr who was the psychologist at the prison facilitated many Gratitude Banquets for the inmates. She helped arrange the food the cooking and who took turns on the podium. These were well attended functions at the prison each year.

Mary also recalls the old TLC which is now the Centers on SR200. Back then there were meetings every Saturday morning. All the meetings in AA at the time were full of cigarette smoke. Mary remembers Patty who later moved back to Ct. Patty now lives in Spring Hill, Florida and is still active in AA. Mary fondly remembers the picnics at the boat basin where we always had canoe rides each year and some of the dances when they first started up.

I interviewed Wayne C. on his 29th AA Anniversary up at the No Name Group in Anthony, Florida on November 24, 2008. Wayne got sober in Ocala in 1979. Wayne will long be remembered for being on the front page of the Ocala Star Banner for driving or flying into the lime rock pit on Hwy 441, the picture was of them hauling him out.

We talked about the old block building behind the Brahma Restaurant that was located on South Pine Ave and 17th Street. Wayne remembers that Detox was right on the Southside of Munroe Hospital and when he was drinking he would sit in the motel across the street and shoot beer cans at the porch. Wayne made several trips in and out of the program.

From 1979-1982 at the Serenity House, Wayne remembers Jim S., Joan S., Jack W. Bill C., John P. (1980) Jerry H., June C. who worked at the Dutch Pantry back then. Wayne also attended the Grace Group on Saturday nights and the Ocala Group at the Presbyterian Church. Wayne remembered that he was so impressed with Jake B. who memorized "How it Works" and never had to read it off the paper. We also remembered Lamar who lived right around the corner from the new Serenity where we met in the voting precinct building.

Wayne recalled that the Ocala Group moved to Charter Springs then to North Magnolia/Winn Dixie, then to 14th Street Unity Church and then to St. Marks.

The first Club was the 305 on Magnolia and the same people attended meetings but there were some of our first day meetings. Wayne also remembers the Citra meeting where Kathy P, attended, Boots and Larry S. and Peggy from the Ocala Group. Larry S. also came to the old Serenity.

At the same time Dick B. in Belleview was very active and attended meetings at Serenity, Mary M. and Frank Mac. Were fixtures in Oxford, Florida, Saturday night speaker meeting? Belleview had St. Theresa's meeting. And a new meeting was started behind Spur Truck Stop and we will check with Bonnie who got sober there. Chip H. attended, Peggy, John P. and Jack W. Wayne had a wonderful sponsor named Les and Les and his wife Benji were loved by all.

We ended our memories when Corliss arrived and she shared that she spoke in Ocala at the Grace Group in 1986 when she moved to Gainesville from

Atlanta. Then we talked about the meeting that used to be held above the Bakery in Gainesville and an old timer Joe L. who has already passed away.

Hermina D.

Any Archival material that we hold in District 17 would not be complete without the story of Hermina. Hermina had 54 years of sobriety when she died and was 94 years old. I was working in Georgia at the time she died but my husband was able to attend the service.

Hermina had a great story and a very interesting background. Hermina actually designed and dressed people for the Broadway shows and had a wonderful sense of style that she maintained into her 90's. Hermina in her older years went partially blind and of course when she went for help at the Center for the Blind ended up teaching classes for others.

Hermina had an amazing story and told about going back out to drink and about eventually returning to the program and how hard it was to learn to "let go" and "hold on." Knowing Hermina was a pleasure and we made an annual pilgrimage to Hilton Island Weekend in January of each year and Hermina would ride with us and meet a woman she sponsored named Helen. Helen kept coming back and some years just sobered up I time to attend the weekend and meet Hermina.

Many people got sober through Hermina sponsoring them and picking her up and delivering her to meetings. For many years her husband Dick would drive her to and from meetings and Hermina was living in the forest when Intergroup opened and worked as the Office Coordinator until she couldn't afford the trip in from the forest and then Ruth became the office Coordinator.

I have included in the District 17 Archives Hermina's letter to GSO concerning her belief in a higher power. Please be sure and read it meant the world to Hermina.

John D. recalls

In February of 1981, I called the phone number for AA and the commercial answering service told me that the man who was "on duty" would return my call. There wasn't any Intergroup or District at the time. The guy returned my call and told me where the meetings were, what time they started and the names of the meetings and the first names of the chairpersons. There were only five meetings a week in all of Marion County and three of them started at 8:30pm. One started at 8pm on Sunday night and was chaired by the same man every week. He is still having the meeting every Sunday night as far as I know. Another meeting was on Saturday at the Marion-Citrus Mental Health Center and it was chaired by the same man for many years. There was another meeting on Sunday night and it was a large meeting and had a speaker meeting and eating meeting. It was held in a County owned building and was cancelled by the County because the group didn't pay the rent for a long time.

There was a meeting on Monday at 5:30pm and I attended this meeting regularly. It was called the Ocala Group and still meets in 2009. I traveled during the rest of the week and don't know if there were meetings on Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday or Friday nights. There was a meeting on Saturday night at 8:30pm. It was an open meeting and had a speaker meeting one Sunday night a month.