
Will The Real Marty Mann Please Stand Up ?

About twenty five years ago, a popular television show called "To Tell the Truth," introduced three people, each of whom claimed to be Marty Mann, described as a recovered alcoholic who had founded the National Council on Alcoholism (now the National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence- NCADD). A panel of celebrities proceeded to question the three. Only the real Marty Mann told the truth - the others lied to fool the panel.

When "the real Marty Mann" stood, the panel of celebrities and the audience were astounded to learn that the only woman among the three, this handsome, poised, articulate, dignified woman, was Marty Mann, a former drunk.

Marty Mann was another who knew the suffering of the alcoholic. She was the first woman to achieve permanent sobriety in Alcoholics Anonymous. Her story is told in Alcoholics Anonymous, the AA "big book," under the title "Women Suffer Too." When she died in 1980, she had not had an alcoholic drink in more than 40 years.

When Marty testified before the Senate Special Subcommittee on Alcoholism and Narcotics in 1969 she said: "I am a recovered alcoholic. I was fortunate to have started my recovery in 1939, after five years of living hell during which I did not know what was wrong with me, I did not know that there was anything that could be done about it, and I had become convinced that I was insane.... This happens to a great many alcoholics who are baffled and bewildered and terrified by their own behavior."

An active member of A.A. since 1939, Marty felt herself a useful member of the human race at last. "I have something to contribute to humanity," she said, "I get my greatest thrill of accomplishment from knowing that I have played a part in the new happiness achieved by countless others like myself."

In 1944, a mere five years after her own recovery, she decided that an effort should be made to bring the kind of knowledge that had saved her life to all suffering alcoholics. When asked how she had received the inspiration for what became the National Council on Alcoholism (now known as the National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence- NCADD), she often told the story that, walking along Park Avenue in New York City one day, she had looked up at the windows of all those large apartment buildings. It occurred to her that behind those windows were persons suffering from alcoholism, just as she had suffered. "I wanted to reach each one - I wanted to help each one - but how?"

With the encouragement of Bill Wilson, a cofounder of Alcoholics Anonymous, Marty planned for the establishment of a national voluntary health agency patterned after those which had overcome the attitudes, fear and stigma once faced by those suffering from tuberculosis, cancer or heart disease. NCA was dedicated to the following three concepts:

1. Alcoholism is a disease and alcoholics are sick people,
2. Alcoholics can be helped and are worth helping.
3. Alcoholism is a public health problem and therefore a public responsibility.

In the beginning Marty worked on an extremely small budget, with only Yvelin Gardner, her Associate Executive Director, and a secretary to help. By 1954, all the money was running out and Yev Gardner was depressed. "Yev," said Marty, "there is a rich drunk out there somewhere who will get sober and help us," she told him.

Marty was not only beautiful, intelligent, gifted and wise, she was a prophet!

A few days after Marty tried to cheer Yev up with talk of a rich drunk,

Yev was called to Town's Hospital on an A.A. Twelfth Step call.

He made his usual pitch to the man sobering up and told him that alcoholism was a disease, but that he could recover.

"It's a disease?" asked the man on the bed, "why don't you tell people that!"

Yev explained that they were trying, but that they didn't have the money they needed.

"You have it now," said the man on the bed. Here was the man Marty had predicted. He was R. Brinkley Smithers, one of the richest men in the country.

Many A.A. members through the years have opposed such efforts by recovered alcoholics claiming - incorrectly - that they are a violation of the A.A. traditions.

Bill Wilson warned against this attitude, and encouraged such people as Marty Mann and Harold Hughes. He went so far as to testify at Senator Hughes' first Senate hearings on alcoholism in 1968.

Wilson and Dr. Bob Smith, the other co-founder of A.A., both became members of the Advisory Board of Marty's organization, even allowing their names (not their relationship to A.A.) to appear on her letterhead.

Marty rose above the criticism, and continued to work to educate the public and remove the stigma from the disease of alcoholism until her death.

"When you raise your head a little above the crowd," she told me when I became discouraged at criticism, "someone always wants to take a pot shot at it." Yes, she understood that kind of suffering, too. Many of the people who should have been supporters - alcoholics she had helped - turned on her, claiming she was trying to make money off AA.

Excerpt from "With a Lot of Help >From Our Friends", Copyright 1998, Nancy Olson ©