

■ The ICOAA Seminar: Communicating a Shared Purpose

The very first Intergroup/Central Office/A.A.W.S./AAGV Seminar was held in September 1986 — with 98 representatives from 82 intergroups attending, plus three trustees from the General Service Board and 13 employees of G.S.O. and Grapevine. From the very beginning, the stated purpose of the seminars has been to provide a forum, through workshops, discussions, and the exchange of ideas and shared experience, for those who labor on A.A.’s front lines.

In the ensuing three and a half decades of ICOAA seminars, that purpose has remained constant, though the seminars — like the rest of A.A. — have not been without their share of debate. The seminar has always been a weekend of sharing and learning about problems and solutions common to most central offices/intergroups and how these interests intersect with the services provided to the Fellowship by A.A.W.S., Grapevine and the General Service Board. Structurally, the appearance of the first intergroups/central offices (IGCOs) in the 1940s predates the creation of the General Service Conference and the A.A. service structure and, while both service entities fulfill the same mission — aiding suffering alcoholics — there are times when different perspectives and opinions have seemed at odds.

And, while communication (or the lack of it) is an ongoing issue between intergroups/central offices and G.S.O., the 35th annual ICOAA Seminar — the first ever virtual one — hosted September 17–20 by the Des Moines, Iowa, central office, went a long way toward broadening and deepening the channels of understanding and shared purpose. “We really should be partners,” says Brook W., Des Moines central office manager. “We have way more things in common than we do differences. But we need to tell G.S.O. what we are doing and G.S.O. needs to tell us. It’s a two-way street. Lack of communication isn’t uncommon in A.A. Alcoholics often don’t communicate well — in groups, areas, districts. The microphone is on, but somehow the transmitter isn’t always working as well as it could.”

Maury P., with 18 years as office manager of the San Francisco/Marin Intergroup, agrees. “One of the pain points we’ve experienced for years is one-way communication with New York. We might get a heads-up about something happening in the A.A.W.S. Highlights, but it

might be more helpful to find out about conversations being had at the New York level that might result in some potential decision that impacts our offices,” particularly in regard to areas like discounting of literature.

Starting over a year ago, Brook formed a committee to prepare for physically hosting the seminar “getting city tours and hotels lined up and so forth,” but the pandemic put a stop to that. So, as Brook puts it, “We retooled. We have a very capable webmaster and she and I got to work on planning a virtual seminar, with the help of volunteers. In some ways, while everyone missed the physical interaction, it worked out better. We had more than 200 attendees, because intergroups/central offices could send more than one member, without the expense of travel and lodging.” (The 200 attendees included 14 from A.A.W.S./AAGV, including four board members.)

The Seminar centered around three workshops, held from 3 to 5:30 on Friday, in which a Board member or G.S.O. staffer paired with an office manager. Beau B., chair of the A.A.W.S. Board and Maury P. spoke on “Business Model Changes”; Kathi F. and Pauline D., Northern Virginia office manager, shared on “Self-Support and Tradition Seven”; and Jeff W. and Jen G., Baltimore office manager, chaired a discussion on “Improving Communication Between All.”

Although Maury missed the “person-to-person connection” that took place at previous ICOAA Seminars, she also felt there were pluses to holding the seminar online. “Having Zoom record the information is a game changer,” she says. Usually someone has to be hired to create transcripts, but now it will be much easier to disseminate information to those central offices unable to attend. And, importantly, the seminar worked better than it had in the past as a shared experience.

“The ICOAA Communications Committee asked us to spend less time presenting with slides and more time interacting and listening,” Jeff W., Group Services staff member at G.S.O., says. “We all tried to focus on our primary purpose, and I think that it did work to a great extent, in terms of good information being shared.”

Workshops and breakout room discussions focused on many of the issues facing intergroups/central offices, particularly during the COVID-19 era. “So many offices

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Note on anonymity: From time to time in this publication full names and/or pictures of G.S.O. employees, Class A trustees and other nonalcoholics are used. The anonymity of A.A. members is maintained, as they are identified throughout by first name and last initial only.

have seen contributions plummet, then surge, then level off, which is disturbing,” Jeff says. “Literature sales are slow and may not pick up again until groups start meeting in person. Yet the number of calls IGCOs received looking for help doubled and tripled after COVID.”

In sharing, office managers exchanged creative financing ideas, from doing silent auctions to an “A.A. Jeopardy” contest to an online telethon. The SF/Marin office, Maury P., points out, has for some time been moving away from dependence on literature sales, instead focusing on group contributions. She emphasized the importance of keeping channels open to suffering alcoholics who reach out to intergroups/central offices during the pandemic. The SF/Marin central office has an online chat service (predating COVID) for those seeking help. “Many people feel more comfortable sending text messages, and it also helps deaf members. We really have three separate ‘first responders’ — the phone, email and chat — and all three of them get requests. This makes it important for me to keep close connections with those three volunteer groups.” SF/Marin Board Chair Alan G. points out: “The support of our Fellowship has been phenomenal. It wouldn’t happen without volunteers. People want to get involved.”

Abby H., Denver Central Office manager, found that as the pandemic hit, literature sales dropped and in-person meetings closed, Denver alcoholics responded in “the classic A.A. model. We rebuilt the ship as it was sinking. We answered our phones 24/7 with volunteers answering after hours.

We have curbside pickups for literature. Twelfth Step emails started coming in and we responded. We are using an online chat feature, for those who are not ready to pick up the phone yet.” She found the seminar and the workshops she attended “a fantastic experience. I enjoyed meeting virtually so we could have this opportunity — people arriving from as far away as New Zealand. We were all standing shoulder to shoulder.”

For their part, A.A.W.S./AAGV employees and board members thought the atmosphere improved and the exchange of information valuable. Kathi F., chair of the Grapevine Board, drew from her own longtime service to her local intergroup/central office, where she has served in roles from answering phones to vice chair, to talk about the tools that AAGV and La Viña have for the Twelfth Step committees that are part of IGCOs.

“Since intergroups/central offices are in existence to do local Twelfth Step work, I focused on what we have that they can offer to their committees in their efforts. We have books and magazines that are geared toward specific populations that each committee can use when reaching out to corrections, schools, professionals, military, etc. Also links that they can put on their websites from our YouTube channel. Our GV ‘Carry the Message’ project is a wonderful way that the committees can engage the groups they serve to carry the message and get a monthly Twelfth Step call into the hands of those that need it.”

Beau B. says, “Nobody argues that we don’t have the same job of carrying the message and A.A.W.S. will never say we are the main connection point. We understand that intergroups feel they are not being heard and some of the actions we are taking demonstrate that we are listening to their concerns. If there is a common theme [coming out of the seminar] it’s this: to discover what is possible when we really start working together in harmony because we understand our differences and make them work for A.A. as a whole.” G.S.O., Beau points out, lacks the “boots on the ground” reach of the

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roughly 500 intergroups/central offices. “Lots of alcoholics are tied into intergroups. We need to work harder to get the message more widely out there through the intergroups.”

“We want to be future partners in terms of evolving our business models together,” Jeff says. Among other initiatives, A.A.W.S. agreed to give more notice to IGCOs on discounted literature so that they can make purchases in bulk, which will aid their often-narrow profit margins. And A.A.W.S. will work to ensure that IGCOs are added to the distribution list whenever it makes announcements to the Fellowship and Conference. In terms of the all-important questions of IGCO self-support, there was wide-ranging discussion at the seminar of possible changes. What would it look like if central offices closed their physical locations — do IGCO essential services really require an office? (But without that physical space, where suffering alcoholics can stop in, find connection, coffee and literature, would intergroup be intergroup?) Or what if IGCOs simply let G.S.O. sell literature and they diverted funds from purchasing literature for other purposes? Or if IGCOs coordinated with clubhouses to sell literature?

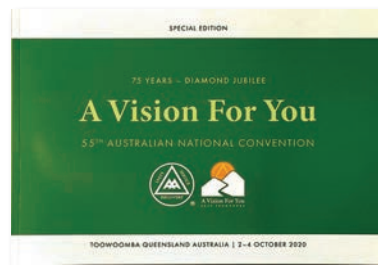
IGCOs have long talked about a lack of representation at G.S.O. They feel that rotation — a staple of G.S.O. staff service — works against them, since staffers newly rotating into Group Services have a learning curve to get up to speed on IGCO concerns. At the seminar, there was talk of a non-rotating G.S.O. employee who would be their liaison, possibly a specific board member to represent their issues and perhaps even their own “area,” which might provide IGCOs with a delegate to voice their concerns at the General Service Conference.

What all agreed on is that communication going forward is key to improved relations. What had been an ad hoc IGCO Communications Committee (comprised of four office managers) will become a permanent one. G.S.O.’s Group Services assignment plans a videoconferencing call open to all IGCOs, either on a monthly or bimonthly basis. And the IGCOs recognize that communication among themselves is of paramount importance.

“We are trying to entertain a more collaborative model,” Maury P. says. “Most intergroups don’t have enough resources, financial or volunteer or staff, and we could be doing so much more for less if we were working together. We do tell everyone to take liberally from us [at SF/Marin] — don’t give us credit, go to our website, copy and paste. Take what you want and leave the rest — we will follow that model.”

“I think that the seminar was really productive and on a much better level than it has been in the past, in terms of attitudes and where are we going with our relationship with G.S.O.,” says Brook. For Abby H., the seminar demonstrated “a whole world of sharing about our similarities and what we were experiencing in A.A. None of us are alone.”

■ Celebrating Australia’s 75th Anniversary: A Virtual Convention in Toowoomba



Australia held its first virtual National Convention, October 2–4, in Toowoomba, Queensland, an event that few who attended will soon forget. For one thing, 2020 is Australia’s Diamond

Jubilee, with 20,000 sober alcoholics celebrating 75 years that Alcoholics Anonymous has been in the country.

The National Convention, held yearly, is usually “just a big get-together that lasts five days” says Stephen R., trustee on Australia’s General Service Board and Deputy Committee Chair for the Convention. They normally draw about 1,000 people for the entire Convention, or at least part of it, including the Al-Anon and Alateen members who also attend Australia’s Conventions. In May, circumstances surrounding the pandemic, including vendor cancellations, forced the committee to pivot to a virtual convention for which they charged the same price — about 100 Australian dollars. This meant, Stephen says, “we needed to figure out how we could add value, doing this online.”

But a convention via videoconference and webinar was without the things everyone loves about A.A. conventions, no matter what the country. “Naturally, it lacked that face-to-face interaction,” says Jon W., committee chair. “It’s nice to sit down and have a cup of tea and share a story with an alcoholic you’ve just met.” It also lacked the beauty of Toowoomba, whose “Carnival of Flowers” festival in October (Australia’s spring) is so enticing that the committee had received special permission to hold the convention then, rather than at its normally scheduled time around Easter.

The Convention committee, led by Jon, Stephen, and their webmaster, Tom R., came up with numerous innovations not normally part of a regular convention. There were hosts who “anchored” the meeting, acting a bit like masters of ceremony. A special app was created, so people could check the program and watch content from their phones. An online auction of A.A. memorabilia and artwork was a popular feature. Parts of the Convention were previously recorded, so virtual attendees did not miss out on anything. Stephen says, “We wrote and videotaped a twenty-eight minute long two-act play on A.A. history, with professional actors who had been in lockdown performing it — one act was shown as the Convention began, the second at the Saturday night 75th birthday party.” There was the opportunity to take a survey to find out how members were faring during

the pandemic, with its paucity of physical meetings. Importantly, Stephen says, “we are able to take oral histories from our indigenous members” to form the nucleus of a planned oral history.

On a lighter note, there were online games and pop-up quizzes. A feature of the birthday party was a Lemington cake, which Stephen describes as “a sponge cake dipped in chocolate and rolled in coconut.” Thinking people sharing the cake online might want to bake their own, Jon says, “We inserted a recipe into the souvenir book for those who had ordered it in advance, so that when they opened it, they could make their own cake and we could all eat a piece together.”

The souvenir book itself was a big part of the Convention story. Entitled “A Vision for You,” it is a pictorial history that features the birth of A.A. as well as the history of A.A. in Australia, and even devotes a page to Detroit, where A.A.’s 85th International Convention was scheduled to have been held this past summer. With time running short and dozens of photographs needing permissions, Stephen reached out to Michele Grinberg (nonalcoholic), chair of the General Service Board, who was scheduled to tape a greetings message from the U.S./Canada General Service Board and A.A.W.S. and AA Grapevine. (The Convention was also attended by Trish L., trustee-at-large/Canada.) “Australia had vibrant A.A. activity going on by the mid-1940s,” Michele says. “It’s amazing how the message of hope crossed vast distances so quickly, and that’s reflected in the souvenir book, which has lots of fascinating history in it. But we needed to work quickly to get permissions in place.”

Michele reached out to G.S.O. Archivist Michelle Mirza (nonalcoholic), who worked closely with Darlene Smith (nonalcoholic), the recently retired senior intellectual property manager. Michelle says, “We provided historical information, digitized materials such as images and published resources, and helped to secure appropriate copyrights for use. We were really happy to be able to assist in this, while working off-site with relatively limited resources.”

Stephen R. says, “We could not have done this without all of their help.” It underscores for him the fact that, despite the distance separating the two countries, “there are so many similarities” in their birth stories and early years, including the help from so many “friends of A.A.” who championed Fellowships on both continents in their early years. In Michele’s message to the Convention, she says, “I touched on our sadness at having to cancel our International Convention and expressed the hope of seeing some of the Australian Fellowship in 2025 in Vancouver. My message was prerecorded, but it was such a joy to feel the connection across thousands of miles.” At the suggestion of Stephen R., Michele recorded her video message with a small kangaroo named Skippy at her side.

Along with the online innovations, the virtual Convention also featured traditions that are a beloved

part of A.A. conventions — a Flag Ceremony, a “Big Meeting,” a sobriety countdown. In general, Jon says, “the feedback was wonderful. Many people said it was the best convention they’d ever been to.” The 2021 Convention is scheduled to take place in Adelaide, and it is Stephen’s hope that their committee can host a physical convention. “Doing it this way was a massive amount of work,” he says. “But we were hell-bent on making sure it wasn’t just another Zoom meeting.”



■ A Link in the Chain: A Nonalcoholic Trustee Provides a Look Back and a Glimpse Ahead

During the 69th General Service Conference in the spring of 2019, Dr. Al J. Mooney, of Cary, North Carolina, was selected as one of the new Class A (nonalcoholic) trustees to serve the Fellowship over the coming six years. Like many, Dr. Mooney was born into a family of alcoholics; that said, he didn’t become an alcoholic himself. Instead, he became an advocate of Alcoholics Anonymous.

Born in 1948 in Statesboro, Georgia, Mooney was the son of a physician/surgeon and a nurse. His father, John, was a medical paratrooper in the 82nd Airborne Division during World War II, and eventually transitioned to piloting gliders that he flew behind enemy lines to transport critical medical supplies. During one such mission in Holland, he crashed his glider and suffered severe back injuries. Due to this accident, Mooney’s father developed an addiction to alcohol and opiates. Soon, his father’s medical practice was destroyed by his addiction, and he was sent to prison for six months for writing illegal prescriptions for narcotics. Initially, his father was considered a hopeless case and was diagnosed a sociopath. His wife, Dorothy, was left to care for their three boys, and was on her way to becoming an alcoholic and addict herself; she ultimately became addicted to the sodium pentothal injections that were a part of her electroshock treatments meant to alleviate her debilitating depression.

Thankfully, Mooney’s father discovered the message

of A.A. while he was imprisoned in the Narcotic Farm, a federal narcotic prison in Lexington, Kentucky. He was released in 1959, and the young Mooney didn't recognize his dad. "He came back in the same body that I always recognized," Mooney remembers, "but he was a different person. It was like I met my dad for the first time when he came home sober." At the time, Mooney was eleven years old, and soon he learned more about A.A. because his mother started to attend meetings with his dad and she got sober, too.

Eventually, his parents opened their home to alcoholics attempting to get sober. "At different times, there were 25 people living in our home with us," recalls Mooney. The family's dining room was transformed into a detox unit with several beds for recovering individuals. "My parents thought of it as Twelfth Step work, but then an accountant convinced them that they were performing services, such as medical treatment, outside of A.A. and that they should consider opening a hospital." In 1971, Willingway Hospital was established by his parents in their hometown of Statesboro. (Still, today, the rehab center operates as a private family-owned hospital on an 11-acre wooded campus. Over the years, Mooney has served in a variety of capacities, such as a physician, the medical director, and later a board member.)

As his parents' involvement in A.A. grew, Mooney joined Alateen and eventually became a lifelong member of Al-Anon. In 1965, Al attended the A.A. International

Convention in Toronto with his parents and siblings, and got a chance to hear Bill W. and Lois speak onstage. On this same trip, the family stopped by the General Service Office — which was located on Madison Avenue at that time — before taking in the World's Fair at Shea Stadium in Queens. Bill W. had a modest office that was simply appointed with a leather couch and a desk.

"My dad had a personality of self-assurance as a surgeon and a doctor," says Mooney, "and his whole demeanor changed when we stepped inside Bill's office. I found myself thinking, 'What the hell is going on with my dad?' I was so awed by this unexpected change in my dad that I almost missed our visit with Bill completely." Mooney remembers Bill's lanky, tall physique, and how he had to awkwardly maneuver to get out from his desk and greet the family. "At the time, as a teenager, I didn't realize how monumental it was to meet Bill," says Mooney, "but I realize now how wonderful it was to experience Bill face-to-face."

As Mooney's parents moved further into their recoveries, they often spoke at A.A. events around the country and Al often traveled with his parents to these engagements. In addition, his parents spoke at Founders' Day in Akron, Ohio, in the late 1960s. As mentioned already, drugs were an integral part of his mother's story, and she was nervous about mentioning this element of her story at Founders' Day as well as at other meetings where she spoke. She decided to ask Bill what he thought about her talking about drugs in her A.A. story; after all who would be a better authority than Bill W.? He gave her the following advice: "Dot, I think it's good to talk about anything that will help you stay sober." And Mooney's mother did just this — told her story as she experienced it, including the details related to her drug-related addiction.

Throughout the decades, Mooney's parents maintained a friendship with Bill and Lois. They made several trips to Stepping Stones, the Wilsons' home in Bedford, about an hour north of New York City. "My dad often would take a Big Book and have Bill sign it," says Mooney with a soft chuckle, "but he never kept the book for himself. Instead, he would give out these autographed copies to people trying to get sober."

Growing up in a sober home and attending open meetings certainly gave Mooney a firm foundation in recovery. "From an early age, my parents shared their recovery with me. As a result, I developed a cultural competence of A.A. and a vocabulary of recovery. This was a very important part of my



Stepping Stones, the home of Bill and Lois W., in Bedford Hills, New York, now designated a State and National Historic Place. Bill and Lois often entertained visitors here and today, Stepping Stones remains open to visitors by reservation.

journey,” Mooney explains. “It helped me to grow up in a family where I was given tools to cope with fear in society and the courage to keep working my own steps and program.” His father passed away in 1983 from lung disease with 24 years of sobriety, and his mom died with 44 years of sobriety in 2004. “I have huge gratitude for the force of recovery that surrounded me in my own life,” reflects Mooney.

When it came time for him to make a decision about his own education career, it wasn’t much of a choice. “I’m a sixth-generation physician,” he says. “Going into medicine was what our family did.” When Mooney was enrolled at the Emory University School of Medicine, he questioned one of his psychiatric professors if it would be possible for a sociopath to become philanthropic and generate goodwill toward others. “I didn’t tell him that I was talking about my dad,” recalls Mooney. His professor’s answer was definitive: The sociopathic individual was hardwired and would never get better. “If I hadn’t known my dad, I might have believed the guy,” remembers Mooney, “but the experience opened my mind and prepared me for what I might discover during my own professional development.”

Later, when he was a resident in family medicine at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Mooney often heard other residents and professors talking about the hopeless nature of alcoholics. “One resident in internal medicine suggested that I identify all of the alcoholics in my practice,” remembers Mooney, “and then he suggested that I give all of my attention to everyone else because they can’t be helped.”

Not surprisingly, Mooney built a professional career and practice where he could help alcoholics as a part of the continuum of recovery. “I saw my job as preparing people to get to A.A. through treatment and rehab,” he says. “I knew once people got to A.A., the program would take care of them.” Over the decades, Mooney became recognized as an expert and leader in the field of addiction medicine. He has worked and been affiliated with multiple institutions, hospitals, and universities.

In 1992, Mooney coauthored and published *The Recovery Book*, which examines the phases of recovery and how the process can take years in terms of an individual fully recovering his/her own sense of self. “As Bill W. gained more sobriety, he moved into a phase called emotional sobriety,” says Mooney. “He was interested in becoming a citizen of the world, and his purpose was to put back into the world as much as his active alcoholism took out of the world. How do people get there? This is what I was interested in exploring in my book.” In addition, Mooney is an inaugural diplomat in the American Board of Addiction Medicine, and helped to establish the certification standards for the specialty in the U.S. while serving on the board of the American Society of Addiction Medicine. Mooney is still involved with the establishment of recovery programs — twelve-step and professional — in countries such as Egypt,

Bosnia, Ghana, and the United Kingdom.

During his lifetime, Mooney has also been drawn to the concept of the psychic change necessary for an alcoholic’s recovery, as described by Dr. Silkworth in the chapter titled “The Doctor’s Opinion” in the Big Book — and how this critical change might be measured in a qualitative sense to demonstrate the efficacy of A.A. As a part of this conversation of scientific investigation, Mooney notes the concluding sentence in the Foreword of the First Edition of the Big Book, which reads: “Inquiry by scientific, medical, and religious societies will be welcomed.” This sentence has served as a true north of sorts for Mooney throughout his career. “As a medical person, this is a way that I can contribute. Without good science, it’s going to be difficult to reduce the suffering,” adds Mooney.

When his parents were still alive, they often mentioned that they were a little disappointed that Mooney wasn’t an alcoholic himself, so he couldn’t experience all of the gifts that A.A. has to offer. With his appointment to the General Service Board, he has finally found a way to get inside the Fellowship. “I do think I have something to offer,” says Mooney. “It’s an honor and a privilege to serve as a trustee.”

■ Opening for Public Information Appointed Committee Member

The trustees’ Committee on Public Information of the General Service Board has an opening for one or two non-trustee appointed committee member(s). We are searching for a suitable individual or individuals to fill this position and would appreciate any recommendations.

In seeking applications for vacancies in Alcoholics Anonymous, the Fellowship is committed to creating a large file of applicants that reflects the inclusiveness and diversity of A.A. itself.

Some of the qualities most desirable for this nontrustee opening are:

1. Professional expertise in evaluation and interpretation of online metrics to assess the effectiveness of public information efforts in digital media.

There is also a need for A.C.M. expertise in social media/networks and communications to assist with the P.I. Comprehensive Media Plan and to serve as a resource on the committee with understanding of this medium and how it intersects with current and future P.I. projects.

- Public relations/media and communications
- An extensive overarching marketing background
- Expertise, such as digital/technology or public relations/media and communications

- Data analysis, or the comprehensive framework for communication strategies relating to social media and production.
2. Availability for meetings of this trustees' committee held during General Service Board weekends (usually the last weekend in January, July and October), as well as one meeting during the General Service Conference. Available time for participation in sub-committees of the trustees' committee, as appointed.

3. At least five years of continuous sobriety.
4. The ability to work within the committee structure.
5. Experience in A.A. service.

A General Service Conference delegate is not eligible to apply until *one year* after their last Conference.

To obtain a résumé form for this opening, please email publicinfo@aa.org. Deadline for applications is February 1, 2021.

Approaching 25, A Fresh Look for La Viña



Just ahead of its 25th anniversary year — its first issue was published in June 1996 — La Viña has launched its redesigned website at aalavina.org. The new site gives the magazine a strong digital presence, with a fresh, open look and additional features.

Karina C., La Viña's editor, speaks of the “spiritual parity” with Grapevine, their sister magazine, that La Viña members have long expressed a desire for. “Part of the point of the redesign was to use Grapevine’s platform” — the magazine launched its own web redesign this past January — “in order to make sure both magazines are equal. For the first time, La Viña now has its own archives section with stories going back to 1997. Members have access to the digital store and to the new ePub feature,” which replaced the old app and can be downloaded on all computers, laptops, tablets and smartphones.

“I think La Viña readers will be thrilled with the new website,” says Janet Bryant (nonalcoholic), director of operations at AA Grapevine. “I have always loved La Viña. The artwork has always been bold and colorful. The website mirrors that. I’m hopeful the Spanish-speaking Fellowship will find the website user-friendly and informative, since we really worked to design it to accommodate their expressed needs.”

Kathi F., chair of the Grapevine Board, agrees: “The La Viña website is wonderful, and as La Viña is a ser-

vice, I think this website will better serve the Spanish-speaking community. I love that it’s up and running and truly a place that the voice of our Spanish-speaking A.A. members can be heard.”

Although the Grapevine web platform served as the template for La Viña’s site, the process was far from a simple one, says Grapevine and La Viña web coordinator Niurka Melendez-Vasquez (nonalcoholic). “The Grapevine platform was naturally in the English language, so in coordinating with the vendor, we had to be really careful of small details, down to making sure that even error messages were translated correctly into Spanish.” Working remotely because of the pandemic, Niurka created 60 pages for the La Viña site. “I had to mock up pretty much every page to make sure every detail was communicated in the right way. But I think La Viña members are now going to have all these features that are on the Grapevine site on their site and it will make their lives easier — the sobriety calculator, the editorial calendar, all this brand-new stuff. Plus an improved search engine.”

Moving forward, 2021 looks to be an exciting year for La Viña, says Karina C. April will see the publication of a new La Viña book, *Mujeres en AA*, stories from pioneering women in A.A. “The first two chapters were translated from Grapevine stories,” Karina says, “but the rest are all stories written expressly for La Viña by Spanish-

speaking women A.A. members. Not having so many women's groups or women's meetings in the Spanish-speaking community, it was amazing to see the themes coming up from the women who contributed the stories over the decades."

Mujeres en AA, Karina says, will be presented to the General Service Conference in spring 2021 by the new joint Grapevine/La Viña Conference committee, a sign of the parity for which the two magazines are striving. And Karina is looking forward to reading new submissions from readers — despite the pandemic, these have not slowed down — and being available for workshops and events that will connect her to La Viña members, who, she says, "are really inspiring people."

On a final note, both Karina and Janet point out that all of this work, both for La Viña and Grapevine, has been accomplished by what Janet calls "a resilient and dedicated staff of 15 people" who have worked closely during the pandemic. "We haven't missed a beat even though these are trying and difficult times," Janet says. "I'm very proud of the Grapevine/La Viña team."

■ Opening the Digital Doorway to A.A. Literature

Literature is one of the cornerstones of recovery for millions of members in Alcoholics Anonymous around the world. The Big Book, the "Twelve and Twelve," special-interest pamphlets, and more have helped countless individuals to discover the lifesaving message of A.A. — and to stay sober. Until recently, ordering literature via A.A.'s online bookstore (onlineliterature.aa.org) wasn't always easy: It was challenging to search and to find exactly what one was looking for amid the many pages of products. Also, it was hard to know what else was available — such as specific translations, pamphlets or even Preamble placards — for sale on the site.

Now, all that has changed: Over the past year, a persistent team from multiple departments in the General Service Office as well as several consultants have created a new and improved online store, where individuals can purchase books, pamphlets, and other items (in English, French and Spanish).

"Admittedly, our old webstore had shown the wear and tear of time," says David R., publishing director at A.A. World Services, who oversaw the team for this project from beginning to end. "From a technology and design perspective, it was clear to everyone that the online bookstore needed an overhaul." Frequent complaints from users often revolved around the site being confusing to find certain items as well as being slow to navigate. The search and sort of the online bookstore was also hindered by recent technological updates. One of these significant upgrades was a new ERP system (a cloud-based enterprise resource planning software system) that had

been implemented over the past few years. "We wanted to provide the current-day capability and all of the power of NetSuite to the e-commerce world of the A.A. website," explains Lorna Graham (nonalcoholic), director of technical services at the General Service Office.

This project was massive in size due to the sheer volume of products for sale — close to 1,000 in all — as well as the translation of the site into Spanish and French. "Translation is very important to us," comments David.

Adding to the project's complexity, the redesign and update of the website started at about the same time that the pandemic was swiftly spreading, causing the entire team to work from home during this enormous undertaking. "It was challenging not being able to run down the hallway, sit side by side, and point at something on the screen," says Lorna. "It's a testament to the communication of the team and the collaboration through multiple vendors and organizations that we managed to realize this goal."

From the onset of the project, roles, responsibilities and deliverables were clearly defined, so Lorna led a very structured plan of attack. "We had frequent virtual group huddles," adds David. "Everyone was helping each other — and the team coalesced so easily and fruitfully. In the Fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous, there is the spirit that we are all in this together," continues David. "We know the power of collaboration in a group — and the new online bookstore is one prime example of how this kind of collaboration and community paid off."

Users will immediately notice a fresh design — easy to read with appealing, soft colors and fonts — that reflects the current standards of today's e-commerce industry. Also, it's much easier to navigate the home page with its distinct audience groups (newcomers, groups and professionals) and the books, pamphlets, and other items organized by these categories of visitors. For newcomers (commonly described as "the most important person in the room at A.A. meetings"), the individual can find literature that is very useful to an alcoholic who is looking for recovery: popular pamphlets, such as "Is A.A. for You?" or "The Newcomer Asks," or books with the newcomer in mind, such as *Living Sober*. Intergroups and central offices can order display racks for pamphlets, the familiar window shades with the Steps and Traditions enumerated, and other helpful items.

The new online bookstore also features an enhanced navigation bar allowing visitors to view products by their product type, such as hardcover, paperback, and other specifics. Once the user arrives at a category, he or she can narrow a product search further via filters (type, format and language). Julia D., editor at A.A. World Services and the writer/editor on the project, was responsible for organizing all of this metadata (read: tags or markers on each product that would allow it to be searchable by filter). A significant part of organizing this data and making the site more functional was about asking certain questions about its users: Who is coming

to the bookstore? What are they looking for? And how can the online bookstore provide the results more easily?

In addition, Julia wrote the descriptions for each of the 1,000 or so items. “I learned a lot about our inventory and the tools available,” she explains. “For example, I didn’t realize how many different editions of the Big Book there are — large print, abridged, pocket version. We want everyone to know what’s available so it doesn’t languish in the warehouse.”

For any member of the Fellowship, it’s not surprising that there is a fair amount of “insider language” when referring to certain pieces of literature, such as the Big Book. “I needed to make sure that people who aren’t members know what we are talking about,” says Julia. “We wanted to make sure that the member feels like they belong without alienating the newcomer or the professional unfamiliar with A.A. I tried to write concise descriptions for each so it would communicate successfully to multiple groups.”

After the content was delivered and the technological glitches were mostly ironed out, Jasmine de la Rosa (nonalcoholic), the webstore operations manager, was responsible for the user testing and outside testing with intergroups, central offices, and other members. Eighty-four volunteers from the Fellowship reviewed the new site in real time. “It was the first test that included members and customers into the process,” explains David. One test user wrote: “I wanted to pass along my many thanks to you and everyone who participated in the redesign and update of the A.A.W.S. webstore. I used the store many times previously and frequently was frustrated. The new design is streamlined and extremely user-friendly and intuitive.” Another user praised: “I wanted to commend you on the search functions as I would have had no idea what pamphlets we had translated into Vietnamese, and with a single click, I was able to order the Big Book and other materials.” Indeed, from this sampling of tests, it was clear that the online bookstore was a success, streamlining the customer experience and making it easier to find lifesaving literature.

The new online bookstore went live September 9, 2020. Like any large project, the team encountered a few hiccups and continues to work on its ongoing implementation. “We’re working on phase two, including a quick order module for central offices and intergroups, since they don’t often need to browse,” adds Jasmine. “We also want to update stock notifications so you can receive status updates on orders and deliveries.”

In the end, the new bookstore is much easier to navigate for new and return visitors. David notes: “The impact of sharing our message — to use one of our cofounders Bill W.’s favorite words — is *incalculable*. This new store is having a great impact on our ability to share our message.”

■ **Spotlight:** The Importance of Sharing A.A. Literature

The following personal reflection on the power of A.A. literature comes from a former World Service Meeting delegate from Peru.

The Twelfth Step suggests “carrying the message.” The original message is written in the Big Book. I had the privilege of being welcomed at my first meeting with a copy of the Big Book. The warmth that I felt at this meeting, the new perspectives that opened for me, when I listened to the members recount their personal stories, moved me to read the book the second I arrived home. I opened the book and didn’t close it until the end. My heart opened up; I found a life experience (Bill’s) that I made my own. I said to myself: If this person could change his life, why can’t I change mine, too? So the message reached me through the agency of the Big Book.

When a fellow member seeks me out to talk or asks me for advice I always have with me a pocket edition of the Big Book. Without fail we find in the book answers or clarifications. I have a few favorite paragraphs that I can

“I’m grateful to have literature on hand and to those who have made and continue to make possible this service which is so important for my recovery and for maintaining my sobriety...”

easily locate: one on page 51, where we’re told that we all have the Higher Power within us. I love the suggestion (experience) on page 62: it guides me about what to do when I’m bothered by some action or lack of action by another person that seems to me unfair. The first lines of page 79 always illuminate and offer a new perspective for optimism and gratitude, because they help us recognize the obstacles to the action of our Higher Power: fear, resentment, egotism and insincerity.

I have had many wonderful experiences sharing the Big Book with professionals (religious and medical). Not only do they like the book, but they have also acquired a real understanding of the Fellowship.

Every day I read several pages from our literature. I prefer above all the Big Book and *A.A. Comes of Age*. These two are my favorite books. I’ve taken part in literature study meetings and I encourage those who have recently started on the A.A. path to do the same.

Truth to tell, our literature is an inexhaustible mine. Whenever I read, I find a message of hope and strength, as if it were the first time ever I’d read the words, like a bottomless well from which springs fresh water to quench the thirst.

In sum, when I share our literature with a still-suffering alcoholic, I'm doing Twelfth Step work. And to share our literature with a fellow member of A.A. is to reread and to comment from a new perspective and this is a labor that enriches geometrically. There is nothing better than finding answers in our literature and it's even more satisfying and worthwhile when we do so with another member of the Fellowship.

As important as showing what I have discovered in our literature is listening to what another A.A. has found there. I like to talk with books in hand. I always discover something new and the effect multiplies.

I'm grateful to have literature on hand and to those who have made and continue to make possible this service which is so important for my recovery and for maintaining my sobriety, which in A.A. I received as a gift from God that renews itself each day, one day at a time.

■ Seventh Tradition Corner: Spirituality and Money

This occasional feature highlights perspectives on the importance of self-support. The following is an excerpt from a presentation given by Chet P., a past Southeast regional trustee, at the General Service Board Sharing Session in January 2016.

When I went to my first A.A. meeting in August of 1984, there was a man standing at the door who exemplified to me a sober person. Although I was too intimidated to ask him to be my sponsor until much later, he influenced my early sobriety more than any other single person. After about three years I was struck with a very unfamiliar emotion that I later identified as gratitude and I asked him what I could do to pay him back for all he had given me. His classic response was that the best payback that I could make was to pass on what I had gotten from him. This response is certainly comprehended in that portion of the Twelfth Step which directs us, as having had a spiritual awakening as the result of the Steps, to carry the message to others. To build on that message, in a 1959 letter, Bill wrote "Gratitude should go forward, rather than backward. In other words, if you carry the message to still others, you will be making the best possible repayment for the help given you."

One definition of *spiritual* is that it is "of or consisting of spirit; not corporeal." How can a discussion of money be "not corporeal" when money is the embodiment of corporeal substances? In the Grapevine article "Safe Use of Money" in May 1946, Bill wrote of the point in "spiritual space" where the proper use of money ends and its misuse begins. On reflection I believe there are two common aspects to spirituality as it relates to "paying back" or "paying forward." The presence or absence of these aspects determines whether the effort is a proper use or a misuse of money; whether there is responsibility or obli-

gation. Those two aspects are gratitude and sacrifice.

Gratitude is defined as thankful appreciation for favors received. For me to experience gratitude I must, by definition, understand and acknowledge that I have received something. Moreover the word *favor* implies that this benefit was unearned.

It was very quickly apparent to me that I had received something of great value from those people who attended my first meetings. Their presence and sharing in meetings became the bedrock of my early sobriety. It was not apparent to me until much later that I had received something of value from the monetary contributions of those who had gone before me and how much those contributions benefitted my sobriety. As the result of a DUI arrest, I had been directed to A.A. by a professional counselor who, himself, was not an alcoholic. I was not aware of the Public Information and Cooperation with the Professional Community materials that had been published and distributed which informed him of help that A.A. could give to his clients, such as me, who had an alcohol problem. I looked up in the telephone directory the telephone number for Alcoholics Anonymous, not realizing that I was calling a number for an Intergroup hotline and that the listing and telephone line had been paid for by those who were paying forward their gratitude. By that call I was directed to a group meeting.

Sacrifice is discussed several times in our literature, but in terms of activity not money. *Sacrifice* is a very onerous sounding word. However, the Oxford English Dictionary defines sacrifice as the surrender of something valued or desired for the sake of something having a higher claim. It is the payment of something valued, not the amount of value, which makes the "paying forward" a spiritual response.

In a well-written and reasoned article entitled "Self-support" in the February 1981 Grapevine, the author suggested that self-support not only avoids corrupting influences, but includes principles that contribute to our spiritual growth, such as self-respect and provides us a sense of belonging and satisfaction of being part of a Fellowship that we have helped to foster and nourish. I cannot expect to receive a sense of belonging and satisfaction if my giving is from my surplus. Surplus is a quantity over and above what is needed; something extra. Financial responsibility at that level is the financial equivalent to a kindly act now and then. Of course this is highly personal because what is one person's sacrifice is another person's surplus and vice versa. I need to take my own inventory and hope that others will do likewise.

What would be the result if we made the small sacrifices out of gratitude for the favors we have received? In the June 1948 Grapevine, Bill challenged us saying, "Yes we A.A.s were once a burden on everybody. We were 'takers.' Now that we are sober, and by the grace of God have become responsible citizens of the world, why shouldn't we now about-face and become 'thankful givers'! Yes, it is high time we did!"

■ A Slice of History: The Responsibility Declaration

By most measures, Alcoholics Anonymous in 1965 had achieved success that seemed beyond the wildest dreams of its two co-founders thirty years earlier. Worldwide membership stood at an estimated 350,000, the Fellowship had become a well-known institution in North America, and many in the recovery field believed that A.A. was the clearest and best answer for alcoholism. With 10,000 members meeting in Toronto early in July for the fourth International Convention, it seemed a good time to bask in self-congratulation and gloat about A.A.'s achievements.

The achievements were noted, but the Toronto Convention was also devoted to serious inventory and, especially, the theme of Responsibility. The Responsibility Declaration was formally introduced there by Bill W. It states, "I am Responsible. When anyone, anywhere, reaches out for help, I want the hand of A.A. always to be there. And for that: I am responsible."

The author of the pledge was the late Al S., a former trustee of the General Service Board, who told the story behind the saying at the sixth International Convention in Denver in 1975. "A statement (on Responsibility) was wanted that would be emotionally gripping to A.A.s without imposing any musts," he recalled. He tried and discarded several approaches before finally arriving at the thought that it should be personal choice and responsibility — "I" instead of "we." Ten thousand A.A.s joined hands at the Toronto Convention to repeat the

declaration, and it has since been distributed throughout the Fellowship and is reprinted in A.A. pamphlets and Grapevine.

Why was the declaration written and accepted at that time? A probable reason is that Bill W. and other A.A. leaders had detected new problems that cast a shadow over A.A.'s future ability to help alcoholics. In 1963, a national magazine had published a highly critical cover story about A.A., suggesting that it was no longer working well. Nonalcoholic professionals in the field were disturbed by the attitudes and actions of some A.A.s, and one of them would even speak at the Toronto Convention. Some hinted that it was time for A.A. to "take its inventory."

Bill W. discussed this issue thoroughly in "Responsibility Is Our Theme," in the July 1965 Grapevine (*The Language of the Heart*, p. 328). He noted how we might have alienated people through our arrogant conviction that we were always right and had the only answers to alcoholism. We needed to correct such attitudes and behavior in order to continue reaching the alcoholic who still suffers.

Bill, far from blaming the Fellowship at large, explained how mistakes of his own had often courted disaster. "If I inventory A.A.'s shortcomings, be also assured that I am also taking stock of my own. I know that my errors of yesterday still have their effect; that my shortcomings of today may likewise affect our future. So it is, with each and all of us."

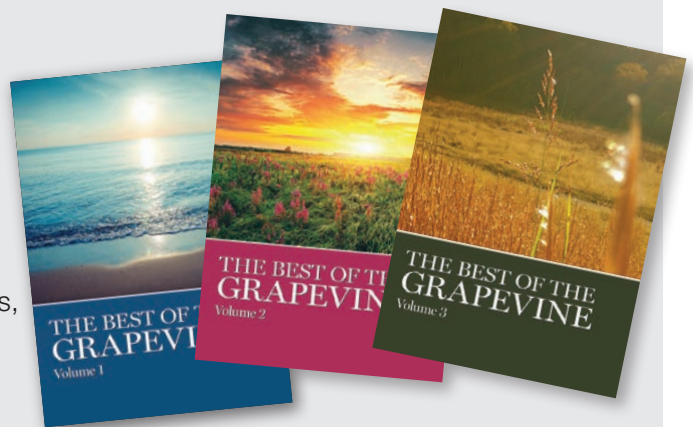
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NOTE: Due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, events may be canceled or moved to online formats. Please contact the event coordinators as listed before making your plans.

Calendar of Events

Events listed here are presented solely as a service to readers, not as an endorsement by the General Service Office. Please note that we cannot attest to the accuracy, relevancy, timeliness, or completeness of information provided by any linked site. **For any additional information, please use the event contact information provided.**

December 2020

5—*Eastern US/CAN Forum*. Write: Forum Coord., Box 459, Grand Central Station, New York, NY 10163; regionalforums@aa.org. Via Internet.

January 2021

08-10—*Garden City, Kansas*. 51st Annual Southwest Kansas Conference. Write: 105 S. Main Street, Ulysses KS 67880.

15-17—*Bismarck, North Dakota*. Rule 62 Rendezvous Woodstock of ND. Write: P.O. Box 268 Bismarck, ND 58502. Info: www.rule62rendezvous.org.

22-24—*Biarritz, France*. Second Biarritz Int'l English-speaking Virtual Conv. Info: www.aavirtualconventionbiarritz.com.

29-31—*Cambridge, Massachusetts*. Freedom Trail Conf. Via Zoom. Info: bgbbwknd@gmail.com.

29-31—*Dallas, Texas*. Experiencia Espiritual. Write: 3530 Forest Lane, Dallas, TX 75234. Info: aadallasgroup.com.



February

5-8—*Bend, Oregon*. 2021 12 Step & 12 Traditions Roundup. www.newhorizonsgroupaa.com. Via internet.

12-13—*Halifax, Nova Scotia Canada*. District 1 & 2 (Area 82) 42nd Annual Mid-Winter Round Up. Write: P.O. Box 31338 B3K 5Z1 Halifax, Nova Scotia Canada; www.aahalifax.org/mid-winter-round-up/.

24-26—*Moncton, New Brunswick, Canada*. Canadian Eastern Reg. Service Assembly. Write: Ch., 80 Ontario St. N, 704, Milton, ON L9T 4Z6; www.ceraasa.org.

26-28—*Rochester, New York*. NERAASA. Info: www.neraasa.org. Via the internet.

March

19-21—*Western Pennsylvania*. 29th Area 60 Pre-Conference Assembly Weekend. Via Zoom. Info: https://www.wpaarea60.org/pcaw/.

April

1-5—*Adelaide, South Australia*. 56th Australia Convention 2021. Write: 95 Currie Street, Adelaide, South Australia, 5000; aanatcon2021.com.au.

23-25—*Sligo, Ireland*. All Ireland Convention 2021. Write: Clarion Road, Ballinode, Sligo, Co Sligo, Ireland F91 N8EF; c182@alcoholicsanonymous.ie.



Planning a Future Event?

To be included in the *Box 4-5-9* Calendar, information must be received at G.S.O. four months prior to the event. We list events that are area, regional, national or international in scope.

For your convenience and ours — please type or print the information to be listed on the Bulletin Board page, and mail to Editor: Box 459, Grand Central Station, New York, NY 10163 or literature@aa.org

Date of event: from _____ to _____, 20_____

Name of event: _____

Location (Please indicate if online.): _____ CITY STATE OR PROVINCE

Address to list: _____ P.O. BOX (OR NUMBER AND STREET)

CITY STATE OR PROVINCE ZIP CODE

Website or email: _____ (NO PERSONAL EMAIL ADDRESSES)

Contact person: _____ NAME PHONE # AND EMAIL