

Biography of Jimmy Kinnon

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Written by one of Jimmy's colleagues for the NA Fellowship. This excerpt was reprinted here with permission. For more information contact the San Fernando Valley Area Website Chairperson.

Jimmy was born in Paisley, Scotland, a small town a little south and west of Glasgow, in 1911 of Irish parents. His father was in the theater, a comedian and dancer, and there was a lot of laughter in his home. Jimmy also became a dancer when he was very young and it set a pattern for his life - one of intense competition. He always needed to be number one, to come in first.

Jimmy reports that one of his best childhood friends was the town drunk who was good to him in many ways, but not so good in others. His name was Crookshank, and on occasions Jimmy would find him in doorways or along the street, bleeding and needing help. On one such occasion he was bleeding profusely and with Jimmy's help, was taken to the hospital. Later when Jimmy inquired of his mother when Mr. Crookshank was going to come back, he was put off with the words "next week" and this kept going on for some time. Finally his mother took him to see his friend; he was in a mental institution.

He was in a wheel chair, and just sat there staring but not seeing. Jimmy wanted to know what was wrong with him. His mother responded that he was a very sick man, he drank too much, and he got hurt too much over the years. Jimmy didn't say anything as his friend was taken away or as they walked to the trolley and went home. Finally his mother asked why he was so quiet. Jimmy responded that "when I grow up I'm going to help people like Mr. Crookshank." He never forgot that, even though he didn't fully understand what he meant at the time.

Jimmy came with his family to America in the early 1920's, landing at Ellis Island among the crush of immigrants from around the world looking for a better life. At the World Convention in 1983, Jimmy spoke of the fear of being separated from his family at Ellis Island, and the relief when they were finally given passage to Manhattan. Jimmy remembered the years in New York City and then the years in Philadelphia as one long series of fights and conflicts. As a teenager Jimmy entered a preparatory school in

Germantown, Pennsylvania, thinking that was the best way to enter the Catholic priesthood.

However, this is where his addiction was nurtured, as the seminary was not without its supply of alcohol. By the time this phase of his life was over, he had become a dedicated drinker. For the next fourteen years he progressed in his disease, using other drugs along the way and eventually becoming full-blown.

It was during these years that he found his way to Los Angeles and the roofing trade. He would work nearly every day, but did drugs too. He married, fathered three boys and three girls and lived in a little house directly across the road from Lockheed airport (later called the Burbank airport), which at that time was a major airport for Los Angeles.

As his children grew, Jimmy continued to practice his addiction, and it finally began to reach its zenith. A series of arrests led him to AA in February of 1950, where he began to confront some of his problems. Although he went to the meetings, he didn't really take to heart some of the program's ideas. The God part was particularly hard for him to adjust to. He had long since relegated God to an unfavorable corner of his mind, as he blamed everyone, including God, for all the travail he had gone through in his life. But he went to meetings and tried his best to stay clean.

He had been clean for about a year-and-a-half, but still struggling within himself, when he had an experience that changed his life. He was consumed with doubt and fear, having something akin to an anxiety attack, and found himself unable to leave his bedroom for over three days. He couldn't talk, and sat there like a vegetable. His wife came in from time to time and asked what was wrong and tried to help. But the best he could do was sit on the bed, occasionally have coffee or go to the bathroom, and then go back to the bed. That was as much as he could manage; he was terrified.

He later reported that he was more fearful during that time than at any other time in his life. He was afraid to leave the house. He had found no Higher Power he could depend on. He had rejected the concept of God advanced by most organized religions. He just didn't believe what they told him. He felt he had reached the point where nothing was going to work for him.

On the third night, he had been asleep for awhile when he awoke in abject terror, but didn't know what was wrong. He was afraid but his fear seemed to have no object. He felt paralyzed; he couldn't move; he was unable to scream or ask for help. It was then he saw a great big round glow of light ahead of him, "it was like a great big orange disk of hammered silver with a large post on either side and a caduceus around them and some steps."

His mind leapt to the fear from his rejection of religion he and he felt "they were going to get him." And a voice out of nowhere said, "don't be afraid." For an instant the fear continued, then the fear passed and he wasn't afraid. And the voice told him what to do. But he said he couldn't do that. But the voice spoke again and struck away the mental shield he was trying to hide behind. Jimmy knew the voice knew him too well. He would say later, that this was the first Higher Power he had ever found. And for the next twenty-four hours he knew complete and absolute serenity.

Jimmy related this to a meeting in 1982, and went on to share that the voice told him what to do, and the NA program came, in part, as a result of that experience. He knew that everything was going to be all right, and that if he would just follow directions according to his own conscience, things would work out. He felt that he had made contact with some inner part of himself and the entire universe, and that was the Higher Power.

It was undoubtedly this experience and his single-minded determination to make NA succeed that sustained him in the middle and late 50's. All he seems to have needed was to get a stable core of members who would also make the commitment to keep an NA meeting going. Then, he undoubtedly knew, NA would become a reality and the path for addicts seeking recovery.

Jimmy's notes suggest that he had, as he put it "first thoughts" of building a fellowship for addicts as far back as 1951. As we have seen, this idea was not unique. Others had similar ideas, and had acted on them too. The most notable was the effort by Danny C. in New York. And we know from Jimmy's notes that he had contact with Danny in 1952. Interestingly, Jimmy refers to "their structure" in these notes, indicating that he viewed Danny's effort as a separate fellowship. There were significant differences between the NA fellowship which developed in California and the New York effort.

The degree of contact between Jimmy and Danny may never be known, but it is nearly inconceivable that they were ignorant of each other's ongoing efforts. It is also nearly inconceivable that they had no communication, especially after the Post article in 1954. The difference between them, especially on the issue of Traditions, is important, and would have probably prevented unification of the two organizations. Jimmy later suggested that the failure of the New York City meetings to be faithful to the Traditions had been a reason that organization did not survive. In a published interview in 1985, Jimmy said:

They were aware of the New York Group but felt that it was not true to the program as originally outlined by AA. Strict adherence to this program, including following all the Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions, was seen as crucial for the organization. The Sun Valley founders emphasized that, in contrast to the New York model, NA should not be identified with a specific treatment agency, nor should it receive government funds.

It may not be important to know how much they communicated, as the facts clearly show that they were different organizations. The close affiliation with the Salvation Army would probably have been found to violate the Sixth and Seventh Traditions by the California fellowship. There has also been the appearance that the New York effort was centered on the personality of Danny, as he allowed himself to be the focus of most of the newspaper and magazine coverage rather than maintaining his anonymity. This clearly seems to violate the Eleventh and Twelfth Traditions. This would not have been acceptable to Jimmy and others in the California group who believed in anonymity and in putting principles before personalities.

It should be remembered, however, that the AA Traditions were not adopted until 1950 - about the time Danny and the others had begun developing their group in New York. Furthermore, it was not until 1951 that the book, Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions was first published by AA, and the full meaning of the Traditions became universally available to the average member.

Many AA groups across the country had themselves not fully adopted and implemented the Traditions by 1953. So while the New York NA movement could not be faulted for not following guidelines not yet in wide use, that group's eventual failure, and the California group's eventual success, stand as significant

testimony to the wisdom and validity of the Traditions. And Jimmy's steadfast insistency on adherence to Traditions, including his stepping back from the group during a time when Traditions were being compromised, stands as testimony to Jimmy's significant contribution to the eventual success of NA.

As 1959 came to a close, Jimmy picked up the pieces of NA, which had completely folded after an internal skirmish over a breech of Traditions, to start it up again. As he took stock of the surviving members, perhaps his strongest supporter was Sylvia W., who had been released from the Lexington hospital, and who brought energy and ideas she had learned while there. Sylvia arrived in Los Angeles in late 1959, met Jimmy, and quickly became a dedicated NA member. She and Jimmy made a good team, as both were similar in personality. Unfortunately Sylvia drifted away after a few years.

Then there was Jimmy's brother Jerry, who went mostly to AA, but could be depended on as a supporter of NA. Russ C. was coming to meetings, but he had been in less than a year. Scott was still around, but Jimmy probably didn't count on his participation. Jack C. had been coming to meetings and could be expected to return. And there were a few others, but not many.

Of course there were always some who came and went. But the question for Jimmy was, could he sustain a meeting long enough to keep some of them around? Bob B. for example, had come and gone in late 1959, and Jimmy surely had no expectation that he would return. Bob's wife, who had met Jimmy's wife at an Alanon meeting and learned there was one NA meeting, "the only NA meeting in the World." Alma forced Bob to go, but as a concession to going the first time she also went "to check it out" while he waited in the car. The meeting was at Shier's Dryer. Bob attended for awhile, but returned to using, was soon arrested again, and spent another eighteen months in and out of custody. Bob remembers he was visited by Jimmy and others several times while he was in the county jail.

Another member to stop over was Chuck S. and another guy who came to the meeting with him, both loaded. Chuck continued to use and didn't stop until July 1961. At that time he hooked up with AA meetings and stayed there for a few years. Another guy who came through was Paul S., but he went back to prison for awhile and then returned to stay through the sixties. Bob R. had come earlier

in the year but, went his own way again. Pepe A. had come and gone, and Jimmy could certainly not have counted on his return.

But deep inside Jimmy was the unwavering commitment to NA, so he began to gather the few that had remained and convinced them to join him in another attempt at making Narcotics Anonymous meetings work. There are now millions of addicts in recovery because Jimmy made that effort and sacrificed the time for himself and others. As the following chapters will show, Jimmy carried the burden of keeping NA alive through some rough times. He also took a leadership role again and again, even at great personal risk.