

Love and Service for AA

Interview with Jim Estelle, Chair Emeritus General Service Board

August, 2007

Jim Estelle served as Class A (non-alcoholic) Trustee on the General Service Board 1977 to 1986, and was elected Chairman of the Board 1993 to 1997. He was director of the Texas Department of Corrections for 12 years, and brought his background in correctional administration to the Board. With some gaps in service, his involvement in AA has totaled 24 years. He continues to stay in touch with AA General Service Board affairs, and is also associated with three other non-profit boards. This recent interview was conducted by phone.

GG: *Our Class A Trustees devote so much of their time and energy to service in our Fellowship. What prompted your interest in AA?*

JE: No one lays claim to ownership of the AA way of life. In doing service, we get so much more out of it than we receive. AA saved my job. I spent all of my adult life in corrections; I continually witnessed AA doing things for alcoholics in the jails and prisons that I, or other people in corrections work, could not do. And they achieved results at no cost to the state. Government can't compare with the help that AA gives. Years ago, there was a period of time when the Corrections Departments went overboard. To treat addictions in the prisons, they hired professionals—contracted with non-AA programs. These programs were expensive, and I felt that they did not work as well as AA. I became profoundly grateful for the work done by members of AA.

GG: *What motivated you to become a member of our General Service Board?*

JE: I was acquainted with the Fellowship professionally through corrections. Two close friends of mine were past Trustees of the General Service Board—one Class A (non-alcoholic) and one Class B (alcoholic), and they asked me to stand as a Trustee of the Board. I responded that I felt that I did not know much about AA, and that if the Trustee position was to come to pass, I would need sponsorship. So I had my two friends mentor me.

GG: *How important is sponsorship for Class A Trustees?*

JE: Every Class A Trustee needs sponsors. Throughout my AA service, I have had three kinds of sponsors: spiritual, service and "regular" sponsors.

GG: *You mentioned gratitude in your association with AA.*

JE: I have always had real gratitude for what AA does for inmates in the jails and prisons. When I was a corrections professional, some of the visiting AA members mentioned to me that I did not need to thank them for coming into the prison—they said that they were doing this for their own sobriety. But, nonetheless, I still saw all of the good that they did, and remained thankful. Whenever I have attended an AA corrections workshop—when I have seen former inmates living sober and productive lives, it has been pay day for me. And I'm grateful for the personal benefits I have gained.

GG: *What are the benefits?*

JE: I noticed a difference in attitude and a difference in my style of management. I listen more. I became more pleasant with other Board members. The 12 Steps give me principles which I try to practice in my own life.

GG: *What trends have you noticed in Corrections and AA?*

JE: There has been more improvement with AA in corrections through the years. In the communities and nationally, we're locking up more people. The Fellowship has been more responsive. More AA literature and more AA sponsorship are now available in the prisons.

GG: *What else have you observed about AA Corrections work?*

JE: There is teamwork between corrections professionals and the Fellowship. And Corrections Committees joining up with other AA Committees greatly enhances the work— Corrections, CPC (Cooperation with the Professional Community), and BTG (Bridging the Gap) all working together. We need CPC to carry the message—to talk to corrections and judicial professionals: wardens, counselors, and so forth.

I'll tell you a secret: I have noticed that something happens to anyone involved with Corrections, as with Archives. It gets into the system. Many people want to stay, which is good. However, a lot of people do not want to rotate out. This used to bother me. Now, I say to go ahead if this helps their sobriety. But we also must remember that it is our responsibility to sponsor others into this service.

GG: *What do you recommend to reduce recidivism?*

JE: Meeting attendance within the first 24 hours after discharge. Bridging the Gap—that connection—is important. When someone takes them to a meeting, it shows that people care. Correctional AA activities are like the outside—if someone is ready for it, it works. Thus we can cherry pick: those who want it can get well.

GG: *What are your thoughts on the current health and the future of AA?*

JE: Internationally, AA is exploding. In North America—US and Canada—there is a need to do some more 12th Step work, and a need for more good sponsorship. Also, it is a myth that we are self-supporting through our contributions. We say that there are no dues or fees, but one of the ways we show our gratitude in action (in addition to 12th Step work and sponsoring) is to put money in the basket in order to help AA reach out to others.

GG: *Tell us about your current involvement with the General Service Board.*

JE: I'm now involved to a limited degree. I attend Board Week-ends and the General Service Conference. I have learned to be an "elder statesman" rather than a "bleeding deacon." This can be difficult to learn!

GG: *Thank-you for your service to our Fellowship.*

JE: I'm grateful for the opportunity to participate in service.