

CORRECTIONS HISTORY DISTRICT 16B

District 16 B has taken AA meetings into correctional institutions somewhere every week for 40 years. Meetings began on a fairly regular basis in the 1970s, both at Jackson County Correctional Institute (CI) and at Clarke County CI.

In 1972, (the late) Billy B. got sober at the Athens Biscayne Room, and immediately formed Breezy Knob in his hometown of Commerce. Soon, he also began carrying the message to prisoners at the Jackson County work camp (now CI).

It was a time – the 1970s – when AA was really beginning to take hold in Georgia and a lot of meetings were getting started. Jimmie D. remembers after getting sober in 1971, he went with his sponsor Andy B., and Bob B. and his father-in-law Ed L. to work camp meetings in Putnam County and Hall County. He began going to Clarke County meetings around 1978 at the work farm off Lexington road.

Clarke County Correctional

“Meetings were held in a small outside building...just a room with chairs, away from the dorms,” Jimmie D. recalls. “Usually about four people from AA would go together, and they had to be there on time, because the gates were opened only once at a certain time.” There was no registration or background check, and when Jimmie and South B. started attending meetings there, they usually took their wives.

The meetings were discussion meetings, seldom speaker meetings, and the AAs came with a topic. Generally they would share a bit about their stories -- what brought them to AA, how the program works, working the steps, etc. They drew topics from what the inmates seemed interested in. Some were interested in the program, but seldom showed up in the local rooms following their release. Of course, many were from different counties and probably returned to their home counties on release.

At this time there was a strong corrections support person in the state assembly, Maynard Y. He advised volunteers they were not “fliers.” Their purpose was to carry the message, not to take anything into the jail or carry messages outside for inmates. The number one policy for AA support persons to remember was that “You’re THEIR guest” at the jail. AAs came when invited, and left when asked to leave. It was considered a “no-no” to say things to inmates like “I should be here with you because of all the things I did while drinking.” Jimmie said that was a quick way to lose inmates’ attention, because it separated you from them, making it seem like you were a step above because you got away with it. It was important to watch the men and see the things they were relating to and to not be drawn into discussions about bum raps or beefs against the authorities, but to stay focused on recovery...a place where you could make a difference.

After Jim R. got sober in 1979, he went with Jimmie on Fridays at 7 p.m. for about two years. Jim says he still talks about that experience and what it did for him. At the time he was a poor, single guy without much to do on a Friday night, and Jimmie said, “Come with me.” It worked! As his sobriety progressed and other opportunities opened up for him on Friday nights, Jim made sure his plans were made for AFTER the jail meeting! The meetings were “come if you want to” for the inmates, and typically 5 – 15 attended. He is grateful for the experience and always left feeling as if he’d given of himself.

South B. was outside sponsor for Clarke County CI for just over 5 years, in the 1980s. "I tried to have speaker's meetings and could usually find somebody," he said. "I remember the settings were unnerving at first. It took a few months to figure out that the unusually friendly inmates usually wanted something: help with parole, money, etc. once I figured how to say no it was a lot better.

"The guards were okay with women speakers at the men's jail. I was desperate for speakers and had quite a few women. I finally noticed that some of them were more willing to come, were very popular. I think JoAnn had to point out that a few of them dressed more provocatively than at normal meetings. I became more selective after that. I had noticed a weird energy, but oblivious as always, had not pinned it down.

"It was hard to pass the job on to someone else," South said. "I think I finally just quit going after mentioning it a few times at area meetings. I also took meetings to the Jackson County CI, and, later, to the (Jackson) diversion center. We had a rotating group of 4 for the diversion center. I remember Billy B. was one, but it didn't hold together for long."

In 1989 or early 1990, recalls Bix W., "I had about 5 months sober when Doug R. and another guy came up to me at the Cobb House and gave me two packs of cigarettes. They told me to give them to the guys when I went in for a meeting at the prison (CI). They just roped me into going there.

"I kept going for about 2½ years until I realized I was investing more time in them than in myself. I needed to do some work on my own program. I think it was Wednesdays at 7 p.m. They had coffee and could smoke. Sometimes I had others who went with me – Tom ___ and Jimmy P. It kept me sober and I felt I was doing my best to help other people out. I took one guy home when he got out, met his family. He stayed sober for a while."

(In 2013, Bix takes a meeting to long-term probationers sentenced to attend the Athens Day Reporting Center (DRC). Like the diversion center Doug R. once took him to years ago, he said, "it is attended by people who haven't accepted institutionalization -- or alcoholism -- yet. They still think they can get away with things, and their resentment factor is rather high.")

In the 1990s, Clarke County CI meetings were revived by Eric M., David K., Bill C. and others. In 2006, the men who were attending AA were released, and no new men came. In 2011, Jim T. took books for the facility to put on the library cart and asked if AA could restart the meeting. The administration said they would announce the meetings and if there was interest they would call him.

However, a meeting did grow out of that effort. The administrative assistant to the Clarke County CI warden told Jim he was moving to the new Athens Clarke County Diversion Center, and that they "absolutely" wanted him to start AA meetings there. "God's sometimes tricky the way He does stuff," Jim said. The Diversion Center opened in May 2012, and AA volunteers have taken in a meeting every week.

Jim T. got sober in August 2007. In the spring of 2008, Darrell C., who was taking the men's meeting to the Clarke County Jail, asked if he would like to help. He was approved in October, when he got off probation, and began going in every other Monday night "into the trailer."

In 2009, he convinced jail personnel to let him go with Roy S. to an every Thursday meeting in the jail's recovery pod. He followed Roy as District 16B Corrections Representative in 2010, and was approved to go with Roy into the Jackson County CI. In 2011 he became state Corrections Co-Chair, and took over as state Chair in January 2013.

"I absolutely love it," Jim said. "It's probably the most meaningful thing I have ever done in my life. It lights me up. The jail is good, but it's so transient that you really don't get a chance to get to know the inmates. What I especially love is the prison meetings. You develop relationships and even friendships, because they are there week after week after week.

Jackson County CI

Doug R. remembers meetings in 1977 and 1978 at the Jackson County work farm. "That was back when everybody called it the chain gang, before they built the prison there (Jackson County CI). Billy B. was my sponsor and I was giving him a lot of trouble. I would go to meetings for a while and I would have a relapse, and I would come back, and he would tell me I needed to go to meetings.

"He carried me out to the county farm, and they had this warehouse out there that they allowed us have the meetings in. It had a dirt floor, and during the wintertime we had to sit around this pot-bellied stove and the prisoners would put wood in that thing and burn it while we were trying to have a meeting. It was very distracting, but it was very, kind of homey. We had meetings there once a week on Wednesday nights.

(A group information record from the state office in Macon is dated June 1980. Submitted by Jimmie D., it states the Struggler's Group has six members and meets at the institution Wednesdays at 7:30 p.m. GSR was James G., alternate was Hugh B. Contact was Billy B. and secretary, Doug R.)

"He also carried me to meetings at the diversion center in Jackson County. It was a newly built facility across from the county farm. That was for younger offenders. Then I kind of fell away for a few years, and when I came back in 1984 -- that was officially my last drink, in 1984. About a year after that in 1985, Billy B *reminded* me that I was finally having success at sobriety and I needed to give back, and that is when I started my 7 years of Wednesday night meetings at the Jackson County CI.

"I remember making note to myself, I carried that meeting for 7 years. But that was all together. In the middle of those 7 years there was a break and I started back up again. I started going with Billy B. in '85 for several years. Then around 1990, the Jackson County CI contacted the area and wanted a meeting. I was DCM and said, 'Well ...sure. We'll get somebody out there.' I was truly sober then.

"Every once in awhile somebody would come with me. Various people. Lots of times it would be newcomers. A couple of sponsees, like Tom G. Tom now has 22 years. He's still sober." Doug stopped going to Jackson County CI around 1994. He does not remember who he recruited to succeed him.

"I had relapses on other substances, the first after 13 1/2 years (1997), and I had stopped corrections meetings some time before that," Doug said. "Believe me, It was good for my sobriety to do that meeting. I met a lot of really cool people in that group that I felt at the time, 'Gosh there's no difference between me and them. They're just on

the inside and I'm on the outside.' I would take a couple of boxes of Little Debbie's; they loved them. We averaged 10 to 15, sometimes even 20 that showed up.

"There was no background check. That was way back. They just wanted someone to bring a meeting. Not even an ID. It's a different world now.

"I got burned out. It's not easy, not like just going to an AA meeting. You're kind of on the spot because you're from outside and these guys are all there, and you don't know what their agendas are, you don't know what they are expecting. It can be anxiety producing. But once you get over it ... When I was carrying it for a long period of time, I loved having my once a week meetings there. Where I started getting burned out, if I couldn't go one Wednesday, they wouldn't have a meeting, and I started feeling guilty.

"After I'd been going for a while we would actually pass the calendar to sign up who was going to chair next week. It makes it feel like it's their meeting instead of somebody doing them a favor. I tried to talk the warden into letting the men have their meeting, no matter whether anybody was there or not, and he said, 'No, that's not going to work.' We had several guys then that were highly motivated and I felt they could pull it off."

Clarke County Jail

When Doug R. was recruiting men to go with him to Jackson County CI in the early 90s, there was no prison outreach to women. A newly sober woman named Amy began asking why AA couldn't have a prison meeting for women. She checked and reported back that the only place women were incarcerated in District 16B was in the county jails, and she approached Clarke County.

T. J. Arnold, programs director for the county jail, said to avoid discrimination, AA must offer meetings to both men and women. Amy and Conoly H. began recruiting women and men to apply for the required record check and to attend a required orientation meeting.

Meetings began in January 1993, with women scheduled for 1st, 3rd, and 5th Mondays at 7 p.m., and men for 2nd and 4th Mondays. They have continued since that time, though times now are 5:30 p.m. for women and 7 p.m. for men. All AA meetings are taken in on 1st, 3rd and 5th Mondays, with Narcotics Anonymous taking meetings on 2nd and 4th Mondays.

Conoly H. recalled, "We signed up and got about 12 women and 12 men approved. I had once heard a workshop speaker at the Cobb House who said he attended jail or prison meetings in Clarke County every week until he burned out, so I tried to rotate people into jail meetings. I told the women no one would be scheduled more than once a month.

After about 5 years, Mary D. began to schedule women. She was followed by Joan B., Ginger G. and Pam W. Some of the first women to take meetings in were: Sara P., Paula S., Valerie W., Kathleen G., Janine S., Kay B., Kathy T., Georgia P., Bobbie R., and Jane B. Attendance by inmates is steady, with as few as 5, but usually 15 to 20 women.

"Two women inmates attended the first meeting; it was their first knowledge of AA, Conoly said. Mae P. (now S.) told her story at one of the first meetings. We tried to set up sponsors for women who wanted them, but this was not successful. We also tried to connect with women when they got out of jail and get them to a meeting, but they never knew when they would be released.

“I did not have much luck rotating men,” Conoly added. A man, or a couple of men would attend every meeting until he/they burned out and recruited another. The first men were Trey W., Tim J. and Eric M. Eric was newly sober, homeless and jobless – he once said he needed the discipline of “showing up, no matter what,” and he totally committed to the men’s jail meeting. He also committed to the Happy Hour Group and once again began weekly meetings at the Clarke County CI.

After Eric died sober in 1997, men’s jail meetings were continued for some time by men from Happy Hour Group – John B., David P., David C. Walter C., and others. Zack G. began scheduling men’s meetings in 2012. Thursday night meetings in a “recovery pod” are held in addition to the Monday meeting in the classroom/library trailer. They began in 2009, and are taken in by Roy S. and Jim T.

Recovery on the Hill

Doug R. burned out in the early or mid-90s, and Jackson County CI meetings stopped until Warden Joe Dalton approached the District and asked for AA meetings to be brought in. Two graduate students, Easy Does It members, T.C. and Paul, began taking a meeting in every other Thursday night. Shortly after this, on July 1, 1997, Roy S. moved to Athens from Ohio.

When Roy shared he had done prison time, and would be willing to take meetings “behind the walls,” Eric M. (corrections rep) and Conoly H. took him to meet the warden.

“I think it was on July 22, we went out to see Joe Dalton. We just talked. He was under the impression I just wanted to come once a month,” Roy said. “I told the warden I wanted to come every week, and if I could, I would like to do it twice a week. And he said, ‘You really must be devoted to want to come twice a week.’ I told him, ‘This saved my life.’ And he just kind of rolled the red carpet out.”

Roy was approved without a records check, and began bringing meetings. “I went by myself for the first couple of meetings. After about the third meeting I announced it at meetings, and I started getting a lot of people who wanted to go – a host of other people, men and women. There was never any problem. They had an open door policy. Most of the time the small room wouldn’t hold all of us. I did that probably for three years.”

Roy wrote New York for a starter kit, and contacted the Georgia State office in Macon. The group was registered as Recovery on the Hill on Oct. 17, 1997.

“We used the rotation format we had in my home group up north (Ohio),” Roy said. “The first week would be a speaker meeting; the second a Big Book study, the third was the 12 Steps and the 4th, the 12 traditions. If there was a fifth week, we generally had open discussion. It is still going on in 2013.

“We celebrate anniversaries once a year, we should have them in July or early August, but the last couple of anniversaries its been like September. ” he added. He brings in a cake for anniversary meetings.

The first GSR was Ronnie B. He got paroled and Roy heard from him for the first year or so he was out.

In 2003 there were staff changes at the prison and the open door policy ended. Warden Vicky Underwood saw a female inappropriately dressed, and discontinued participation by women. It was during her tenure (about 2005 to 2009) that IDs started being required.

“Today, (2013) it’s just me and Jim T.,” Roy said. “By the time we leave the (Clarke) county jail at 6:30, we never get there at 7. We get there about 7:15 or 7:20 and (the men) have already read all the readings, opened the meeting with prayer. They are already in the visitation room, they have coffee all ready for us. If we didn’t show up, they would still have their meetings. It’s not like some other places where we would have to show up before they bring the men out.

“Some have been coming for as long as 5 or 6 years,” Roy said. “One man, my shining star in AA, was Aaron O. (We called him O.B.). He is still sober and moved from Georgia back to Ohio. I’ve had a couple more, but he was the one who was more outstanding. I’ve had him come and speak at my birthday. And he got involved in his district. He would have correctional workshops in Buford and invite me. That’s the kind of stuff you like to be a part of.

“The highlight of it is that of the nearly 16 years going out there, I know of six men who are still sober. Some of them have double-digit years. That is just a blessing, to know six men who are still sober. I hear from them periodically.”

Roy also began attending Monday men’s meetings at Clarke County jail and a went few times to Wednesday meetings at Clarke County CI.

Now he goes to Clarke County Jail on Thursday nights. “Three and a half to four years ago, they started letting me go in Charlie 4 or Charlie 5, and when they finished with the two new pods, I started going in there because one of the pods is an educational pod and one is a recovery pod.

“Thank God for (Chaplain, and now Chief) Tommy York. He’s so vital to the recovery community,” Roy said. “Today Jim and I take an AA meeting into the pod on Thursday from 5:30 -- 6:30 p.m. Some of the other guys go on Mondays. The every other Monday men’s meeting is also at 5:30, but not in the pod. They allow three men in at a time. I don’t go to that meeting because on Monday I have a newcomers’ meeting at Happy Hour.

“In the county jail the men are coming and going. It is the prison where there is stability. I see the men from the Clarke County jail in meetings outside, but no continuous sobriety. How long do most of them stay – don’t have a clue. The most important fact is that the seed has been planted and whenever they make up their mind that’s what they are going to do, they’ll do it. And that’s all we can do.”

16B Corrections Committee

In the 1990s Intergroup voted \$100 a year for to buy literature for inmates for Christmas. District 16B voted a \$100 annual budget to buy Big Books, pamphlets and chips.

Eric M. was District 16B corrections committee representative from the mid-1990s until his death in 1997. He was followed by Conoly H. from 1997 to 1999. Roy S. served from about 2000 until 2010, when he was elected alternate DCM.

“When Roy was elected alternate DCM, he had to step down as Corrections Rep,” Jim T. recalled, “he announced to the district that Jim T. would take over. And that was a surprise to Jim, but I was okay with it. I started doing the corrections job in January 2010.”

Jim T. became co-chair of the state (area) corrections in January 2011 and suggested Ginger G. to finish his rotation as district 16B corrections rep.

“I knew Ginger would do a great job,” he said. “Because she was committed. I think corrections is different than any other form of AA service. Corrections requires a major league commitment. If I’m going into a jail, and I can’t make it and I don’t call and let them know that, and they move inmates unnecessarily, that reflects badly not only on me but on AA as a whole.

“It takes awhile to get a state ID badge, and that can be frustrating. The good side is that it really sorts out the people who are committed. The same applies to the jail. People who are unwilling to wait to get a badge, aren’t going to be willing to show up every time. Corrections requires, I think, a very strong commitment on the part of the volunteer.”

Ginger G. got started in corrections in the mid 1990’s, as many volunteers do, through the county jail meeting. She was approached after an AA meeting and invited to go to the women’s meeting at the jail. “I was early in sobriety (sobriety date 1/29/1992) and afraid and still looking for a comfortable seat ‘in the middle of the boat.’ I was approved and put on the list of volunteers and started helping take in meetings and have continued to do so to the present,” she said.

“I have never left a jail or prison meeting wanting to drink and I always leave knowing that I do not have any problems,” Ginger said. “It seems like whenever I was depressed or hurting, Conoly or Joan would call me and ask me to go to a meeting at Clarke County and I found it to be the best cure for depression.”

“I started doing meetings in correctional facilities solely with the motive of wanting it to help me be sober. And while I still know it will help keep me sober, I more and more want to be of use to God by carrying the AA message of hope and recovery to these women. Sometimes it is heartbreaking but the program does provide a seed of hope.”

Expanding Programs

During their district rotations, Jim and Ginger expanded the corrections program. Ginger attended both morning and evening corrections workshops at the Georgia State Service Assembly in January 2010. At that time she was corrections representative for Lumpkin Street Noontimers and was scheduling women to take meetings into Clarke County Jail.

She brought two ideas back to 16B. The first was the pink Coins for Cons cans, used in groups to collect donations to buy literature for inmates. The idea, she believes, originated in California in 1957. Because of cutbacks in Georgia, the state government provides books for prison libraries, but does not give them to inmates.

From May 2010 through 2012, the program has put *into the hands of inmates* 835 Big Books (full editions, pocket and Spanish), 84 copies of The 12 & 12, 430 other books (Living Sober, AA in Prison, As Bill Sees It, and Daily Reflections), and 1,150 pamphlets. They’ve gone to Clarke, Oconee and Jackson and Barrow counties, Jackson County Correctional Institute, ACC Diversion Center, Clarke County Day Reporting Center and Lee Arrendale State Prison for Women.

At the evening workshop, Ginger heard about “chip cards” from Maggie M, who was taking meetings into a jail in District 10A. The printed cards are the size of a

standard business card. Brightly colored, they begin with a white (surrender) card and mark by months an inmate's sober time. They have a quotation from AA literature on the back. They are used at jail meetings in District 16B and at Lee Arrendale Prison.

During their terms as district corrections rep, Jim and Ginger worked together to start new meetings. They took an informal poll, and when they knew they had a core group of volunteers, approached Barrow, Jackson and Oconee Counties.

Barrow has continued to say they are not ready for an AA meeting. AA members take literature for the library cart, and keep checking back. "We show them our consistency and our continued desire to carry the message," Jim said. "Because sometimes that's what it takes. We are asking them to disrupt their routine. We have to prove ourselves to them."

Jackson County's problem is not having a meeting room they can gather interested inmates in. "The sheriff is very enthusiastic," Jim said. "But she is not comfortable with us going into the pod. I tell her we do it in Clarke and in Oconee. In modern facilities they've got cameras everywhere. That's one of the things with corrections. We need to work not only with the staff, but we have to work with the physical layout of the facility".

Oconee County became part of District 16B in Sept. 2011, and the District Corrections Committee approached the jail immediately. The Sheriff and director of inmate programs were enthusiastic, and the first men's meeting was taken in by Zack G. and Jim T. on November 26. Two weeks later, Meera N. and Ginger G. held a women's meeting.

Men and women's meetings are held every other Saturday at 10:30 a.m. in the pods, unless there are no inmates wanting one. Here again, there is no central meeting space and inmates in the three men's pods and one women's pod are polled each Friday to determine how many meetings there will be. There could be four meetings, or no meetings, Ginger said. "A lot of times you go out there and you just go home. That's the hardest part of it." Often meetings are one on one.

District 16B is also carrying the message to Lee Arrendale (Women's) State Prison in Alto, GA. In 2011, after Jim got his Georgia Department of Corrections ID badge, Jackson County CI was moving to a new location and canceled the regular AA meeting one Thursday, so he attended the meeting at Lee Arrendale.

"It just blew me away. There were about 65 women sitting on bleachers in the gymnasium. I'll never forget it," he said. He told Ginger about it and she began working to get a state ID for herself and others in the District. She's been going for 2½ years, and has recruited Sally M., Meera N., Lisa H. and Stephanie C. In 2013 the meeting became a registered AA group, The Garden of Hope.

In addition to Recovery on the Hill, two institutional groups have been registered. They are Strugglers Group, Jackson CCI, registered 4/3/1974 and All Together Group, Clarke CCI, registered 9/26/1974. Both have been declared inactive.