

Bob G: My name is Bob G. And

Dennis T: I'm Dennis T.

Bob G: And I'm interviewing Dennis T, who is a good friend of mine in the program. And this is my first interview as the interviewer and his first interview as an interviewee. And so Dennis, I want to thank you for taking time to come join me today, and I want to thank you for buying me lunch.

Dennis T: You mighty welcome.

Bob G: And I'm going to ask you-

Dennis T: My pleasure.

Bob G: It was my pleasure, Dennis. And I'm going to ask you some questions and they relate to AA and the program, how it was, how is today and your own experience with it and service work in the community. So why don't you tell me a little about your life before you found AA, where you were born, what your childhood was like, and growing up.

Dennis T: I was born in Clark County, Athens, Georgia, and more than anything, I grew up on a farm about nine miles outside of Athens. I had a very good childhood, my father was very well off and I didn't want for nothing. I was taken care of. And the main reason is my mother had seven miscarriages between my brother and me. It's 13 years between the time of my brother and me. For some reason at about the age of 12, somewhere in that neighborhood, I developed a fear and I couldn't tell what I was scared of. I was just fearful, felt like something was always getting ready to happen, and I used to stay up at night. I wouldn't sleep.

Then my mother got back problems and she got on drugs and she killed herself in front of me. And that fear that I had got worse, the emptiness that lived inside of me, I could taste it. It was so harsh. I went ahead and went to work when I was 16 years old to give me something to do and I bailed hay from my daddy on the farm. And then along about the age of 16, I took a drink and all that fear, all that emptiness and all that being alone went away. And I figured right then I know why people drink because it fit me. It made my life whole, I thought.

And I kept drinking every weekend during high school, every weekend I could get out and drink, I would go drink, I'd go to a party, but I really didn't care whether I was at a party or not. As long as I had my drink, I was in good shape and I went on to college, made good grades as much as I drank, I couldn't believe I made bad grades, but I made good grades. Then my daddy got sick and back up a minute, he met somebody after my mother died and remarried. I did not like that. Something in me just turned against that and I felt distant. I felt like nobody bothered to ask me was it going to be all right. And of course they don't need to, but at 15 or 16 years old, that's how you think. But I went on to college and then came Vietnam. I came back, went back to school, went back to Georgia.

And while I was at Georgia, my father got prostate cancer. And back then there was nobody in Athens that could do a prostatectomy. Bob Payne was the first one that came to town that could do it. And he tried to get my daddy to let him do a prostatectomy on him. And my daddy looked at him and said, "I've known you since you were that high. You ain't cutting on me." And my daddy sat there and died. He didn't die that day, but he just slowly went on and died. What else we got on there?

Bob G: Well, so we're going to move forward. When and how did your drinking get out of control?

Dennis T: My drinking got out of control the first time I drank. And the reason is because I had psychological problems and I was scared all the time. Everything that you read in the Big Book about lying, about stealing, about doing these things. I had them all. And I tried to get rid of them. I couldn't get rid of them, but I drank constantly. And then it turned into where I was drinking every day.

Bob G: How old were you when you were drinking every day?

Dennis T: 19.

Bob G: But you were in college?

Dennis T: I was in college.

Bob G: So you're drinking every day and you're going to school and getting good grades?

Dennis T: Getting good grades, that's amazing to me.

Bob G: Yes it is.

Dennis T: I didn't know it.

Bob G: And in the army you had access to alcohol? Not every day.

Dennis T: Not every day. But the one thing that I had was that I had taken ROTC at UGA. So I took this exam, the army gives you one of these where they show you a hammer and a nail and they say, match it up. Anyway. But I got to a point to where when my father was sick and my brother was trying to run two companies, he couldn't do it. And he asked me would I come to work. And so that's what I did. I went to work helping him with the companies and still drinking a lot. And it was out of hand. The first time that I ever drank in the morning I was 21.

Bob G: Well then you're doing all this drinking. How did you know you had hit bottom? When did you hit bottom and how did you know you hit bottom?

Dennis T: How I knew I hit bottom was I got up one morning and went in and mixed a drink at about, I don't know, say eight, nine o'clock in the morning, sat down and started

drinking it. And all of a sudden it just came over me because see, I come from a long line of alcoholics. Everybody on my mother's side of the family, six children, and every one of them had it. And I got scared that that's what was happening to me. And so I tried to stop.

Well, I was young enough that I got over the shakes, but I kept throwing up so much that I threw up blood and went to the hospital. Family doctor came in there and sat down as nice as he could, talked to me about my drinking. And of course that was in one ear and out the other, because I was smart, you see, especially after I'd had one or two hits. I was smart. I knew everything. I really didn't know. I had plenty of money. I knew everything I needed to get by, I thought. And so I drank myself down to where I couldn't work anymore. Stayed sick all the time when I drank. When I would wake up, I'd be like that and I would drink to get rid of the shakes. And I went to first treatment center when I was 27 years old.

Bob G: Really?

Dennis T: And the man in the room with me died.

Bob G: At the treatment center?

Dennis T: And they tried to make me feel like if I didn't straighten up. And my response to that was, well, if I get out of here, I'm just not going to drink as much, if I get out of here. Because see, I thought of a treatment center, they were going to have a big hose and hose me down and do all kinds of shit like that, but they didn't. But this started a long line of treatment centers for me, 14.

Bob G: You were in treatment centers at 14 different times.

Dennis T: Right. And the reason I did that is because I found out I could go into a treatment center and they could drug you and stop you from throwing up and feeling so bad for a while. And so when I would get too sick from drinking, I'd just go to a treatment center. I wouldn't stay there the whole time. Just a jerk. Just an asshole. Just smart ass. Everything.

Bob G: Let's switch now into what your role was and your experience was with AA. How old were you and when did you get into AA and who got you in and what was that like when you first went in?

Dennis T: I was 27 years old, the first AA meeting that I went, I take that back. I was 26, because I went to Peachford, Charter Peachford to be detoxed and gone through treatment for alcoholism. And I made the first week there, a young man in the bed next to me died. And it scared me to death. I tried to go home. I did everything I could to try to get my family to come get me. They wouldn't do it. And I got out and I swore that I'd never drink again, which is being a good alcoholic. We know that we can lie to ourselves very well. And I stayed sober for about six months. And then I started back. And this time, I

went to the sixth floor at Athens Regional, which was where they put the people that had kind of tilted to the one side in the brain.

But anyway, Bill Tumbling would come up there and see me and talk to me. And he kept telling me, he said, "You're going to keep this up, and something really bad's going to happen, you got to stop. I just wish I could beg you to stop." So I got out of there and I went for about another four months. And then it got to be about every six months I'd be drunk. And of course I'd go off to treatment centers because I knew that I had the money to go to them. And the second thing was I wouldn't be sick throwing up from drinking so much. And then I got where I had a sponsor who turned out to be my sponsor from then on out. But he told me I was going to die and so did Bill Tumbling.

They tried to get me to go off to Helen, Georgia and I wouldn't do it. So they kept me there in the hospital from July until right after Thanksgiving and they wouldn't let me go home. And I don't blame them. I was crazy. And stop a minute and it's okay to just stop.

Bob G: Yeah. Okay. Well, obviously you didn't die, so.

Dennis T: Yeah, right.

Bob G: What happened with AA and what Clubhouse or what meeting group did you join and where was it and what did you think of it Dennis? You're a rip-roaring drunk and you're going to AA and I'm curious as to what you thought about the whole hocus pocus, the Big Book, the steps, the works.

Dennis T: I thought all of that needed somebody and that person wasn't going to be me. I knew deep down, deep inside I was an alcoholic. I knew that. The problem is I wanted to want to be one. You see what I'm saying here? I wanted to want to quit, but I couldn't quit. I could not stop, no matter what. And I finally, I went back into treatment not because of drinking. I went back in because I was scared I was going to drink again. And I went back in for three weeks and kept me in. Bill Tumbling did, for three weeks. And my sponsor got me working different things around AA. Back then, people smoked a lot and meetings. So I got to clean out ashtrays. I got to-

Bob G: Where was the first meeting you went to?

Dennis T: The first meeting I went to was over on Row Road. You probably don't know where that is. Other people know where it is. It's behind Poultry plant over there. And it's named Row Road because of the road that cuts through there. And I had, trying to think-

Bob G: Did the group have a name?

Dennis T: Well, that's what I was trying to think of. And I can't remember the name of that group.

Bob G: Was it men and Women?

Dennis T: Yeah.

Bob G: Was it just a meeting room or a church?

Dennis T: No, it was a meeting room and it was men and women. And I didn't like it. I didn't like it one bit. I didn't like somebody telling me what to do, telling me how to think and because after all, I mean I was getting along just fine. I just accidentally had too many times I was drunk. But besides that, I was doing real good. But then-

Bob G: Did you try to work the steps?

Dennis T: No.

Bob G: A well-known sponsor, Philip.

Dennis T: Philip.

Bob G: He wanted you to do the step work.

Dennis T: That's right. And he fired me. And then I had a mental breakdown. They used to call it nervous-

Bob G: Nervous breakdown.

Dennis T: Yeah, they call it something else now. Loss of coping skills. And I had that and I didn't think I was going to come out from under it. And I laid in the bed for about three weeks, no food. They came out there and they gave me water, hooked up. I mean, I was sick and I was so scared I was going to die. I called Mike West and he said, "I'll meet you at the hospital. I'm going up there now to do a case. I'll see you there." So I went up to St. Mary's and got in there and they thought I'd die.

My heart quit at one time. I mean, anyway, I was very fortunate. And they took me to Charter Winds that next day. And I was so scared that I was going to start drinking again, that I wouldn't let them put me in a room. I wanted to be where somebody could see me the whole time. Nurses, and I tell you something, I used to walk the floor at night. I wouldn't sleep. And had this wonderful nurse named Sherry, and she said, "Dennis, you've got to go back there and get in that bed. Dr. Tumbling is not going to let you go home until you go to sleep. You understand me?" And I said, "Yes, but I'll tell you what, every time I think about going back there in that room and laying down on that one bed in that room, you know what I think about? I think how I'm going to kill myself." And she went, "Well, why don't you just lay down right here on this gurney and me and you'll just hang out here together."

But I had the best sponsor that I could get for me, and he turned my ass around. And I look at AA now, and I don't know whether you want me to go this far or not, but I look at AA now and it is not what I think AA should be.

Bob G: Well, I'm going to ask you how it was and how it is and the differences in how you feel about it also, as long as we're making that transition. Tell me, with Phillip as your sponsor, did you start working the steps?

Dennis T: Yes.

Bob G: Okay. How long did it take to get through the 12 steps? A year?

Dennis T: 12 steps took eight months.

Bob G: Eight months.

Dennis T: It took four months to just get to four and five.

Bob G: Yeah. What was AA's reputation in the community. You were at a Clubhouse, a meeting?

Dennis T: Meeting. And at that time it was still, I wouldn't say it's frowned upon, but it's something that was a little odd for people that they didn't know what alcoholism was. And so AA was not looked upon then as it is now, where you get help, where you're doing something for yourself to get better. It was, Oh, you at that meeting? And that was the end of it.

Bob G: Tell me, were there many AA groups in Athens? What year are we talking about now?

Dennis T: I'd say '76 through, and then we'll go on up to '89 because that's when I quit. There was about, I'd say in Athens when I first started, there was about six groups somewhere in that neighborhood. And Phillip would pick me up because I didn't have a driver's license.

Bob G: How come?

Dennis T: My wife wouldn't let me drive? It wasn't the cops, it's her. She didn't, didn't trust me.

Bob G: She was a super cop.

Dennis T: Yeah. She didn't trust me. And we'd go to meetings, meet Carl after the meeting, have coffee. I mean, everything was good. He put me to doing things, going to see people in the hospital, going to see people in jail. I mean, everything that I did had to be, or was working towards what AA presented me with.

Bob G: Now, when you went to a meeting, I know today we have a script and we follow a format. We say the Serenity Prayer and we go over things. Was there a script in those days? If you chaired a meeting, you followed a format?

Dennis T: Yes. And each group has their own format. Here at the one that you and I go to, of course they read three things and that's it. You go out to the Clubhouse and they'll read

four things. And that's where I start splitting off. I think the most important part of that meeting is the time that you take to speak in the meeting.

Bob G: The sharing.

Dennis T: Yeah, the sharing is the most important. The reading, I understand it, but you don't get anywhere with it in my book. I was taught that the fifth tradition keeps us alive and never to sway from it. And I don't know whether you know this or not, but in the way to conduct an AA meeting, if it's an AA meeting, there is no talk of drugs in there. Even on open days, there is no, okay, you're a drug addict, you can talk. They can sit in there and observe, but not to take over the meeting or something like that.

And I'm real sticky about that. And that keeps me from joining the Clubhouse out there because they talk in general terms, addicts and stuff like that. And I don't like that. I go to NA at times and they good, but there's not, and this is just my opinion, we don't have the people that are sponsors like we used to have. People back when I was coming along, they were tough. People died. I mean, it was nothing. One a week. And it is sad. It's really sad. And I mean people, you could hear them when they were getting ready to go off the deep end, they start talking crazy. I mean, just awful.

Bob G: Wow. So I want you to tell me about your experience sponsoring other people. How long were you in the program before Philip said, "Okay, you're ready to sponsor," and you'd raise your hand and then somebody came up to you and said, "Hey, I'm Bob. Would you be my sponsor?" Tell me about that and tell me how it was being a brand new sponsor.

Dennis T: I was told when I celebrated my second year, and he was not big on chips, he said, "Go get one if you want it." But he said, "Let me tell you something here, it's one day at a time, one just day at a time." And I did things in there that I didn't think I'd ever do. That's cleaning toilets. I mean, it's just crazy. And Phillip at two years told me, he said, "I've got somebody that you need to talk to." And I said, "Are you asking me to be a sponsor?" And he said, "No, I'm telling you." And he said, "Let me tell you something about being a sponsor. If you do it right and you want to do it right, you'll learn more about yourself than you will about the other person. You'll find out how deep you are in the program and where you are weak and where you're strong."

Bob G: And was that the case?

Dennis T: Yep.

Bob G: He was right.

Dennis T: Yeah. And he was a tough old bird. He was kind of a small man and just like a banty rooster. And if the meeting got out of hand talking, he'd be the one that'd stop it. Carl used to do it.

Bob G: Yeah, Carl would do it.

Dennis T: And I mean Carl would, years and years ago, he was really good at it and Philip was good. It was two or three people in there that they were so scared about getting drunk. I mean, you and I kid around about it a little bit, but they didn't kid.

Bob G: You moved to other groups then?

Dennis T: Yes.

Bob G: You left this Road place.

Dennis T: I've been-

Bob G: Is that because Philip went to another place? You wanted to follow your sponsor?

Dennis T: Well, Philip had his own group, and that was out off of on the East Athens side. I forget the name of the group. I used to go to it. It's at a church out there, but there just wasn't a lot like it is now. I mean, you can go find a meeting anytime. But I just got brought in and so did Dick. Dick had to do the same thing. But I was just very fortunate, that's all.

Bob G: Okay. So let me ask you something. I know people have different opinions about the Big Book. Some people think it's better than the Holy Bible. And that Bill W, who wrote the Big Book, he was like a patron saint, like Moses. And what was your experience and thoughts about the Big Book? I mean, is it important to you? There are people who they call book thumpers who will say, turn to page 85, and sure enough, you turn to 85 and they're right. They know the pages by heart. What's your story with the Big Book?

Dennis T: The Big Book to me, I didn't read like I was supposed to read and all that. I would try to skim, any way that I could figure out a way to do something easy, that's the way I did it. The Big Book, I'll tell you how it works, and forgive me if I'm preaching to you, but this goes back to a friend of mine who left a law practice here in town to go to Emory to go through Candler School of Theology. And he said that he met this guy that was teaching World Bible history, and he also happened to be one of the ones that signs off on if it's correct when they... So anyway, he walked into the school, walked into the classroom one morning and went around and just picked up four or five different Bibles and stood back in front of room.

He said, "Now, who in here can tell me what this is?" And one of the good old boys is. "Oh, that's the word of God. That's what that is." "Oh, it is?" "Yeah." "Are you sure about that?" "Yeah, that's the word of God." And he says, "Well, let's look at this a minute." And of course, he knows what he's looking for. And so he goes and he flips through one of the Bibles and he says, "Now the Bible you say is the word of God says this, and this New American standard says this, and the new King James version says this. There's something's wrong here. God's lying or something's wrong. What's wrong here?" And he said, "Let me tell you something, everybody in here listen to me a minute. That's not the word of God. That's the word of man."



He said, "What you've got here is a book. And this book here turns your soul into what God means by these words. And it's going to be different every time you read it. That's why you read it and you go, well, I didn't read that before. That sounds so different to me." And I've always remembered that because I'll read in that Big Book and things come out like they should, but it's different than the time I read it before.

Bob G: Well, how many times have you read the Big Book?

Dennis T: I read it every year on my AA birthday.

Bob G: When is your AA birthday?

Dennis T: AA birthday is July the 18th, 1989.

Bob G: When you joined the program and started and was sober and started going to meetings and Philip Morris is your sponsor, were you continuously sober until today when I'm sitting here from you or did you go out?

Dennis T: No, once I left, I've been sober ever since. July 18th.

Bob G: July 18th.

Dennis T: Yeah.

Bob G: Okay. And since you had a sponsor, that's when he picked you up and when all this story takes place.

Dennis T: Right.

Bob G: And until then, you were in and out of all those recovery centers?

Dennis T: He died in my arms.

Bob G: Philip Morris?

Dennis T: Sure did. And he and I got to be best friends, and that normally doesn't happen, but we got to be best friends. And he had throat cancer and they killed it. And then he had another one pop up on his lung and he just couldn't, body couldn't recover. And I was laying there, I was sitting there on the side of the bed with him and I picked him up and held him in my arms and he said, "I'm tired. I'm tired. I mean, I just cannot do this one more day. I love you, Dennis." And he shut his eyes and then they just opened right back up. He was dead. And I didn't know.

Bob G: How old was Philip at the time? You think?

Dennis T: 60.

Bob G: Oh wow.

Dennis T: He's probably 66, something like that.

Bob G: Were you involved ever with the conferences and the assemblies and the conventions in the region or state and what was that like? And how'd you get involved?

Dennis T: No, I did things, but it's so far back that I can't hardly remember it. Because Philip made me do all that to get involved in AA. And so when I did the state, and it was fun. I mean, you ain't got to worry about people being drunk and they ain't loud and they don't care if you go in there and watch a movie on TV. They don't give a damn.

Bob G: Okay. Well, do you still go to any of those things?

Dennis T: No, I've done my deal. I've been just about everything you can be.

Bob G: Well, let me ask you this. So since 1989, that's a lot of sobriety. You have a lot of sobriety and a lot of meetings you've been to.

Dennis T: Right.

Bob G: So we were at a meeting today, you and I were at a meeting, we were at Noon Timers on Lumpkin. That's my home group. I was always happy to have you there. It always made me feel good and felt that we knew each other a lot longer than just the three and a half years I've got. But how has AA changed since the first time you walked in at that place in 1989 and you've had your last drink, you're going to AA that was 30 or something years ago. How has it changed to today?

Dennis T: Today-

Bob G: And how do you see the difference? Would you wish it was the old days?

Dennis T: I wish that it was back like the old days.

Bob G: So what were the old days?

Dennis T: The old days were like, your sponsor was very engaged in your life and he talked to you like Carl, I assume, talked to you. And we needed that then because people were dying. But what's happened is it's not as strict as it used to be. And I don't know any other way to put it, but it's real funny. When I go out there to the Clubhouse, it really bothers me as good as that place is and everything, they still talk drugs in meetings. And I can't handle that because I was brought up where it said, "No, you don't do that. You got to take care of what's doing it." I don't know if you know this or not, but there was a group called the Washingtonians. At one time, this group had over a half a million sober people. And they got to thinking, if we can do that, there's no telling what we can do to help humanity. So they got off of their AA stuff and started going and preaching to people and all kinds of these things, and half of them died drunk.

Bob G: No.

Dennis T: But that's the truth. 500,000 people. But they quit doing what they were supposed to be doing.

Bob G: And Carl felt very strongly about that.

Dennis T: I know he did.

Bob G: I know he did. So how did you wind up at Noon Timers?

Dennis T: I went to try to find a meeting and I walked into that one. It was the wrong meeting, but I walked in and I sat down and I kind of liked the people that were in there. See, that's Philip's church. He didn't want us up there because his son was a deacon in that church and he didn't want us up there. Well, after he died, I went up there and talked to the pastor because we needed a place, the Catholic Center was kicking us out. And I went up there and told him who I was and who Phillip was and what he was to me. And was there any way that we could squeeze three days a week out of you to have an AA meeting here for an hour?

And I don't know, there's a lot of people that take credit for it, but I don't. But that is what happened. But like I said, AA has changed to it's just getting... I don't know, except it doesn't have the grips on it that it used to have. And people don't understand it'll kill you. I mean, we laugh and we talk in the rooms and everything, and that's all bright and good, but you start drinking again.

Bob G: It's a bad disease and it will kill you.

Dennis T: Yup.

Bob G: There's no question about that. I think one of the issues is people are coming in sooner. They're not as sick. So they're getting more years of sobriety, but they're not dying and reinforcing the dangers of alcohol because they are coming in soon. They're coming in and they don't have liver disease. They don't have wet brain. So you're not seeing the ravages of alcohol in the rooms.

Dennis T: Right. Like we used to. You're exactly right. See, I don't see the sickies coming there. Back at Cobb Street, Cobb group, one of the rooms in there was wood, and it was a small room. It held maybe 20 people in there. And you could always tell when somebody was new in there.

Bob G: Yeah, cool. Bit shaky, nervous through it. They're in withdrawal.

Dennis T: Yeah. And you can sit there and say, "God damn, I'm glad that ain't me." I mean, oh God. Because it could be.

Bob G: Carl used to tell me people would come into the room drunk.

Dennis T: Yeah,

Bob G: I've never seen that happen.

Dennis T: Oh, well, I went to a meet and drunk, this guy named Billy Bolton, who was a friend of my daddy's and my brothers, wore a big old cowboy hat all the time, cowboy boots and had a cigar. And the cigar was the same size every time you'd see him chew on that cigar. And so they decided to sic him on me, he was going straighten me out, and he came to take me over there to Row Road, to the meeting over there. And we pulled up in the car and he reached over and turned that ignition off. And he slid that big ass of his around in that car. He says, "Now you listen to me." And I go, "Uh-uh," he says, "You're not to say a goddamn word in there. Do you understand me?" "Yeah," "That's good. If you do now you're going out the door." And so the first couple of meetings I went to, I was drunk.

Bob G: Well,

Dennis T: And I mean, it's funny now, but hell, it's sad.

Bob G: It's sad.

Dennis T: It really is.

Bob G: Well, Dennis, that's quite a journey you've had, and I do really appreciate taking the time, having lunch with you, and I love seeing you in the meeting. And we'll transcribe this and we'll see what it looks like and you'll get a chance to read it.

Dennis T: Okay. Thank you.