

Old Timer Interview- AA Archives
Farris J. 12/14/2024

Bob: Good afternoon. I'm Bob G., at the 24th Street Clubhouse with Farris J. Today is Saturday, December 14th, 2024. Farris, I want to thank you for your time today. During this interview, I will ask you some questions about your time in AA, your recovery, your service work, and some of your observations about AA practices in the past compared to today. But let me start by asking you what your sobriety date is.

Farris: My sobriety date is August 30th, 1998.

Bob: Wow. Okay. Well, please tell me a little bit about your life before you found AA.

Farris: I was born in Athens, Georgia, in 1952. Some of my earliest recollections are that I was somehow different. I kept looking for things that would make me happy, and I was very upset that no one seemed to intuitively guess the things that would make me happy. I was born to two loving parents who made it clear that they had dedicated their lives to making my life good-materially, educationally, and religiously (I had no concept of spirituality, physically). I now realize that praise and punishment were fair and appropriate.

I dropped out of nursery school. I had a cousin who was two months younger than me. We would go to nursery school together but hated it passionately, so we dropped out. That cousin ultimately died related to addiction. I started kindergarten at age 5 and proceeded through elementary school, except for vivid memories of anxiety and a sense that I didn't fit in. When I got to fourth grade, my fourth-grade teacher thought I had an ability that exceeded the norm. I was given some testing, and I skipped fifth grade. However, rather than seeing this as a compliment, I felt I was being punished because my friends who had gone to school with me were no longer with me. I had some anxiety at the beginning of every year anyway, and I had horrible anxiety when I suddenly ended up in sixth grade, knowing no one. Nevertheless, it wasn't long before I had new friends in sixth grade, and I proceeded through sixth, seventh, and eighth grades.

At 13 years of age, I got drunk for the first time. As a kid, we occasionally had a tiny glass of wine at Christmas. I never felt any effect from it, nor did I have any fantasy about it. When I was in fourth grade, I did try cigarettes, and I thought that would make me seem like an adult. I was convinced in fourth grade that I was an adult. I didn't have a job, but aside from that, if I had a salary, I would've been a full-fledged adult. I really did not like authority. My father had a bottle that he would keep under the sink in the kitchen, and he would usually have one drink a week. At age 13, Super Bowl I, I got drunk for the first time. I felt that suddenly I was relieved of all anxiety, and I had arrived. From that point on, I would periodically put small amounts of alcohol in aspirin bottles or other things and take it to school with me, put it in my locker, and at an appropriate time during the day, I would drink it. I always got that relief from anxiety and stress. I could talk to girls, I could dance, I could do things that I could never do under the influence of alcohol.

I graduated from high school. I was the second honor graduate. I would've been first, but my 12th-grade homeroom teacher gave me a C in conduct, and I still have a resentment about that today. I didn't know what a resentment was. I only knew that I wanted to kill him, and I still have feelings of wanting to kill him.

Farris: I graduated from high school. I was 16 when I graduated and started college at 17. I did a pre-college program the summer before my freshman year in college. I created a fake ID. I experienced my first blackout after consuming a half-pint of Smirnoff 100-proof vodka. The hangover was horrible. I felt very sick and said, "Gee, that was certainly an unintended consequence." I do remember the blackout; I had these little photographs of the entire evening—messing with people, waking people up, jumping on their beds. I don't think I urinated on anybody's bed on that occasion, and I said to myself, "You're not going to do that again."

I bought a half-pint of vodka and a half-pint of Bacardi 80-proof rum using my created ID. So the half-pint of Bacardi was still in my room, and two days later, I changed my mind and decided to drink it. From that point on, I drank as often as I could. I don't remember how often. By the age of 17, I had heard of marijuana. It had come to the University of Georgia, and I said, "Gee, I sure would like to experience that stuff," but I didn't know where to get it.

During my freshman year in college, I tried marijuana for the first time. I didn't feel anything, but I persisted. I finally achieved that high, but alcohol was still my favorite. What I found was the combination of alcohol and marijuana was great.

After my second year in college, I did research at the University of Michigan. While in Ann Arbor, I did some very interesting things. One was using certain psychedelic substances that I found to be quite intriguing. My nursery school cousin lived in Detroit, and he allowed me to use certain inhaled opiates, which was an interesting experience as well.

I returned to college after a great summer—except for one little event. It was an accidental overdose of barbiturates, which I tried to dissolve in beer. Horrible combination. It turns out that barbiturates are not soluble in beer, but if you persevere, you can certainly ingest enough. I spent a couple of days unconscious but was cared for by some very nice ladies who just chose to take care of me. One of them was a girl I had moved in with.

I had a lot of other interesting experiences of bad behavior that became known to my family members. They told me that I knew better, and I told them, "Okay," but I told myself, "You just don't know." My third year in college was another exciting year of the same stuff on a different day. But academically, I did great.

After my third year in college, I did research at Oak Ridge National Laboratories in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, where, believe it or not, I found another large stock bottle of barbiturates. I experienced the same effect—another few days of being cared for by some lovely ladies I had met there.

I finished that summer and returned to college for one semester of my senior year. I had two more hours than I needed for graduation and chose to leave. I registered for graduation with a promise to return for the ceremony in May. I came home and started fooling around with a young lady who had been my high school girlfriend. My father got tired of me coming home at whatever time I wanted to, so he told me, "You can rent or leave." I packed my bags, moved in with my girlfriend, and two days later, we got married.

I had already been accepted to medical school at the University of Pittsburgh, so off we went. She and I proceeded to drink a lot. We used a lot of drugs, I cheated on her, and so on. Life got worse and worse. By my third year of medical school, she threatened to leave me. I prayed to God and said, “God, if you’ll just not let her leave me, I’ll stop drinking.” She didn’t leave me, so I stopped drinking, but I went on what is now a well-known program of marijuana maintenance.

Farris: I graduated from medical school and went on to active duty in the United States Air Force. I started my internship and completed my residency with only minor incidents—usually related to my marriage and not due to excess intoxication, although I drank quite regularly. After finishing my residency, I was stationed at Maxwell Air Force Base in Alabama, where I bought a house.

Mind you, these accomplishments were my justification for drinking. After all, I worked hard, made reasonable money, and came home most nights. I spent five years in Montgomery, Alabama, and decided it was time for me to leave the Air Force. Well, it wasn’t exactly like that.

It turns out some people I was using drugs with got busted, and they named some names—mine included. However, since I was chief of a department at my hospital, my hospital commander simply said, “Now, Farris, I know you wouldn’t do those things.” And I said, “Sir, you’re absolutely right.” That was enough to tell me that perhaps the Air Force and I might need to part ways. So, I left the Air Force under honorable circumstances and moved back to Athens, Georgia.

Things took off like a rocket. I was working as an ER doctor and sometimes came to work significantly impaired. Thankfully, no bad events occurred. My wife and I had two kids while we were in Alabama, and in 1987, I delivered our third child myself at home. By 1989, I was getting high and drinking almost daily. In fact, I kept a bottle of vodka in the refrigerator because I reasoned that using a glass and ice was a waste of time.

In February of 1990, I overdosed on cocaine. I was hallucinating and thought the police were coming, so I made a suicide attempt. Once I came down, I called my wife. She took me to Atlanta because I refused to go to a hospital in Athens. I was hospitalized overnight, and an addictionologist

was called in. The next day, I was transferred to CPC Parkwood in Atlanta for my first stint in treatment.

I went to AA for the first time, got a white chip, and found it to be a marvelous experience. I finally felt like I was at home. It was one of the first times I ever entered a new experience with a feeling of comfort, ease, and welcome. I stayed at CPC Parkwood for a week and then continued treatment for another year, going back twice a week while maintaining my job.

Bob: Were you going to AA meetings during this time?

Farris: Yes, I was attending AA meetings practically every day—mostly in Athens. I started going to the Noon Cobb group and later joined the Sunrise meeting, which met on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday at the Cobb House. AA was an enjoyable experience. I made a lot of friends, some of whom I still see today, although some have passed away.

By 1992, I had divorced my then-wife. I should mention that there's a saying in AA: "No new relationships for a year." I went through treatment in February 1990, and on February 16, 1991, I met my current wife. She was gorgeous and had a personality that lit up the room. I thought this was a sign from God that it was okay for me to start a new relationship. She had two children, and I had three. She was very reluctant to marry me—wisely so—because she thought we had too many kids between us. But in November 1993, we got married, and she became my new program.

Gradually, I drifted away from AA. I was on a five-year agreement with the state of Georgia, and by 1996, when that agreement ended, so did my association with AA.

Bob: Did you have a sponsor during that time?

Farris: I had a sponsor of record, but I never worked the steps with him. Essentially, I sponsored myself. I worked the first half of Step 1 and the last half of Step 12. I did meet a counselor from the Cobb Group who became a great friend, but I didn't actively engage in the steps.

In 1998, I had to return to treatment after another overdose. This time, I was taken to Athens Regional Medical Center, where I was on staff. Things

were no longer going my way—God decided I could no longer call the shots. I was sent to Ridgeview for a 96-hour evaluation, which turned into a 30-day stay. This time, I was placed on a relapse track, which lasted a year and required me to attend Ridgeview twice a week.

After that, I had to do two years of aftercare. I initially balked at the idea but was told aftercare was mandatory. This began my close association with the Commencement Center, and it turned out to be a great experience. While in treatment at Ridgeview, I made the decision to do as I was told. That was the single wisest decision I've ever made.

At Ridgeview, I truly started to understand the principles of AA. Interestingly, my father had told me as a child that my life would be so much better if I just did as I was told. It turns out he was right. Through my association with AA, I've grown into adulthood in ways I didn't think were possible.

My first real sponsor was Roque F., a counselor at the Commencement Center. I put his name down when I needed a sponsor for Ridgeview. When I returned to Athens, I started meeting with him weekly. I never explicitly asked him to be my sponsor, but after about 8 to 10 months, Roque said, "I'm so glad you asked me to be your sponsor." I thought, "I never actually asked you," but I kept that to myself.

Roque was the first person I trusted with my deepest, darkest secrets. Working with him, I began to understand the steps. I initially approached them from an academic perspective, but I started seeing them as tools for emotional and spiritual growth over time. Slowly but surely, I began to mature.

Bob: You mentioned workshops earlier and their impact on your recovery. Can you expand on that?

Farris: Sure. At one point, I thought I needed to see a psychiatrist, so I asked the addictionologist at Ridgeview. He said, "You might, but you should work the steps first. Then consider going to workshops." I didn't know what a workshop was then, but I took his advice and focused on the steps. Eventually, friends like Randy P. encouraged me to attend the Atlanta Men's Workshop, also known as "The Rock."

Around 2013 or 2014, I started attending the workshop. It was transformative. Hundreds of men gathered for a weekend of fellowship and learning. The first time I went, it was a deeply spiritual experience. I attended twice yearly until the pandemic interrupted things.

Bob: You've mentioned sponsors and sponsees. Can you tell me more about your experiences sponsoring others?

Farris: Early on, I was eager for someone to ask me to be their sponsor, but it seemed like every time someone did, they disappeared after a meeting or two. Over the years, I've sponsored about eight to ten people for varying lengths of time. One of my first long-term relationships was with Ken P., who I met at The Rock. Unfortunately, Ken had a stroke that changed his behavior and emotional responses, and he drifted away from the program.

Another sponsee, Jon R., has been with me for several years. Sponsoring others has been an incredible experience. I've learned that I get more out of these relationships than I give.

Bob: You've been deeply involved in the Athens AA community for decades. Who are some people who have been particularly influential in your recovery?

Farris: There have been so many. Roy S., Randy P., Jimmy P., Jim H., Johnette P., Bobbi M., Carl M., Venus J., and Bill T. Carl M. tried to help me work on my language. Carl and Roque encouraged me to stop profanity, though neither succeeded. Still, their efforts have left a lasting impression.

Bob: Let's shift gears. How do you think AA has changed in Athens and, more broadly, over the years?

Farris: AA has remained remarkably consistent in many ways. Meetings today are like those I attended decades ago, especially in format and structure. However, there's been a significant shift in attitudes. People are more accepting and tolerant now, especially when it comes to issues like drugs or dual diagnoses.

Back when I first joined, there was a strong emphasis on the singleness of purpose—some members were adamant that only alcohol should be discussed. That's less common now. I think this change reflects broader

societal shifts, as we've come to understand that addiction isn't confined to one substance.

Bob: What about the community's perception of alcoholism and AA?

Farris: There's definitely more awareness and acceptance of alcoholism as a disease. However, the support systems in place—especially in the medical field—aren't as robust as they used to be. Hospitals used to be more understanding and supportive of employees seeking treatment. Now, many professionals face significant stigma and challenges in maintaining employment after being diagnosed with addiction.

That said, AA continues to be my lifeline. It's not just a place to stay sober—it's a place to grow spiritually, mentally, and emotionally.

Bob: We're sitting here in the 24th Street Clubhouse. What are your thoughts on the idea of AA owning its building?

Farris: Owning a building could be a good idea if approached thoughtfully. It's important to have a separate business entity handle the logistics and finances, keeping those responsibilities distinct from those of the AA group. Timing is everything, though. We have a great arrangement here, so there's no need to rush into anything.

Bob: As we wrap up, is there anything else you'd like to share?

Farris: Just this: AA has taught me the true meaning of spirituality. It's shown me that we're all connected profoundly regardless of what we call our higher power. The program has allowed me to grow into the person I was meant to be, and I'm eternally grateful for that.

Bob: Thank you for sharing your story, Farris. Your insights and experiences will undoubtedly inspire and help many others.

Farris: Thank you. It's been a privilege.