DO ‘CHIPS’ HELP OR HINDER OUR PRIMARY PURPOSE?

By Laurie A.

Tradition Six: An AA group ought never endorse, finance or lend the AA name to any related facility or outside enterprise, lest problems of money, property and prestige divert us from our primary purpose.

I don’t collect ‘chips’, the medallions given by some AA groups to mark members’ sobriety dates, but I made an exception on my 30th anniversary. I went to meetings of three groups that offer chips and collected one each for my wife, son and daughter; if anyone deserves a medal they do for not giving up on me in the dark drinking days and for encouraging me in recovery. They never stopped loving me.

I know some members feel giving and receiving chips is a positive way to celebrate sobriety but to me expecting recognition for staying sober would be like a drowning man calling for a round of applause after grabbing hold of a life-belt. As a US General Service Board committee set up in 1992 to consider the awarding of chips noted, ‘Any attempt to make medallions more than a symbol may lead perilously towards ego-inflation and self-glorification, rather than ego-deflation’ (see Tradition 12).

There are other aspects of the practice that concern me. AA does not authorise or produce chips (or jewellery, bumper stickers etc) and outside bodies that sell them to groups and at conventions are using the AA name and logo without AA’s permission. Do groups who issue them pay for them with money from the ‘pot’, money that should be used to carry the message to the still suffering alcoholic? Of course each group is autonomous, but should AA members be endorsing these products?

As far as I know AA in Great Britain has not had to defend its copyright to the circle and triangle logo in the courts but it was happening in America where the symbol was being exploited by all sorts of commercial enterprises including treatment centres. That abuse prompted the 1992 US Conference to ask the trustees to consider the problem and make recommendations.
The 1993 US Conference decided the use of medallions was a matter for local autonomy, but that it was not appropriate for AA World Services (AAWS) to produce or license the production of sobriety chips.

The committee had commented that ‘a public lawsuit is a public controversy, something in which our Tradition (10) says we may not engage.’ And, ‘The Seventh Tradition reminds us, “Experience has often warned us that nothing can so surely destroy our spiritual heritage as futile disputes over property, money or authority”.’

Of the circle and triangle logo it commented, ‘... we suspect that the belief that we (or anyone) can “possess” the symbol is a fallacy. It actually works against the foundation of the Steps that lead us to sobriety. Ownership necessarily involves control and to argue over that control through litigation takes the focus away from the fact that we are ultimately powerless...’

Immediately after the Conference the US General Service Board accepted AAWS’s recommendation to discontinue protecting the circle and triangle symbol as one of AA’s registered marks. The trustees also reached substantial unanimity in support of AAWS’s statement that, to avoid the suggestion of affiliation with outside goods and services, AAWS would phase out the ‘official’ or ‘legal’ use of the circle and triangle. As literature was due for reprinting, the symbol would be deleted.

The guidelines on copyright and logos in the Great Britain AA Service Handbook notes, ‘The General Service Board recognises only two logos. One incorporates the words Recovery, Unity and Service on the sides of the triangle; the other carries the words General Service Conference inside the circle.’ The guideline gives examples when the first logo may be used for AA purposes, and adds, ‘NB - permission for any other use can only be granted, in writing, by the Board.’

In 1990 en route to the international reunion in Seattle I visited Bill W.’s grave in Vermont. It was covered in chips from grateful members who had also made the pilgrimage to pay respects to our co-founder. Ironically, although Bill accepted awards on behalf of AA he always declined personal honours, calling himself just another drunk.
ANONYMOUS