John: Hello, and welcome to AA Beyond Belief, the podcast. I'm your host, John S. Today we'll be speaking Benn B, Willow F, and Vic L, all of us having just returned from WAAFT-IAAC 2 held in Austin, Texas just this past week. We'll share our experiences at the convention, and our assessment of how things went. I hope you enjoy the discussion.

Well, hello. We're doing something a little bit different on AA Beyond Belief. We're actually having a conversation with four people at one time. A first, for us. And with me, I have Vic L, who was on the board of directors for the, what was then known as WAAFT-IAAC 2016. How are you doing, Vic?

I'm doing very well, thank you.

And thank you for joining us from New York, where it's 9:00 at night right now, that's very nice of you. And then I also have Willow F, Willow you're from Olympia, Washington, is that right?

Seattle, actually.

Oh, Seattle? Okay. And I'm glad that you're here, 'cause you were not at the convention in Santa Monica, so you're the only one of us, I think, that were not at that convention. Isn't that right?

That's correct.

Okay. So this'll be your first WAAFT-IAAC experience.

Yeah.

And then, of course, we have Benn B, who is my co-host, and goes through the steps with me here on the podcast. How you doing, Benn?

I'm doing pretty good, John. How are you?

Excellent, excellent.

Good.

Well, let's get right into it. I guess, Willow, I might wanna start with you, since this was your first experience at what we used to call WAAFT-IAAC. Why don't you tell us a little bit about your experience there, what was your overall assessment of how things went there?

Overall, I thought it went really great. It's been a long time since I've been to a convention, or a conference or anything like that. I used to go to a lot of them when I was newly sober, and although, I don't know, I was pretty young then, and it was more for the kind of the sober party that I went. I paid attention a little bit to the workshops and things like that, but that wasn't always the biggest thing on my mind. So this one, I was really interested in the workshops, in meeting the people, having conversations, and just being really engaged and involved. And I have
been to the one day conference that they did in Olympia in January, and that was great. So, it was really amazing to have just more time like that, more chances to connect with people. And overall, I thought it was amazing, that the workshops were good, everything was great. The only thing that I would have liked to have seen that I didn't, was a countdown, 'cause I was really amazed at years and years of recovery that were there, moreso than any other conference of that small size that I'd seen before.

03:12 John: Isn't that interesting? Yeah, the sobriety countdown. Yep. Yeah, we do have a lot of long timers in our fellowship in secular AA, don't we?

03:21 Willow: Yeah, it seems that way.

03:22 John: And Benn, what was your assessment of the thing?

03:25 Benn: It was great to be with like-minded people within the fellowship again. I think lately, I have not been going to that much local AA here. So, one, it was good for me to get back involved, just in AA in general, not that I don't do plenty of things and stay involved, but I just hadn't been to many local meetings. So, the fellowship was great. Obviously, having it in Austin, I thought was very fitting, the weather was perfect. The thing I always enjoy is the workshops. Some of the formality of what goes on with the business meeting and stuff like that, that's sometimes kind of a turn off to me. But the workshop's just great, I mean where else can you go in AA and hear a workshop about stoicism, and how it relates to recovery? I mean it was fresh, it rejuvenated me, it makes me excited to be in recovery again.

04:21 John: Well, Vic, I think it was a successful convention, judging by these two. What do you think?

04:25 Vic: Oh, I definitely do. But I must say that I was on the board, although I was not on the Program Committee. The whole board, we all discussed different workshops and panels, and just no one mentioned a countdown, it just completely slipped all our minds, so, apologies. And I'm sure that the new board will have it on their schedule. As I said to you in this little article that I wrote, that the first thing that struck me was that it was a relief not hearing anything about the election. It was two days after the election, we actually arrived Thursday night, the board did, and that was just a relief, so that was a side benefit. And yeah, I think we all felt pretty good, the board, it was just building so much, we'd been talking together every two weeks for the last couple of months. So it was really getting pressure, and it was just a relief. I remember when Nick said at the future meeting of panels, that he was an ex-member, and he really enjoyed saying that, ex-member of the board. But it's very satisfying, and of course, I have my little things which I hope, different people come to and constantly make it better.

05:44 John: Yeah.

05:45 Vic: We can always do better. And I have several things that I can talk about whenever you like, but...

05:53 John: Sure. Well, we might wanna get into that. I would have to say, overall, it was a great convention. Having experienced Santa Monica, I probably had my expectations kind of high, and you can never replicate an experience that, probably in hindsight, is maybe better than it was actually in reality. But I enjoyed myself there. And for me, it's not necessarily the workshops and
the panels, it's everything that happens between those. All the people, the discussions, the conversations I have. It was great to talk to you, Vic. It was great to talk to John H, other people that you only know online or through email, and just sitting down with them face-to-face, just to me, just means a lot. And you get to know people better that way, so I really enjoyed that aspect of it.

06:42 Vic: I just wanna...

06:43 John: Go ahead.

06:43 Vic: This is Vic, I just wanna add to that. When I walked into the meeting on Thursday night with the board, I was immediately struck by the fact that I'm sorry we didn't get together face-to-face beforehand, because we got rather snippy with each other on conference calls and in emails. We just didn't take that extra step. And then once we saw each other, this whole feeling came over all of us, we talked about it at dinner, that we're human beings. And it's a lot different being with each other than it is just emailing and conferencing.

07:18 John: Well, I will give you one criticism, and I don't wanna wage an old battle, [chuckle] but I think we missed an opportunity when you had the executive editor of the Grapevine there. I think she should have been given her own hour, by herself. Because what happened, when she was on the panel with the other people, she was drawing all the attention. And I think that people really wanted to engage with her more, and ask more questions. And what she did as she did this workshop, but people were so interested in asking her questions, that she couldn't really put on the workshop. I think that she was... Everything that I've heard from her was that she was very happy with the experience. So did you hear anything about that, Vic? About how she felt about it, or how anyone else felt about her, just as a panelist?

08:07 Vic: No, I'm afraid I was kind of out of that. I know there was some controversy in the beginning with the two Johns, and because the Grapevine has been pretty, pretty religious publication. So, everybody was very leery. And again, I was not on the Program Committee, so I don't know how the final decisions were made. She didn't do a lot of talking... I mean did do a lot of talking, so I have a feeling she got across what she wanted to get across. I find it rather interesting, when she just described the whole structure and how decisions were made. I thought that was quite interesting.

08:49 John: I thought so, too. Did you happen to see that, Willow? Did you go to the literature panel?

08:54 Willow: Yeah, I did, that was one of the ones that I really wanted to take part in. And I didn't really... I've seen a little bit of the information that's been discussed on, I don't know, I guess in some of the articles on Beyond Belief, or Agnostica about Amy and kind of some of the controversy with that. So, I was just kind of curious, I didn't really know what to expect. I really loved hearing... There's a whole business process behind publishing a magazine like that to such a large audience, right? And I think it really is a case of what's submitted that meets the criteria for publish. I think we hear a lot of people say, "Oh, you're not publishing this kind of thing, this kind of thing." Well, it depends on what's getting submitted. And I actually, I spoke with Amy after that panel, and there was a little bit of contention at the end, people feel pretty strongly about some of the stuff that we're talking about, and I love that we can kind of get into some of those controversial things, but it is important to remember, we're all people. And one of the things that I found really
interesting, that I had no idea of, is that I think Amy was there not just as the person representing the Grapevine that had put out that particular pamphlet, but I think she was there participating as a member, just as any one of us.

10:34 John: Yeah, you're right.

10:35 Willow: And that kind of got me to thinking that when it came to the idea of why she was or wasn't one of the keynote speakers, I understand the idea that it might not have been great if she was just there representing the Grapevine, but if she was there as a member of our kind of unique constituency, I think she would have been amazing. And I hope that we hear from her soon. I went in there expecting, "Oh, she's just gonna be here talking about this, and then she's gone." She was there through the whole conference to participate, and it was really great to get to know her a little bit, and to hear that side of things.

11:21 John: That's a really good point, she was actually there throughout the whole entire conference, and she was a participant, she was a member. And I saw her chatting with people all the time. So I don't know, what are your thoughts on that, Benn?

11:35 Benn: I'm apt to agree with you, John, I think she would have made a good keynote speaker. I understand that we don't... And I get people's beef, too, about we don't just wanna kiss the butt of formal AA on some level all the time, but it was kind of distracting, I think, for the other participants on that panel as well. I know one person in particular seemed to kind of have their feelings hurt that they weren't asked many questions, and I can understand how that was frustrating. And I felt like she was maybe treated a little bit disrespectfully, maybe, and I might have even done that a little bit when I asked her my question, too. But it just felt like she was getting grilled. It felt like she was kind of getting the brunt of everybody's anger, at whatever the formal idea of AA is. It wasn't anything out of control or anything, but it felt like she couldn't have done any right on some level.

12:27 John: So, what was your question, Benn, that thought might have been kind of rough?

12:30 Benn: Well, okay, I think I should have just asked her on her own. But I asked about how they choose the, a little bit more specifically, how they choose the stories, because it's seems like every story in the Grapevine... I'm sorry, I just find the Grapevine super boring, it's like you feel so pressured to make your story sound a certain way, that it takes out any authenticity at all. And so, it just seemed like... I think in that same issue, there was a couple of stories in there that had... It's basically like a member writing in about a story about brow-beating people for doing things in meetings they don't think are real AA, or something like, "Somebody was playing on their phone, and I think they should not do that in AA meetings. And we need to remember we're all here for fellowship and blah, blah, blah." If I wanna get preached at, I can get that in any AA meeting anywhere, I don't know, as far as the Grapevine goes, those are the type of things that get said at meetings that annoy me. It's like, "Pay attention," or, "do this," or, "do that." I don't know.

13:33 Benn: I don't care for the Grapevine that much, but I agree with Willow, it was very interesting to hear the whole process of it all, and her talk about the business behind the Grapevine, and approving books to be published, and conference-approved to be published, I always like to say that. We don't have conference-approved literature as in, "This is okay to read." It's, "This is what's been agreed upon by AA to publish," is what that really says. And I thought she was a very nice woman, and I agree with you guys, I saw her talking to a lot of people. When some of our more
outspoken atheist members were speaking, I could tell, she just looked kind of pained. I felt bad for her, some of the things that were coming out of people's mouths, I could see she was just kind of like, "Oh my goodness, there's a lot of anger here." And I agree with Willow, I'm glad that this is a place where we can speak a little more freely. I mean it happened in Santa Monica, and it happened here, and I don't think we're any worse because of it.

14:34 John: I think you're right, I think you're right. Vic, I wanna pay you a compliment. I was on your panel, and I think you did an excellent job, you're a real pro at that.

14:43 Vic: Oh, well thank you. Thank you very much.

14:45 John: What were you trying to... Your panel was, "What is WAAFT?" That was one of your panels, anyway. Were you satisfied with how that went? What were you wanting to get out that?

14:57 Vic: Well what I wanted, I wanted to provoke a discussion, just about what we are, and how we're gonna go forward, and what it sort of... Because we are a very diverse group, which is fine, and I just wanted to get some sort of consensus, some sort of understanding. Of course you never do. [chuckle]

15:16 John: No.

15:17 Vic: So, I approached these things, well, we're gonna nail this down, of course, it's not possible. I just wanna say something, I was really struck by the fact of the slow, laborious way decisions are made in publishing in the AA literature. I could not believe all these committees in holding for a year, and then they had... I was just really shocked.

[laughter]

15:42 Vic: But, I was very impressed, she seems a very, very capable person. And I thought she was very good. I mean I think, in defense of my fellow board members who were upset that she was chosen, up until... Don't forget the agnostic and atheist edition, or issue, came out just a month before the convention. Before then, the Grapevine is a very religious AA document, so they were saying, "Well, what are we doing here? Are we inviting someone who's gonna preach to us?" So, I think that was the original impetus. I wasn't very vocal in that particular argument, but you have to understand that they were fearful, and...

16:28 John: I think it's understandable, that kind of makes sense to me when I was at her workshop too, 'cause she was getting some flak from people. People said, "Hey, you're censoring articles," and this sort of thing. I think people have the impression, because like Benn said, you open up the Grapevine and you read it, and it does seem like they're pretty formulated stories...

16:46 Vic: Yeah. I don't read the Grapevine, but there's something to be said for someone being a curator, I mean that's her job, or other people's jobs. And some people were saying, "Well, you should publish everything." Well then, make a post, and have every article that's there, and if you wanna read it, fine. But I do respect professionals who curate things and edit things, and publish, I mean they have skills far beyond mine, and I trust it.

17:14 John: Yeah, I think she's a pro, there's no doubt about that. So, another thing that happened at the convention, was renaming the convention from WAAFT-IAAC to, what's it called, ICSA?
17:25 Vic: Yeah, that was one of mine. I had a few things, that was one, and I had to fight to get that panel in. And I'm still pushing for secular AA, and as I said in one of the panels, I feel like I'm fighting just to get to neutral. And since there's so many... I mean there are atheists, agnostics, freethinkers... Humanists aren't in WAAFT, non-believers, a whole bunch of stuff. I mean secular does encompass all that stuff, and it's not anti-religious. And to me, it's the only name. So, the halfway measure, I think, we adapted Dianne's idea of ICSA, and I'm hoping that it will default to secular AA. I hope so.

18:13 John: Yeah. It could. So Willow, what was your opinion on that?

18:18 Willow: Well, so I went to that panel, I also went to the business meeting. And those ones they might have kind of felt like the least enjoyable of any of them, because but they're the most important kind of. The other stuff is really important as well, right? Because we meet as individuals. But for the movement, for lack of a better word, as a whole, those ones were really important. And that business stuff is so hard, I don't know if it's just because it's AA. I stayed away from it for a really long time, but I feel like the stuff is super important, so I'm trying to get involved with it, both at home and there. And it's a little bit tough because of the way that it's conducted. So, there was voting online, but really just the votes in the room were all that was counted. There was a little bit of, it seems like, some of the wording was lost in translation when it was put onto the list that we talked about in the room.

19:21 John: And we're still not sure if it's convention or conference.

19:23 Willow: Well, I mean I know what was on the list and what I voted on, which was conference. And just the other piece, to Vic's point, it was really clearly stated there, that what we were voting on was just the name of the conference, right? Because I mean it's still within AA, so just secular AA might be what we call things in general, but I don't know at this point, I don't know that there's anything official tied to that. But it was clearly stated that what we were discussing in that room was the name of the entity that was going to put on the conference, and that's why I felt that ICSA was a good choice, that was the one that I went with. It was the same wording as the Issac, except that I didn't think we needed to punch a biblical reference in the... That just didn't seem to have a point to me.

20:25 John: So what do you think, Benn, about the name change?

20:27 Benn: I guess in general I don't really care that much. I mean I hate to say that, but I think just a knee jerk reaction, like secular AA to me sounds like... When I think of somebody who would be an AA die-hard, they would think, "Well, secular AA, that sounds like separate from AA." But I don't know, I agree that the WAAFT thing was kind of just, I don't know, just not very clear. But there are... I mean, I know a few people here who are believers, who like the idea of free thinking AA. So I mean I guess on some level, secular would keep them out of that. But anybody can come to our conference convention that they want to. In general, I don't really care, I think it's fine. ICSA's nice, and secular is a nice broad term for all of it.

21:15 John: Yeah, secular just means the experience you're gonna have. It's gonna be free of religion, I guess.

21:22 Vic: Religion, yeah, everybody's welcome. In New York we had... Actually in New York,
people called it Agnostic AA, but we had in one of our meetings a seminary student, and he was as welcome as anybody else. So I'm Mr. Inclusive.

21:40 John: You know, something interesting happened when I was there, which I wasn't expecting. We were having our Kansas City meeting, because they were having those round the clock meetings. And right when the meeting was done, someone texted me and they said that the new Board wanted to talk to me, and they wanted to see me right away. So I walked in there where they were all meeting, and they wanted to know about WAAFT Central, because they all thought that WAAFT Central and WAAFT-IAAC were all the same thing. So I explained to them what the history was of WAAFT Central, how it started, what it does, and et cetera, et cetera. And they were interesting in kind of wrapping that up under one umbrella. And I don't quite get this, but I'm thinking this might not be a bad idea, but they were talking about having one organization, secular AA would be secular AA, okay? And underneath secular AA, you would have ICSA, the convention, and you would have whatever you were going to call this other service entity, that is now known as WAAFT Central.

22:45 John: And I don't know, I was kind of impressed with this Board, they all seemed to have their sense about them, they seemed to be knowledgeable of the traditions, the concepts. It seemed to make sense to me that, "Hey, you've got a structure here in place that could carry on the work and it was almost a bit of a relief, but there's still a lot to work out. But I don't know, what do you guys think about that? Do you even know what WAAFT Central is? And what do you think about that kind of a structure?

23:15 Vic: Well this is Vic, this is something I've always wanted. And I just think it makes sense. I just think that we in secular AA should have a nexus of where we can go online that'll have all sorts of resources, that ICSA will be one part of it, there'll be a meeting directory, all these things. So that if you're new... In New York we have 16 groups, and almost at every meeting, one or two people are visitors that have found us online. And I know that we have a lot of visitors because we're a tourist attraction, but it's very critical that we get organized. And I don't know anybody on the Board except Thomas, they all seem really terrific, and if they came up with this idea, I couldn't back it more. I mean I just think it's terrific, and I hope you go through with it. You'll probably end up talking to Jerry, who's Mr. Bylaws, and I would send you to him right away. And however you do it is fine, I just think that one central place would be just terrific, I think we would reach more people that way.

24:27 John: Yeah. I talked to two of the four Board members on WAAFT Central, and they were for it, so I think that we're probably leaning that way, so that'll probably happen. Willow, do you know anything about WAAFT Central? What do you think about that stuff that I'm talking about?

24:49 Willow: Well I kind of like the idea of a little bit of autonomy between the two, I think that it makes a lot of sense to... Because they were created separately, and then there's the Facebook groups and things like that. So if it's feasible following the naming convention change seems to make sense. But especially because we're fairly young in process in general I would worry that if everything gets lumped together. If there's a failure somewhere, then it takes it all down. Or something like that. So I think secular AA Central sounds good to me, SAAC isn't that bad of an acronym. Does it need to get folded in and be underneath the other board? I don't know. But that would be something that the folks that are on the WAAFT Central Board now would need to decide. And I don't know, I think there's also a lot of new people getting involved in the process, and willing to step in and take the reins, or help out if needed if there's too much stress on...
26:06 John: Well I think it's gonna be important that we do have something in place, because I think we are gonna see an increase in meetings starting up, or at least an interest in meetings. So we're gonna have more traffic, probably, to the WAAFT Central site that we have now, people using the meeting directory. Plus another thing, when Deidre was giving her talk, which was excellent by the way...

26:26 Willow: She was amazing.

26:27 John: She was talking about consolidating the list keeping duties in one place. That's an awesome responsibility. She's been doing that since what, 2011, is that right Vic?

26:40 Vic: Oh no, a lot...

26:41 John: 2001, right?

26:42 Vic: Yes exactly, right after 9/11.

26:44 John: That's right.

26:44 Willow: Yeah.

26:46 John: So she's put a lot of work into that. And so I kind of take that as a very serious responsibility, and that's why one reason I kind of like having this existing board that has already had been passed on from... This is now the third incarnation, that it seems to be something that has legs to it, and has a way to somehow carry on and I would like to see some sort of... When they organize it, some sort of a way of demarcation of duties, or separation of duties or something like that, and maybe some sort of a failsafe so that if one fails, the other can still go on. I don't know. But Benn, what are your thoughts on all of that?

27:27 Benn: Yeah, I definitely like the idea of something like WAAFT Central going on. Again, I agree with Willow, autonomous on some level in case something does fail somewhere, makes sense to me. But I think also minimal in scope, I feel like sometimes this thing starts to get a little grandiose. I know previous board members had kind of taken it a level... I don't know, too far. I think less is maybe more here, maybe a central place for meeting lists everybody's talking about, that makes sense. But if it gets too grandiose and big, I mean then I think you start bringing the AA fundamentalist in on us being aligned with something else other than AA, or something. I don't know.

28:12 John: Yeah, kind of keeping it simple, basically.

28:15 Benn: Yeah, yeah, I really think so. And if all we do is get together every two years for this conference, I'm cool with that. But yeah it is nice to have a central place with meeting lists, and the agnostic preamble, and things to start a more freethinking meeting and things like that, I do think that's very good.

28:34 John: Well everything that I've heard from everybody that I've talked to have been pretty positive. So Vic, is there anything that you wanted to talk about? Any criticisms, or anything at all that you thought should be pointed out?
28:50 Vic: Sure, always leave it to me. [chuckle] I have one thing to just add, quite obviously we are a very old group, and we're a white group, and I'd like to see that change. I also think that the people we wanna talk with, we increased over 130 groups in two years since Santa Monica, yet we only had 100 more attendees. And I think the people that we wanna reach are the people in, what I'm starting to call religious AA, and in 2020 AA is gonna bring 80,000 people to Detroit.

29:29 John: Wow.

29:29 Vic: And I think we should have a very strong presence there, either be part of them, I know they have an agnostic wing, I don't know how independent it is, if it's like the agnostic chapter, then it's not very good. I think we should be defining ourselves to that. So there's a big opportunity to let 80,000 people know we exist, and inform them who we are. And then the other suggestion I have, which is kind of what Willow and Benn were suggesting in terms of autonomy. One of the criticism of the Board was that we were too top down. And I think one of my radical suggestions is to have the secular AA conference, ICSA, every five years, let's say 30 months out of, say, from religious AA's conventions. And then in the intermediate times in the interim, have local conferences, like as were in Phoenix and Olympia, have them all over the country.

30:36 John: I think that's an excellent idea.

30:36 Vic: More people could afford to go to them, because they'd be closer, and more often, and more local and autonomous. So that's just a suggestion.

30:47 John: I think it's a really good idea, actually. And when you first suggested it, I didn't like the idea because I like to see people every couple of years, but when you really think about it, having the regional conferences as often as they wanna have them does make it easier for people to get to. Because younger people might have difficulty traveling across the continent to get to a convention, and this gives us an opportunity to kind of grow a little bit better, and get more people involved and then have that big one every 5 years. It kind of makes sense to me, I think it's a good idea actually.

31:22 Vic: Young people have jobs and they just take off.

31:24 John: That's right.

31:25 Benn: Yeah, I'm with you, John. My first feeling is like, "No! I wanna see everyone more often than that." But yeah, I could start attending more regional too. I just wonder if we have the numbers to make that work. But, like you're saying, Vic, we're gonna need to develop the numbers. There's people that need reach so that it will grow.

31:48 John: Willow, do you think that... I mean, I think that we have more younger people actually come to our meetings in Kansas City than what's represented at the conference. Do you think that that's the case where you're from?

32:01 Willow: So the meetings that I go to, the two that are in... I live in South Seattle, they're in Burien, which is a little town just to the south of me. So the ones that I go to there, we have fairly good representation, depending what you call young.

32:24 Willow: And especially one of them, the smallest meeting, which is the one that I secretary
on Wednesday nights, it's usually not more than five people. But we've had a pretty good cycle of
fairly young people come into that meeting, and maybe it's their first, or second or third AA
meeting, and they're finding us because in the... In our online directory as part of our name we have
Atheist Agnostic friendly and so they're finding us that way, because I think they're looking for
something different.

33:03 John: Yeah.

33:06 Willow: The meetings, I've been to a couple of the Olympia meetings, not so much the
Portland meetings, especially the Sunday one that they have there, I mean that's a huge meeting,
there's 75 people, I couldn't believe how many people were in that room. It was so moving to see.
And I'd say that they are probably 30% of what I would consider young people. Even the people
who aren't young people are fairly young-minded. I think the youngest person in that room is this
woman who I'm sure is over 70, [chuckle] but...

33:41 John: Well AA itself is kind of aging, when you look at the demographics of AA itself, it's
kind of like that.

33:46 Vic: Let me understand something, Willow, did you say you have an Agnostic meeting with
75 people attending?

33:53 Willow: In Portland there is one. In Portland.

33:56 John: That is incredible.

33:58 Willow: Yeah, it's packed packed, people sitting on the floor and in pretty much every spot at
the Portland one that they have upstairs. It's really wonderful, if you're ever there. And I think when
it comes to a conference, it definitely is, it's a little bit harder for young people to travel. I also really
think one of the reasons that we don't see as many young people, I've been really thinking about
this. Younger folks, especially if they already have an issue with what they see... I call it traditional
AA, I don't think any AA is religious, although some people might act that way. But I call the other
meetings traditional AA. And there's definately people that do have an impression of what's that
like and why they may not be into it. I think young folks today are willing to get online, see what
else is out there, and I think that there are some other options for finding recovery, apart from AA.

34:53 John: Yeah, I think you're right.

34:54 Willow: I think that that's one of the reasons we don't see any. But it also makes it more
important for us to integrate with traditional AA. I mean one of the things, to me, all AA is
supposed to be secular, that's also one of the reasons that I voted for that name, because I hope we
come to the point where we swell in numbers and then we dwindle, because it's not necessary
anymore to separate it out.

35:26 Vic: Well I think that we will grow if we get the word out that you don't have to have all this
God business, and still be sober in AA. I very much want to stay within traditional AA, I really
don't want any schism of any sort, and I think that's paramount. But I think our numbers will grow
if people just get to know us, that's all, just to know we are there...
35:54 Willow: That means getting in those traditional places like you said, Vic, going to the world convention and having representation there. Having representation at some of our smaller conventions. Our meeting did a workshop at a little one day conference that we have here in Burien that's about service work. And we didn't have a whole lot of people attending it. We were at the same time as a workshop put on by a meeting that's really popular in the area. But getting some of our groups to get out there and get involved in some of those broader events, because I really think that there's a lot of people who would be open, not just open to what we're doing but would have preference for what we're doing, they just have no idea that it's even an option.

36:49 Vic: No. Well look at the pew research poll, I mean the nones, N-O-N-E-S, I mean it's grown immensely in the last 10 year. So I think that's our demographic, and make our presence know.

37:02 John: Yeah, and like Vic, you pointed out one time we talked about this, that those people don't necessarily identify as atheists or agnostics, but they do probably represent people who don't necessarily wanna stand with others and hold hands and pray at the end of some meeting. So it's not like you have to necessarily be an atheist to want to have a secular AA meeting, I mean just almost anybody might want to have that nowadays.

37:29 Willow: Yeah, yeah.

37:30 Vic: Precisely my point, yes, exactly what I mean.

37:34 Benn: Well it's like before I got involved in this, and was feeling frustrated at traditional meetings, I didn't even know it was legitimate to be able to have a meeting without prayer. I wanted to kowtow to the higher ups, what I thought were higher ups in AA. So just to even go to Santa Monica the first time and realize that you can have a meeting be whatever you want. I mean each meeting's autonomous, and all the different quotes shared from Bill Wilson that give credence to what we're talking about. There may come a day where, and this is grandiose probably, but where AA needs to lean on whatever us is, because their membership has died that believes that certain way. Like Vic, you're saying the nones are growing, and that's only gonna continue.

38:20 John: Yeah, we need to reach out to people who aren't in AA now that might be able to be helped through our meetings. So that's definitely something that we should be focusing on, I think. And there seems to be a lot more interest now because of court rulings to get involved with the judicial system, and to let the courts know about our meetings, because they might be more receptive to sending somebody to a secular AA meeting, because they can't refer them to a religious AA meeting, anymore.

38:50 Vic: Absolutely. And also prisons, let some prisoners know they don't have to believe in God to get sober in prison.

38:56 John: Yeah. Go ahead, Benn.

38:58 Benn: Is anybody a member of the Facebook group like "Leaving AA" or any other 12 Step Fellowship? So many of the posts that are in that Facebook group are people just saying they're sick of the God thing in AA. So I mean, yeah, most people think they have to leave if they don't believe in that stuff.
39:14 John: I'm in that group, and the one time I posted there was when I posted the podcast I did with Jon Stewart, the podcast was titled "Leaving AA and Staying Sober." So I posted in that group, and they all jumped all over me. [chuckle] I was like, "What are you doing? This is your guy!"

39:32 Benn: What did they say?

39:33 John: That they hated me, because I was a cult person.

39:36 Benn: Oh boy.

[chuckle]

39:37 Vic: Yikes! Yeah, you can't win for losing, or lose for winning, or whatever.

39:41 John: You really can't. [chuckle] Okay. So in 2018 it'll be Toronto, I'm feeling pretty optimistic about the new board when I met them. They are taking the advice of the old board, they're gonna meet in a year, they're gonna meet in Toronto during Toronto's Regional Conference. And I don't know, I guess I'm pretty optimistic about it and we'll see just where things go from there.

40:08 Vic: I think they have their act together, I was very impressed with them. And I'm very optimistic. I do have some news today.

40:17 John: Oh, okay.

40:18 Vic: Just actually a few minutes ago, I emailed Joe C, and my subject line was, "Any word on the human rights Toronto decision?" And he said, "Word is all parties settled. Intergroup has to get it ratified by the members which ought to be done the last Tuesday of the month." So I guess it certainly means that they will list them.

40:42 John: Good, I'm assuming that will be the case.

40:43 Willow: That would be amazing.

40:45 Benn: Nice.

40:46 John: Good news, excellent.

40:47 Vic: That's great news.

40:48 John: Yeah. Well, thank you, Vic, for reporting that for us. [chuckle]

40:51 Benn: Yeah.

40:52 Vic: My pleasure.

40:52 Willow: Breaking news right here.
40:54 John: Yeah, how about that.

40:56 Benn: Anybody else have any other... Well I wanna share some concerns too. I was surprised. I thought there would be more young people in Austin at the conference, like you guys were talking about, maybe it's a matter of not being able to travel. And maybe the numbers weren't higher either because I think we were probably able to grab so many people just from LA surrounding area, when we were the first one. But there were less LGBTQIA, I'm trying to get them all included. And I thought there would be more of... I don't know, I was expecting more of a mixed crowd of everybody.

41:38 Vic: Well part of my reasoning is I think that secular AA skews older for two reasons. Number one, sometimes it takes people a little later in life to sort out their beliefs and non-beliefs. And in my case, I was reluctant to come out of the closet, so a couple of reasons, too.

42:01 John: Great point.

42:02 Willow: I think that age, both standard age and also age in sobriety kind of gives you the leeway to say, "Hey, you know what? No, that's not what I think, I'm not gonna play along anymore." I've been really interested to see just how many... So I came around to realizing that I was atheist right about in that 25-26 year sober mark.


42:28 Willow: But I thought as well that that was kind of where you were at. And I've heard that from so many people, so many of the people involved in these meetings are in that time range, which I think is really interesting. Because to me, I started being willing to stand up and say, "You know what? This is how I feel and I'm gonna say it here." Because at this point, I know that I can also say if somebody disagrees with me, or tries to shoot me down, I can say, "You know what? If you and I are in this meeting in another 25 years, come talk to me then." Nobody's gonna kick me out of AA, and I know it. I think when you're younger, both in regular age and in sobriety, it's hard to stand up and make a statement like that, and stand behind it.

43:16 John: Yeah, you're absolutely right, because you're kind of at a bad, vulnerable time in your life, and you're more likely just to follow whatever suggestions are given you, "Yeah, I'll do whatever it takes, whatever you tell me to do."

43:25 Willow: Yeah.

43:26 Vic: Absolutely.

43:27 Benn: Yeah, and it takes a while to get your confidence up, and security in your own beliefs. And yeah, it can be a scary thing to do, especially when you feel like you've not been accepted lots of places in your life, or not really fit in, and then you find this place like AA where you do feel like that way. I mean I know from experience, as soon as I started speaking up honestly, and not even doing so in a mean or angry way, there's definitely a little bit of shunning that goes on, and I think people seem to assume, and they'll say they don't, and then people seem to assume, and when they talk to me it's like they think I'm going to get to where they're at. And I'm not saying I'm right, but sometimes I think I've gotten passed wherever they think they are.
44:11 Benn: They assume that I just haven't heard the right thing, or read the right God material, or whatever. I mean most people don't know I was considering going to seminary school, I used to be a big believer. I mean, they just assume you haven't heard the right thing. Yeah, so you get some years behind your belt, and it gives a little bit of credence to it and people can't... 'Cause I see people get shouted down in meetings when they say things I say at a different meeting, because they've only got three or four years. People just cross sharing at them like crazy, but then I'll come in there next week and say the same thing, and everybody, I guess, I've been there long enough that they're like, "Well, we know he's not just here on a dry drunk."

44:54 John: Well, I wanna thank you guys. I think that we've had a pretty good discussion here. Thank you Benn, Vic, and Willow for joining us. It was great to see in Austin.

45:04 Benn: Oh yeah, it was so awesome.

45:06 Willow: Yep, thanks so much. It's really an honor to participate.

45:09 John: Oh, it was great to have you. I'm gonna have to have you back some time, Willow, so you can tell your story.

[chuckle]

45:15 Vic: That'd be great. Thanks, John.

45:17 John: Thank you, Vic. Y'all take care now.

45:19 Vic: Thanks John.

45:19 Benn: Thanks John.

45:20 Vic: Alright, bye.

45:21 Benn: Bye guys.

45:21 John: Well, that's it for another episode of AA Beyond Belief, the podcast. I hope you enjoyed the program. We'll be back next week with Richard H, from Calgary, Alberta, Canada. I think you'll enjoy that one. Until then, you all take care, be well, and for you Americans, have a very Happy Thanksgiving.

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