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**00:16 John S :** Hello and welcome to AA Beyond Belief, the Podcast. Today's episode was recorded on Christmas Day 2016. And it's a talk that I gave at an Alkathon hosted by the Paseo Group in Kansas City, Missouri. The Paseo Group is among my favorite groups in Kansas City. It's a group that has and still does inspire me. So here it is. My Christmas Day talk at the Paseo Group.

**00:44 John S :** First of all, I wanna tell you Merry Christmas.

**00:46 Audience:** Merry Christmas.

**00:48 John S :** And it's an honor to be here. I think that the Paseo Group is an incredibly important group to the history of Alcoholics Anonymous. I came here last year for your Alkathon and I read your history. And I was really moved by it, because this turns out, I didn't know, but this is the first truly inclusive AA Group in Kansas City. It was started in 1947, at a time when it was a novel idea for black people and white people to sit together at an AA meeting. And a group of people here in Kansas City started a group that they called the Kansas City Interracial Group. That group later became the Paseo Group. And what I find so moving about that story is that, despite how these people were treated, they weren't allowed to go to group one, they weren't allowed to go other groups, they created a group where everybody was welcome. They followed the tradition before I think we even had the traditions written [chuckle] that the only requirement for membership is the desire to stop drinking. Anything else doesn't matter.

**02:03 John S :** So I've always known about this group. I've spoken here a number of times. I've been in AA for a very long time. I got sober in July of 1988. Went to your location when I was in the little house at another Alkathon many years ago. And I've always know that you've been very involved with the community here, the AA community in Kansas City, but I never really was. For me, AA was always just my home group. So I didn't really think so much about that. But something happened a couple of years ago, where I got involved with starting a new AA group. And I've decided that I wanted to be involved with service in Kansas City AA.

**02:47 John S :** So I wanted to get involved with our district here in Kansas City. And so at the very first district meeting I came to, which I think was probably in January of 2015, it was here in this room. And I was expecting, being an atheist, from a newly-formed diagnostic group, I was expecting some resistance. I was probably ready for a fight. [laughter] But that's not what I found here. What I found here is what typifies Alcoholics Anonymous and is best described by our co-Founder, Doctor Bob Smith, love and service. I was welcomed with open arms. People were happy to see me and I fell in love with service. And I fell in love with our district and the western area of Missouri. It was people at this group who threw their example, taught me how to be a servant to Alcoholics Anonymous, and I'm really grateful for that.

**03:43 John S :** Today, I don't have a role to play at our area assembly. I'm no longer the GSR for my group, but I'm still gonna participate at our district and still gonna participate at the area assembly because I learned here how important that is. So today, I wanna talk about service and I wanna talk about our 12th step. The 12th step, of course, regret it. Having had a spiritual awakening that's the result of these steps, we try to carry this message to alcoholics and to practice these principles in all our affairs and I hope I got that right. I believe that it's something that's happened to me. I've had a spiritual awakening, if that's how you wanna describe it. I would say that I've been changed. I've been changed in ways that I was unable to change on my own. I was changed through

the power of love and service in Alcoholics Anonymous. My first experience with the 12th step was, as a newcomer, while I was on the receiving end. It was time when I had nothing, I had no job, I had no home. I was afraid that I was gonna be going to jail for a while. People didn't want anything to do with me and I was truly down and out.

**04:58 John S :** So I came to AA. And here, I was met with love and support and people shared their experience with me and showed me how they stayed sober in AA. And that was a gift that they were giving me. They were doing 12 step works. As a newcomer, I was getting a lot of that. I was taking probably more than I was giving. I would go to meetings and I went to a lot of meetings at the time. Everyday I went to a meeting and sometimes, more than once a day I went to a meeting. And I absorbed everything that people were telling me and it was a place that I needed to be because that was the only place where I felt comfortable being sober. I don't think I could have stayed sober without doing that. So anyway, I was going to meetings at the time at P3. And P3 was a group that would take meetings to other AA groups and to treatment centers and jails and things like that. They were really involved to that.

**06:00 John S :** And also at that time we just did a lot of old-fashioned 12 Step calls, where we went to someone's house or their apartment. And my first experience with taking meetings outside of the group was with... I was probably sober, I don't know, six months, five months, less than a year, anyway. And Bill A. Asked me if I would like to go to the Kansas City Community Center to speak. My sobriety was very fragile. I was literally white-knuckling it. I had to be in AA meetings because I was terrified that I was gonna drink. I didn't think I really had anything to give anybody, but I said to Bill, I said "Bill, what am I gonna say? I've not been sober that long." And he said, "Well John, they're gonna identify with you probably more than me." He had been sober for 20 years at the time, I think. "Because you're fresh from the trenches." He said, "All you gotta do is tell them what happened and what you're doing now to stay sober." And that's what I did. I got there and I shared with them what happened to me, my drinking history, and what I was doing at that time in Alcoholics Anonymous to stay sober. And it was a great experience.

**07:14 John S :** After that, we went out and we had coffee, or we had a bite to eat or whatever and Bill and I started bonding. And that was the experience that I had at P3. That's what we did. We would go out to treatment centers, we'd go out to jails, we'd go out to other AA groups, a bunch of us would go together. Three or four of us maybe at a time, and we would speak and then afterwards we would just go out and be together and just have fun being together. And so it was a great way for me to build my confidence as a person in recovery, but also to get more involved with the fellowship and get to know the people at the group that were really, truly saving my life at the time. And it was a lot of fun. We have fun here. Service work and carrying the message, it has a lot of rewards.

**08:08 John S :** But that also comes with some tragedy that we witness. And I've certainly seen my share of that. I've taken a number of drunks to emergency rooms and hospitals. There was an instance where I was in an emergency room at Truman Medical Center. I believe the guy was drinking on the way to the hospital and when we got there, I don't know how long I was with him, it seemed like hours. And he was just sobbing and sobbing like a baby, just crying in that emergency room. And I was kind of embarrassed but I was I just sat there with him [chuckle] and we got him into the hospital. I went to see him the next day and I did what I learned to do from the big book and from other people in my group and I just approached him and took him based upon where he was at that time. And that's really the best time to reach an alcoholic, is when they're down like that. The alcohol was coming out of his system, his brain was clearing and he was very depressed. And that's the time that people are receptive, I think, to hearing a message of hope.

**09:20 John S :** Now I've learned that that message doesn't always get through, and that's not necessarily what's so important. What's so important is that I try to transmit the message, because in doing that, that keeps me sober. And in every 12th Step opportunity that I've ever had, I don't know what's happened to the other person, but I've always left sober. And I think that that's the beauty behind the 12th Step. I've got to give it away, if I want to keep it.

**09:48 John S :** There was another time I took a person to an emergency room. But by the time that we pulled into the parking lot he was having a seizure. There was another time I carried a guy with his blood and vomit dripping all over me into the emergency room. And went back to see him the next day at the hospital, and they had him strapped in his bed and he was shaking from head to toe. He couldn't even talk to me. That guy later, I became his sponsor and I took him through the first three steps and he started getting his life back together. He started working again and staying sober, but he didn't come back to meetings after that. So I'd like to think that he's doing well. I hope he is, that that maybe was all that he needed.

**10:41 John S :** But there's something I wanna talk about, I guess from that 12th Step call that emphasizes to me the importance of doing this with another person. When I went to his apartment to help this guy, and he'd been drinking vodka for days, the first thing he did was reach a bottle of vodka out to me and the first thing that I did, just almost reflexively, was reach out as if I was [chuckle] gonna drink it. And it really almost scared me and I'm glad that my sponsor was there. And I've heard people say that that's one really good reason, when you're going on a 12th Step call to have another alcoholic with you, because the whole goal is that we leave sober. [chuckle]

**11:21 John S :** So anyway, I think it's important to stay on the firing lines like that. I've seen a lot of tragedy, I've seen people not make it. The first person that I sponsored was a fireman. And he lost his job with the fire department over drinking. And he was really having a very difficult time with the program and staying sober. He reminded me much of myself, but he's a little bit older. And for whatever reason, he liked me and he asked me to be his sponsor.

**12:00 John S :** I started sponsoring him and I don't know if we actually went through the steps or anything, but we talked a lot, and we went to a lot of meetings. And I tried to support him in his desire to stop drinking. Well, one day I got a phone call from his father and he had told me that Dan had died. He had run his car into a street light, he went really fast. Now I don't know if he was drunk or sober, it doesn't really matter. He was no longer with us. And that was my first funeral that I went to in AA for someone I knew that had died. And I met his family at the funeral. And I remember feeling kind of uncomfortable because they knew I was his sponsor and they looked at me as if I might have some insight to give them as to what happened and I really didn't.

**13:03 John S :** And that has always been the humbling part for me when it comes to alcoholism. That even as an alcoholic, I can't really explain it. I can't explain why we do what we do because it's just pure insanity, and I can't explain why it's so difficult for us not to drink, but it is. And I'm sorry for his family because they never really got to see him experience recovery. He never got over the hump, and I kind of did. I got to a point where sobriety became a way of life and I enjoyed it. He never got there. He was where I was in those early days where it was a struggle. So I'm sorry that his family didn't get to experience that, but I'm glad that I got to know him and that I got to experience that. Because all of these things are lessons that I learned that will just help me further do more work for others.

**14:04 John S :** I kinda forgot my very first time, I wanna go back to this. The very first time that I was ever helped by another person in AA, and it totally blew me away. I was sober for three months and I had a lot of problems. I'd gotten arrested for drunk driving for like the third time in a three-year period, and I had a really bad habit of getting arrested for various things and being given tickets and just putting them in a drawer and not doing anything and not showing up for court. So besides my DUI, I had a lot of other miscellaneous offenses out there. And I had a bail bondsman who vouched for me to get out of jail when I was arrested and I didn't live up to whatever that was supposed to be. So I had a bail bondsman that was on me. So I was just... Every time a police car would drive by, I was afraid, I'd wanna hide. So I was really uncomfortable. So I turned myself into the bondsman and I was sober. I turned myself into the bondsman and I called my sponsor, who happened to be a lawyer and I told him, I said that, "Hey, I turned myself in to the bail bondsman." And he said, "Why did you do that?" And I said, "Well, I don't know but I did." He says, "Okay. What's gonna happen is they're gonna take you to jail, and that's where you're gonna spend the night and then I'll come and talk to you in the morning and see what we can do."

**15:35 John S :** And so he came to see me in the morning, and it was a mess, because like I don't even know how many offenses I had, but they were all in different courtrooms. And he had to figure out the schedule, how to see all these different judges to deal with my problems. And he did. I remember, I can't remember what he said, but I stood there in that courtroom having spent the night in jail, looking horrible, and he spoke for me. And I can't remember what he said, but the judge ended up giving me six months probation. He didn't make me go to jail, but he did make me go to the community addictions program for six months. And they required that I go to AA meetings.

**16:14 John S :** So that was a good deal for me. And I remember after all of that happened, I went to this person, my sponsor, and I said to him, I said, "Listen, I don't have a job. I don't have anything. I don't have any money. I have no idea how I can ever pay you." And he said, "You don't worry about it. When you can, you help somebody else." And so, that's a memory that is forever with me and I will never forget that kindness. And I hope that I do what he asked me to do, that I try to help others when I can because that's what I think it's truly all about. That, what he did, made a huge difference for me in my life. And I just don't even know how to... It's above and beyond the call of duty, what he did. So anyway, that and then so much more.

**17:10 John S :** I talk a little bit about Billy A, the guy who took me to Casey CC for the first time. And he's also the person who took me on my first 12th Step call to someone's apartment. And I can't remember what the situation was in that particular call, whether it came in from central office or the person called our group. But we went to this guy's house and I was wet behind the ears, just like I say, the first time I'd ever done this but Bill had been around for a long time. And I remember he was talking to the guy and the first thing he said was, "Do you wanna stop drinking?" And I remember thinking, "Well, that was kind of blunt." Do you wanna stop drinking? But the way that Bill said it though was from a place of understanding and a place of compassion and he just got right to it.

**18:01 John S :** 'Cause I don't know whatever happened to that guy, whether or not he went to a meeting, whether he went to treatment, whether he went on to have a sober life, I have no idea. But Bill and I from that experience, gained something. Again, we left sober. I learned something from Bill. Years later we went to a 12th Step call at someone's house, and the family called us and they were hoping that we could do something for their family member who was suffering, up in his bedroom from drinking. And so me and a younger guy in the program went to talk to the guy and I

remember his family was really hoping that we could do something. And of course we're powerless over alcohol for ourselves as well as anyone else. There was no magic that I could perform to make him better, all I could do was share with him what we do.

**18:56 John S :** So I went up with my friend who was new to the program and I sat with him and I asked him the same question that Bill asked the fellow on my very first 12th Step call. I said, "Do you want to stop drinking? And if you want to stop drinking I'll do whatever we can do to help." So we talked to him and again, I don't know how things turned out. But I remember the family and the families have always been the most difficult part. Because they're the ones who suffer from a place of not really understanding and wanting to help and not being able to do anything and really hoping that their loved one can experience the recovery that they see with us. To walk into a house and say "I'm an alcoholic and I don't drink." And for the family to see that means everything to them. They want that for their loved one so bad and I wish that there was something that we could do to just make that happen, but there isn't.

**19:55 John S :** The last 12th Step call I'm gonna talk about, and it's probably the last one I've actually been on where I go to a stranger's house was just around the corner from P3. And we went to this guy's house and it was a husband and wife, and the husband was the alcoholic. And I don't know if he was really ready to stop drinking but his wife was badly bruised and obviously beaten. And she told us, to explain her bruises that she had just fallen down. Of course we knew that she was being beaten. Somehow, I don't know how this happened, but we ended up taking her to an Al-Anon meeting. And it was the first Al-Anon meeting I've ever been to, just a straight Al-Anon. I've been to mixed meetings where there's Al-Anons and AAs together. This was the first Al-Anon meeting I ever went to. And I took her to this meeting and it was amazing to see the love and support that the other Al-Anons gave her. They understood her. They understood the beatings and watching the husband die from drinking. And I don't know how receptive she was to it but I know that her being there was a help to the other people. And my witnessing it was certainly a help to me because there's just so much power in love and service and I've learned that over the years and that was a lesson learned.

**21:25 John S :** So I don't go on the 12th Step calls that much anymore, I don't at all anymore. But I'm assuming that they still happen. The only closest thing would be when my brother-in-law and sister-in-law were in the throes of alcoholism and we got my sister-in-law to Valley Hope, and she is sober today. But my brother-in-law ended up dying from alcoholism. But that would probably be the last time, and this was 3-4 years ago, I don't know, that I actually had gone to the persons bedside and tried to talk to them and help 'em out. So anyway, I've been transformed by the Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous and I feel that it's very important for me to give back, so I continue to do that but I'm doing it in a different way now.

**22:23 John S :** A couple years ago I started a, or helped start, a new AA Meeting and it's the We Agnostics Group. And the story behind that is I had been sober for 25 years, and for whatever reason, I came to understand that I am an atheist, that I don't have a belief in God. And it was a disconcerting thing for me to come to that understanding because Alcoholics Anonymous was so important to me and I wasn't sure if I would still belong. And I went to my group, P3, and was very quiet about what was going on with me. But what was going on with me is I started re-thinking these Steps and I started looking at the actions behind the things that we do and I started finding value in what we do, the program of action. And I started to understand that the belief is really secondary to the things that we do. And I could take it so far as to even see value in the act of praying even if you don't believe in God. Because I prayed for many years on my knees in the morning and on my knees at night and during the day and it was helpful to me. Now I don't believe

that there's a God. That's just my personal belief and I'm comfortable with that and I don't want to believe any other way.

**23:55 John S :** But I do believe that by taking some time in the morning, to quiet myself, to still myself. And to remind myself what's important, and what's important is to not drink and help another person, was helpful to me. I think it was helpful to stop when I was agitated, when I was afraid, when I wanted to drink, and to recite the serenity prayer over and over and over. Those are helpful things. So, there's value in the actions. And there's value in the process of the 12th Steps. I'm a firm believer in that. A lot of those steps were experiences that we had and experiences that we came to accept. And others are concrete actions that we had to take. But it was definitely a process and it was a process that changed us. So, anyway, I was comfortable with that view. But I went to AA meetings at my home group, and I tried to talk in a way that, "Yes, I don't share your belief in a God, but these are the things I do."

**25:04 John S :** And it might have been just my perception but I didn't think that my new way of seeing the programme was very well received. And I wasn't feeling comfortable there anymore. And it actually got to where I wasn't comfortable in any AA meeting any more. So, I learned about these agnostic AA groups and that's how we started We Agnostics, me and one other guy, we started meeting just the two of us, once a week. And the group has really taken off. People seek us out that won't go to AA because they perceive that it's religious or they just want a more secular experience and you come to our meeting and it's basically like any other AA meeting, the only difference is we don't open and close with a prayer. And that, for us, it makes a huge difference, but that's essentially it, really. And we probably talk about God more than the rest of you guys do, though.

[laughter]

**26:00 John S :** That's what they always say about us, that's kind of a joke. So anyway, starting that group was a huge experience for me when it came to service and the 12th Step, because like I say, that's when I got involved with General Service. That's when I came to the Paseo Group for that first district meeting, because I wanted to represent my group and I wanted our group to be good AA citizens.

**26:24 John S :** When we set up our group, we set it up to have regular business meetings every three months, so that the group would be autonomous and that the members of the group would decide how the meetings would be run and how we would act as a group. It wouldn't just be the founders that would decide these things and we did that very early on. And we still have our business meetings every three months. Recently, we had an election and we have a new General Service Representative and a new Alternate GSR and both of these people will be going to district meetings and area assembly, as will I. So now there'll be three people from our group in service.

**27:01 John S :** And that's from being inspired by your group. By seeing several people from the Paseo Group when I go to district, when I go to area assembly, we learn from you. We learn from your history as a group. We, in AA, are at a point where, we're recognizing that there are a lot of under-represented groups in AA. And we, agnostics, atheists, we're one of those. But also, when 4% of the population in Alcoholics Anonymous consists of African Americans, when 15% of American population is African American, then we have an opportunity I think, to reach out to that under-represented group.

**27:55 John S :** Recently, the grapevine had an issue that was dedicated to agnostics and atheists because I believe that the grapevine is wanting to make an effort to reach out to these under-represented groups. Well, I think the black community is gonna have to be one of these groups. And I think that this is a real opportunity for us, in our area. The Paseo Group is actually a group that is really pushing for this. And what happened was, I won't go into the details but there was an unfortunate event at a convention that hurt a lot of people. So we had a really frank discussion about this at the area assembly about... It was a racist incident, quite frankly, is what it was.

**28:35 John S :** And we had a discussion about it and starting in January, at the next assembly, I believe it was Michael from this group, had proposed that we begin having a discussion at the area assembly about unity within AA. And what he's talking about is coming together regardless of our beliefs, regardless of our race, regardless of any of our differences, but somehow coming together. And I think it's a great opportunity for us, in Missouri, to begin reaching out to these under-represented groups and start asking ourselves "Why?" Why are these groups so under-represented? And then maybe making some changes to reach out to them. And remember that we do this because that's our primary purpose.

**29:18 John S :** Our primary purpose is to stay sober and help other alcoholics to achieve sobriety. So when we see that in our society that there are thousands around us that are dying from alcoholism that we're not reaching, yeah, it's a tragedy, but it's also a great opportunity for us. It's an opportunity for us to be of service to our fellow man, to be of help and for us to stay sober. So, I think I've talked a long time, I'm gonna close by thanking you once again, for having me here and for wishing you again, a Merry Christmas. And if you do believe in God, I want your faith to sustain you through your sobriety and I hope that it will.

**30:01 John S :** And if you don't believe in God, I want the fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous to sustain you for another day of sobriety because I know it will. And it's just a real pleasure to be here and without passing.

**30:13 John S :** Well, that's it for another episode of AA Beyond Belief, the podcast. We'll be back next week with Ben, talking about step 11. Until then, we here at AA Beyond Belief want to wish you a very happy, prosperous and peaceful new year.

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