

0:00:16 John S: Hello and welcome to AA Beyond Belief, the podcast. I'm your host, John S. Today, we meet Len R from Jasper, Georgia. Len has recently been recording audio versions of the stories that have been published on our site. You can find them all on our YouTube and SoundCloud channels.

0:00:40 John S: Hello, I'm here today with Len R from Jasper, Georgia. I met Len, I don't know, a month or two ago. He contacted us wanting to do some work for AA Beyond Belief. And what he has done truly is beyond belief. He has done a tremendous number of voice-overs for all of our articles on the site, and we have these things uploaded on SoundCloud and YouTube, and we're starting to get a really good response to them. They're just short little 15-minute, 20-minute audio stories from what has been published in AA Beyond Belief. And Len has done a tremendous job with that. So thank you, Len, and welcome to the podcast. It's good to have you here.

0:01:20 Len R: Thank you, John, and Happy New Year to you. And as far as the podcast and the recordings go, it's my pleasure and my honor to be of service. You can't begin to understand just how much this service means to me, and how much it's helped me. Even my wife has said she's noticed a difference in my demeanor, since I've started doing this. It's sort of, I've found a sense of purpose. And to be of service really is one of the foundations of our program.

0:01:51 John S: It is. I understand exactly where you're coming from. This site, AA Beyond Belief, and working on it with everybody else has become almost really a home group to me. [chuckle] I get just as much out of this as I do my regular group here in Kansas City, I love it. And it makes me happy to see that other people like you and Doris and so many others, Thomas, are out there and also receiving, I don't know, help or benefit or something from participating in this.

0:02:20 Len R: I was telling my wife the other day a fantasy. I said, "I wanna get on a plane and go to Kansas City, and go to the meeting."

0:02:25 John S: There you go. [chuckle]

0:02:27 Len R: Discovering this. I literally just discovered that there was an agnostic atheist movement within AA in... Oh, I made some notes here. I think it was September that I first found that there were some meetings here and attended a meeting. Yeah, September 19th was my first AA Agnostic meeting. It went on from there. I started learning more, I started reading your site, signed up to go to the convention, sent you the email volunteering to work. And it has just been a journey for me that's just been beyond exciting.

0:03:07 John S: Let's talk about that journey.

0:03:08 Len R: Okay, I guess one of the important things is I had 22 years of contiguous sobriety, before losing it about six years ago. So to go back to the early days, I was born in a large family, eight kids, and I was the oldest. Seven boys, one girl. I learned a lot of responsibility early, just being in that kind of a large family. Because my dad was a truck driver, worked long hours; and mom was a stay-at-home mom because she was either pregnant or taking care of babies. So how could she be anything else, but? I grew up around, I didn't know it at the time, but alcoholism. My father was a heavy drinker. I hesitate to lay a designation of alcoholism on anybody. That's up to them to say who or what they are. My parents are both deceased. But my dad would drink. He would work all day, and a lot of hard physical labor back in the days when he drove a truck, hauling steel. And this is before the days of power steering and automatic transmissions on big trucks. And

he was about 5'6", 150-pound guy, and throwing big heavy canvas tarps. There weren't those little plastic tarps like today.

0:04:33 Len R: Chains and ropes and tarps to tie down those loads of steel, and then drive it across town. And then have to take all that off and be unloaded and loaded again, do it again. That was a lot of physical labor. I can remember one thing from my youth. My father could... He had so much upper body strength that those ladders that they mount right onto the side of a wall, so you're like climbing up the wall, he could grab one rung with one hand and a lower rung with the other hand and swing his feet straight out. He had that much upper body strength. But he worked, and when he finished working, he would stop at the bar and he would drink. And sometimes, he came home, and it was fine. And other times, he overshot the mark and my mother would always just make an excuse for him. "He works hard, he's just tired." Nowadays, when I look back, and I didn't know any of this as a kid. This was just normal. He was drunk. He wasn't sleeping on the floor at the top of the stairs because he was tired, he passed out.

0:05:43 Len R: And Mom was a secret drinker. She would wait until we all went to bed, and then she would drink. And there were many mornings that she didn't "feel good" and it was my responsibility to get all the kids fed, the littler ones fed, lunches made, off to school, off to school myself, and be home right after school. Because with that big a family, she needed help. So those were my early years and drinking, heavy drinking, was just normal. If we went to visit anybody else, our family friends, we went to, of course, visit friends who were like "us". That's all I saw, was heaving drinking there too. As a matter of fact, when you walked through the door, at least the adults, they shook hands and handed you a beer with the other.

0:06:31 Len R: And later on during the visit, the hard stuff would come out. And to me, that was just normal. You work hard, you support your family. Out of eight kids on a truck driver's salary, we were always fed, we were always warm. We were poor, but we didn't know it. We always had Christmas. Of course, a lot of this stuff was hand-me-downs and etcetera, but again, I knew no other way. I knew no other life. So as my story continues, when I was 18 years old, I made the great decision to get out of there. So I did something really smart. I got married at 18. [chuckle] And 11 months later, our first daughter was born. And two years after that, our second daughter was born. And I continued on in the pattern that I had seen my entire life. I went to work, I supported my family and made sure all the bills were paid. My wife was a stay-at-home mom. And when my responsibilities were complete, I drank. And I just figured that's just what adults do, and that was my right to do that.

0:07:45 Len R: As long as I kept them fed, sheltered, supported, then it was my right to do whatever I wanted to do. But "supported" also meant emotional support. And I have to admit, now, looking back, having learned from the program, I wasn't there for them. They didn't have my emotional support. I wasn't there at night. After I finished working, and then I would stop at the bar and drink, and I would come home and go to sleep. On the weekends, we spent a little time together. But again, after things were taken care of, if it was all done and shopping was done and we played, we went to the park or did this or did that, it was my turn. I would either drink at home, or go out to a bar. And it continued that way through about seven years of that marriage, and she finally divorced me. And I was never there. I really can't go back and blame her. And so now I was free to drink or stay out as late as I want, as often as I wanted to. And that's what I did. I'm an excellent pool player, or was when I was still young and could see. And I could play well enough at that time to the local bars, we'd play for a beer or a dollar.

0:09:03 Len R: And even though the divorce left me with very little in my pocket, because in those days the mother always got custody of the children, so I had to pay child support, which the judge set at about 60% of my take-home salary, so I had nothing to live on. I had to live with my parents. But in any case, I could drink. I didn't have a lot of money, but I could drink for free because I'd go to bars and play pool for a dollar. And I could play and stay there for hours, get drunk, have something to eat, and still leave with \$5 in my pocket.

0:09:38 Len R: And I could also sing. I had some musical talent. I actually played in a band in high school where we made money. So it was actually a band. We had paying gigs. School dances, we had a standing gig at the USO club in Downtown Detroit. We're talking late '60s here. And so I could sing. And there was a piano bar in the neighborhood where I worked, and I discovered my second avenue to get free drinks. You go to a piano bar, and this was before the days of karaoke, you could drink, and if you performed well and sang songs that people liked, drinks started coming your way. [chuckle] And at the place where I drank, if somebody bought you a drink and you were drinking and you weren't done yet, and somebody else bought you one, they just brought you a shot glass and turned it upside down in front of you. There were times when I had four or five shot glasses lined up in front of me.

0:10:38 John S: Wow.

0:10:39 Len R: It was there that I met my second wife. We worked together at the same company, not in the same departments. But I was kind of the social after-work drink guy. Just before 5:00, I'd start going around saying, "Who wants to stop for one?" And if we were gonna go to the piano bar, I made sure to invite her and then sing some songs looking directly at her, and we fell in love and eventually moved in together. And that was comfortable because we were both recently divorced, and living together was good enough for us. We didn't need to get married. Then I moved to... I got a promotion that moved me to California. So now both of us were making a cross-country move, and we got married, mostly at her mother's insistence. "You're not moving to California unless you guys are married." So we got married. And we were drinking buddies. Her social life was tied to mine. I liked to drink in bars, and she didn't drink nearly as much as I did, but she'd be there with me. We had a social life. Long story short, my alcoholism progressed. It got worse.

0:12:00 Len R: I had always felt that as long as I could do my job, get up, go to work, everything was fine. But now, I was calling in sick more often. And when I was at work, my work was beginning to suffer. And I started trying to quit drinking, but it never lasted. I could stop for a while and say I'm not gonna do it, and then a week later, I'd be drinking again. At work, they had... Throughout my career, I worked mostly for Fortune 250 companies, so it was a large company with a big HR department. And I started seeing these employee assistance pamphlets showing up on my desk, the ones that say, "Do you or anyone in your family have a problem with drugs or alcohol? We can help." And I said, "Interesting."

0:13:03 Len R: I thought everybody was getting them, but they weren't. [chuckle] My boss, who turns out his father is a doctor and was enlightened about alcoholism, saw my problem and started putting these pamphlets on my desk. One day, I just went out Friday night, got really drunk, had a hangover Saturday. I never really suffered much from hangovers, but got better that afternoon. But on Sunday, I got really sick, and so I went to the hospital. And usually... In my story, I tell people, "I used to pay doctors for the privilege of lying to them." [chuckle] "How much do you drink?" "Oh, a couple of drinks a week, not even enough to mention." But this time, I told the doctor the truth, for whatever reason. And I said, "How could that be connected? Because I haven't had a drink

since Friday, and here it is, Sunday, and I'm sick as a dog." And he said, "I believe you're going through withdrawal."

0:14:13 John S: How about that?

0:14:14 Len R: Wow, that was a shock. He recommended that I see my regular doctor and he gave me a shot, and they watched me for a few hours and I felt better, but that really scared the heck out of me. I did go to my doctor, and tell him the truth. It was just sort of a serendipitous sequence of events. He said, "You know, I don't know much about alcoholism." And in my mind, I screamed, "Alcoholism? Who said anything about alcoholism?" He said, "But I just joined the staff of the local St. Jude's Hospital, and they have a chemical dependency unit that I hear is pretty good. Maybe you should go over and talk to them." And I can remember thinking, "Chemical dependency. Well, that's a label that fits a man of my stature."

[chuckle]

0:15:08 Len R: I could be chemically dependent. But I'm not an alcoholic, because alcoholics are skid row bums. I went and met with them, and I met with one of the counselors. And they tried their best to talk me into checking in, but I said I wanted to think about it. And they gave me a big book and a Twelve and Twelve, and sent me home. Then a week later... Made an appointment to come back a week later. And I went back there for that appointment with all the full intention of giving them back the books and saying, "No thanks." Because when... I read the books, and I could certainly identify with Bill W's story, but then I saw God on every page and I was an agnostic. I sort of glossed over that. In my early life, I was raised Catholic. But when I became a teenager, I began to have questions like, "How could God sentence someone to hell for eternity if they committed a mortal sin, but died on their way to confession?"

0:16:15 John S: Yeah, if he just made it to confession, everything would have been cool, right?

0:16:18 Len R: Yeah. If they made it to confession, you could have gotten by.

[chuckle]

0:16:21 Len R: But you didn't, so you died with a mortal sin on your soul and you go to Hell. How come babies that aren't baptized don't get to go Heaven? And I said the loving and vengeful God thing I just couldn't come to grips with and became agnostic. Now at this point, I'm seeing God on every page of the big book and this isn't for me.

0:16:47 John S: Was this like, 1980s, Len, that you're talking about now?

0:16:51 Len R: Yeah. We're actually in 1988. My sobriety date was 12/16/88.

0:17:00 John S: Of '88. Got you, okay.

0:17:01 Len R: And I didn't even make it through Christmas and New Year's. [chuckle] When I went back and I told the counselor, "I don't think this is for me." They said, "Wait a minute, if you could." And my AA claim to fame, Dr. Paul O. In the room. He just happened to be the medical director of the program at St. Jude's.

0:17:26 John S: Now he's the author of "Doctor, Alcoholic, Addict."

0:17:29 Len R: Right. It's "Doctor, Alcoholic, Addict" in the third edition. In the fourth edition, they changed it to "Acceptance is the Answer."

0:17:38 John S: Right. And as a newcomer, people would quote that, his chapter, probably more than any other story in the book, I think.

0:17:45 Len R: And it was. And he was a remarkable, remarkable man. Sat down, calmly told me his story. And I said to myself afterwards, "If a doctor..." Now, again, we're talking about I have this self image to maintain. "If a doctor could go through this and this program helped him, well maybe I need to give a shot 'cause I gotta do something. I can't stop drinking on my own, I need some help." So I checked in and the very next day... The first day, they keep you under observation and I wasn't real bad, I wasn't going through withdrawals. So the second day they put me in a van and hauled me off to my first AA meeting along with the other patients. And I expected that they were going to bring me into some room full of skid row bums and they brought me into this room, this large room, it was a speaker meeting on a Saturday night and normal people, people like me, laughing, joking, slapping each other on the back. And it clicked that in my mind... I'm kind of a smart guy, smart enough to know that every one of the people in there were alcoholics but they were having fun and they were sober.

0:19:07 John S: This is what kills me when I hear people's stories. What you just described, that's the magic of AA, in my opinion.

0:19:16 Len R: Yes, that fellowship. I didn't know you could be happy and have that kind of fun, have a party and not be drinking. But here they were. That was a reality and I wanted that bad, so I jumped in with both feet. I set aside my agnosticism. I said I'll give it a try. They said, "Give God a try." I said, "You bet." And I did everything. I did the steps, on my knees, got a sponsor, did the steps on my knees, did everything I could, said all the God stuff. In the back of my mind, I didn't believe it, but they said... And I even brought that up and they said, "Don't worry, it'll come." And so I just kept going. Got involved in service work, chaired meetings, secretary, treasurer. The treatment program had an alumni association and I got involved in that. And what they were doing was mostly making sure that there was a meeting for people as they got out of the program, they would go to this meeting. And so they were newbies and they were people... Part of my job was to make sure that there were alumni people who had gone through that same treatment program, they're at the meeting so there could be some real identification going on. I helped do that and did that for a couple years until the hospital finally shut down their program because the insurance companies were no longer paying, easily paying for inpatient programs. They wouldn't pay for inpatient unless you tried outpatient and other things.

0:21:00 John S: Now, you're in Southern California, right?

0:21:01 Len R: Yes.

0:21:02 John S: Okay, and so when you're... It sounds like you're having a pretty good time with the program here and the God stuff isn't bothering you too much, 'cause when you talk to people about your objections it's more like, "Hey, don't worry about it, it'll come." Nobody's really pushing you too hard on it.

0:21:17 Len R: Right, right. The meetings were a lot more fun, happy, joyous, free. And there was God talk but it wasn't shoved down your throat. Whenever anybody shared, when you were done, people clapped. If you were picking up a 30-day chip, people were cheering...

0:21:35 John S: That's California, they do a lot of the clapping there, don't they?

0:21:38 Len R: Oh indeed.

[chuckle]

0:21:40 Len R: And there was a lot of comradery and I can't think of a group that didn't go out for coffee and pie or dinner, whatever, after a meeting. It was a big social environment and I loved it. But then I got laid off, reduction in force, they call it. I got riffed and picked up a job that said, "You have to move to Chicago." So that was my choice and I did, took the job. But now I was leaving behind my AA in Southern California, all my friends, my two grown daughters were there, everything that I got sober in was gone. And by the way, during that time, that second wife divorced me. And I couldn't blame her because she lost her best buddy, her drinking buddy, her friend. It completely changed her social life and that wasn't what she had bought into. And so again, we're still friends today. And I don't blame her at all. But at five years sober, I'd gone through the death of my mother, the loss of that job, a new job that required a cross-country move, leaving my daughters and my friends, my AA. And I got to Chicago, up into northwest suburbs, actually. And I didn't even know anything about, again, anything about Agnostic AA. And Quad A I guess was active at the time, but I didn't know. And the meetings in my area were way different.

0:23:26 Len R: In Southern California, we were taught. It was like boot camp. If a new face walks into the room and you don't know them, we would converge upon them to make sure that they felt comfortable, whether they had a day's sobriety or 40 years' sobriety. If they were new in that room and we didn't recognize them, everybody was there introducing themselves and making sure that they get coffee or whatever information they needed. But in Chicago, things were different. They weren't... I walked in and found myself having to introduce myself. There were people talking and laughing, but they were in their own little cliques. And I was kind of standing on the outside trying to get in. And im not saying, again, now that's not all meetings in Chicago, but that's the ones that were near me. And I stopped going as frequently.

0:24:23 Len R: Then another riff, but I got a job a little further out of Chicago and found a better meeting where they were more like that California meeting. They were more inclusive and they made sure I felt... It was a smaller meeting and they made sure I felt comfortable and I got a sponsor. But turned out he had to move away, and then shortly thereafter, I had gotten transferred to Atlanta. So I get down in Atlanta, and now I'm in the Bible Belt. And the God was real strong in those meetings and now I'm starting to grit my teeth because my agnosticism had returned. After I had gone trough the Twelve Steps and done all of this, I never felt any of that God feeling that everybody talked about.

0:25:14 John S: Yeah, let me ask you this though. Your experience is very similar to mine because I suppose I was agnostic, I was maybe an apathist. I really had no religious background whatsoever. But I went trough the steps, kind of going trough the motions. In other words, what I did I would speak in meetings as if I believed, I guess. I don't know what I was doing, Len. But I somehow in my mind intellectualized the process and somehow realized that, "Okay, even though I don't believe that there's a god, there must be some psychological benefit to what I'm doing." Did you see value

in what you were doing? Or did you think it was all BS? How did you feel about what you were doing as an agnostic as you went through those steps?

0:25:54 Len R: Well, when I was going through the steps, I was making an honest effort to believe that there was a deity that was listening. But then as I concluded them and was working with others, I found that, again, that God sense that people talk about just never came to me. But I knew the language and I'm a people pleaser so I said what I knew they wanted to hear, "God did this for me and God did that for me." Because the program works.

0:26:29 John S: It does.

0:26:29 Len R: I lost my belief in God, but I never lost my belief in the program. It did work. It worked for me and I saw it working for thousands of other people. Something about it worked, I made the group my higher power. I heard somebody say one time, "G-O-D: Group of drunks." So I took that and ran with that, and it worked. But when I got to Georgia, now the meetings were not only spiritual, they were... At least, again, the ones I was in were religious. One of them, at one meeting they even asked me what church I belonged to. And it just gritted my teeth, because it wasn't just references to a higher power or references to God. It was references to Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior.

0:27:27 John S: I have heard about this in AA, but I have never personally experienced it, but I think even around here it happens, and maybe more frequently than it used to. But I've never experienced that, but I know that it happens and other people experience it and that would really be difficult for me to have to deal with, too.

0:27:42 Len R: Right. So before I start getting letters from everybody in Georgia, I found out later on not all meetings are like that. But the ones around me were and it still exists in the small towns, small town AA. And long story short, I just stopped going to meetings. This was about halfway through that 22 years and I made it the rest of the time with no program at all. And I didn't have any desire to drink. The cravings didn't come back, I didn't have any program, didn't have friends in the program, wasn't doing anything, wasn't reading the book. But I was staying sober. Got married to a woman that I met in Atlanta. She married me sober, she had never see me drink. I was open to her about the fact that I was an alcoholic. But if she wanted to drink, that was okay, but I would just order a diet coke. But still being a typical alcoholic, she could leave half of a \$30 steak sittin' on the table and I didn't care. But if she left half of a \$6 drink, I started looking at... "Aren't you gonna finish that?" [chuckle] So I was still alcoholic, still had that alcoholic thinking.

0:29:02 Len R: I went through all of life that people go through. My father died during that time, my dog died during that time, I lost the good job that I was involved in there in Atlanta, stayed unemployed for 18 months, had some severe medical problems, had to go on some significant narcotics. And I found that for me, narcotics, if you really need them, if you're really in pain, they were giving me morphine and I didn't get high. But when I started to get better and I started to need less, I started to begin to feel a little bit of a high and started looking forward to the time that I could take my next batch of pills. And sometimes would even take a few extra so I could get a little extra pain relief. And this, in my mind, started threatening my sobriety. I'm not drinking, but if I'm abusing drugs, then that's sobriety. So I went to the doctor, had him cut it back, threw away the extra that I had, and continued through that.

0:30:18 Len R: Again, lost that job, they finally had a temporary one down in Florida for a while.

But that was during the real estate crash, so that job exploded. Then a headhunter found me a job in Houston and we moved there. And one time... Now, we're talking about March of 2011, my wife was out of the country. That didn't have a whole lot to do with it, but she wasn't there, and I just decided to have a drink. And my alcoholism, my alcoholic thinking had returned and that insanity came back and I just thought it'd be a good idea. Maybe I wasn't really an alcoholic after all, maybe I just had a drinking problem 22 years ago. Hell, it's been 22 years, I haven't had a drink. So I bought a bottle intending to have a few and got drunk. And the next day, I poured it out and said, "I'm not gonna drink again. I can't drink." And I didn't go back to AA. In fact, at that time, there was a lot of shame involved. After that drunk, I was ashamed. I had 22 years, I knew better, and I blew it. But I just set that aside and said, "That's it, I'm not drinking."

0:31:37 Len R: Then about a month later, and I'll try and speed this up a bit... About a month later, I walked in after working late into a restaurant, it was Applebee's or Chili's, or something and the place was full but they had some room at the bar. And I went and sat down at the bar with absolutely no intention of drinking. And when the bartender said, "What do you want?" I said, "Bourbon, a draft beer, and a cheeseburger." It just rolled out. And ironically, I controlled it like that for about a year, not getting drunk. Because my wife had never seen me drink, and I didn't tell her that I had had a drink. But now, I'm coming home more and more late telling her I'm working late, projects, so don't wait for me, I'll just grab dinner on the way home. And she didn't stop to think that maybe I was drinking, that didn't occur to her. She thought maybe I was having an affair. And I was, with my best friend, alcohol.

0:32:43 Len R: And I tried to convince her that I could handle it and showed her that I could, but I couldn't. Just like with everybody else, I started to drink. And I became a binge drinker. I'd never been a binge drinker before. I'd been a daily drinker, but I'm not a binge drinker. So now I would stay sober for weeks at a time, and then buy a bottle and just... If it was a half pint, I'd drink it all. If it was a pint, I'd drink it all. If it was a quart, I'd drink it all. And had to enter a detox because I wanted to stop. And this time... And by now, my wife doesn't want me around drinking, and she's seen me kill herself. She loves me, I love her, and she's watching me destroy myself. And she had had some history in the past with previous relationships with substance abuse, so she wasn't gonna stand for it.

0:33:43 Len R: And I checked into a detox, and it was hell trying to get out. After the five days, I said, "Okay, I'm ready to go home." And they wouldn't release me. They wanted me to go through their treatment program. And long story short, I set up a meeting with the hospital administrator, or the program administrator, and said, "I had 22 years of sobriety. I slipped. I know AA, I know everything about AA. I know the program, I know the steps, I know what I have to do. There's nothing you can do for me except keep me locked up for another 20 more days. You're not gonna teach me anything I don't know." And I got out, started going to meetings. And now I'm not deep in the Bible Belt, but I still am. And there was a lot of God talk there. And went for a while, and my wife even went to some Al-Anon, and just gradually drifted away and stayed sober again for a long time. I can't really remember how long though. The six years here now between then and now got a little fuzzy. But it started again, only I was a little better at hiding it.

0:35:01 Len R: Wound up in another detox, this time, I agreed to go to their aftercare program. And again, for me, it was nothing. Because it was mostly geared around teaching newbies about alcoholism. But they did have a one night a week, you were supposed to bring your significant other to the meeting with you, family night. And that was helpful for her because the family was allowed to get some of their pain off their chest, and also learn a little bit about alcoholism. It wasn't all me just being bad. I did have a disease. There was some benefit that came from that. And again, that

lasted for a long time. And then again, I started sneaking some drinks and that quickly escalated into the binge drinking again, and back into another detox.

0:35:56 Len R: This time I went to a psychiatrist who specialized in alcoholism and addiction and did outpatient detox. And that really worked well for the both of us. And I had couple of slips but they were minor ones, and he had prescribed some meds for me to come down, and my wife had someone to talk to, as well. It was kinda unique, this psychiatrist had what he called a concierge service. I paid him for a year's worth of \$6,000 of counseling in advance. And for that amount of money, he was available 24/7 to be called and especially in the beginning. In the first few months, I would go in to see him every week and then we'd gradually cut that back, and that was good and I stayed sober for a long time there. Then I was working in a high stress job that I didn't like for a person that I didn't like. A real... You talk about A-type personalities, this was a triple A-type. And I finally said I had enough. I was 64 years old, my plan was to retire at 66.

0:37:27 Len R: And the month before I quit, which was September of 2015, my wife had been back in Georgia visiting relatives and one of those relatives had a business and wanted to sell it because he enjoyed the business, but didn't enjoy running the business and it was making him ill. So she came back from that vacation and said, "Gosh, when you retire, wouldn't it be nice if we could move back and buy a little business and I could run it?" And we said, "Yeah." After I quit that job, we're sitting there saying, "What to do?" And we said, "Well, your cousin wants to sell that business, let's go look at it." And the next week we were on a plane, we looked at it, decided we were gonna buy it, she went back. We decided that. Now, we didn't have any income, and I was making a significant income, so if I had started to draw on social security, they would have just taken it all back because we exceeded the amount we could earn. But I moved here to do due diligence and the alcoholism raised its head again. Here I was, alone, lonely, nobody else around, uncomfortable, and I started drinking. And again, on and off, doing those little binges. Do it, stop, throw it away. I would take Antabuse.

0:39:00 Len R: And then that psychiatrist had given my wife a little breathalyzer to use if she suspected me. So we would do little video chats and I would do the breathalyzer and take the Antabuse in front of her, etcetera, etcetera. But I found ways to cheat. When she came out finally in December, things got better. But then I was still sneaking some drinks. Long story short, last July, I went to my last detox, five day inpatient detox program because I had been drinking a pint or more a night. I would wait for her to go to sleep, get up, quickly chug as much as I could, and then jump back into bed. And so I came out... Sorry, let me back up. Before that, I really wanted to stop drinking. She caught me drinking a few times and I found a doctor who specialized in addiction and was a member and an atheist. So I started working with him and a counselor that he recommended but then I started secretly drinking and wound up in that detox.

0:40:15 Len R: When I got out, continued to see that doctor only for counseling. I switched back to that psychiatrist in Houston and we did FaceTime, Skype meetings back and forth. And so that was back last August. And then I think it was in September, I started Googling. For whatever reason I looked up atheist or agnostic AA and found WAFT. And I went, "Wow." And there's a meeting schedule. And so I looked up Georgia and found out there were exactly four meetings in Georgia, two in Atlanta and two in Savannah, which is hundreds of miles away. Even the one in Atlanta is an hour drive each way, 60 miles away from me. But I went to my first agnostic AA meeting of the two. The first I didn't like so much, the second was a really good one. On October 14th, the AA group, the more religious one that was close to me, still a 20-minute drive to get to the meeting, they put up a poster about this men's weekend, and highly suggested that I go because it was great. And so I went and I looked around and they did it at this big 4H center that had room for... Cabins

and could sleep eight people, etcetera, etcetera. And I hear these 400 people and they're all talking about God got them sober and was keeping them sober.

0:42:00 Len R: And I had sort of an a-ha moment that occurred, because now I'm more and more firmly agnostic. And I said, "If these 400, in my opinion, delusional people, think God is keeping them sober, then something about this program works." Again, they're staying sober. I don't believe there is a God, so something is there. And then it just started cascading. I went to the... I found your email address, volunteered to narrate stories, we met at the convention. That convention just blew me away. To see that many people who were atheist and agnostics who didn't have horns.

[chuckle]

0:42:55 Len R: And came back from there. Unfortunately, I also had cataracts. It was fall and I could no longer drive at night and couldn't go to those meetings. So recording those stories became my meetings. I was going to meetings daily, I was listening to other people's stories and recording them. That's why I say that was so, so important to my sobriety. During December, I had the cataract surgery and now, last week, I went to my first meeting again. I can finally drive, released to drive at night. And it was the best meeting that I have attended since I left California. Here again was the comradery. We went to dinner afterwards. They asked me to be of service. I started talking a little bit about hours and we'll talk more about that later, but it was really great. That's really my story up until now.

0:44:01 Len R: Now, I'm staying sober a day at a time. And I think for me to wrap up my story, it's really important for me to say that the program really is one day at a time. I recently heard somebody share a day of sobriety is like a marble. Just stay sober, you get a marble, but you can't stack marbles. No matter how many of them you have, you have to work this program at a daily basis. I got a bag of marbles with over 8,000 marbles in it and it didn't keep me sober. But one day at a time. If I wake up and don't take a drink that day and then go to bed sober, I get a marble. I can say I'm in sobriety now because on a day-to-day basis, I don't drink.

0:44:56 John S: I agree. That's what it's about.

0:44:58 Len R: I still take some of those medicines that the doctors recommended. They said because of all the relapses I had had over the six years, they wanted to put me on medication, Naltrexone. I started off with 40 milligrams of Valium a day and now it's down to two and a half and in another week, it'll be none and some gabapentin. So people are asking me, "Well, what's your sobriety date?" And I said, "Well at this point, I have yet to name one." When I'm no longer walking with crutches, meaning still taking those drugs, then perhaps I'll pick a day and say, "Okay, this is... January 31st is my new sobriety date." But to me, it doesn't matter. I didn't lose those 22 years of sobriety.

0:45:48 John S: No, you didn't. No, absolutely not.

0:45:50 Len R: I learned the program. I lived...

0:45:53 John S: It's part of your story still. You haven't lost a damn thing.

0:45:56 Len R: And even when I went back to drinking, I still lived the principles of the program.

0:46:05 John S: Let's talk a little bit about what you've done within AA Beyond Belief, 'cause I'm quite frankly amazed by it. You have recorded at least 46, maybe now by now 47 stories over a relatively short period of time and the quality is incredible. You could be making thousands of dollars doing this, but the way that you put emotion into the stories, it's like you understand... You somehow have a way of dramatically conveying what the writer wanted to convey. It amazes me. Did you have acting experience or anything? How did you ever get to learn to do something like this?

0:46:47 Len R: No, I didn't have any acting experience. Years and years and years ago, I got involved in one play in community theater that my wife wanted to join, but that really was my only experience. I never had acting experience but I think what it is is I really, really do identify with what these people are saying. I feel what they feel. I can understand it like no others can outside of our program. We can each understand each other's pain and suffering, even if our stories are different.

0:47:25 John S: That what amazes me. When I listened to those stories, and I've listened to almost every one that you've recorded, you get the sarcasm, you get the humor. It's incredible. 'Cause the way that you read the story through your voice, through how you emote, I'm understanding what the author is conveying. It's just absolutely incredible. Plus the way that you do it is very professional so that you can hear it very, very well. The sound quality is pitch perfect, your diction, it's just incredible. But as you go through these stories, what are your thoughts? How do you feel on an emotional level reading all of these as often as you do? What kind of impact is that having on you?

0:48:12 Len R: Well, some of them actually... You talk about the professionalism of the recording and how it flows, some of them I've gotta stop and go back and re-record several times because sometimes it's me choking up. I just can't get it out and say the whole sentence without tripping up. And other times, I'm laughing. And other times, I'm just enjoying what they're saying or they've just exposed me to a new idea that I hadn't thought of that way before.

0:48:48 John S: Isn't that something else? It is like a meeting, isn't it?

0:48:53 Len R: Yeah, it truly, truly is. I get to read their stories and then understand them, and then I go back and I try to read them. I free read them, it's not like I try to practice in advance, I just start reading the story out loud like you would reading from the book at a meeting. And when I flub up, I just back up and re-record over that spot. But that's how I get through them. And listening to the experience of some of these people, it is... These are meetings online for me. They were my meetings, I wasn't able to go out at night, and I didn't live in an area where I'm not truly welcome at my local meeting, because I announced myself as an agnostic. It's not like they're openly hostile to me, but I'll share and absolutely nobody will pick up on the theme and there's nobody shaking my hand at the end of the meeting saying, "I liked what you had to say."

0:50:00 John S: No. That is kind of sad. I experienced that at my old home group after I started talking a little bit differently. It's kind of weird to not get those feel goods from your fellow AAs. [chuckle]

0:50:13 Len R: But in all fairness, they've got a very solid group who grew up here in the Bible Belt. They truly believe in what they believe in, and it takes both hands to count the number of people who have sobriety in the 20 plus years. There's a lot of old-timers there that have been going to those meetings for a long time and sober for a long time, one celebrating 40 years. I'm not gonna

change anybody's opinion there, and they're never gonna accept my opinion. So if I've got to drive 60 miles to find a meeting that works for me, I'll do that.

0:50:58 John S: And besides what you're doing on AA Beyond Belief, that truly is service. Another thing I was gonna say, I've tried recording a story that I've written before, and I couldn't do it. No one would wanna listen to it because there's a difference... Speaking and reading are two different things. Speaking, reading, writing are just completely different as far as I've ever been able to experience. You have somehow been able to read it in a way that's very engaging for the listener, where it's not necessarily like it's being read. That's my impression anyway. When I listen to your stories, it really draws me into the stories. Sometimes, I actually get more out of the story listening to it rather than reading it. 'Cause I've read a story and I thought, "Well, this is a great story." But then somehow when I listen to you read the story, I get even more out of it. I don't know what it is, but there's something different between those three modes, reading, writing, and speaking and you somehow bring them all together.

0:52:06 Len R: Oh, it's very gratifying to hear that. And it's, again, my honor to do so. I try to, when I'm narrating them, think of myself as standing up in front of a group telling the story. So I try to do it like... I've written out stories before, but now I'm speaking at a meeting.

0:52:35 John S: Well, it's an incredible service.

0:52:35 Len R: I gotta use some inflection, I got to use a few jokes.

0:52:41 John S: A couple of year ago, when was it? It was... Okay, when I realized I was an atheist, I was like, 25 years sober and I came to the conclusion I was an atheist. This is prior to 2014. Maybe 2013, 2014, I don't know when it was, 'cause a couple of years before that I started searching online. There wasn't a lot of stuff out there on the Internet at that time. I think San Francisco had a site, New York had a site, but you didn't have anything on YouTube about atheist or agnostics in AA. You didn't really have any stories out there. Now, that's completely changed, everything's different now, Len, because of what you've done. That YouTube channel of ours is incredible, because you've now got 46 stories recorded that people are listening to, and people like it on YouTube where you can have a story, you can listen to for 10, 15 minutes, as opposed to a podcast where you have to invest a whole hour. So you've got all this stuff out there that's searchable. And I think that... Speaking of that, I think that the next step that I wanna do is categorize all the stories on YouTube and we also have them on SoundCloud, 'cause we can create different playlists for different subject matters. So that way if people are looking for a particular topic, they can find a story that is relating to that topic, make it a little bit more searchable for 'em that way.

0:54:01 Len R: That sounds truly, truly interesting and I think that this medium now will become... Just like I said, the meeting that I went to, those people are set in their ways. I think AA, our central office, is indeed kind of set in their ways and they're not gonna change it. They aren't embracing the Internet. They are't...

0:54:25 John S: They're slow about it. They're talking about it, but all they do is talk, talk, talk. They never... They're afraid of it. And it's too bad, but the rest of us AAs are out here doing it anyway, so it's a game changer. It truly is. And it's only gonna evolve from here. I was reading a post on Facebook that... [chuckle] I always talk about Jay all the time, he's one of my favorite people. But he posted something on Facebook about how he thinks in 20 years from now that online

meetings are gonna be probably the norm. And then someone else mentioned something about how with the advent of virtual reality technology that it's gonna be almost like face-to-face meetings, I don't know, but anyway, a lot of people think that this is the future of AA. It's even hard for me. As much as I embrace technology, it's kind of hard for me to even understand what they're envisioning. 'Cause I still have that need for the human connection face-to-face, too. But it's interesting to watch this development online though technology like this.

0:55:36 Len R: Yeah, I don't think the actual face-to-face fellowship part will... If we ever lose that, I think we'll lose. It can't be all online. But there's gonna be a lot more online and I think what's gonna happen is as the elder statesmen retire and the younger generation starts moving in, we'll find more acceptance for some of this. Just like the first generation wouldn't accept gays, or black meeting, or any sort of specialty meeting. They didn't even consider a women's meeting. And they moved on and others moved in who found those ideas more acceptable. And as the leadership changes, it will gradually growing and maybe it's a good thing that we don't try to change too quickly. But I think we're headed in the right direction. And our agnostic, atheist freethinkers meetings are being more and more accepted and growing.

0:56:52 John S: They are growing.

0:56:52 Len R: And one of the stories that I just narrated was from somebody who was spiritual but preferred the agnostic meetings because they were a little more real.

0:57:03 John S: Yeah, that's how I like them because of the... We're less focused on what you believe and more focused on what we do. And we give more credit to the fellowship. It's maddening for me, and I'm not a total atheist, but it's maddening for me to sit in a group of people who I see helping each other and they don't give each other credit for... [chuckle] It's always some external deity that has done the miracle.

0:57:30 Len R: Right, and it's really them working together and making it happen. So that fellowship was what I lost and I got drunk. Now that I've found that fellowship again, the obsession to drink is now... I can't say it's left me completely, I'm still too young again. But it's gone away. I'm not feeling like I need a release. I have one, I've found a new family. I've found my fellowship again. And that makes me so happy inside and comfortable that it's just hard to express how wonderful having the fellowship is.

0:58:16 John S: Tell me this... One thing I like for AA Beyond Belief is to be a platform for people in recovery to express their recovery through their own creativity, their own talents. We've got audio, there's all kinds of medium that I would like to see displayed at AA Beyond Belief. What would you like to do? Do you have any ideas as to where you would like to go? Anything that you would like to explore as far as working on the site, and working with maybe podcast or anything like that?

0:58:51 Len R: Well, I'm certainly interested in continuing to narrate stories for us, for aabeyondbelief.com and for any other website that would... I'd be happy to volunteer to do the same for them. I would like to see more of the podcast, the interviews, maybe online meetings where we could... I know there are some online meetings today but they don't all...

0:59:21 John S: They don't record them.

0:59:24 Len R: But maybe we could record them and then play them so there could be... And we would probably have to change the format a little bit and have a moderator moderating the topic of the meeting...

0:59:35 John S: You could do streaming meetings on YouTube. You could actually have a live, streaming meeting that you can have on YouTube and record it for people to listen to later. And you can still protect everybody's anonymity because it doesn't have to be filmed. You don't show anybody's faces and people just use their last name. It'd just be like an open meeting, where the public is free to come and listen if they want to. But I kind of like that idea and it's actually really good for people who have never experienced an agnostic meeting to be able to get kind of a flavor of what one truly is like. It'd be good for some of the traditionalists to see, "Oh, this isn't that much different from what we do really, other than they don't pray." And it might be good for people who are avoiding AA to see what actually takes place.

1:00:21 Len R: And I'm a city boy, I've always lived in or in the near suburbs of a large city, and now I'm a country mouse. I'm sitting out here in the north Georgia mountains.

1:00:34 John S: Beautiful up there.

1:00:35 Len R: And yes, indeed it is, but a lot of the population does not have access to meetings unless they drive for an hour in one direction or another. And having something like that be available to them, the challenge is gonna be getting the word out. I'm not quite sure how to do that.

1:00:55 John S: You were asking me, by the way, if we had a flyer and we do, I'll email you one and it was actually created by Mikey in Orlando. He created a little flyer for AA Beyond Belief, which I shall send to you so you'll have one.

1:01:08 Len R: Great. And that way I can hand them out to people at the secular meetings and I'll go to the business meeting at my local group and see... Try and put on a case and see if I can get it put up on the wall there, too. Because I know I've been encouraged to continue to speak up as agnostic in that meeting, even though they might not like to hear it, because somebody else in that room probably has the same feeling and isn't gonna stand up and say it. And eventually they will, and eventually I'll pick up a couple and maybe we'll get our own meeting started up here. So far, I've had no nibbles on the hook, but somebody out there... I mean small town life is everybody knows what's going on and if you come out, you're out. So it may be difficult to get this growing but more and more as people learn and become educated, and again, the generational changes take place, there are more and more young people coming in who I think are turned off by the non-secular meetings and would be very much more attracted to the secular ones. So I'm gonna try and get myself introduced into a few of the treatment programs here and see if I can maybe be a speaker or maybe even that would be a place to start a meeting.

1:02:41 John S: Yeah, actually it would be a good place to start a meeting. That's a excellent idea. They would love to hear it and it might be that they might even not even be aware of Agnostic AA at the treatment centers in your area. But a lot of treatment centers really welcome it and we get a lot of referrals, actually, to our group in Kansas City from treatment centers around here when... If they have a patient who says "I don't want to do AA, it's got too much God," they say, "Oh, check this group out." And we actually get a lot of people that way.

1:03:11 Len R: I have one psychologist here who I've sat with and volunteered to do so. They

were... She holds one meeting a month, but it's really a counseling meeting. You gotta pay \$40 for people to come in. And that's a part of it, people who aren't into the religious AA but are court-ordered to get treatment. [chuckle] And she invited me to come to those. Of course, I still gotta pay \$40. So I know I'm not gonna get a whole lot of people that are interested in going there. But from there, I can pull in some people and we'll get something started. One way or another, it's gonna happen.

1:04:03 John S: It's gonna happen. It will. Well, I've really enjoyed this talk. Thank you very much for agreeing to do this and thank you again for all of your work on AA Beyond Belief. It's helped many, many people, including myself. So thank you very much for that, Len.

1:04:16 Len R: Well, thank you very much for having me, for giving me a platform to tell my story, and also to anybody that's listening. If you're interested in North Georgia to try and get something together or even if it's not a meeting, just get together, I welcome anybody to contact me.

1:04:38 John S: Well, thank you Len.

1:04:39 Len R: Thank you for letting me be of service.

1:04:43 John S: Well, that's it for another episode of AA Beyond Belief, the podcast. Thank you for listening. May take a week off next week, my daytime job is getting pretty demanding, gotta put a little bit of time into that. But I've got some interesting guests coming up. I'm reading a book right now that I'll be finishing soon, "We Could Be Heroes," by Sarah Dale, a very talented author from Lincoln, Nebraska. And I'd love to have her on to talk about her book. Also Dale Kay, my friend from Florida, has written a very interesting book. A study, a secular study of the big book. I'd love to talk to him about that. Ben B. Of course, also from Lincoln, will be back on to help us finish out the steps with a nice little chat about Step 12. Until then, you all take care, be well, we'll talk again soon.