

District 22, Area 93
Interview with Keith M. (On-line version)
5/5/09

(Edited for the internet to assure anonymity. As such, some continuity present in the original audio recording may have been altered or deleted.)

Jim: Hello, my name is Jim L., and I am an alcoholic. The interview I'm about to record is intended for internal use only for Alcoholics Anonymous and its members. As such, I'll be including last names and other identifiers. However, if any portion of this interview is used by the media—press, radio, television, films, internet—or in any public presentation, then our tradition of anonymity must be respected, and identifiers other than the first name and the initial of the last name must be omitted.

This morning I am sitting with Keith M. in his lovely living-dining room, and it is May 5th 2009. Happy Cinco de Mayo by the way!

Keith: Yeah, it is.

Jim: And I'm going to learn some more about Keith and his history of AA in San Luis Obispo County. So, Keith, would you tell us how you got into AA?

Keith: Yeah, I, my name is Keith, and I'm an alcoholic, and I got sober November 25, 1960, and I was 17 years old. And my mother had gotten into Alcoholics Anonymous 3 years ahead of me. And I was locked up in Newport Beach city jail. I had been busted for drunk driving, reckless driving, resisting arrest, assaulting a police officer and attempted escape. Very hard to run when your hands are handcuffed behind your back, and I did do that. So it sets up the qualifier. You need a total deflation to get your attention sometimes, and that what's happened in that jail.

I was in the Explorer Scouts. I had rigged a high school deal where that's what happened. I ended up being elected _____ by my peers, and then the city went along with it on a government day program. So, I got to ride around in the police chief's car and wave and have a good time and run the siren. And 6 months later, I'm in the jail for drunk driving, reckless driving, resisting arrest, and the whole gig, so I'd had the big deflation and I'd only drank for 2 1/2 years. I started drinking right after my mom got sober, and we'd won the C.I.F. championship. I was on the swimming team. And that was a big deal in those days. And we were going to go to the Olympics. We were all planning on going to the Olympics, and we won the C.I.F. championship, and next thing I know, I started drinking with my buddies. And by the time my senior year rolled around, I wasn't on the swimming team anymore, and I'd developed a heart condition, and the end of my so-called Olympic swimming career. It never happened!

But I ended up going to my first AA meeting in Garden Grove in 1960.

Jim: Was the heart condition related to alcohol?

Keith: It's a family problem.

Jim: OK.

Keith: Alcohol exacerbated it, made it worse. It's just something I had to live with. It got me out of the service when they drafted me. After I got sober, I got drafted, and went down there with a few of my other buddies from high school. We all flunked out, because we had these weird, little things that happened to us. My heart attack; another guy was a sleep walker; another guy was just a wild man, smoking about 4 to 5 packs of
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cigarettes in an hour if he could, just to try to get out of it. Anyway, that's what happened. I didn't go to Vietnam. I got stuck staying in Orange County and going to AA meetings.

We started a Young Peoples' meeting in those early days. We had 3 members. I was 17; the other guy was, oh, 21, and he was my sponsor, because I met him at my first AA meeting. In all of Orange County, there was only 8 meetings a week in the County. And there was one guy who was 21 years old and was sober for something like 6 months or 8 months, and I made him my sponsor immediately, because I had that discernment to know who was and who wasn't good sponsor material. But he was the only young person under 40, so I latched onto him right away. I came to find out that he was a heroin addict, and he would hang out in AA, trying to get some rest. And he gave me some good advice. He said, "Peoples' feet are made out of clay. Put your faith in the principles of the program, and you'll make it." And then he got drunk 6 months later. And I tried to sponsor him back in a couple of times. He wasn't ready. In the meantime, he lost his wife and kids. Last time I heard, he was in jail and had gotten in a fight and lost his eye. You know, things were going bad. And, Hank, Hank I. was his name, and he had carried the message to his mom and dad in East L.A. that were winos, and they'd gotten sober and stayed sober.

Jim: But he didn't.

Keith: But he didn't. And I heard he died in a prison fight or something.

You know, it's one of those deals. In the meantime, I run into 2 guys. One was a new guy that I knew, and his son was a drunk, and he wanted help for his son. He got sober a month ahead of me. He said, "Can you help my son?" I said, "Sure, if he wants to go to a meeting." He said, "Sure." He came to our Young Peoples' meeting we had at my house. He brought with him a guy named Jim K., who was just a visitor, and his son was Bill, Bill R., and Bill managed to stay sober off and on for about 15 years of slipping, and then he got sober and stayed sober until now. And his buddy, Jim, it took him another year. His mom was already in the program. And Jim K., "Crazy _____", we called him, and he stayed sober...he got sober like a year and a half later, and he and I were teaching each other how to read, so we could read the Big Book.

We dissolved the Young Peoples' meeting, because it was getting too weird. And we had Hank I., my 21-year-old buddy, who was one member, myself, and a guy who was like 35 years old, who was a former radio disc jockey. And we had a unique thing; we had a group sponsor, a guy named Bob W., who was like the quiet version of Chuck C., very spiritual, very heavy duty, neat guy to have around. I think he taught Chuck a lot in the beginning without ever being asked, you know. And he would come and sit at our meeting, and help add a little reference from the Big Book once in a while to keep us on track. And we used to bring our dates and let them go downstairs and drink while we had our meeting upstairs. And we partied after we got rid of the old man—the sponsor of the group.

So we could see this wasn't going to work out too well, so we kind of quit doing that, and realized we needed to have a meeting in a regular place. And we got together and started a meeting in Laguna. And we had like 7 or 8 members by then, about a year, year and a half later after I got sober.

Jim: Still a young people's group?

Keith: It stayed in existence for almost 30 some years, and then it kind of dissipated out, because all of the average age was young, and the rest of us were old by then. But we revived it a couple of years later, and called it the "Under 40 Reunion Group". Anyhow, it was a place that when it was getting started, our membership was very unique, because you name it, we had it in our group. Before anyone ever mentioned dope, we had...

Jim: You mean the "outside issues"?

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Keith: We had everybody in there! We had guys that rewrote the book for N.A., and all those people. We had all the hippies that came off the beach in the '60's. We went through all the wild times. One of our secretaries got busted and hauled off to jail for drug dealing. He couldn't get off, you know, whatever. He was a sober drug dealer.

He went to jail. Our group kept surviving. We got kicked out of the Laguna Canyon Club. Chuck C. got very upset and never went back to the Canyon Club to speak after that. We went and got ourselves put in a little Episcopal church, and they liked us, and we stayed there for a long time.

Jim: Why did you get kicked out of the Canyon Club?

Keith: Well, the older people in that area there of the Canyon Club, the AA members, thought we had too many bad influences showing up on Friday night, and they had a group that wasn't really an AA group, it was some Al-Anons and some alcoholics that were married to each other that wanted to have a family group, and they didn't know what to call it, but they wanted to take our place, which they did. And conveniently, the cops had called the manager of the Club and said, "You know so-and-so is dealing drugs in the parking lot, and we're going to bust you guys and close the Club down." So that's why we got asked to leave.

Jim: Yeah, that's not dissimilar from the experience that the first young people's group in Santa Fe, New Mexico ran into. They were not allowed to use the Club, because the board of the Club was afraid of the influence of the "outside issues", and what are these young people going to be doing. They were afraid of the teenagers. And the way they solved the problem was they started to have their meeting, the Young Peoples' Group, on the lawn of the Club, in full view of everybody. And they did that for several months until finally...

Keith: Let them have a home?

Jim: They let them.

Was this at a time, when your Young Peoples' Group was in existence, was that about the same time that young people's groups were forming everywhere, or was that prior to...?

Keith: Yes.

Jim: ...prior to ICYPAA?

Keith: Yes, prior to ICYPAA. Or it was coming. ICYPAA was...well, we had a Young Peoples' Intergroup, which we started. We had a Long Beach Young People's Group when I got sober. One Thursday night down in Newport Beach I had been asked to read the 12 Traditions...I think I was 6 months sober...I think you had to be 6 months sober to do that...anyway I was sober long enough that I could pronounce "anonymity", so they let me go up there and do that. And I stood up and looked out at the audience and half the room was under 30, sitting there. The whole Group came down, and twelve stepped me, and said, "Why aren't you in our Group?"

"I don't know. Where's your Group?"

I went down to their meeting. We had some real characters in all that group, and neat people. And there were some young women sober, and so it was worth going to Long Beach.

One of the guys that I met, who was one of the members of that Under 40 Group...he had gotten out of prison and he was under 40, so he was going to that Group. I had acquired a...I called him my institutional

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sponsor...a guy named Obie C., who was a fog horn of a voice. You could hear him 5 blocks away when he talked to you. And he was a very commanding, demanding person. If you weren't at his house at the designated time to leave, one minute later he was in the car and gone. That's it! He taught us how to be responsible and show up. And he took us to L.A. to the Institutional Committee, and we got active in doing institutional work in prisons, And his deal was, when he saw me get sober...he was at my first meeting...he saw me get sober, he said. "Well, if this kid will stay sober long enough, I know we can get him to the Youth Authority". He was already planning, so I already had about 3, 4 years of sobriety, and he said, "We want to get this started in Chino. We've got the warden who asked us to try something. We got permission." So, he put together myself, Bob E., Johnnie H., and a guy named Gordon from over in Pomona. And we went in there and carried the message. Our goal, among the four of us talking about it, our plan was to go in there and bring a speaker each month, each night that we went in. We had 4 guys, so we had 4 nights a month that we covered, once a week. We would show up once a week on Saturday and have a meeting. And one guy would do it always rotating, so we were always busy taking a panel in. You know Johnnie H. was like a 5 time loser. He had run the prison up at San Quentin; he was tough.

Jim: Major league!

Keith: Big time! And the other guys...Bob E. was quite a talker, and later became very famous in show business, created a lot of big shows for _____, had his issues and went around the world doing whatever he does. Then myself, and I was the young one; the rest of them were older. So they liked having me on the panel for that reason. I was scared to death going in there, because you know what, they can pull your covers in 2 seconds. You can't bull shit a bull shitter, you know what I'm saying. So they actually...every week I went in there would be a different one of my buddies, either Bob E. or Johnnie H. or even Obie or Gordon or one of them would show up and go in with me. I never understood that. A few years later when we were all around talking about it, they said, "Well, you dummy, we were protecting your backside! This place is not just playing here, you know!" I had no fear in that respect. Talking about AA, going on an AA thing, I did not have that fear. But I had fear, apprehension about going there. But after being there, no, I didn't have any more fear of being in there. We even got a Saturday morning book study group going, and I went there a couple of times and got hooked on going to that one, because we did the Steps together there, me and them. I admitted when I had a problem. "I don't know how to do this one at all!" And they would...we all shared and it was great. They pulled my covers.

You know, coming in as the young person, you're the only one in the room that's a young person, so they all pat you on the back and tell you what a hell of good job you're doing. You can stay sober 5, 10 years without doing the Steps. I can attest to that! I mean doing them, but not doing them. You know what I mean? You're going to a lot of meetings; you're very active; but you probably haven't gotten through the 4th Step yet.

Jim: It took you how many years to get through...?

Keith: About 10.

Jim: OK!

Keith: The 4th Step, so I know how that one works!

We didn't have the same structure...I had sponsors...I had 3 sponsors. I had Obie C.; I had Joe Q., who was my main sponsor; and I had Ralph S., my other, go-to...

Keith: And Ralph was a carnie. And Joe was a numbers runner for the Philadelphia mob. He stole their money and still lived to tell about it.

Jim: Lucky guy!

Keith: Yeah. All his brothers were cops.

And then there was Obie, who was a real hustler from the old days. He shot a cop in Arizona in the vital parts, and they didn't like him in Arizona, and he had to have a police escort if he went into the state to visit his mom and dad in Yuma, where they lived. And they would meet him at the border. The police would take him to his mom's house, and he could stand on the front porch and talk to them for 20 minutes...

Jim: And then "out of here".

Keith: And they hauled him back out. And I got to drive him over to Tucson to see his daughter from his first marriage get married. And we got to watch her stepfather walk her down the aisle, and we were so pleased to be able to be there. And I got to witness that little miracle, because there were no cops bringing us to the meeting; we went there unescorted, 'cause he had already been granted a full pardon from being sober in AA and doing what he did. Giving back, going back into institutions was his thing.

And he went and moved to Alaska, worked the pipeline up there and stayed. And I got to go up there and visit him once in the late '80's.

But all these people are gone now, all the people I got sober with.

Jim: Well, you got sober a long time ago.

Keith: Yeah, that's why! I never dreamed I was going to be sitting around here, 66 years old, sober in Alcoholics Anonymous, still going to meetings, actually going to more meetings than I ever went to, 'cause I have the time to do it. And having a great time doing it, you know.

And I got these friends that I hung out with. They were boozers and wild kids. They were friends of mine. I was like 24 or 23.

Jim: You were 6 or 7 months sober...6 or 7 years sober.

Keith: And I moved up to... '65 actually, so about 5 years sober...I got a job in San Luis Obispo, working for a construction company selling real estate. I had a real estate license. I got it when I was like 19 or 20 years old. And so I was selling real estate, and I went up there to sell...well, actually to go in the restaurant business 'cause I had a friend who was running a restaurant here in San Luis called _____. I came up here and washed dishes and worked as a host for him. I got the job at the construction company selling real estate, but we were going to open a restaurant in this development called _____. I worked for this developer, the owner of the company, and the first job that he wanted me to do was open the golf course and run the snack bar there. So I was setting that up and working in the meantime at _____ in between and getting by.

And that first time away from home, and my friends all drank, gambled and partied a lot, and I went to AA meetings. I was their mascot, alcoholic, sober. They treated me that way. They were good guys. I came to San Luis Obispo, and I was about almost 4, 5 years sober when I was up here. And I met the group at that time that I spent time with...I met Birdie and her first husband, and then Bob...they got married later. Came to the program, and met Bud, and Bob, and Birdie as a kid. Everybody kind of just took me in, and I stayed right

basically in San Luis going to meetings all the time there, 'cause that was where almost all of the meetings were.

Jim: Back then, it would have been Melody and the Pioneer?

Keith: Yeah, Melody had already started, and we had Pioneer. We'd go over to the Friday night meeting, to the candlelight meeting they had over there. Melody, we'd go up Saturday night for the speaker meeting. And we'd get anybody who was driving through the area that stayed over night or dropped by that was in AA, they end up being our speaker. It was a nice, small, little group, and we had a great time. We had intergroups all the time, so we knew everybody in the county. Got to know Bernie K. and Willie...I hadn't met her at that time; she might have been in L.A. at that time. But I met her later. And Larry F., got to know him. And you know, it was an interesting group of people. There was a guy who worked over at the Tribune newspaper, and he was getting sober. He went on down to San Diego. But he was kind of a young guy and he took an interest in helping me get by up there and keeping me straight 'cause I had all these crazy people that I hung out with at work and stuff. But I was going to my AA meetings on a regular basis, because I just always kept going to my meetings.

And I met a guy named Jim B., who was a little, kind of short guy, and he was just kind of blowing through town, but he was Jim B., the meanest man in town. He had his handle, and you know, I got into an altercation with my buddy who owned the restaurant. We were in a bar shooting pool at 2:30 or 3:00 in the morning, after they closed the place, and I won the pool game, and he didn't want to pay up. Next thing I know, I was in a bar room fight, 5 years sober, and you know, you know everything when you're 5 years sober, and I'm in bar room fight getting the crap beat out of me. And I'm in there beating him up. It became a draw. It was just hilarious...really funny, and we just called it a draw and walked out. After the buddies all settled their bets and got rid of me, I left. I woke up in the morning and said, "Well, I can't work for him anymore." I wanted to kill him by then. I had a bad attitude and resentment by then. So I didn't have a job, and my rent was due. I could leave town. Well, I thought I could go north and get drunk. "I'm a failure. To hell with it." Or I could go south, down to back home, you know. But who wants to go back home with Mommy? Jeez, I didn't want to do that. But those are my choices. Course my mom was sober in AA, and I had a place I could go and get rehabbed without having to take a drink, so, you know, it was a safe haven...

Jim: So, it was north and get drunk, or home to Mommy.

Keith: Yeah, and I've got to go down and get a hanger thing to put in the car and the auto parts store, so I can load my stuff up and get out of town. And I'm walking in, and there's Jim B., the meanest man in town, 'cause when you're in AA, you always run into somebody every day that you know in the program. And there was Jim B., the meanest man in town. And he looked at me. He just took one look at me and he says. "Let's go get a cup of coffee." I'd already been to the Golden West Saloon, where we'd had the fight, and I asked if anybody had found my watch. And the guy who had been sweeping out the place was already drunk, so I knew he found my watch. End of that story. And then I run into Jim, and he takes me over to the Spud Nuts, and we sit down and have a cup of coffee. I'd never go in that place. After all, I worked at _____. We're the best restaurant in town.

Anyhow, I go sit down there with him, and none of that crap mattered now. We're talking how to stay sober today. And the guy sat there and said, "Well, let's do the compared to what." He says, "What are you going to do? Go north and get drunk? Or go south and stay sober?" "How did you know?" And he says, "I've been around a little longer than you, kid!" You know, I was always "The Kid". And he says, "Well, you don't have to. There's no big shame here. Hell, you're going home to your AA group. Make your move. You can't go back to work there, 'cause that isn't going to work out." And so I went back to Orange County and got back to work doing some other stuff.

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You know, that's those little highlights that hit you at the right time. And I've had a lot of those little crossroads in my life, as far as the little coincidences of God working in your life, and you're not recognizing it, until you're about halfway through the session. And I kind of knew why he was sitting there. "I'd better listen, 'cause He's here." I took his advice of course and went back down to Orange County.

But that's just my first introduction to San Luis Obispo. I loved the area, so I kept coming back every 10 years and living here. Well, the next time I came back with my wife, my first wife and my two sons. They had been born, and I was in the restaurant business, working full time in a chain down in Los Angeles, the Reuben E. Lee and Reuben's restaurants down in Newport Beach. I wanted to get off of that chain deal and go to work for, you know, a shot to get my own place. So I came up, and the coincidence being my neighbor knew a guy who happened to own the motel that had _____ in it, and those guys had all got drunk and blew their deal, and the hotel had inherited the restaurant back, and they were now owners of the restaurant, and he needed a manager. He asked me to come up there and run it. I went back to the place I had my first restaurant job in as the manager. I took the wife and the kiddies, and we moved up there, and we got active in San Luis AA. My wife was in Al-Anon, and that was in 1960...let's see...1972. 1973 actually. In January of '73, I started working at _____, went to work there and got settled in with my kids and my wife, and we stayed there for about 4 years.

And then I moved back down to Orange County and went to work in the RV business. A friend of mine in the program had an RV...owned an RV manufacturing company, and his son was running the sales line and drinking heavy. He said, "You need a job. Would you do me a favor and be willing to come down and work with my son, and help him in his RV business? And we'll sell you the business."

Jim: And, by the way, "Can you get him sober, too?"

Keith: Yeah. And I said, "I can't get anybody sober." And he said, "I know that, but you need a job, and I got a way to get you going." So, I went down there and went to work with them. And I had never towed a trailer or knew anything about it. In Traveland USA, there in Orange County, we had the _____ dealership.

Jim: Off I-5.

Keith: Yeah. We had the _____ dealership in East Irvine, and we eventually got *another brand* and introduced that to the West Coast, and took on *another brand* Motorhomes. You know, it was a good gig. We became the number one _____ dealer in the United States. It did help that his Dad owned the company, but the man never let us have carte blanche. We had to pay for every unit that came out the door, cash, no credit, son. The only place that you can have credit is down at the bank. You can go down there and get a line of credit, and we'll use that, but as far as our company relationship, it was business all the way. So, we did it, and we had a good time. It was a great experience.

My sponsor came in one day, Ralph S., and he's looking at the whole yard, and looking at me and my attitude, and we walked outside, and he looked at me and he says, "I think you've got a problem here." I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "You're working night and day. You haven't had a day off in 364 days. You have a one year agreement, and it's up this coming week." He said, "You're just making the basic wage you're just getting by on. You're not getting any commission. And how are you going to buy this business?" I said, "You know the funny thing is the agreement for purchase has never been filed, completed yet. They're still discussing it." He says, "I think maybe you might want to consider what you're doing here." He said, "You know, I think you're full of shit right now. And I got to tell you, because I'm worried about you." And I said, "Yeah, I think maybe I am." He said, "Yeah, I know you are. But what you got to do...you know the guy's in the program. He's a good guy, and he hasn't done you wrong. But it turns out his son, who he wanted to go to work in the

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manufacturing business and manufacture his own trailers, doesn't want to do that. He's having too much fun with you guys selling. He doesn't want to do that; he wants to stay and sell." I said, "I had figured that out already." And he said, "Besides, he's not really an alcoholic. He's just a heavy drinker when he wants to be. But he's not an alcoholic." I said, "Yeah, that's right. What I want to do is get out of here gracefully and not owe a dime, and let it go by. Because I enjoy the experience, but I know this is not something I want to do 365 days a year." And you know, he said, "Well, do what you have to do. You got to make that decision." And the main thing...I didn't want to hurt my friendship with somebody who was in AA at all. And I had to make that decision about not getting upset about it not working out my way. So I went in and told my... 'cause basically we were partners; we'd incorporated and put it all together.

I went in and said, "Now, here's what I'm going to do. I'm going to exit, 'cause I've had my year, and I appreciate the experience. And I'm going to go, you know, without any problem." They were wondering how to get rid of me, I'm sure, because it was kind of a two-way street. And you know, no problem, we just did it. I couldn't compete with their...my deal just would not have worked out. When we penciled it out and got real, I wouldn't get enough flooring to last more than 90 days. The rent was too high. It wasn't going to work out.

Jim: Besides, there was the son, too.

Keith: Well, the son would have stuck by. He would have gone ahead with the deal. He would not cross his dad, no matter what. And the kid has his own stock in the company, which he never had to work ever, ever again if he didn't want to. The old man was worth \$450,000,000. So, the kid already had his half, his cut. His brother sold *another brand*, and his brother owned that. They were all doing good. I was the only poor one.

But yet I took all that as a great learning experience for me and for them. I applied my AA practices. I had no resentments. The person who got mad the most was my now ex-wife. She was more of a social climber than anything else, and I had to let go of her. She had to let go of me. We had to get divorced. That happened shortly after that.

And I went to work drilling water wells with a guy named _____ who worked for _____ Hydronics. I stayed busy. I always worked; the kids were always taken care of. But I would flounder; I had a job-a-log history in sobriety for a long time. That's why it took me so long to get where I got. But I became a driller's helper on a water well drilling rig. And I made more money on that job than any job I ever had. We got union pay on certain jobs, and we got regular pay when we weren't working for the government. Any other job we just our regular stuff, but it was good pay, and I had a lot of fun. It was too physical and I had to give it up. You know, I knew I couldn't keep it up.

Jim: Meanwhile, somewhere along that road...

Keith: I got back to San Luis.

Jim: Before you got back to San Luis, you did your 4th Step.

Keith: Oh yeah, yeah, yeah. And it was so funny. I went...it was Obie...he just said one day, "You're doing your 4th Step today. We're not screwing around any longer." I'd talked to Joe, and I'd talked to...the 3 of them worked the tag team on me together all the time. It didn't matter which one. And they were best friends, all 3 of them. And so, I was their project I think. And so he says, "I don't care what you have written down. We're going to do it, even if it's on the back of a matchbook cover, that's enough. We'll get started. But we've got to get in the process." And that's what we did.

And since then, through Step 10, I've continued taking an inventory for a long time, because you know, you create new stuff that you have to take care of. And if you don't read page 86 of the Big Book and follow that, you'll get lost. You know, finding out that I could turn this back over to God and follow His Will, not my will, was the main thing that I had to learn. You know, I was very fortunate to have... I had a spiritual awakening the night of that jail cell, when I was locked up. And I'd seen the guy with the book, and we went through the book of life, and I knew where I stood, so I did have a good spiritual understanding of that position. And I had been picking Chuck C.'s brain for years. I'd go sit in his house a lot, and talk to Chuck. It turned out that he and my dad were old friends in business. 'Cause my dad, my father said, "Well, your mom can go to AA", 'cause he met Chuck at a meeting. He knew him in business, but he heard him speak at an AA meeting, and he gave my mom his full endorsement of being sober, because of course he was the right person, business-wise. My dad owned a chain of grocery stores. They had all their images and shit to keep up. I didn't. You know, I played at it, but I didn't really.

Always wanted to be an artist, but I never got the time to do it.

Jim: Now you have it.

Keith: Well, now I, now I have the opportunity to do more of it. I did it when I got sick with the pigeon flu, I called it. It was Cryptococcus.

Jim: So you got back up to San Luis again. This would have been in the '80's, or so.

Keith: After I got divorced from my first wife, I married a newcomer. That's the best policy—marry a newcomer right away before they find out how crazy you are. And I did that. I married a gal who was sober less than a year, or over, or maybe just close to a year. And we eventually moved up here to San Luis Obispo.

Jim: So, you married her when she had just under a year, but you must have met her before that.

Keith: No, I met her in an AA meeting. She had almost a year when I met her.

Jim: OK, not quite 13th stepping.

Keith: Close!

Jim: OK.

Keith: Very close! I didn't like to do 13th stepping. In fact, that was my first. Anyway, that was really my first 13th step. The others...yeah. Yeah, and so, we got married...wild and crazy young people, sober. Late 30's. I was 35, and she was like 30. And we had a good time. And we came up here to San Luis Obispo after I had been working for a dealership down in Orange County for about 5 years. Then we sold everything and came on up here. Well, actually, not here. We went up to Port Angeles, Washington.

Jim: We are resuming the interview. There was a little break when Keith's wife came in. We said, "Hello", and now we are back talking about Keith coming back to San Luis Obispo after successfully not quite 13th stepping.

Keith: Yeah, right, yeah, 'cause...well, let's see. The second time I moved back here...let's see, when am I coming up... '72, right?

Jim: Right. You came up in '72, then you went back. And now, we're in the '80's.

Keith: OK. During that '72 and all, I got to go to a lot of the conventions up here, and got to...in that period of time there was a guy named Bill M., "Smiling Bill", and he changed his name to Burc, 'cause the number count was right.

Jim: Burk? "B", "U", "R", "K"?

Keith: Yeah, Burc S.. He's passed on now. He used to do the Saturday night speaker meeting in Arroyo Grande, behind the church, in their rec room, back there, on Grand Street, right downtown there. And that meeting was 3 Saturdays a month. The 4th Saturday was the Intergroup meeting, and they'd get a speaker from L.A. And Burc was getting speakers from L.A. And we were paying their hotel and meal, and we'd all have dinner with them at Trader Nick's, down there at the waterfront...you know where the Kon Tiki Motel is now. And we'd go down there, and it got so...we got into an argument. Burc and I could get into arguments easily, and we got into an argument about that not being a...he said, "It's just a meeting. It's not a group." And he didn't have it registered with New York. And I got into a big fight with him, and said, "Grrr..., you know, I'm from Orange County, blah, blah, blah", which they didn't really want to hear. And he says, "Well,..."

Jim: Where you did things right.

Keith: And I said, "Well, you need to register the group. And what you do is, you put an "X" down on it, so that when they take a vote, they won't count their votes, because all those people belong to another home group. It's just a meeting. But you register it, so it's in the registry, and it's listed and everybody can find you. There are some people that think it is a group and that it is their home group. So, we're in a dilemma here. Why don't we register it?" And he says, "You know, you know so much about it, why don't you take over and do it." And he quit and made me secretary of it, or the speaker-getter.

Jim: That's one way of getting it done.

Keith: And I said, "Well, I can't take the job until I'm elected. You can't just give me the group and say that it's your group." And he said, "Well, I just did!"

Well, you see, I'm the new guy from L.A. who's got the Rolodex, right, and he's running out of energy for it. So that became my new job on Saturday nights, getting out of work and be there every week to do that meeting. I always scheduled myself off on Saturday nights, 'cause I was the manager of the restaurant.

(Phone rings)

Jim: Back again.

Keith: So this is when I'm getting involved in the local AA politics immediately on arriving in town with my first wife, Judy, and my two sons, Kevin and Jeff. Burc decides that I'm going to be the secretary of the Saturday meeting, and I can get the speakers. And so I went down there, and he announced to the group that I'm the new secretary. And I got up, and the first announcement I said, "We need to have an election. All in favor of Keith being the secretary, vote!" And then I was elected the secretary. And after that, we elected a delegate to the...you know, we wanted to have a representative.

Jim: GSR.

Keith: So we got our GSR, and that was Ann G.. We launched her career in AA politics, which took her all the way to New York. She was the...

Jim: Just so that I get it right when I'm typing out, it's G.....?

Keith: Yeah, I think so. Ann became our group rep, and...

Jim: And she became Delegate.

Keith: And Delegate to New York at "the big meeting"! The big conference of all conferences.

Jim: Right.

Keith: Where they do the real work in AA.

Jim: Right. So they say.

Keith: Well, they spend years debating one little topic, and then they vote on it. It's almost like the United Nations. But every once in a while, they come up with a real good thing. And you know, it's interesting, because somebody has to...AA came to that point where we got the most members on the board of directors, so we actually are responsible for our membership.

Jim: Right, right.

Keith: And the Trustees still have non-alcoholic members, to keep some sanity in case anybody... 'cause they always were questioning whether alkie could actually run their own organization. But after 40 years, they decided, after 30 some years...

Jim: We'll give them a try.

Keith: ...to let us have it. So anyway, I did that. Burc and I always stayed good friends. We had a good rivalry and a lot of fun. He was selling mobile homes. I was bragging; I said, "Well, I know a guy that sells mobile homes." And it turned out that the guy who owned the mobile home company was one, he was one of his dealers, and he didn't even know... anyway, I put them together and they had a great time together. We went camping out at their house. They had a house out here in the back hills, and we'd do family campouts together and stuff. It was just neat.

We had a conference down in Lompoc, and that was the famous conference when they forgot to read all the Steps... Bud did... it was a hilarious time. The _____ host, Jack B., was doing our speaking, our major speaker that night. And I guess Bud was so impressed, or Bob was, anyway that they forgot to read the Steps and the Traditions, and they just introduced him. And right off, he gets up and says, "Well, this is different!" And then they realized they had to stop and go back and do the rest of the reading before we let Jack finish the rest of the talking. But we had a great, great, little convention down there. That was while we were still mixed with Santa Maria, and Lompoc was all in our district, clear up to just short of King City. So we had that convention and it would move every year... Santa Maria, then down to Lompoc, then up to San Luis to the Vet's Hall.

And at the Vet's Hall, we had a convention there, and it was in 1975, I guess. We'd had the international convention in Colorado, and Lois was there at the convention in Denver. And you couldn't get near her. There were 45,000 people wanting to shake her hand, and they had her surrounded with guards, so that she could be
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protected. This was a little, tiny, frail lady, that could get run over by the mass crowds. My wife at the time, Judy, she had had some conflict with some of the local Al-Anons, 'cause she wanted to tell them how to run Al-Anon, which isn't a good idea sometimes. Anyway, she'd written to Lois back in New York and told her all about the problems and situations she was having out here. And nothing really happened except for one of the other gals said, "I'd, we'd like to have Lois speak at our convention. Let's ask her." They did, and she said, "Why yes, I'm coming through that area, and I'd love to stop. My kids, my relatives will drop me off, and I'll stay for 3 days." So, right after this big deal in Denver, in August, we have our little convention, and here's Lois staying at the Travelodge right across the street from the Vet's Hall. She was with us for 3 days, and all of us got to sit down and just have a great talk and interview with her. And you know, she was just another member of our fellowship at the meetings, and she just loved it because she could just be Lois and have a good time. And no big deal, and it was cool.

And all the guys from L.A., you know, the guys that like to go to conventions...Chuck C. and all the other guys and all that entourage, short of Clancy's group...had come to our convention, of course, that weekend. I think Chuck had a suite of rooms over at the Madonna Inn and then asked her to come on over to his room. You know, it was a very large suite over there at the Madonna Inn. So there was probably about 25 or 30 of us that sat there for 3 hours just talking with Lois about anything that popped into our heads. And she was just fireballing, just very alert, very sharp. And you know, somebody asked her...

Jim: And this was in the '70's.

Keith: Yeah, in '75. And she said, "You know, somebody asked Bill one time how long's AA going to last...somebody from Australia, and he said it's going to last until God doesn't need it anymore." 'Cause he says, "It ain't him!" It isn't the personality, remember, it's the principles, the principles we have laid down in AA. There's some kind of spiritual foundation in there that we don't mess with. It's there. It's working. And we keep seeing these miracles. You know, my mom always used to say she'd loved to...she'd much rather go to her AA meetings and see a sermon than go listen to some guy give a sermon. Walking miracles of people sober in AA.

Jim: Speaking of her, she died sober?

Keith: Oh, yeah.

Jim: How many years did she have?

Keith: She moved up here...36, 37 years?...yeah. She died on my birthday in 1995. She came here in August of '57. She got sober. She had a good run. She said the only thing she regretted was outliving her money, but other than that, it was OK. Right up until the day she died, at the hospital, at the Huntington over in Morro Bay (*now Casa de Flores*), we had a gal named Shirley, a nurse who worked at the hospital, the head nurse. Shirley is sober in the program, and she and Mom would have a meeting every morning..."Hi, how are you"...and then Mom would say, "Well, who have you got today?" And she'd say, "I got a new gal working here as a nurses aid. I assigned her to your room. Maybe you can break her in. OK?"

Jim: So, she was 12 stepping all the way to the end.

Keith: All the time. She had a new one all the time. She was always talking to somebody. But yet, she wouldn't go to an AA meeting there. They had a Tuesday night AA meeting. She said, "Oh, no, I won't go to that meeting". "Why?" She says, "I don't want all these old birds knowing my personal business". She says, "I'm anonymous!" I said, "Yeah, right!" But she went to the women's' meeting on Saturday. That was her main meeting, and she really enjoyed the gals up here. She liked the peeps here.

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And she passed away, and I moved back down to Orange County right after that.

Jim: We got you here to the '70's, and we got you here to the '80's, and then you went back down to Orange...so you came back...

Keith: Each time. Each time I went back down to Orange County...my former wife married...her name was Mary D. Her uncles were Jimmy and Tommy D., and that was her family. And they all died of alcoholism. Her mom had died of...had committed suicide. A tough life. She had gotten sober, and her dad was a real keen guy, and he lived at the Huntington at the same time with my mom. So we had our in-laws together. Not in the same...but you know, they had separate...Tony was a little Italian guy that ran around in charge of everything. The owner of the place always says, "I'm going home now. You can take over, Tony, and run the joint." Anyway, he was a character.

And so, she wanted to go down to Orange County and try to get back into doing a comedy act she'd been working on. At the time I felt like, well, OK, let's go down there. Whatever! And so we moved back down to Orange County. I had a job delivering...I had been doing newspapers for about 10 years by then. I ended up working for the Tribune for a long time. And I had gone do there, and I didn't go into the newspaper business. I did a delivery job for a medical supply company. Took medicine out to people with cancer and all. Home deliveries and stuff. Worked for them a half a day, and in the morning I took, delivered drugs to all the large, chain stores, to their pharmacies.

And we were just getting by. We were having a rocky time. She wasn't feeling...she was starting to act funny...something wasn't right. And I didn't know what was going on for sure. And I had a heart attack...6 way by-pass...died on the table...came back...

Jim: How old were you then?

Keith: 53.

Jim: 53.

Keith: 35 years sober, and there I was. And she was under a lot of stress with that night. I didn't know that before I had married her she had been in the institution over there at the Hoag Hospital lock up for bipolar disease, and she had not had an incident in 16 years. So I came home from the hospital from the open-heart surgery, and she's taking care of me, and I said, "I'm doing real good, and I'm still on oxygen, but I'm OK. And if you want to go back to work, you can". And she said, "Yeah, I'm going to go back to work." And she got dressed and kissed me goodbye and went off to go to work.

I felt like I was never going to see her again. And that's what happened. She didn't get to work. She went and got drunk. She tried to kill herself. I sat there all night waiting. She didn't get in. She was supposed to be back at 11 at night, and she didn't show up. And I didn't want to wake up my Al-Anon sponsor, because I had started to go to Al-Anon. We'd been separated for 2 or 3 months, and we were just back together. Everything was going really pretty good, and then I had this heart attack.

And so what happened was that I called my sponsor in Al-Anon. He happened to be in AA. A guy named Lynn W. And Lynn said, "Sit still. I'll have somebody over there in about 20 minutes or less." This is about 6AM in the morning. I waited 'til 6 to call him. I had a...like I had a peace of mind that whole night knowing that...I know something had happened...I knew maybe where she might be...in my mind, I figure she might be almost dead or going to be dead. I just knew. I was wired in there.

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So, the doorbell rings, and I open the door, and in walks this alcoholic guy that was the senior class president of my high school class, the star of the football team, the guy that got the homecoming queen. He sat down, and you know, he was a take-charge guy. He saved my butt that day.

And we just made the calls to the police department and everything. And they called up and said we've already got her. She's in the... They didn't know where she was. But I told them where she probably would be, and they went and checked, and the car was there, but she wasn't. And then they checked the hospital, and she'd just been taken up there for...

You know, she'd made a mistake. She knew what kind of over-the-counter medicine you could buy at the drug store that you could take and that would kill you. The only problem was that she had downed them with a bottle of vodka, and threw half of it up, so it didn't kill her.

Jim: It's lunchtime.

Jim: It's Jim again, and we've just had a great lunch, and during lunch, Keith told me all about the crisis that happened when they were back down in Orange County after his mother had died and his wife's father had died, and he had a heart attack and by-pass surgery, and his wife's bipolar disease came back, and she was in the hospital, and in, and out, and in, and out. And they both got well, and Keith met his third wife, another Mary, and here we are again.

Keith: Well, you know that last deal, I brought Mary back up here...my first Mary back up here, because this is where she had spent the majority of her sobriety in AA, and a lot of people really loved her up here. She'd helped a lot of people and was a nurse in the community and worked real hard carrying the message and working with people for 16 years basically up here. And the only person she had let help her with her bipolar disease was our friend Lloyd, a mutual friend in the...a psychiatrist who helped her quite a bit. And the result of that was that we had a great one month after we got back up here. And everything was like normal. Everybody was normal, and everything was just great. And then all her bipolarism came back just triple. And she told me to leave period, and she was getting divorced. And she left and I moved into the little motel. And then a couple of days later, I got myself a little, shoebox, one bedroom apartment. Moved into that and got myself set up and was taking care of everything as best I could, one day at a time. Just don't drink; go to meetings. When your ass is falling off, you just carry it in with you. And the love and understanding of all the people here in Morro Bay and my home groups carried me, literally carried me through.

A clause in my life insurance policy said if I survived open-heart surgery, I would get half of the face value of the life insurance. So guess what. I got \$25,000 cashier's check when Mary and I had moved back to San Luis for her to get some treatment. And she'd already been through one recovery house, but was getting drunk every other week, slipping and sliding like crazy. This time she was sober, and we had a good month of taking care of business with each other.

And then she asked me to leave, and I went ahead and got set up in my own place, and she went off and got started doing some bizarre behaviors. She took all our money and gave it away to the homeless in Santa Monica one night---hundred dollar bills. And different antics like that, and was off and running. And we went ahead and got divorced. We only had one lawyer, so we had a friendly divorce and took care of that as best you can. The problem was...the doctor she used to work for was also my medical doctor. We both ended up there at the same time for a medical visit with the doc. I had helped his brother in Orange County when he was getting sober. So, we had a little inside, close, family relationship. And the doctor looked at me and Mary

sitting there and he says, "Ah, Mary, the ambulance is coming from the psych ward, and they are taking you back to the psych ward. And, Keith, with your heart condition and your situation, you're going to a lawyer and getting divorced on Monday. Or you're dead!" And he said that right in front of Mary. So there wasn't no secrets here. And that's when I had to surrender and let go.

Disk 2

Keith: Yeah, you know, Mary's illness, before we had moved we had already made an agreement that if things weren't going the way we had wanted them to, we were going to get divorced. So, it was in the picture, and we knew what we were dealing with. Anyway, when we came back and this went down, I had a friend of mine in the program, and he said, "Yes, I'll help you do the divorce." And he helped us do it, and he said, "The only way you're going..." When we got done with the divorce, it was a very fair settlement. Mary paid me back what money she could of the money she threw away out of her retirement fund. We didn't argue over any of it. We just let it take its course and do what is right for both of us. And you know, I just felt heartsick because I couldn't do anything about it.

And I'm living in my shoebox, and I'm going to the marriage and family counselor lady who happens to be an Al-Anon person who understands it very well. And we got into some of my other issues that I had and that we worked through. You know, it's a lot of healing time going on there. We just stripped everything apart and got the next thorough moral inventory completed finally and acceptance of who I am, and where I come from, and where I am, the whole bit.

And I went to the group session on Friday with the rest of us that were in the group that I went to at her office. I announced to the group that I was just really happy, and had given up women. No more of this. No more of this getting married jazz. I was just feeling real comfortable being single and living with Keith, you know, by myself. Everything's cool. I'm never going to be married again or date or anything. Head right in a cloud.

That was on Friday, and on Saturday, Mary H., my friend that we knew down in Orange County, who the first Mary said, "If anything ever happens to her, I should marry her", because we're so both, both artists and blah, blah, blah. And she was engaged to somebody, but her mom had just moved up to our area in South County, and she was up for that weekend. She had gone to a meeting in Orange County, and my friend, Norm W., had told her that I was living in a shoebox in Morro Bay, and that if she went up there, be sure and call me and go to a meeting. So that was cool. She called and I told her that the judge was speaking at a meeting over in Morro Bay that night, that we're having a special meeting, a speaker meeting that we did once or twice a year. So she came up there and met me there at the meeting. We had a great time and a great talk. Then afterwards, we went over to Denny's and had coffee, and I explained to her the whole, long, drawn-out story of what had happened. Hell, we sat there all night talking!

When she left, I kissed her goodbye, and she went home. And the next day, that night I couldn't get her out of my mind. So the next night, the next day, I called that evening on a Monday, and she was at a meeting in Arroyo Grande. I got that from her step-dad. So I went over to the meeting and met her there and well, we've been together ever since. AA takes a hostage immediately! I did that, yeah, yeah, I did.

Well, I couldn't see any reason to mealy-mouth around about it. That's what we're doing. But I didn't have any secrets from her. Nothing. She knew it all straight out---who I am, where I am, what it's all about for me. So we've been together ever since. You know, we've gone through some really tough times in sobriety, married together, as far as economics, keeping jobs, keeping it going. We've had some tough times where I've had to leave Morro Bay and that area and lost a business that I had going. Went back into the newspaper

distribution business up here and got going pretty good. And a guy kind of bankrupted me. Canceled my contract and left me hanging. I was stuck. Fortunately, my partner and I...I left the partnership, and he cleaned up the rest of it. I had no, no...I got out of here clean, but I had to go bankrupt. And I did, and I was embarrassed, and I left and went to Phoenix, Arizona where my son and my new granddaughter had just been born and was living. So I went over there, and we went to work there and stayed for a year. But it was very tough over there. Mary couldn't keep a job very long. Just about 90 days, and you're ready to get benefits, and they fire you. And I was just working for myself, running a delivery deal for a dispatcher company, you know a courier type thing for an auto parts business. You know, we had a great time over there. The meetings were great. The people were wonderful, and we had a good, good program. And one of my old buddies I had known for years, Les E., an old-timer who had started a lot of big AA. He started an AA convention in Las Vegas and all that, the round ups out there. He was there, and he was my sponsor there. Had a good time, and a lot of action with some newcomers.

And we tried to get it off the ground, but things weren't working, so we took a job on the road doing bathtub installations, rebathing motel rooms for Ambath Corporation out on the road. The first job was in Ventura, and the second job 2 weeks later was in Oklahoma City. You figure that out! Anyhow, we're in Oklahoma City, and it's 100 degrees, and it's raining. So it's 100% humidity, and it's 100 degrees, and it's July 3rd, and we finish the job we'd been at at this hotel there and come out and call my boss to find out what my next job was and he says, "I've got bad news." "What's that?" "You're fired." Oh, great, two jobs, and I'm fired! I almost said, "Thank you!", 'cause I didn't like the job and I was grateful.

Mary and I were working as a team. And she was totally pissed, and I was just being very calm and together, because I'm the old-timer with the good sobriety. So we immediately jumped in the car and made it to the 5 o'clock AA meeting that we'd been going to there in Oklahoma and told them our sad story, cried a little bit, and they all laughed, and we all laughed. And then we got in the car and drove back to California. And we didn't know where we were going to end up.

And my old buddy, that I had at my first young people's meeting that was shooting straight needle, right through his pant leg, so he could have a little buzz, so he could talk at the meeting, some kind of Benzedrine type stuff—he's sober some 40 some years now. He's like 2 years behind me, and he's still pissed about it. But anyway, he said, "You can stay on our floor for a few days." And I stayed with him until we got a place to live up in the Sacramento area in Auburn. I was living one day at a time!, and reading that One Day at a Time book, and doing morning meditations, or sitting on the porch having our morning coffee and sharing our experience, strength and hope with each other, and going to meetings and waiting to see what that next opportunity would be. I went through about 6 jobs in 2 months. I ended up with a newspaper up there working. I got a nice little job, not a big deal. Mary got on at the same paper. We're cruising along OK. We got a better place to live. Things are going along fine, and we were recovering financially. We were down to the point that we had to go down to get the free food at the kitchen, you know, 'cause we had no money. They repossessed my truck from the bankruptcy. I gave it back. And so we were in dire straights

You know how AA works. You have somebody you don't like, that you have a big resentment against, and you think is the world's biggest jerk, which was my mother-in-law's boyfriend that she was living with. He cut Mary a \$5,000 check when we needed it more than anything. He didn't know we needed it, but he sent us a \$5,000 check in the mail. She's had a hard time holding on to that resentment. Works on it all the time. But I said, "Goes to show you. Even the guy you think is the biggest jerk in the world has a conscience." He'd taken her mom's money, and Mary had never gotten anything from the estate when her dad died.

And so we bought a car and paid cash, which is a new concept. A cheap, nice, running, little car, and we had no payments. Getting squared away. And so, we've learned how to not use credit cards. Our life has gotten better. And I worked on that job, and I went to work every day. And I was getting healthy, and everything was

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great. I worked a 10-hour shift. Went down and moved a big pile of magazines out of the back of a Chevy truck, and had to push them on a pallet. And I did. Hooked it up to my forklift. Got it out of the truck. Put it in the building. Parked the forklift. Got back in my truck. Headed back to the plant. I was 10 minutes down the road, and I had another heart attack.

So, my life has been changing according to whenever the heart attacks hit. And this time what pissed me off was the boss fired me for not coming to work on Monday, because I'd had a heart attack. So, you know what I mean, I had a little resentment there.

Jim: A little resentment.

Keith: I did sue him for the medical expenses. I did win that case. They've taken care of me very well. And I left town because I had no job. And Mary got so mad, she quit her job. She was going to tell him off.

So, we left town and moved down to...well, I called my old business partner. We happened to be visiting her mom, who had just moved here again to this area. And that's what happened. He says, "Hey, I'm snowballed with work. Will you come to work for me? Start as soon as you get here." So I came back down here, of course, because this is where all my family of alcoholics that I love is at. You know, they've always...they've seen me at my worst and at my best. You know, it's a great group of people.

And I lived in every town in the county, almost. I'm in Atascadero now, and I'm really enjoying it up here. We've got a men's' stag group on Saturday morning doing good work. Lots of newcomers. I sponsor somebody. I took the one nobody else wanted.

Jim: The runt of the litter.

Keith: Yeah, I like those guys! I don't know. There's something about them. It's challenge. I get to be a witness to God's miracles, that He carries the message. You don't. You are just a vessel that the message. Not your message, but THE MESSAGE, the 12 Steps of the Big Book. You know, God could and would if sought, and it's always been that way.

And so, I've had a lot of miracles in living. And I'd have missed all this if I'd have stayed dead that time I had that big, major heart attack. 'Cause I was outside my body, and I left, and I was glad I was gone. It was cool. And then I heard the doctor say, "We've got him!" And I went, "Oh shit, I've got to come back." Because I knew that Mary and I were facing a divorce. I just knew all this stuff was hanging, and I'd have to deal with it.

So the best policy is to just deal with it. Don't have the heart attack. Don't let it stew. Take care of it at the beginning, right away.

So, I've had a little bit of everything happen. I had to seek outside help as far as going to a counselor in sobriety.

Jim: We're told we should do that. We're told to do it.

Keith: It says it right there in the Big Book. And be quick to see where they may be right. And AA isn't the doctor, you know, or the medical person, or the psychiatrist.

So it's a learning and a very spiritual thing. I got very active in churches, in my life in AA. I was a deacon at a church in Los Osos. And I actually studied the Bible, and got some understanding of that finally. I had a hard

time reading, because I couldn't read. I had dyslexia so bad it was impossible. I could talk and memorized stuff, but I couldn't read but like about the 1st grade level.

Jim: You said something earlier about your friend in the Young Peoples' Group...you got together and taught yourself how to read.

Keith: The two of us did. Yeah, we read the Big Book together. And the heroin addict...well, he wasn't a heroin addict. He was a whatever, everything addict! Yeah, his name was James, and you know, being James, he thought we should read the Book of James. And so, we read the Book of James and the Big Book, and a lot of it parallels very close. It's very revealing what's in there. And you know, we got through that, and I started learning how to read by getting over it. I had a teacher in high school that picked up on my problem. Didn't know much about it in those days, but she knew that I had a reading problem, and she said, "It's not mental. It's just learning, it's just something you learn. I can teach you how to read a thousand words a minute. You will read a thousand words a minute." So, I started taking the exam, and she started showing me how to do it. And I started following that in high school a little bit. This is in my senior year. I'm finally going to learn how to do something and get by with it. And then I finally read my first book, after I'd been sober for about 4 years. I mean really, for leisure. I mean I read the whole book. It helped that I had seen the movie!

Jim: And now, we were talking over lunch, you have so many books, and you don't know what to do with them.

Keith: Yeah, yeah, I've inherited a lot of the books, and I've read some of them too, now. And I've found I like history. I've always like histories. I just keep reading all these old books of American history for pleasure. I'm starting to read Ben Franklin right now, and I'm having a good time with that. You know, John Adams...reading those, and the letters between...in 1958, as a kid, my folks took us back East, and I got to go and see Jefferson's house. I got very enthralled with this guy and what he...barring some of his human flaws, some of his other activities were really cool. You know, some of the inventions that he had and his thinking. You know, people had a open mind of where they wanted to go because they were experiencing real freedom, not this dictatorship stuff that confine us, make us into a mold, you know.

So, I don't know, I'm real lucky I had some people come along and help me. And that teacher that did that, that got me to learn that I wasn't mentally defective. I had two mentally defective sisters. I'm figuring I'm going off the deep end somewhere.

Jim: That you've got it, too.

Keith: No, I'm just a garden variety alcoholic. Never could control it. I was a misguided missile from the first drink. If I had one, I was drunk and went into the full tailspin every time. And driving on the road was not a good thing. 6 automobile accidents, 6 speeding tickets in a 6 month period of time, and a drunk driving charge. So, I got here quicker, but I've gotten to stay longer.

Jim: And you've been here now how many years?

Keith: Right now, 48 years.

Jim: 48 years.

Keith: In November, the 25th, I'll have 49 years, yeah.

Jim: And you've been bouncing back and forth to San Luis County all that time. What would you say are some of the big changes you've in AA around here?

Keith: Well, we were so closely knit as an area. Our Area, alcoholic area...

Jim: District?

Keith: Our District. Very close knit. You knew everybody in the District, because every month, we had a speaker meeting in the District hosted by one of the Groups. And we all drove to that meeting. It was a potluck, and then we had the speaker meeting. So you got to know everyone right away in your sobriety. You lunched with them; you had dinner with them., you know. We had that club, the Pioneer Club, and that was the central clearing house for everything that went on. And in South County, they got a club started finally down there. I saw that happen after a while. And, you know, Morro Bay and Los Osos, we always drove to San Luis for all of our activity. And then the North County, they all came down to San Luis. So San Luis was the hub of our basic county anyway. But we knew the people in Santa Maria, too. We didn't see them that much, but we did at the convention every year, and then at District meetings.

Jim: Just before we end, I'd like to know if there's anything that you'd like to say special about your time in AA.

Keith: Yeah, well, one of the luckiest guys in the world. Coming into Alcoholics Anonymous in 1960, I'd been to the International Convention in Long Beach before I went to my first meeting, you know, for myself. I went with my mom to that meeting. And I got to see Sister Ignatia, Bill W. and Ebby on the stage together. And they all talked and shared a little bit of their stories there for a minute. And I got to witness that whole exercise of the people, the spirit that was in that place. You could just cut it with a knife, it was so real and inspiring. As a little kid, I had heard about AA on the radio, and I prayed that my mom would get sober. And you know, growing up in a household of alcoholism, and all the other things that were going on in that zoo that we had there. My dad would work 18 hours a day to provide, and a good provider as far as money. And maybe that was all he could provide. Emotionally he was like...you know, we never had a real conversation until, like on Golden Pond, the day before he died, you know, we had a great talk which resolved a lot of issues.

And AA, seeing at the time, and I got to experience all these guys that founded the meetings and started AA in Orange County and in Los Angeles County, you know. There was a guy named Andy G., who started AA in Orange County. I would sit at his feet a lot, and go over to his house and talk. And he would excuse...he told me later, they told me, he says, "You can't come over for a month, because I have a visitor coming." And this was in summer time. You know, I didn't know who the visitor was. Never did until later when one of the guys told me, "Well, don't you know who that visitor was?" And I said, "No." And he said, "Well, that was Bill and Lois. They came and spent a month with Andy, so they could walk the beach and be anonymous and not go to the meetings, and just get away." 'Cause they would be recognized too easily. He would always come stay with Andy. Andy was a great guy. A Scotsman and an oil driller. A neat guy.

And then, Cliff W., I got to go to Hawaii on an AA tour with Roy Y., who started AA in Texas and in Alaska and lived in Los Angeles. He organized the tour, and took Andy and...well, 80 of us from AA went, and I got to go. I was like 18 years old, 6 months sober. My other guy was like 39 years old. We were the two young guys.

Jim: How do you spell Y.....?

Keith: Y.....? I don't know.

Jim: The German way?

Keith: Yeah, probably. It's in AA Comes of Age.

Jim: OK, I'll check it out.

Keith: And so, you know, Cliff W. had been our milkman when I was a kid. You know, this is a small world. When I lived in Whittier, as a baby, he delivered our milk. He ends up in AA and becomes the oldest member in Los Angeles. Meeting these characters that came along...and Johnny H., he just gets out of prison. Obie C.'s driving him and me to meetings. And you know, his wife killed herself, and he's going through all this, and I'm sitting there and he used to deliver the Canada Dry to my grocery store where I worked as a clerk. I was just getting sober and working there. And I'd get an AA meeting with Johnny every week when he'd bring the soda in. And then Bob E. and I hook up and spend years, running around, going to meetings, doing stuff together.

All the experience of the people that have come through my life and getting to meet all of them and having...you know, my sponsors told me, "Pick everybody's brain that you see. Go talk to them, no matter who they are. Go up and introduce yourself. They'll talk to you and tell you their story. They love it! They'll do it." And I did!

They kept saying, "Look kid, you're going to be the old version of us later." You know, you've got to try to remember some of this, because some day you will try to recall it and you won't remember all of it. I find now I've got to write down...

Jim: You're doing a pretty good job!

Keith: But you know, all these guys that came in, and put this together, and the guys up in LA in the Institutional Committee were just incredible people with their stories and what happened. And getting to...you know, I was a fair-haired boy. I was getting all the attention because I was staying sober. So I was eating it up!

Eventually, I had to work every single step. I thought you could pick and choose like cafeteria style. No, you got to end up doing it One through Twelve, starting with One. And if you ever learn how to read the Book, you learn that you do read the Prefaces, 'cause there's a lot of meat there in the introductions. So I finally learned that, and it took me a long time in some respects.

And I did accomplish a lot of things in my life. I had the pleasure of, the good fortune of being able to work a lot of different careers and jobs. And people thought, "Oh, my God! He can't get..." Well, it was a great experience. And spending the time with Chuck C., a lot of time with Chuck, going to the retreats, the men's retreats, the one when he did The New Pair of Glasses...I was there with my friend, Bill, and my friend, Jim, the 3 of us, that are still sober and still alive in AA to this day.

And you know, there is no way you could ever imagine where you would be, what would happen. And then for the whipped cream on the whole thing, after 2 failed marriages...they weren't really failed...everyone of them was a great married experience...I married to a wonderful woman who's going on 20 year's sober in AA and has had to work her program and do it and we're still growing. And you know, I could have missed this whole thing. When I had that heart attack, if I hadn't survived through that and been willing to keep showing up...'cause I was tired. When I died, I was done. Well, that's as good as it's going to be...and then to come back and now to know that some of the most important things is the family that I have. That I have 4 granddaughters and a new grandson that was just born last Tuesday, a week ago.

Jim: Congratulations.

Keith: Two sons that are grown. They are not alcoholics. One's a very spiritual, very religious. He's got a... he's building a church in Montana and working for the state, a historian. He has my liking for history. And he's got the degrees to back it up. He works for the State of Montana as a historian. And my other son is married to a very nice lady in Las Vegas, and they have a very...both of them have successful jobs, and now they have 2 children, one granddaughter and one grandson there in Vegas. You know, they got all the little goodies and they're doing fine.

You know, I couldn't, I can't claim responsibility for any of that other than that God could and would if sought. And my first wife lives in Vegas, she's remarried. She still has problems of liking me, but that's her problem. I don't have that problem. And I let the children figure that one out. And they have. And there's not a big issue one way or another for me with it. And I always thank her for the good job she did raising them, you know. And I give credit where credit is due, and forget the rest of that crap, because it doesn't work, you know.

I'm real lucky to be here and be sober today, you know. So whatever I can give away, I like to do that. "Cause it is for free, and it is for fun, and you can't take any of the money with you. Money, property and prestige doesn't get it. The thing that gets it is when you see the newcomer stick around and get that year cake, start telling everybody else how to do it. It's great! I love it! When they get 5 years and know everything, it's even better, 'cause you know they're going to learn that they don't know nothing, and it's OK. And now, I don't have to know everything, and I don't! You know, I'm here one day at a time. I've been living on that one day at a time thing for a long time now, and when I had the heart attacks, the doctor told me that it was, "One day at a time", and I said, "OK, I've been doing that, Doc." And he said, "I think you made it because you did it one day at a time".

Jim: Sounds right to me. And what's going to happen with this is that this is going to be around long after you and I are not.

Keith: Oh, yeah, I look forward to where it's going. You know, I've been to AA in Australia, New Zealand. I had some great experiences with traveling. No matter where you go, I always try to go to a meeting, because I got new friends I haven't met yet, and I want to meet them. Where else can you go and do this? I think 4 or 5 international conventions.

Jim: Looking forward to the next one in San Antonio.

Keith: Yeah, well, that's a neat town I've never been to yet. I should have gone there, but I didn't. I had a girlfriend from there, but I never got to go see it. Yeah, I would love to get down there. Maybe I will this time.

Jim: Thanks. We'll see you later.

Transcribed by Jim L., May 2010