

Cleveland AA and the LGBT... Community

It was 1937, year 2 on the AA calendar, when an Akron alcoholic fellow came to the Fellowship stating that he had a malady even more stigmatized than alcoholism. He presented himself as a “sex deviate” which we now refer to simply as gay. AA was very new, so even the smallest scandal could swamp it. The question of his membership was brought to Dr. Bob. When Bob asked, “What would the master do?” the guy was admitted.

Later in New York an alcoholic, drug-addicted, Black transvestite appeared at the local club. His desire for membership was brought to Bill W. After Bill confirmed that he was indeed an alcoholic, Bill decided that we need no further requirement. At that time members of the LGBTQ+ community were by and large considered to have a moral failing, very much like similar views of alcoholism.

Since the late 1930s gay alcoholics started gathering in homes but did not present themselves as AA groups. Gay groups in AA started largely in coastal cities like New York and San Francisco. The first credible public venue AA special purpose group for gays may have been the Fell Street Group in San Francisco which started in 1968. Hereabouts Jeff F. and his wife, straight renowned AAs, started “The Open Door Group” on Fridays around 1975. It was not listed as gay, but its name and location suggested it. I once attended a meeting there to hear the first lead of a woman friend. The only difference between them and any other AA group was some announcements I had not heard elsewhere. One of these was of the annual Ohio Roundup (ohioroundup.org). Two guys from the group, Dennis D. and Dennis S., early on went to all the gay friendly meetings they learned of throughout Ohio and pitched the need for such an area wide gathering. In August 2022 they will be celebrating their 40th roundup in Columbus.

In 1972 it was proposed that General Service add gay groups to our directories. This was discussed hot and heavy in 1973 and postponed to 1974. Spirited discussion resumed but it resolved into a 128-2 vote in favor.

In 1981 Dennis S. and some others started the You Are Needed Group on Thursdays, named after a line in the *Emergency Rations* pamphlet sold at our office. It was listed as “gay” despite pushback, justifying it by stating that they

didn't want straight newcomers wandering in and being dissuaded from joining AA itself. But not until 1990 did Open Door get a like listing.

At the General Service Conference in 1981 a proposal to create a draft pamphlet for Gay and Lesbian Alcoholics was adopted. Such new pamphlet proposals typically take 2-3 years from proposal to approval. This took NINE. The original draft was considered somewhat militant and gay-lib oriented. This might have been okay with the target audience but needed the approval of the Conference as a whole, few of whom were gay and some not very gay-friendly. Some objected that the pamphlet "Do You Think You're Different" already had one gay story. After a rewrite by straight AA member, Ames S., it finally got approved. I got sober in 1984 and by 1986 was involved in General Service. My DCM And service sponsor, Al W., was gay and a strong proponent of this pamphlet and, aided by our delegate, Joyce K., whom I learned much later was a lesbian. They battled the pushback by others at least one of whom was a GSO staff member. Why did they need a pamphlet? That was perhaps best expressed by a fellow on the Conference Literature Committee in 1981:

I think it was because people working on service at the district level had encountered the same thing we do at our Intergroup's answering services: we need something [to give to people calling us for help]. We can tell people that we do understand that there are gay groups and lesbian groups, that everyone is welcome, that its open, but when you have a written pamphlet it gives [your assurances] a validity that the spoken word does not.¹

In 1989 Dennis D, upset by what he felt was overpowering demands by the lesbians in Open Door, started the Gay & Sober Men's Discussion also on Friday. The office pushed back on listing this as gay but the group won on appeal. In 1991 Celebrate Sobriety, the first suburban eastside gay group started.

Other groups have come and gone and not all LGBT... folk attend these groups, choosing instead to attend gay-friendly or at least gay-tolerant groups. Of course many, possibly most, are as protective of their LGBT... anonymity as they are of their AA-membership anonymity. Despite their differences, they are alcoholics and so they are us!

¹ Pg. 169, *The History of Gay People in Alcoholics Anonymous* by Audrey Borden