

## One Group's Ongoing Process of Sponsorship

"Experience shows clearly that the members getting the most of the AA program, and the groups doing the best job of carrying the AA message to still-suffering alcoholics, are those for whom sponsorship is too important to be left to chance."

(Questions & Answers on Sponsorship, Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc.)

The Loyola Men's Group of Portland, Oregon, has been in existence for over forty-five years, and we have a very strong tradition of reaching out to newcomers. The group moved to a new, larger location in the middle of 1998. During the following months, our attendance doubled in size to about 150 per week. We had so many new alcoholics arriving that we needed to develop better ways to welcome the new people and invite them to be a part of our group. So we took a good look at ourselves during a two-month inventory in early 1999. Invigorated by that progress, we developed a number of ways to improve the quality of our home group - for everyone, not just for the newcomers.

Loyola Greeter Teams are groups of five or six men who reach out to newcomers before and after our weekly meeting. They give out informational welcome packets and their personal phone numbers. They also ask the newcomers for their phone numbers in order to allow follow-up calls. The Greeters are asked to stand up during the announcements at the middle of the meeting so they are visible to everyone, and they make themselves available for at least twenty minutes after the meeting as well. We have found that old-timers are really energized when they take their turns as Greeters. And, better yet, more of the newcomers are coming back week after week.

Phone Trees are groups of three alcoholics who commit to visiting with each other by telephone, or meeting face-to-face at least once a week, outside of the meeting. The Trees are rotated every three months from a list of voluntary participants, and newcomers are always mixed in with old-timers. The continually expanding communication among group members has been remarkable since we established our Phone Trees. "One alcoholic talking to another" is the foundation of the entire AA Fellowship, and it definitely works in our home group.

We've also created a better way to encourage sponsorship. Like many groups, we ask newcomers to introduce themselves at the beginning of the meeting. In the past, we'd suggest that they get a sponsor, but we did very little to help them with this suggestion. As a result, many of the newcomers drifted away without ever making a good connection with a sponsor. The simple truth is that many newcomers find it difficult to reach out to complete strangers. Compounding this problem, many old-timers are distracted by their own busy lives and their established friendships. One night last year, all that changed for us at Loyola. A long-time member of the group stood up during the announcements and said, "If you want a sponsor, talk to me after the meeting. I'll hook you up with someone." That was the night the Sponsor Broker was created.

It took our new Sponsor Broker about six months of flying blind to sort out an efficient and effective way to get all these different alcoholics connected with each other. On virtually every night since that announcement, our Sponsor Broker has had new people requesting his services after the meeting. He emphasizes that his job is to make a match for temporary sponsorship. It is always up to the individuals to decide if they want to keep working with each other. During the past year, he has put together more than ninety pairs of alcoholics, and well over thirty have evolved into full time relationships.

The first task for the Sponsor Broker is to create a list of willing sponsors. The list was developed by recruiting Step-experienced members, talking with other members for suggestions, and making general announcements at the meetings. We have learned that an effective Sponsor Broker to be an outgoing, active member of the group. This is not a job for wallflowers.

The next step is to collect some information from potential sponsors and sponsees. We ask for name, address, and phone numbers so that people can contact each other. We request information about the individual's age, AA history, and treatment history, as well as marital and parental experience - all of which helps the Sponsor Broker make an effective match. We believe it's important that men volunteering to be sponsors have their own sponsor. (In fact, quite a few old-timers who had drifted away from their original sponsors now have new sponsors thanks to the efforts of our Sponsor Broker.) We have also learned that the most productive relationships seem to develop between people who regularly attend the same home group.

Experience has shown that the best time to make a match is right at the meeting. When a new man reaches out, we are ready for him, and can suggest a sponsor who can begin working with the newcomer

that night. The Sponsor Broker must be willing to tell people what to do to get things rolling. If the first match is not working for whatever reason, the Sponsor Broker is always willing to make another match to get the new man connected.

We have found that the key ingredient for success of these new relationships between sponsor and sponsee is the follow-up by the sponsor. If all AA members who have worked all Twelve Steps out of the Big Book take some of the initiative during those first few weeks, newcomers seem to come back more frequently and get active in the group more quickly. The 500-pound telephone that we have all experienced applies only to out-going calls - incoming calls are light as a feather! When we reach out to a newcomer with a few phone calls, we are teaching by example that reaching out is the way to stay connected and stay sober.

While recruiting potential sponsors, we have discovered that many longtime members of AA do not feel confident in their ability to sponsor other alcoholics. In addition, some members are uncertain about the time commitment involved with sponsorship, while a few others are just plain lazy. Our Sponsor Broker had developed his own gentle and not-so-gentle ways to encourage and guide people past their own reluctance to become sponsors. Some alcoholics actually need a little education, while others just need a shove in the right direction. Like so many things in our Fellowship, the amazing benefits of sponsorship cannot be fully understood until they are experienced.

Sponsorship education has become an ongoing process for our group. We have an audiotape available of a sponsorship workshop given by one of our long-time members at a local convention. Another reliable source of information is a pamphlet from AA World Services, Inc. called "Questions & Answers on Sponsorship." Recently, we have conducted a series of one-hour sponsorship seminars which have been held before the first meeting of the month. The seminars consist of a dozen or so group members each speaking for three to four minutes on their specifically assigned topic concerning sponsorship. Some of the topics from the past four months include: making a place for yourself in AA; start with the First Step; using the phone; daily maintenance; switching addictions; keeping secrets; recovery on the road; slips; thirteenth-stepping; understanding God; and sponsors don't need to know all the answers. These monthly seminars have significantly energized our group and have taught us much about sponsorship. We have also shared the audiotapes of these seminars with other AA members in our area.

The Sponsor Broker has become a truly valuable service position at the Loyola Men's Group. Our group has become more vibrant since that night when one man stood up and said, "If you want a sponsor, talk to me after the meeting. I'll hook you up with someone." Long-time members are more involved in the group, reaching out to newcomers and becoming more active with their own sponsors. We see more new people coming to out meetings, getting connected, and staying sober. Our group is more fully experiencing what the Big Book describes on page 89: "Life will take on new meaning. To watch people recover, to see them help others, to watch loneliness vanish, to see a fellowship grow up about you, to have a host of friends - this is an experience you must not miss. We know you will not want to miss it. Frequent contacts with newcomers and with each other is the bright spot of our lives."

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