

Interview with Chairman of the General Service Board and Class A Trustee Leonard Blumenthal, Area 36 Recovery, Unity, and Service Conference, 1/6/2008

The following interview took place during Southern Minnesota Area 36's Recovery, Unity, and Service Conference on January 6, 2008. Leonard Blumenthal, Class A (Non-Alcoholic) Trustee, and Chairman of the General Service Board, was in attendance at our Service Conference. He was interviewed by Carla N. and Doug C., Area 36's Public Information Chair and Alternate Chair. The Service Conference was held at the Marriott Minneapolis West in St. Louis Park, Minnesota, from January 4th through January 6th.

As a non-alcoholic, Mr. Blumenthal is not subject to AA's tradition of anonymity at the public level.

Carla N: Leonard, thank you very much for the opportunity to meet with you and have this interview. We appreciate you taking your time to attend Area 36's annual Service Conference, and especially appreciate your willingness to be a presenter as well as share your story here on Saturday night.

Leonard: Thank you, pleasure to be here.

Doug C: Would you be willing to briefly share how you became aware of the program of Alcoholics Anonymous?

Leonard: Actually, it happened once I started working with alcoholics. I took a leave of absence from my teaching position and was hired as a junior counselor in our local alcoholism treatment program, which was at that point a day program in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. My second week on the job one of the other counselors, who was in the program, started taking me to meetings. That's when I became aware of what the program was and became acquainted with it.

Doug C: How then were you recruited to the General Service Board of Alcoholics Anonymous?

Leonard: Well, fast forward 35 years, and a Past Delegate from Alberta/Northwest Territories submitted my resume to New York and asked that I be considered as a Class A Trustee. Three years later I was called for an interview, came to New York, had my interview, and was asked to join the Board. And the year I was elected was 2000, at the General Service Conference of 2000.

Doug C: What is the term of service for a Class A Trustee?

Leonard: Class A's are usually there for 6 years. My own situation changed somewhat because after my first 5 years I was asked to take on the Chair of the Board's job, and so that extended me for 3 years more. So I'll be there a total of 9 years when I'm all done.

Doug C: And how long again have you been on the board?

Leonard: I've been on since 2000 so I'm in year 8 now.

Doug C: When were you elected as Chair of the Board?

Leonard: It would have been at the 2006 General Service Conference.

Doug C: What Trustees' Committees do you serve on?

Leonard: Actually, as Chair, I'm Ex Officio on all Committees, and all sub-Committees. Prior to that, when I was the Class A Trustee, I think I was on almost every Trustees' Committee that's there at one time or another. I chaired Corrections at one point, I chaired International Conventions/Regional Forums at one point, and I was on many of the others.

Carla N: As AA members, we need to individually and personally work the Steps, Traditions, and Concepts of AA to recover from alcoholism, and then to safeguard the unity of our Fellowship. Is there any kind of orientation or training on the Steps, Traditions and Concepts provided to the Class A Trustees, since your lives aren't dependant on our form of a spiritual life?

Leonard: The orientation process is not that extensive. We have a short orientation; we have the same orientation as the Class B Trustees when we come on the Board. And we're expected to read all of these things, and read everything we can, and ask any questions we can ask to anyone we can ask them. We're also asked to adopt or get someone to be our Trustee Sponsor or buddy Sponsor from the Trustee Board, or as a former Trustee, and we do that. Plus, all of the former Chairs of the Board, who are Class A Trustees, are also at all the Board meetings, and they're available to us for consultation and clarification.

Carla N.: So it sounds like the element of a service sponsor is woven into that like it is for those of us who are involved as General Service Reps, District Committee Members and such. That's good to know.

Leonard: Very much so, very much the same principle.

Doug C: We've noticed in the AA World Service Highlights, Box 459 and other AA pieces of literature, that you are often involved in traveling internationally, outside of Canada and the US, to countries that are in the initial stages of starting up an AA structure. What is your role in these visits?

Leonard: Well, it varies. It depends on at what stage, these countries, their structure is at. In some cases you're coming in simply to stir the pot and get some enthusiasm going, to organize into a service structure and in other cases you're asked to speak at a national conference of some sort where a national structure is already in place. Depending on where the country of invitation is at in their service development that depends on what role you play at that point.

Doug C: What is the role of the General Service Office staff during these visits?

Leonard: The General Service Office staff, usually they provide the expertise because many of these international situations involve copyrights and translations and all of that sort of technical detail. Our General Service Office staff has more expertise in those matters because they have to supervise these contracts on a day-to-day basis, so they provide that kind of detailed input and advice.

Doug C: Are you able to comment on the copyright issues of Alcoholics Anonymous and the Grapevine literature? For example, in regards to the General Service Office staff members, Greg M. and Julio E.'s recent meeting with the West Central Mexicana General Service Board?

Leonard: I can comment a bit, but there is much more information than what I would know, probably. But, they did meet with that Board and part of the reason for meeting with that Board was to help heal a rift within Mexico itself, in their service structure, with another group that has set itself up to be a General Service Board. So, they are doing that, but the copyright is still with the Central Mexicana group for all of the literature that is translated into Spanish on our behalf.

Carla N: Given that Alcoholics Anonymous is now 72 years old, and both co-founders, who had ties to New York, are now deceased, have there been any recent reviews of the economic feasibility of moving the General Service Office to a more centralized United States location?

Leonard: There was a study done last year where they looked at New York, Kansas City and Los Angeles and analyzed many, many factors that would be involved in this and it was found that New York was still the most viable place to have this for several reasons. We're in a very attractive rent situation in the building we're in - that's a not-for-profit building. Secondly, travel to New York is very economical compared to many other places because there are direct flights from almost everywhere to one of the three New York area airports and they're opening a fourth airport in New York, by the way. So, I think it might be that way for a while to come. So, it is still the most economical place after all the analysis was done. It's the one that still makes the most sense.

Carla N: What is your understanding of Alcoholics Anonymous' spiritual principle of rotation?

Leonard: Well, I think rotation is very valuable in that you keep bringing new and fresh talent to the Board and new fresh ideas and you really never lose the old talent. What happens is that you just extend your reach. So you have past Trustees out there in our Regions and Areas. You have A's and B's and past General Service Board members that are always still out there on the roster and we can always contact them and we see them at Forums and many other locations and occasions and we can always touch base with them if we need them and they are always willing to help and serve. So rotation helps you broaden your base of expertise is what it does.

Carla N: How do you feel that extends to our Delegates as well as to our paid staff?

Leonard: Paid staff is a whole different ball of wax as far as I'm concerned. Because there you are hiring people for a very specific kind of expertise that you want them to have and they provide the stability and the continuity when you have everything else rotating. I think it's so important to have that stability when you have people who can make a career out of a very special area and make that work very well for themselves and they bring corporate memory, corporate expertise to that career. The first part of that (question) was

Carla N: In regards to Delegates.

Leonard: Oh, yes, Delegates. Delegates, to me, seem to rotate very quickly. Two years isn't very long and I am always amazed when every year, half the delegates are new and they are brand new fresh rookies and they emerge as powerful leaders in that second year. And they make that transition so quickly and so ably, but yet, it seems to go very quickly.

Doug C: In our recent annual report of the 57th General Service Conference, you make reference to Board Inventories that were conducted by AA World Services, the Grapevine Board and the General Service Board in the past few years; would you provide more detail of some of the recommended suggested actions by these inventories?

Leonard: I don't know if I can remember them all because there were so many, there were a lot of details actually and there were some ways that we were doing things on these boards that were actually tidied up and they were mainly a look at how we were doing things and how we could do them better or more economically or whether we should keep doing some things. For the most part, I think things were on track fairly well. We have to do some clean up of our corporate stuff, our bylaws, because in many cases we found we were not really operating within the laws of New York, as we were supposed to be, and these came to light during the inventory process, but all and all we felt that things were going quite well. We had the whole Board together three times for special meetings and I think they were very valuable and sometimes even if you confirm what you're doing; it's worthwhile looking at it. You are much more expert at inventories than I will ever be, so you'd know how that works.

Carla N: When there's meetings, like you just mentioned, all three of the service boards gathering, do you bring in an outside facilitator for that to kind of keep yourselves on track or do you use the skill base that's here, within the fellowship, of A's and B's?

Leonard: Well, usually what happens here with these is we had our Past Chair, Elaine McDowell (Class A Trustee), facilitate one of them and then I facilitated the last two because I'm not really part of one of those Boards except as Ex-Officio, so I can take a pace back and be a little more objective than someone who's really into that up to their necks and involved in the detail. It seemed to work out okay as far as everyone was concerned, having someone like myself do that and then I had a committee of Trustees put together some questions on areas that have to be considered in each case and when we came up with those questions for discussion, we divided the group up into smaller groups and then brought the small groups into a whole and that's how we ended up with our final results.

Doug C: As Chair of the General Service Board, what do you see as the biggest challenges of the three boards, the General Service Board, AA World Services and the Grapevine Board?

Leonard: AA World Services, the challenge there is to continue to operate an efficient operation, because that is where most of the staffing and publication takes place and provide the kind of service that the Conference wants the fellowship to have and that the fellowship demands and do it within the money that's available. That's always a challenge, making do with that balance. With regard to the Grapevine, the constant challenge there is to try and operate a publication on a regular basis based on subscriptions only. Without having any resort to advertising or any other revenue that a normal publication would be having. And as a result, they are also looking at special publications, books, compilations of previous articles and now the whole business of the Spanish language magazine, La Vina, taking it under its umbrella and trying to make this financially a viable operation, tremendously challenging. The General Service Board, the biggest challenge there that I would see is trying to focus on long range vision and planning and not be captured by day to day detail and introspection, that is a continual challenge.

Doug C: To what extent does the General Service Board discuss our primary purpose, to carry the message to the still suffering alcoholic, in the decisions made by the General Service Board?

Leonard: I think that's implicit in everything that's discussed. That is a primary motivator of everything the General Service Board tries to do and we keep going back and saying we have to ask ourselves this question with what we're addressing, "Is this carrying the message?" "Is this moving things forward as far as carrying the message goes?" That question is always being reflected back and that is the template that things are measured against.

Carla N: Do you think there's enough education being provided to our AA members about the need for our fellowship at large to be more self-supporting financially?

Leonard: I don't know if it's education that's the key here, I think education is certainly one, like awareness, raising the awareness of self-support, but the other one is the importance of it and the spiritual significance of it and I think it is not necessarily always appreciated. I think we could do more in holding up examples of self-support that are evident to me. For example, the situation in Ireland where it is now the only General Service Office that is totally self-supporting by contributions and we still have to rely on literature sales, they don't. And they made a tremendous transition when they went to the Euro in Ireland where the 5 Euro coin is now the same kind of coin that the 1 pound coin used to be, but it's worth twice as much. So, now they throw the 5 Euro coin in the pot and it's worth twice as much as the pound used to be and all of a sudden they're self-supporting. If we would ever get to that point, it would be a wonderful situation where we could give away everything we publish. All of our literature, all of our books, all of our materials. And that, I think, should be our constant goal.

Carla N: It's my understanding that as a fellowship in the United States and Canada, the closest we've ever come to being self-supporting is the first and second year after Bill W. passed away. It's just a comment.

Leonard: That probably is very true and we always have a blip rise in the contributions the year immediately following an International Conference or Convention, rather.

Carla N: During our Area 36 Service Conference, we discussed training leaders and are already looking for tomorrow's leaders for our service structure. What suggestions would you make to our AA members regarding the possible recruitment of future Class A Trustees?

Leonard: Everyone in AA knows people who would make good Class A Trustees and the fact is that many times, these potential Class A Trustees are not made aware of AA and are not brought along so they can appreciate what this program does and we lose them in that way and we never actually find them in many cases. I know I was brought along very early; I was very young and very early in my career when I was brought into this thing and they never let me be. The AA people just kept on coming and kept me involved and I think that's what you have to do. You find someone, you find several people and you keep them involved in what's going on and you'll have them as Class A Trustees.

Carla N: I noticed from hearing your story that you shared last night and you've shared this at Forums and other conferences that you've been invited to. It sounded like, from your own experience, that it was a member of the fellowship who brought you to meetings?

Leonard: Right.

Carla N: Would you almost encourage us, as AA members, to take our non-AA folks, professionals that we might know to open AA meetings?

Leonard: Every chance you get. Even to weekends like this service conference. I mean, I don't think there were any deep, dark secrets that were revealed here. And a professional, who sees what is involved and how AA can operate, and how it can be of service would have learned a lot here this weekend.

Carla N: We're nearing the end of our interview and have just a few more questions. In your opinion as a Class A Trustee, what do you see as the main strengths and assets of Alcoholics Anonymous?

Leonard: The main strength is, that, to me, it's the only successful treatment program that has kept people sober. I don't know of anything else that's done that, to this point. And I know we say that it's not for everyone, but still, there's no other game in town. So, the fact is that anyone with an alcohol problem, if they don't get to AA, or they don't know or don't have any way of getting to AA, we're dooming them to death from this illness and in good conscience; I don't think we should be doing that. I have mentioned this weekend that if we take the world health formula, we have a minimum of 16 to 18 million alcoholics in Canada and the USA and we have, probably if we're lucky, 2 million in our fellowship. So, we have

a long way to go to get people aware of this and we'll never get them all, but let's get as many as we can so that they are exposed to this life saving program.

Carla N: A similar question. In your opinion, as a Class A Trustee, what do you see as the fellowship's biggest challenges?

Leonard: Well, there are a few challenges. The hiding behind the anonymity is one. Where anonymity is identified as, well, it's a spiritual, I forget the exact wording, I think it's somewhere in the 12th Tradition, anyway, I think that as long as it's not a public breach of anonymity, I think the program should be talked about in many areas, where ever it can be talked about. And everyone again visits professionals - lawyers, doctors, clergy - these people should be made aware of this program. They are not the ones who can implement the program, but they can bring people to the program. Because, again, there's nothing that's as powerful as a spiritual contact between two alcoholics reaching out to each other and supporting each other. People call this a self-help program; I call it a mutual aid program. They're very different and that's what's important here, I think that's what we have to encourage and make happen.

Carla N: As Doug and I were preparing for this interview, we asked some general members what questions they would like us to consider asking you. One of them just said, very bluntly, "What's in it for you, to be a Class A Trustee, to help us"?

Leonard: What's in it for me is, first of all, you get to hang around winners all the time. When I was working in the treatment business, it didn't always happen. I like people, but I was always sad when someone came back for treatment, over and over again. That meant that it didn't work out and it hadn't worked for them and so it was another challenge for us. I get to see miracles happen, how often does anyone in this world anymore see a miracle? I see them all the time. I see walking miracles, people whose lives were gone and who would be dead by now if they wouldn't have found this program or this program wouldn't have found them. So, you get to see this over and over again and that's what makes it worthwhile.

Carla N: Leonard, on behalf of the fellowship here in Southern Minnesota Area 36, we'd like to thank you very much for your willingness to come to our Recovery, Unity, Service Conference, participate in this interview, for your willingness to serve on the General Service Board, your passion for alcoholics and Alcoholics Anonymous. Thank you so much.

Leonard: Thank you very much, Carla and Doug.