

Chuck Chamberlain's Testimony Before a U.S. Senate Subcommittee, 1969

Chuck Chamberlain, a well-known early AA member in California, testified before the Alcoholism and Drug Abuse Subcommittee in Los Angeles on Saturday, September 27, 1969. This is his testimony which I have copied from the official hearing records:

Present: Senators Hughes, (presiding), Dominick, and Saxbe [members of the Subcommittee]. Also present: Senators Cranston and Murphy [both Senators from California]. [page 150]

Senator Hughes. For the next witness, I want no television, no pictures taken of the witness at all, because it's the witness's desire there be none. Once before a witness's anonymity was broken before this subcommittee, so I'll ask all members of the press, radio, and television please to respect the identity of this man and no photographs. He can state his own preferences about what he says.

STATEMENT OF CHUCK C., RECOVERED ALCOHOLIC, MEMBER OF ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS.

Mr. Chuck C. Thank you, Senator Hughes. It's a privilege for me to come with you this morning. I feel rather like a fifth wheel, because the things have been pretty well covered already: But I appear in a little different capacity than any of the others this morning, because I am Chuck C. and I am a member of Alcoholics Anonymous.

Through the program of Alcoholics Anonymous, applied to my own life, I haven't had a drink or a sedating or tranquilizing pill since January of 1946, for which I am very grateful.

Now, we in Alcoholics Anonymous think that alcoholism is a disease. You have heard it spoken of this morning several times as such. I think informed medical opinion throughout the country recognizes it as a disease. It is defined as a disease of twofold nature, an allergy of the body coupled with an obsession of the mind.

However, most of us, or many of us, think that there is a third factor. We think it's a living problem. We do not deny the allergy of the body or the obsession of the mind. I had them both. I tried for the last ten years of a 25-year drinking career to prove that I didn't have an allergy of the body or obsession of the mind. However, I knew nothing about them, because I knew nothing about the disease of alcoholism. I tried to beat this thing myself for the last 10 years of a 25-year drinking career; and I proved to myself conclusively that I do have both the allergy and the obsession.

Now with 24 years of sobriety, 25 years of drinking, and the time before I drank to look at, I believe that our problem is primarily a living problem, and that alcohol is pretty much a symbol of it or a symptom of it.

For instance; I never had a drink until I was out of athletics. I was an athlete in my youth. I was always in training and I never smoked and never drank until I was out of school and out of athletics. When I took my first drink it was not a problem. It was an answer -- providing that the problem was already with me. If I hadn't already had the problem I wouldn't have needed an answer. I used alcohol as an answer for 15 years. But being the wrong answer, it finally turned on me and beat me to death making it necessary for me to find the right answer and, of course, it came through my association with drunks in the program of Alcoholics Anonymous.

Now, we feel that the medical approach and psychological approach, and the religious approach are all good. We feel that all approaches to this disease should be brought to bear upon it, but most of us are convinced that if we're going to get rid of the bottle we have to replace it with something better, with a state of being that makes drinking unnecessary.

For instance, why am I not drunk this morning? I'm an alcoholic. I'm an alcoholic of the tongue chewing, babbling, idiot variety: so why am I not drunk this

morning? Because I have the thing I was looking for in the bottle. And what is the thing? It is a state of being that makes drinking absolutely unnecessary. There is nothing that a drink or a sedating or tranquilizing pill or needle can do for me but tear me down; therefore, there's no necessity for it at all. It can't do anything for me. I have the answer that I was looking for.

Now, we have been in existence as Alcoholic Anonymous for 34 years. We have a membership of perhaps some 500,000 but we see that's just a slight percentage, it may be 2 percent, of the problem drinkers. And that's all we've been able to accomplish in 34 years. But we're not selling it short. We love it, but much more has to be done.

We think that before long it might be the legal opinion that they can't throw us in jail any more just for being a drunk, that we have to be taken care of as sick people. And it looks as though there will have to be detoxification centers and halfway houses throughout the country.

And it's going to take a lot of money. It's going to take a lot of know-how. We are very pleased about the fact that there is a separate committee now that is very much interested in this problem and that it is manned by knowledgeable people. We think that perhaps through the medium of these meetings throughout the country more interest will be brought to bear on the Senate as a whole and that as a result you will get appropriations which will make it possible for you to do some things -- such as setting up these detoxification centers and halfway houses.

In this event what would be the position of Alcoholics Anonymous?

Traditionally we neither endorse or oppose any causes. We cooperate but we do not affiliate. We are on tap in most of these things, but never on top. So I think our position would be this: That when the detoxification has been accomplished, that we would, as individual members of Alcoholic Anonymous, then be available to share our experience, strength and hope with those who are coming through the halfway houses. And it is from this angle that I think that it would be of the greatest benefit to your program. We cannot take an

active part as a society, but we can take an active part as individuals.

Senator Hughes: Sir, would you mind me interrupting you for a moment as you go along? I'd like to ask a question for the record. I have received a lot of mail from people who know nothing about Alcoholics Anonymous wondering why we don't appropriate money to Alcoholics Anonymous to handle the job since they obviously do pretty well. Would you like to reply to that?

Mr. Chuck C. We also have the tradition that we are self supporting. We don't take any moneys from any outside sources whatsoever. We support ourselves through our own contributions. We have no paid teachers or speakers. We do this work on a voluntary basis. And I'd like to throw this in for the record, also, that I suspect that in the last 23 years half of my waking time has been spent working with alcoholics throughout this country and Canada and in many of the other countries. And I find it a very fascinating and rewarding experience - I think that's what you wanted.

A very interesting fact has been brought out already: When I came to the program the average age probably would have been 45. I don't think it would have been less than that. It might have been nearer 50. But over the years the age has come down, down, down, until today the face of Alcoholics Anonymous has changed considerably. They are coming to us much younger.

For instance, we have a man in our own group in Laguna Beach who had his first birthday in Alcoholics Anonymous before his eighteenth birthday. We find this is true pretty much throughout the country. Brought about through better educational programs such as the Committee on Alcoholism for instance, and things of that kind. People are coming to us much, much younger than in my day and that is a very good sign.

One of the things that I would like very much to speak on for a minute (and this certainly is my own opinion), we've heard a little about the seriousness of the problem. And, of course, the problem is serious. I suspect it's the most serious problem that we face in our country today. And I know that if we put pills with it

it would be by far and away the most serious problem that affects our society today.

But it is my opinion that the individual alcoholic cannot be dealt with seriously. Let me give you an example. I was sitting in Edmonton, Canada, at a banquet and I had six judges around me, and they were saying to me, "We only have so many dollars and so many days and that's the only thing we can put out. We know that isn't the answer, but how can we help you; what can we do to help you?" And I said, "Well, don't sell yourselves short with so many dollars and so many days, because you and the highway patrolmen probably are responsible for my life, because you've taken me off the street at times when I was a great danger to anybody who was there, including myself. So don't sell yourselves short with so many dollars and so many days.

But perhaps the one thing that you could cut out could be the lecture that you give. When you sentence us, don't give us that lecture, because we can't take it. We've given the same lecture to ourselves many, many times, so instead of giving us a lecture, as we go by you poke us in the ribs with your elbow and say, "Look, dad, when you are sick enough of being sick, and tired enough of being tired, I know a place you can go for an answer." And laugh right in our teeth; because we can understand that, but we can't take the preachment or the lectures.

So, indeed, in A.A. we have a lot of fun. I find it the most fascinating thing that has ever crossed my path. I love it. I happen to have hated alcoholics worse than anybody in the world. As a matter of fact, when I ran out of time I didn't care for the human race. I thought it was a cosmic mistake. I didn't even like the good people and the drunks I hated. Because I was a drunk and hated myself. I hated all drunks. In the last 24 years, however, I've come to the place where I think I love all of God's children, and of all of them I love the drunks the most. So my dedication, my love, and my life, are in the program of Alcoholics Anonymous, working with drunks.

And, again, we are most happy that you, all of you, are headed in the direction in which you're headed. And we want to help as much as it is humanly possible for us to help, both in seeing to it that you get an appropriation -

maybe by doing a little work on the rest of the Senate by letters, and so forth - and also by being on tap when you need to call on us later on.

And that would be all I have to say.

Senator Hughes. Thank you very much, Chuck. I'd like to point out that the camera in the back of the room was not taking pictures.

I'd like to ask you, just for the record, to explain that fact when you say you want to be of help. I happen to have been visiting a lot of halfway houses around the country and in all of them I found Alcoholics Anonymous is a stable working factor within the halfway house. You point out, of course, that you accept no money and all of this is on a voluntary basis. I take it then, that should appropriations someday be made, whether it's on a sharing basis with States or communities and the Federal Government, that all these members of A.A. will be around and will be working with the people who come into these facilities. Is that right?

Mr. Chuck C. That would be a fair statement, I'm quite certain Individual members of the society can and do work as counselors and are paid for it in industry and other places. But, in the main, I think that most of the effective work in all the hospitals, in all the penitentiaries, and in many of the halfway houses that we have throughout the country today, is and will be on a voluntary basis by individual members of Alcoholics Anonymous.

Senator Hughes. Could you, perhaps, elaborate just a little bit on the changes you have seen in this 24 years in hospital treatment of patients and doctor's treatment of patients? Have you seen any changes?

Mr. Chuck C. There's been great change, of course. In my last 10 years of drinking, I went to all the recognized sources for help. I went to the clergy, to men of medicine and to a few people who knew more psychiatry than there is. And my answer from all of them was willpower, backbone and stand-up-and-be-a man.

I never heard of the disease of alcoholism until I came to my first Alcoholics Anonymous meeting. Today this is common knowledge now amongst all informed, all who want to be informed about this subject.

It is only recently that we have been able to get alcoholics into most hospitals. There are beds for us in most of them now and this was not the case for a long, long time. Everything has changed for the better. It's not fast enough, but it has changed for the better over the years.

Again, due, I think, not only to what we have done in Alcoholics Anonymous, but to the great educational programs of such organizations as the National Committee on Alcoholism.

Senator Hughes. I'd like to ask you a question and answer it any way you see fit. Why the word, "anonymous" Why do alcoholics want to remain anonymous?

Mr. Chuck C. There are many reasons for it. But the two great reasons - the fundamental reasons, I believe, are these: There is a little verse in the Good Book that says, "Let not thy right hand know what thy left hand doeth," and this is probably the first time in our lives that we have ever been willing to do things like getting up in the middle of the night and going clear across town, at our own expense, to a dark room with an alcoholic who is really suffering. It's the first time in our lives we've been willing to do these things free - maybe even hoping that nobody will ever find out about it.

And the second reason is that. As long as we are anonymous people can come to us without feeling that they're going to have their problems become general knowledge. And people will come to us with problems when they won't go to anybody else, because, they don't want it known that they have this problem.

Senator Hughes. Why don't they?

Mr. Chuck C. It's a holdover from the days when the only descriptive adjectives used for people like me were bums, spineless people, dregs of society, a cancer on the social body, and all that sort of thing.

Senator Hughes. The great stigma.

Mr. Chuck C. Yes, it was a great stigma, but this is changing much for the better.

Senator Hughes. Senator Dominick?

Senator Dominick. I just first want to say it's highly refreshing, Chuck, to find a group of people who are not asking for appropriations from the Federal Government. [Audience laughter.]

May I congratulate you and your group, of which I have a fair knowledge because of my association with people afflicted with the problem.

I want to get back to this treatment center and halfway house. I'm sure that there must be some method of detoxification, but I also - only based on my own experience, and you have got a lot more than I have - have grave doubts whether detoxification, in fact, does the job. A lot of people go and get dried out. This is a kind of social phenomena, particularly in the East. You go and get dried out and then go out and start all over again.

Questions will be raised in the subcommittee and later on the Senate floor as we move forward. Senators will ask: "What good does it do? Isn't there an organization which is doing a lot better than this voluntarily? Is a treatment center, in fact, going to be more than just a way station for drying out to give them strength to start in all over again? And will a halfway house follow enough of a detoxification process to be able to bring people back into the mainstream, particularly those who don't particularly want to, and how large a proportion of the ones that we have that are afflicted with this disease really want to recover; really want to admit to themselves that they're an alcoholic and that they can't take that first drink?"

I don't have any facts and figures. I know we're going to develop some as we go along in these hearings, but I'd just like to get your comments on this, which I think is a very grave communication problem that we've got.

Mr. Chuck C. This is the reason I spoke of the detoxification centers and halfway houses.

Senator Dominick. I notice that you couple them together all the time.

Mr. Chuck C. I think that the detoxification center is where the professional people can get us defogged so that we may hear what's said to us. And then the great rehabilitation work starts.

For instance, in Alcoholics Anonymous, we have nothing in our program that tells a person how to get sober, how to get physically sober. There's nothing in the book that tells you how to do that.

But we, as members of Alcoholics Anonymous, help each other get sober. It's a great part of our work and we wouldn't change it. We help each other get sober only that we might then take care of our problem - which is alcoholism; but before we can talk about the problem itself, we've got to get people so they can hear. And so they're detoxified, or gotten sober and then we talk with them. In our work we talk with them mainly in their homes or in ours. But, again, the job is too great for that.

And we are going to have the problem dumped in our laps whether we like it or not, because one of these days we're not going to have any place to put drunks if we do not have detoxification centers and halfway houses; because we're not going to take them to jail. (If you go back prior to 24 years ago you can find me all over the blotter of this town. I was no respecter of jails. I went to all of them.) So we are going to have to have places where we get sober and then we are going to have to have therapy that comes not only from members of Alcoholics Anonymous but from professional people like psychiatrists.

Now this thing is seemingly proven in our work. Any alcoholic who sits through an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting, leaves knowing the answer is there - whether or not he admits that he has a problem.

Now, he might say to himself. "Well, I'm not one of these people. I haven't gone to this extent. Therefore, I'm not an alcoholic." But he knows, before he leaves that meeting, that the answer's in the room for an

alcoholic and maybe many years later when he runs out of time he remembers and comes back, and he isn't lost.

So I believe that no one, no alcoholic, regardless of whether he has admitted it or not, who is exposed to this therapy about which we are talking, leaves with any questions in his mind. I think he knows immediately that the answer is in the room.

Does that help you any?

Senator Dominick. Yes, I think it does with respect to the Alcoholics Anonymous. My problem is trying to get the people that I have known to go to you.

Mr. Chuck C. Yes --

Senator Dominick. You know, they just say, "No. No, I don't want to do that. I want to drink."

Mr. Chuck C. But we have it. We have it in the setup that we are talking about. They are going to be sent to these detoxification centers. But they're going to be sent there by the court or by the police instead of being sent to jail. They will have to go through that. But to a large extent they will have to go to the halfway houses once they are set up.

Senator Dominick. That program has worked; that's what I want to know?

Mr. Chuck C. Yes.

Senator Dominick. Where they say you go there or you go to jail?

Mr. Chuck C. Very definitely. I happen to be very familiar with Judge Harrison's work up in Des Moines. But I believe Judge Taft in Santa Monica was one of the first to use this approach many, many years ago.

And I've talked at meetings where there were over a hundred men and women who had been sober a year or more who had initially been sentenced to the program by Judge Taft and it worked.

Senator Dominick. Let's use another word. Let's say recommended.

Mr. Chuck C. Recommended. Okay. (audience laughter).

Senator Hughes. Don't stop. I just wanted to make a comment. Senator Dominick, my limited experience with this has been that some of the time the private institutions for detoxification are rather protected and they are not really exposed when they are dried out.

Also, we see right now in Washington, D.C., for example, the detoxification center which was originally set up for 5 days of detoxification and then building into the therapy. Now they're down to 24 hours because of the crush of patients.

The court is sending the patients there. They have no bed space. Their unit of 800 beds over at Lorton is completely filled with the so-called recovery part. The physical part of the detoxification stage has been taken care of, unless there is serious complications. You're right, it's got so easy that in many instances the guy who runs through the mill to be detoxified feels great again and he's ready to go. So often there is no follow-up. It can serve as a revolving door drying out process.

Excuse my interruption.

Senator Dominick. That's all I have.

Senator Hughes. Senator Saxbe?

Senator Saxbe. Well, I want to compliment you for not only coming, but also for the great work you are doing. I'm familiar with it. I've dealt with Alcoholics Anonymous in working with friends and acquaintances. I've always been amazed at the dedication and willingness of members to turn out at 3, 4 o'clock in the morning to drive somebody a hundred miles and to stay with them at great personal sacrifice perhaps to their own jobs and business; and seemingly to stick with them, even when their own families have abandoned them. This dedication has paid off.

Oh, I've known some cases where it hasn't worked, but in many cases it's been a successful salvage job. I think if just somehow we can get this same kind of dedication into a public facility, it would certainly simplify the work of the political subdivision in meeting this problem.

Thank you very much.

Senator Hughes. Chuck, I want to thank you very much for coming forward and sharing with us your thoughts and ideas on what we might do, and your hopes, also. I especially thank you for your support as we get to a point of trying legislation.

Mr. Chuck C. Thank you.

Others have sent the following information on Chuck Chamberlain:

He was born in 1902, and got sober in A.A. in January 1946. He wrote a book called "A New Pair Of Glasses" which is a transcript of a retreat he gave for alcoholics in 1975. The Preface is written by Clancy I. of California. It can be purchased through New-Look Publishing Co., 1960 Fairchild, Irvine, CA 92715.

His son [Richard] became a famous actor.

Chuck died in 1984.

