**SOBER AND ALIVE AT 75**

Thirteen days ago I received my Two Year Chip. That was the second time I quit drinking for two years. Two years and thirteen days represents the longest I have been sober since I was about 18. The first time I stopped drinking for two years, I was 68, when my doctor told me I had the beginning of a fatty liver. “What’s that?” I innocently asked. “Well, the next step is cirrhosis of the liver” he answered. I knew what that was because Uncle Joe died of it.

I grew up on a farm as one of eight kids in a big Irish Family. Oh, it was hard but I have lots of wonderful memories and I had a great childhood. Both my parents were teachers and the importance of education and hard work was instilled in us from an early age. There was no alcohol on that farm-oh, maybe Dad had the occasional cold beer after haying and a glass of sherry at Christmas but that’s all.

I went through five years of school and ended up with a Master’s Degree. My education came so hard and cost so much-I waitressed and cashiered my way through school-that I had no time for booze and parties. I remember a big beer brawl-lotta glass-scared me to death. So I wasn’t a big drinker in college and they were not the best years of my life as they were for some people.

My love affair with alcohol started when I met my husband. Up until then, I had mainly been a beer drinker. My husband introduced me to manhattans in Manhattan and away I went! What a smooth, wonderful drink that was! Manhattans and then wine represented the world of glamour and sophistication to me. At first we were mainly weekend drinkers as I was teaching although, my husband describes martini lunches as typical of the business world he inhabited. Drinking became a regular part of our lives and our whole social life was with other people who drank. But, we were just “social drinkers”, right? We started socializing with a group of doctors and wealthy businessmen and I entered the wonderful world of wine. These people clearly drank too much and one of them was definitely what I thought of as an alcoholic. But, not me ‘cause I could “hold my liquor” and I knew pretty much how much I could drink. I could control my drinking, right?

Once, on a cruise, a friend who was a recovering alcoholic married to an active alcoholic said to me, “I just want you to know alcoholism is a progressive, fatal disease.” I then proceeded to prove the truth of that statement. I became Exhibit A. One Manhattan was no longer enough and actually, that “one” Manhattan had always been a double. I became ridiculously particular about how it was made: got rid of the cherry-said I’d rather die of the alcohol than from the red dye! Little did I know that truer words were never spoken had I not gotten to AA. I kept asking for less and less vermouth ‘til I was probably drinking straight Crown Royal on the rocks. My daughter recalls my saying to a bartender once, “Can I just make it myself?” My sister said she knew I “had a problem” when we couldn’t go anyplace to eat that didn’t have a full bar.

The progression continued. I started adding beer chasers to the manhattans but as I gradually gained weight and couldn’t handle the number of manhattans I wanted to drink, I switched to wine. I tried to control how much I drank because by this time, I was a Realtor and could not risk a DUI. You can’t very well show property and ask the client to drive!

So, I had my rules: never drink more than one glass of wine at all those Brokers’ Opens or golf luncheons, never drink before five, never drink more than a half bottle of merlot a night, etc., etc., etc. Of course, I broke them all! Yes, I only drank one glass of wine a night but it was what my daughter described as my “endless glass of wine”. I just kept topping it off until I staggered up the stairs to bed. Over the years I had a couple of trips to the ER which we referred to as “dehydration” episodes. I finally started to emerge from the depths of denial when I saw somewhere in my medical records the words, “alcohol abuse”.

Alcohol had definitely taken over my life: I woke up in the morning thinking, “Oh, good, I’m not going anywhere tonight. I can come home and drink”. Did I care if my husband stayed at the Office? Hell, no…I could drink wine and read a book and forget about the pressures and strife of life. They say “Never drink alone”. Well, I loved drinking alone, wine was my best friend and so the alcoholism progressed until the day my Doctor said, “You have the beginning of a fatty liver”. So, what did I do? I quit! I “white-knuckled it” until the ultrasound showed I had completely regenerated my liver. That was the first time I quit for two years.

 So, then, what did I do? On my 70th Birthday, surrounded by my wonderful Family, I started drinking again! This time I would drink like a Lady-one glass of wine a night. Talk about insanity! Pretty soon I was right back where I left off. I remembered another thing my friend had said to me on that cruise:” If you start back, it’s like you never stopped.”

Then, a lifelong dear friend said to me one night, ”Why don’t you try AA? It’s really helped a client of mine”. She made me go home and google where the meetings were and text her. I had to laugh when I texted her that there were plenty of meetings right there at the Church where I had belonged for the last forty years! My friend said to me, “A lot of people have trouble with the “Higher Power” piece of AA but you’ve got that part down pat.” My Higher Power had definitely kicked in.

My problem was getting to Step One of the Twelve Steps-admitting I was an Alcoholic. I went to my first meeting at my church; the group was called “To Thine own Self Be True”-a sure sign-Shakespeare would lead an English Major to her first meeting. As I listened to the reading (It was from Chapter 3 of The Big Book “More about Alcoholism”), it described me to a “T”. Tears came to my eyes and I prayed, “Don’t let me start sobbing in front of all these people”.

So, this was the beginning of a miraculous recovery program and the discovery of a wonderful new life. I switched from the 7 a.m. meeting to a 6 a.m. meeting called “Upon Awakening” so I could go to 7 a.m. Mass to not only talk and listen to my Higher Power but to receive my Higher Power in Communion. I found a wonderful Sponsor who took me through the 12 Steps. I am on my Twelfth Step now and this writing of “My Story” is a Twelfth Step attempt to help other “Senior Alcoholics” like myself. Many people who have learned I’m in AA said, “I didn’t know you ‘had a problem’. I never saw you drunk.” Well, I love the Theatre and believe me, I was a greet actress all those years hiding this disease. There is so much shame attached to it. It is such a relief to be “in the rooms” where people are so brutally honest and one finds out, “You’re not alone”. I pray for the day it has the same impact to say “I’m an Alcoholic” as it has to say “I’m a Diabetic” so we can help each other climb out of the depths of this disease. Drinking is just plain BAD for your Health. I thought my drinking was the problem but through this incredible program, I have learned, as they say in AA, that it’s only a symptom.

So now, on this New Year’s Eve, alcohol no longer controls my life. I have gone through enormous changes, am involved in a brand new life and am concentrating on others instead of on me, me, and me. The AA Promises are my New Year’s Resolutions. As they say, “Are these extravagant promises? We think not. They are being fulfilled among us-sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly. They will always materialize if we work for them.” I guess the “sometimes slowly” applies to me but “better late than never” and as I look forward to the New Year of 2020, I pray I can “see’ more clearly and I am so grateful to be sober and alive at 75!