

A Short History of A.A.
and the 80th Anniversary
of their Presence in Montreal
(Area 87)

Dave B. finally had his moment of grace on Good Friday, April 7, 1944, the day after he was put in a cell for drunkenness. This event, being put in the brig to sober up, happened to me personally once during my drinking career. I'd fallen asleep at the bus terminal counter after a night of drinking and was snoring so much the whole building was shaking, my head resting on the counter, my nose in my coffee. I woke up lying on an iron bed in a police station cell with a terrible hangover. I'd missed the bus. Unlike Dave, I continued my career for a few more years.

In 1941, Dave had been committed to the Douglas Institute for the treatment of his drinking problem. It was there that his sister had given him a copy of the book *Alcoholics Anonymous*. His doctor had leafed through it before handing it to him, and Dave wasn't at all pleased when he threw it on his bed and told him it might help. Nor with the references to God he'd found in it. The book was forgotten somewhere. Put in a cell to sober up on April 6, 1944, Dave remembered the *Big Book*. After repeated calls to the A.A. office in New York City, a telephone conversation with Bobbie B, the secretary of the Alcoholic Foundation, was the spark that ignited the light:

"I'm an alcoholic too, there are a lot of us here and we've found a way to become sober; if you want us to, we'll help you."

"*We'll help you!*" It was these words spoken by a stranger over 750 kilometers away that were reason enough for Dave B. to become a member of Alcoholics Anonymous on April 7, 1944.

Sometime after his historic phone call, Dave received a new copy of the *Big Book*, and the following day, and the next one, and the one after that, and almost every day for nearly a year, he'd receive a letter, a note, something from Bobbie, from Bill, or one of the other members of the Alcoholic Foundation. So Dave became involved in A.A. by correspondence. In time, he would become "a *Twelfth Step marathoner*," as Bill W. described him.

Slowly, one by one, Dave began to approach other candidates in the Montreal area, eventually forming a first Alcoholics Anonymous group. These early members went on to work hard to alter mindsets and make it clear that alcoholism is a disease that can be successfully treated. Let's just remember that the beginnings were not easy. Dave and his family were true pioneers.

And we find ourselves here today, May 25, 2024, over 80 years after an event that could have been considered a mere anecdotal event.

80 years is a long time, but not that long. Like many of us who joined AA some time ago, time seems to have flown by like the snap of a finger.

The Fellowship began to gain momentum in Quebec in 1945, thanks in part to an article that appeared in the pages of *The Gazette* in early winter. The first members held their meetings at Dave's home at 4939 Victoria Street in Montreal. In March 1945, two members obtained permission to hold meetings at the Forum for the sum of \$10 a month. After a while, the *Snowdon* group was created to relieve the Forum group's overflow.

Until 1948, as elsewhere in Canada and the U.S., a few English-speaking groups flourished. These included the meetings held at *Kimberly House* and the groups that sprang up later, such

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as *Tuesday Central*, *Lakeshore*, *Rosemount* and others. By 1948, Montreal AA had some 250 members.

In the fall of 1949, a fourteenth group called the *Maritime and Newfoundland Group* met on Sunday evenings at *Kimberly House*. After five years of growth, the fifth anniversary celebrations were marked by a dinner in the ballroom of Montreal's Ritz Carlton Hotel, attended by some 350 members. By the end of 1949, Montreal-area A.A. had 400 members and 14 groups.

French-Language A.A. in Quebec

It was in the basement of Dave's home that two French-speaking alcoholics learned of A.A.'s existence. Dave had been visited by a doctor and a lawyer looking for help in early 1945. All the French-language meetings that exist today grew out of this meeting between these three alcoholics.

After several attempts, the first ever French-language AA group was founded in September 1947 by Bob P., a friend of Dave's, at *Preston Hall* on Drummond Street. The second French-language AA group held its meetings at *Kimberly House* in 1948, and still in 1948, a third French-language AA group held its meetings at the *Palestre Nationale* on Cherrier Street.

Based on detailed research, members of the *Mount Royal* group (celebrating its 75th anniversary this year) have identified February 14, 1949, as the founding date of their group. According to this research and the group's tradition, the *Mont-Royal* group already existed in 1949.

A front-page article in the December 22, 1949 edition of *The Town of Mount Royal Weekly Post* mentioned that a meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous would be held at Town Hall on Wednesday, December 28 (1949).

Further research in the archives of the General Services Office (N.Y.) uncovered information dated October 30, 1972, mentioning that the *Mount Royal* group met on Mondays and celebrated its anniversary on February 14, but without specifying the year the group was founded. Based on this information and on the group's tradition, it was only a small step to retain February 14, 1949, as the founding date of the *Groupe Mont-Royal*.

As of the end of 1949, with the enthusiasm created by their initial successes, AAs spread throughout Quebec. Apart from the information on the *Mont-Royal* group, it's likely that the first meetings were held mostly in members' homes, since in those days, groups had few members and few resources. Things have certainly changed over time.

Spanish-Speaking AA in Quebec

Among our Latino American friends, the *Hispano* group opened for the first time on November 4, 1974. It was the first Spanish-language group in Montreal.

The group began holding meetings at *Kimberley House* (3652. Sainte Famille Street). The idea of holding Spanish-language meetings came from Alberto G., who had noticed that the basement of *Kimberley House* was unoccupied. So, he decided to ask the building's

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management to occupy the basement, which was graciously granted. There was no furniture except for a pool table.

At the time, *Kimberley House* was a three-story building, the first two floors of which were occupied by A.A. members. French-speaking A.A. members occupied the second floor, and the first floor was occupied by English-speaking A.A. members. Spanish meetings were held in the basement of *Kimberley House* every Wednesday at 7:00 pm.

Alberto and David G. and his wife began giving shape to the project. The A.A. message spread throughout Montreal's Spanish-speaking/Latino community. Later, the group moved to 4780 Colonial Street in Montreal, where it continued to grow.

At the same time, the group had forged links with a number of groups in the U.S. (New York City, Boston, and also New Jersey). And as the *Hispano* group was the only Spanish-language AA group in Canada, the U.S. members took it upon themselves to sponsor the group for a time, with members regularly traveling to Montreal for workshops on the Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions. In the meantime, the *Hispano* group became the *Central Hispano* group. Since then, Spanish-speaking AA members in Quebec and Canada have continued to grow and to develop.

Today, the Latino American A.A. community in Quebec is mainly united within *Intergrupala de Montreal* (which Area 87 identifies as District 87-32). *Intergrupala* has 9 healthy groups offering over 60 regular meetings a week.

One of *Intergrupala Montreal's* current challenges is to carry the A.A. message outside Montreal. The Latino American community as a whole is expanding throughout Quebec. *Intergrupala* remains the beacon that continues to attract future A.A. members from this community. It is a major challenge that the trusted servants of *Intergrupala* have no hesitation in meeting. Area 87 is more than happy to support them in their efforts to achieve our primary goal of carrying the A.A. message to whoever needs it most, wherever he or she may be.

Recently, the Montreal *Intergrupala* liaison person informed us that a Spanish-language group has taken root in the Bois-Francs region. As in the early days of the *Hispano* group, *Intergrupala* members are working to sponsor this first group outside the Island of Montreal. To be continued...

A Changing World

Let's talk about our Area. When you stop to think about it, the population of the Greater Montreal area is a genuine mosaic. In 2023, the population of the Island of Montreal was 2.1 million. It represents a great diversity of cultures, races, colors, beliefs and languages. There are no fewer than 120 cultural communities from all five continents. This reality is not necessarily reflected in our meeting rooms.

In 31 years of attending AA meetings in Montreal, the AA message hasn't changed. I've changed. The world has changed. The city I've lived in for nearly 40 years has also changed a lot. I'm still the same man, but my inner dimension has been transformed by the Twelve Step program of Alcoholics Anonymous. My best friend is English-speaking, my sponsor is American. I have a close friendship and collaboration with a Latino American member, despite

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the fact that I speak almost no Spanish. I have Russian, Greek, Italian, Haitian and other friends. I manage, I learn, I communicate the A.A. message at every opportunity.

When I use public transport in Montreal, I'm really in another world than sitting comfortably in one of the regular meetings of my home group. The contrast is striking. How can we get this small world of AA of the Greater Montreal area moving today and project it into the future? The challenge is great.

While 56% of the Montreal area population is bilingual and 24% trilingual, the issue of discrimination on the basis of race, color, language or ethnic origin is real, even in 2024.

The forthcoming arrival of *The Big Book* in Haitian Creole challenges us to reach out to this important community in the greater Montreal area. There are over 150,000 people of Haitian origin living in and around the city.

I also mention our Russian friends in a group that meets once a week on Sundays and is hosted by a Latino American group. We also have a Polish group which is currently inactive, but which the Area continues to post on our meetings list. Native Americans have two officially registered groups in our Area. We used to have a Farsi-language group (Iranians), which has now disbanded and been integrated into an English-language group. Italian members frequent our English-speaking groups. And let's not forget the *Le Cercle - Signe de vie* group for deaf people, which offers a regular meeting every Tuesday in Quebec Sign Language (Langue des Signes du Québec)(LSQ) and has been going strong for over 30 years. When we refer to diversity in Area 87, this is what it looks like ... for now.

Evolution of Area 87 Membership

Let's consider our Area's AA community as a whole. Historically, A.A. has never attempted to keep official membership lists. No more here in Area 87 than elsewhere. This makes it extremely difficult to obtain accurate figures on the total number of members at any given time. However, the only known figures are estimates. The evolution of these estimates is the only means at our disposal to assess the evolution of A.A. membership in Area 87. This can be traced in the pages of the General Service Conference (GSC) final reports over the years.¹

¹ Data for 1990 are from the Report of the 41st General Services Conference (GSC), 1991; for 1995 from the Report of the 46th CSG, 1996, etc.

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Estimating from the average number of members per group for the years 2014 to 2020² (**16.6 members on average per group**³), we could establish that Region 87's membership at December 6, 2023 stood at 6,424 members instead of 8,943 at the end of 2020. A drop of 28% in 3 years.

1990 - 14,854 members for 572 registered groups (average of 26 members per group);
1995 - 15,569 members for 603 registered groups (average of 26 members per group);
2000 - 15,103 members for 568 registered groups (average of 26 members per group);
2005 - 14,912 members for 532 registered groups (average of 28 members per group);
2010 - 12,684 members for 530 registered groups (average of 24 members per group);
2015 - 9,067 members for 569 registered groups (average of 16 members per group);
2020 - 8,943 members for 522 registered groups (average of 17 members per group).

With the help of our registrar, I counted that as of December 6, 2023, we had **387 registered groups** (257 French groups, 117 English groups, 9 Latino American groups, 2 Native American groups, 1 Russian group, 1 QSL group).

Estimating from the average number of members per group for the years 2014 to 2020² (**16.6 members on average per group**³), we could establish that the Area 87 membership as of **December 6, 2023**, stood at **6,424 members** instead of 8,943 at the end of 2020. A drop of 28% over 3 years.

Estimating that there would currently be 7,000 Francophones, 2,000 Anglophones and around 250 Latino Americans in 387 groups no longer holds up. If we repeat the calculation for each community, on December 6, 2023 we arrive at **4,266** French-speaking members, **1,942** English-speaking members, **150** Latino-American members (according to the *Intergruppal* liaison officer, this number was more likely to be **between 200 and 250**). Assuming that there were 7,000 French-speaking members at the end of 2020, the drop would be of 39% at the end of 2023.

² According to information received from G.S.O. (N.Y.), the number of groups and members found in GSC reports comes from the ERP database, NetSuite used by the General Services Office (G.S.O.). This information is supplied by Area registrars and GSRs. Its reliability depends on the frequency and accuracy of communications between Area offices and GSRs and the G.S.O. In 2020, the G.S.O. was still resolving issues resulting from the conversion of the FNV database to ERP NetSuite, which impacted the accuracy of data for the year 2019 where no data on the number of groups and members appears in the report of the 70th Conference (2020). Since the 72nd GSC (2022), no membership data has appeared in subsequent reports. The reason for this is as yet unknown.

³ The average number of members per group from 2015 to 2018 is 16.5. If we add the average number of members per group for 2020, which is 17, we obtain an average for the period 2015 to 2020 (5 years) of 16.6 members per group. Taking into account the explanation given earlier by the GSO, we have given preference to the 5-year average for our calculations and the number of groups listed as of December 6, 2023 in Area 87.

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It would then be perfectly legitimate to ask: what happened? In the second half of 2019⁴, 81% of Quebec residents aged 15 and over reported having consumed alcohol. Of these, 21% mentioned having experienced at least one alcohol-related harm⁵.

After the Pandemic

At the beginning of 2022, we knew that the pandemic was now behind us. Our Area structure needed a little boost to get back on its feet. At the initiative of our trusted servants, a newly-formed Service Sponsorship Working Group began its activities, which were followed by many of our members. We have collectively decided to invest time and resources to enable all our trusted servants to participate in Eastern Canada Territory activities, such as ASTECAA 2023. We plan to do the same for the Eastern Canada Regional Forum, to be held August 23-25, 2024, at Ottawa's Delta Hotel. There will also be ASTECAA 2025 at the Delta Hotel in Dartmouth (NS) from February 21 to 23, 2025. Since 2023, we've delegated the responsibility of organizing a day of gratitude to celebrate AA's anniversary around the date of June 10 to our local Area AA young people. This year, the event will be held on Saturday, June 15, 2024, at Collège Maisonneuve, starting at 7:00 p.m. Also, on the occasion of the Area 87 Annual Convention, we wanted to focus on the good things we do to reach out to the still suffering alcoholic seeking help. On an individual level, we have some excellent sponsors who have a lot to give...

There is no Shortage of Ideas

We know that together, hand in hand, with the help of a Loving God and our minds focused on the members to come, we are certainly capable of reversing the trend of the last three years. And we need all of you!

Our Great Responsibility

We have before us a great challenge and a great responsibility, both individual and collective. Our efforts will be fruitful only if we direct our actions according to our spiritual principles (the Twelve Steps, the Twelve Traditions, the Twelve Concepts). My sponsor often reminds me: stay close to the principles to avoid errors of perspective and spiritual poverty. I agree with him. This was also the theme of the 74th General Service Conference: "Unity and Service ,Connecting with Love".

In discussions with members, we asked ourselves where we stood with our First Step, our powerlessness in the face of alcohol. This is the reality we all have to live with - a chronic hopeless condition - alcohol dependence or alcoholism as described in detail in the pages of the book *Alcoholics Anonymous*. Chronic and desperate because, to date, no one, to my knowledge, has succeeded in permanently solving the enigma that is alcoholism.

⁴ The Canadian Alcohol and Drugs Survey (CADS) by Statistics Canada is conducted every two years among Canadians to assess alcohol and drug use among people aged 15 and over. The data used to illustrate our discussion were collected from June 2019 to December 2019.

⁵ Being unable to stop drinking once started; failing to do what was normally expected from you because of drinking; needing a first drink in the morning to get yourself going after a heavy drinking session; being unable to remember what happened the night before because of your drinking; having a feeling of guilt or remorse after drinking. Respondents could indicate more than one response.

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We in A.A. have a solution that, according to our greatest admirers, guarantees enduring sobriety over time, is zero-cost, and assesses the impact of a recovered alcoholic in his or her environment as being difficult to measure. So why procrastinate, why wonder where and how to go about it?

To stop drinking is just the beginning, they say, but it's even more important to put our principles into practice in our own homes, our activities and at work. But once you've started, the journey is just beginning. Among the Twelve Steps is the Twelfth Step, the transmission of the message. But before the Twelfth Step, there are 11 that precede it.

A sponsor would ask: where are you at with the Twelve Steps? That same sponsor would tell you: look at the Twelve Steps and don't tell me what you're doing; tell me what you're not doing. I would then have the answer to my dilemma. The experience of thousands, even of millions of AA members since 1935 proves that *"It works - it really works!"*

Carrying the Message

The very first paragraph of *The A.A. Service Manual* says it well. Bill writes to us:

"Our Twelfth Step — carrying the message — is the basic service that the A.A. Fellowship gives; this is our principal aim and the main reason for our existence. Therefore, A.A. is more than a set of principles; it is a society of alcoholics in action. We must carry the message, else we ourselves can wither and those who haven't been given the truth may die."

I don't do service work to recover. I do service because, in the end, after my recovery, service seems to be the only reason of my existence if I don't want to wither away and deprive another alcoholic of the chance given to me to join Alcoholics Anonymous.

As I often say, these have been the best years of my life. I have a life of abundance, a life rich in human experience. I've tried to live sober outside of AA before, and the result was nil. I didn't drink, but I understand today that my condition as an alcoholic can only improve if I remain in good spiritual shape. Spiritual fitness is something simple. Doing something for others, especially for an alcoholic. And remain active in Alcoholics Anonymous. In my opinion, there's no better remedy for anxiety, depression, irritability and instability.

For me, AA is **"living one day at a time"**, free, *trudging with courage on the Road of Happy Destiny*. It's not just some kind of illusion. For me, it's *the Great Reality*.

May God bless you and long live *Alcoholics Anonymous*.

André D.
Delegate A87/P74