

In Memory of Denis



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Denis started the first agnostic AA meeting in the city of Vancouver.

By Dan V.

Today I write with a heavy heart and with great sadness about a man whose name is Denis Kilborn.

On April 1, 2016, he passed away from cancer complications.

His sobriety date was April 28, 1975. He was introduced to AA in Toronto, Ontario, and it was there that he met his first sponsor, Jack. It was Jack who told Denis you don't do steps, you live them, which he followed for the rest of his life.

In his 41 years in AA he helped countless numbers of people, as a sponsor and as a friend. AA was his life – he was always working with newcomers – and the life of his family.

His wife's parents – her father, Bud, was Denis' sponsor when he moved to the west coast and that, of course, is how he met his wife – were both alcoholics and had over 50 years each of sobriety in AA.

He had three children; two daughters and a son. His son James was in the program as both an alcoholic and addict, and spent a great deal of time in treatment, until his death on September 26, 2013 at the young age of 23 as a result of a drug overdose.

Denis was not only my sponsor for 32 years but also my trusted friend.

I first met him on February 14, 1984. On Valentine's Day. At the time he was doing a tremendous amount of 12 Step work, had lots of different sponsees and was very, very active in taking the message to people. On that day Denis became my sponsor and was not only my sponsor for 32 years, but also very much a trusted friend. He always referred to me as his Valentine's Day present.

I've only had one sponsor in all my time in recovery, and he's the guy.

AA was a simple program for Denis.

Except...

Twenty five years in sobriety, in the year 2000, Denis checked himself into a treatment centre. It was there that he found answers to some burning questions that had tormented him throughout his recovery process.

It had everything to do with his belief system. He had faked it for so long in AA and could no longer handle the internal struggles as a result. "What do I believe? What don't I believe?" were the questions on the table in that period of treatment.



And that's where he started verbalizing his lack of belief in God.

Now he had this new-found idea that you actually can get sober and maintain sobriety at a level that is conducive to a good life without a God. Well, this is going against everything that he had heard over the last twenty-five years. His big question then was, "Who do I share that with?"

It was then that a decision was made to help widen the path of AA for all who suffer.

Denis started the first agnostic AA meeting in the city of Vancouver.

The meeting sort of morphed into an agnostic meeting. It began as a Step meeting that attracted a number of guys who were like-minded and at one point they all realized, "Wow, we are all agnostics and atheists!" There wasn't a god-believing person in the room.

At this time Denis read about the agnostic groups in Toronto being booted out of Intergroup (you can read that here: [Fight Over God Splits Toronto AA Groups](#)) and he decided, along with the group, that this is where they were going to make their stand, this would be their "Waterloo". So Denis registered the meeting with Vancouver Intergroup as "We Agnostics".

He also helped start a Tuesday night meeting called "Sober Agnostics". Its founding meeting was on May 7, 2013, and it is still going strong.

It too was registered with Central Office and on the Vancouver AA meeting list.

But that's when the problem arose in Vancouver. The groups were not only originally accepted but they were welcomed. The person at Central Office said "Fantastic! It's time we had one of these meetings in Vancouver", and then a short time later that individual was let go or fired and then the meetings were stricken from the list.

This did not go well with some people. I personally wanted to lash out, however, Denis calmly stood his ground and as a result of that agnostic AA is flourishing in Vancouver today, thanks to our elder statesman. Denis was the poster child of agnostic AA in Vancouver.

When he found AA Agnostica it was like, "Wow, there is the family I have been looking for. We were lost and now we have found each other..." The wonderful articles. The great comments.

About two years ago Denis was told that a shadow was seen on his lungs. After many tests and doctor appointments, two months ago he was told he had stage 4 lung cancer. With treatment he should live a little over a year.

Never one to duck the challenge, he simply said "it is what it is", "let's fight this to the end", and with good humor and integrity he marched forward.

On April 1/16 he awoke like any other day, drove to his favorite coffee shop to meet with his friends. Feeling a bit funny he decided to go home to lie down and rest, and that is where he died three hours later.

On a personal note, Denis and I spoke the same language. It is the language of someone who has been where you are. It is in the eyes, the eyes of a true friend and confidant. Without words so much is said.

It is in the silence that I heard his voice, "don't drink and go to meetings", which is still working today, some 32 years later.

Thank you Denis, you helped me save my life and the life of my family. I will forever be grateful.

Your friend,

Dan V.

Roger's Footnote: Denis and I were great pals. We talked on the phone at least once a week. If he were in Toronto, we would get together at a meeting and for dinner. We were both in Santa Monica for the convention. In January, he used his points to cover the cost of my flight to Vancouver so that he, Dan and I could go down to Olympia, Washington, together for the Widening Our Gateway agnostic AA conference. What a great time the three of us had together.

It was on the way to Olympia that we stopped at one of his favourite diners, the Argo Cafe, and that's where I took the above photo of Denis.

Denis was determined to live each and every remaining day as fully as possible, one day and one moment at time. Sounds like something he might have learned in AA. Another friend of his, Mike D, phoned me the day he died. He reported that Denis had told him that the previous day had been one of the best days of his life. I am overwhelmed by sadness every time I think of Denis, but that thought makes me smile, makes me happy.
