

Hope in a Bitter Teen-Age Tragedy

by Herbert Brean, LIFE Staff Writer

It had once been a small neighborhood store in a western town. Now its walls were plain white, decorated by a few pictures. Neat wicker chairs were scattered around the spotless linoleum. A podium stood near the entrance, and coffee bubbled at the coffee bar at the far end of the light, cheerful room.

The young people who came in by ones and twos chatted gaily. They were dressed as though for a party, the girls in fluffy skirts, their hair carefully done, the boys in sports shirts and jackets with the fresh-scrubbed look of teen-agers. They stood around in small, murmurous knots until that evening's chairman, a boy named Phil, took his place behind the podium and announced it was time they got started. Everyone sat down.

First Phil read a prayer: "Our Father, we come to you as a friend. . . . We ask you at all times to guide." Then the assemblage of some 22 boys and girls recited in unison: "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference."

It was the Serenity Prayer of Alcoholics Anonymous. These teen-agers were not meeting to have a party. They were there to discuss a deep crisis in their lives: the fact that one or both of their parents were alcoholics. These youngsters had formed a chapter in a new and fast-growing national organization called Alateens, which bands together such young people for purposes of mutual help. This was their weekly meeting, looked forward to and listened to with eagerness, since it represented the best hope they had yet found for solving problems far beyond their years. The boy named Phil, a member since the chapter was organized, had faced his particular problem longer than many of the others, but all the boys and girls at the meeting could recognize their own experiences in his story.

Phil's troubles had started three years ago when his mother remarried. She and his real father had separated when he was very small, and mother and son had lived by themselves in modest comfort for a decade. Then she had married an insurance accountant, a pleasant, humorous, open-handed man named Daniels. They took a good-looking house in a nice neighborhood and Phil, at the age of 14, looked forward to having a father again. Now he was 17 and it had not worked out that way.

After a few months of marriage Mr. Daniels began coming home for dinner in an exhilarated and voluble condition. Phil had never seen anything like it. His stepfather seemed terribly happy and good-humored, but he could undergo sudden changes, turning into a glowering, unreasonable tyrant. It not only frightened Phil but gave him a permanent feeling of uneasiness. What had he done or said that was wrong? And what could he do to make things right?

He asked his mother about it. "Oh, you mustn't pay any attention," she told him with a bright, worried smile. "He's just been drinking. He'll be all right."

But he wasn't. Phil found himself being lectured or reprimanded or even punished without reason. Home became a place of sudden threats and dangers against which he could not defend himself. His mother explained that his stepfather had once been an alcoholic but had given up all drinking for a year before they were married. On the night of the wedding reception drinks had been served, and he had had some. He had been drinking occasionally ever since. She tried to explain what alcoholism was, but Phil could not understand her explanation. If drinking made you ill and also irrational, why drink?

Phil is a serious, slender, dark-haired boy with a scientific bent. He hopes to be a doctor,

perhaps a psychiatrist. As his stepfather's behavior got worse, Phil found it hard to study or to feel any deep interest in school work--or in anything else. He stopped inviting school friends to his home because he never knew when his father might start haranguing them. He became ashamed of his father's appearance--his red face, rambling speech and shambling gait. Phil began to withdraw into himself--"you just shut up tight inside."

His father drank almost constantly now but especially on weekends. On Mondays he was sometimes too "sick" to go to work, but somehow he hung on to his job. Evenings were especially bad. Then he roamed the house, often until 2 or 3 a.m., bellowing imprecations, seeking an argument with anyone who dared talk back to him. Phil was determined to help and protect his mother as best he could, but he did not know exactly how. He grew nervous and apprehensive. His school work got worse, but he didn't care.

Once in a while he would plead with his father not to drink. Sometimes the only answer Phil got was a cold stare, sometimes it was a stumble-tongued denial of drinking, sometimes it was a genial promise that he would stop after just one more. Phil and his mother, a remarkably patient and religious woman, often talked it over trying to decide what to do. "If it gets much worse, we may have to leave," she would say quietly. Phil wondered how much worse it would have to get.

Phil never saw his father actually take a drink. He and his mother found bottles around the house. Often there was one under Daniels' bed and sometimes under his pillow, and always under the cushion of the large easy chair from which he watched television, but Mr. Daniels was never seen drinking from them. With the sly secrecy typical of many alcoholics, he drank only when he was alone. It was hard for Phil to explain to other kids in school, who invited him to parties, why he could not invite them back. In time he grew used to the knowledge that his classmates were aware his father was an alcoholic, and he became calloused, if not reconciled. But he could not

become calloused to the fresh embarrassment he felt every time someone came to the house and met his father or saw the house itself.

In two years its carpets had become stippled with burns from half-smoked cigarets dropped heedlessly on the floor. The kitchen and dining-room bore nicks and drip marks where his father had suddenly hurled his plate or glass in a drunken tantrum. One night Phil came home to find a milk bottle lodged halfway through a screen in a front window. His father, angered at his wife's failure to come at once when he called her, had thrown the bottle at the TV screen, missed it and hit the window. The broken window and the stain on the paint outside stung Phil. "Makes the house look neat, doesn't it?" he said to a friend.

The wall-to-wall carpeting in his mother's bedroom, of which Phil was so proud, had become blotched from knocked-over glasses. The family car was a mess, filled with forgotten insurance literature in the back, the fenders dented by uncertain driving, the seat covers filthy, the glove-compartment door rickety from being banged open to get the bottle always stored there. Lying in bed nights, tapping his foot almost uncontrollably from tension, Phil thought of what other kids had and what he was missing. He and his mother could never plan a family outing because his father's condition was too unpredictable. The best they could expect was an infrequent barbecue in the back yard.

As the months passed Phil's father got worse. Once he tried to throttle his wife and Phil had to wrestle him to the floor. Another time Phil had to tie his hands with a necktie and hold him, fuming and cursing, until he finally passed out. Still another time Phil had to knock him down, no great feat because of his father's condition.

Mr. Daniels began to display spells of grandiosity. "They ask me to take a bigger job," he would declaim to the empty living room at 3 a.m. "They come to me on their knees, begging. I don't want another job, and I tell'em so."

One afternoon a girl he knew in high school called Phil to ask him to a dance. His father

answered the phone. Loudly and obscenely he cursed out the young girl, then hung up. Phil would not stay in the house that night. He slept at a friend's and next day went over to the girl's house and mumbled a red-faced apology for his father. It was one of the hardest things he ever had to do.

Mr. Daniels' health steadily deteriorated. At times he needed hospitalization, and occasionally his physical condition so alarmed him that he himself tried to slow down and "taper off." In this he had the advice of the family doctor who gave him various drugs to discourage drinking. None worked for long because Mr. Daniels went back to the bottle as soon as he began feeling better. Some nights he would burst into Phil's room, wake him up by turning on the light, and launch on a long, incoherent lecture. Phil finally arranged the light so that it could not be turned on at the door. His father continued to fling in whenever he felt like it, but it no longer really awakened Phil. "It's like the noise of the planes passing overhead," Phil says. "I just don't hear it anymore."

But he still carried the tension inside himself. His foot twitched steadily at night as he tried to go to sleep. On weekends he stayed away from the house as much as he could. He tried to keep up his studies, but it was hard to get up in front of the class to give a book report, knowing what they all knew about him. He was morbidly self-conscious about his appearance and about what the other kids might be thinking about him.

Another boy named Jerry, who lived down the street, had a similar problem. His father and mother both drank heavily and steadily, although more peaceably. Common problems, including poorer clothes and less spending money than other kids had, brought Phil and Jerry together. Occasionally they met to compare notes on the behavior of their parents. One day Jerry said he had heard there was some sort of juvenile branch of Alcoholics Anonymous, not for youthful drinkers but for the children of heavy-drinking parents. They called up the local "AA," got some literature

and enlisted a third boy who had an alcoholic father.

The three boys met whenever they could and talked over their problems. After months of hiding his shame, it was a wonderful release for Phil to talk openly. It made him feel better to learn that other kids had the same problems he did and could even suggest some solutions. Soon the three boys were joined by the pretty blond daughter of an alcoholic, and the meetings acquired a little social atmosphere.

As news of the small movement spread, other youngsters joined up, and this attracted the attention of the local chapter of Al-Anon, a companion organization of Alcoholics Anonymous. AA is the league of alcoholics who have joined forces to help each other fight their mutual disease. Al-Anon is an organization of wives, relatives and friends of alcoholics who also meet to exchange suggestions and compare notes. Alateens, made up of the children of alcoholics, is a ward of the two main organizations. Phil's group decided to form an Alateen chapter. A kind-faced woman named Margaret Wells, with long experience in Al-Anon, volunteered to serve as guide and sponsor, but the youngsters conducted their own meetings. In a year Phil's and Jerry's frail partnership grew to 60 members, one of the largest Alateen groups in the U.S.

No easy cures

Alateen meetings do not solve the basic problems and certainly do not propose cures for alcoholic parents. They do, however, help members live with problems they cannot solve. They do this by offering a version of the Alcoholics Anonymous approach, which is a mixture of nonsectarian religious faith and personal psychological counseling. Alcoholics Anonymous gets its members to admit to themselves that they cannot control their disease alone but need the help of a "Greater Power," to whom they must turn over their lives. In the same way the members of Alateens are encouraged to face the fact that they cannot overcome their parents' alcoholism, but by putting their problems in

God's hands and by practicing understanding and forbearance, they are taught to achieve an inward calm during a stormy adolescence.

The new Alateen member is taught the AA Serenity Prayer and the AA philosophy of trying to live one day at a time. One of the most striking features of the movement is the quietly spiritual attitude of the veteran Alateen member who, even though he may not be a member of any religious faith, lives closely and intimately with a God of his own choosing. This unusually frank reliance on the "Greater Power" pervades most Alateen meetings.

At the recent meeting of Phil's group, Phil invited members to step up to the podium and discuss their experiences. A rebellious dark-haired girl of 15 stood up and said:

"I know everybody says you ought to turn it over to God. But I can't." She paused, then spoke haltingly. "Maybe I should. I guess He brought me here to this meeting . . . in a way. But tonight Dad was going to take us to a show. He got provoked and pulled one of his stunts. He took off by himself. I--I tried to get my brother to go to the show anyway by himself, but he wouldn't. . . . I've learned here to try to be nice to people. But it takes time."

Phil asked for comment. A boy told the girl, "You can't just call on God when you're in a jam. You have to turn your whole life over to Him. My dad and I are a lot closer now since I did that. Last night we worked together fixing his bureau, and he doesn't come home drunk when he knows my pal is going to stay overnight with us. Probably your father is under great tensions, like mine is. You can always pray and hope it *might* come out all right."

Phil called on another girl, Annabelle. As is customary at Alateen meetings, only first names were used and the parent was often referred to simply as "my alcoholic." Annabelle took the podium to report on her progress. "I've got a temper," she said, "and when I said my prayers last night, I told God what my problem was today, that I had to work in the kitchen at home and I didn't want to. But I said I'd do my best because I wanted to help others."

A boy of 15 with a bristly red haircut raised

his hand. "I've got a temper too. My mother is our alcoholic, and I have to do a lot of the housework. When they get to arguing, my father involves me in it. But when they start yelling at me I just say the Serenity Prayer to myself."

Mrs. Wells said, "I'd like to add a word to this. You all look healthy and happy and well fed to me. Maybe your parents don't always do as you think they should. But they did well to get you this far. They are doing the best they are mentally capable of at the moment. They love you but they are almost afraid to love you. They don't dare. They don't understand their children well enough."

A thin six-foot boy with a long face went to the podium. He was a newcomer and very nervous. "Maybe some of you have got your problems solved. I haven't. I--I just haven't. I can't take it any longer, and I'm not going to. I have a chance to go into a foster home and--and--I'm saying goodbye to my family." He was close to tears.

Phil looked around for hands. Mrs. Wells said, "Dig into your hearts. What can we tell him that will really help?" There was silence.

"You've got to turn your problem over to God," a boy in the back said.

"You'll get a better deal out of it that way," said another. "He knows what we don't."

"Foster homes are no good," said a girl. "They're too regulated."

"You've got to try to help yourself," said the boy who had warned against calling on God only when you are in a jam.

"And be courteous, and don't argue."

"What happens if he sends you out for a bottle for him?" asked the boy at the podium.

"You don't go," said Phil firmly. "We've talked that over. Lots of people have that problem. But you just politely refuse. If you do it once, he'll ask you to do it again."

"Yeah," the boy at the podium considered. "But I like to have friends over, and I never know . . ."

"Oh, golly," said another boy, raising his hand. "Never invite friends over without first reconnoitering. If your dad's drinking, just

keep out of the way as much as you can."

'I used to feel abused, too'

The boy at the podium was replaced by a pretty, fair-haired girl. "You can come here with any sort of problem," she said, addressing the newcomer. "That's what I like about it. I used to feel abused too. Sometimes one of my friends would say, 'We all went out to dinner last night,' and I'd lie. 'I went out to dinner with my family, too,' I'd say. And my friend would say, 'No, you didn't. I know your father's drinking now.' But I found out that if I don't worry about tomorrow or the bad things that happened today but think of the good things, then--well, tomorrow can be another day to be happy with."

Another girl raised her hand. "I know what you mean about lying. I've got two alcoholics, both my parents. There were lots of things I couldn't have. So I began boasting to the other kids. I'd say we were getting a new car or a new dog or were going to Florida for a vacation. I told terrible lies. Then I started Alateens. I went back to the people I'd lied to and told the truth. I'm a new person. I'm getting along better in school and I'm an officer of my class."

The meeting was now more than an hour old, and the entire discussion had dealt with parental drinking problems. Few Alateens have drinking problems of their own. Some of them are led through everyday association to experiment with alcohol, and because they have seen how destructive it can be, they sometimes believe that they have a "drinking problem." This is almost always juvenile self-consciousness.

At the podium Phil said that if there were no other matters, the social hour would begin. Coffee and cookies were produced. After a collection was taken up for next week's cookies, the audience broke up into groups, chattering as though at a dance intermission. The tall, thin newcomer was surrounded by a knot of others, anxious to welcome him and help.

"Everyone's nervous getting up at first," someone told him, "but after a few times they won't be able to stop you from talking." "That's

right," said Phil. "And you'd be surprised how much it helps you in school when you have to get up and make a talk to the class."

Soon they took their leave by ones and twos. Mrs. Wells drove several of them home. It had been a typical Alateen meeting, a new phenomenon in American life.

Less than four years old, the Alateen movement is still in its infancy. Ninety-seven groups are registered, and another 75 are believed to be in the formative stages. The total membership is perhaps 2,000 members--"perhaps" because communication between the groups and the parent AA or Al-Anon headquarters is often scanty. Alateen is certain to expand, for it gives the teen-aged child of an alcoholic something he can get nowhere else: a chance to hold up his head and talk about his troubles with others who suffer the same way. He acquires friends who he can telephone at night for encouragement or advice when the going gets tough, and he also gets a chance to talk openly about other problems. "I'm too shy" is a common complaint. "I'm always nervous" is another problem readily understood by more experienced Alateens who know the cause of the nervousness.

Above all, the Alateen member achieves a depth of understanding rare in youth, and he helps to spread a new spirit of understanding to his whole family. Even the alcoholic parent, after a few guilty misgivings ("Do you actually talk about *me* at those meetings?"), becomes more serene and in time may even decide to seek help himself.

So far that has not happened to Phil's alcoholic. He still shakes the house with his occasional falls, wants to be waited on, never apologizes. He still bellows his challenges to nonexistent adversaries and occasionally goes berserk.

Phil has learned to "live around" the problem. His grades in school have again risen to a B average, and he is determined to stick it out with his mother until he enters college 18 months from now. He is still tense and nerve-ridden. When he speaks, his hands dart

in quick, finger-tapping gestures, and some nights he wriggles about uncontrollably in bed before he can go to sleep. But he says, "I don't really have any problems any more. They're there, but I don't fight them. No one can beat alcoholism by himself. So I just try to be polite and helpful, and let God take care of things."

The illustrations for this article [as it appeared in *Life*] were drawn by Franklin McMahon, who attended Alateen meetings in different sections of the country and sketched the teen-agers as they discussed their problems. Their own words, spoken at these meetings, serve as captions for the drawings:

"When Mom and I came home, Dad was

hanging up a noose on the landing. When he's drunk, he sometimes acts suicidal."

"I have learned to keep my mouth shut by saying the Serenity Prayer to myself."

"I have to keep telling myself over and over again that the monster we were up against Tuesday night was nothing but a great big bottle."

"I come here with my older brother because he said I'd learn how not to get excited. Now when Daddy gets drunk, I just go on with my business."

"Some day we'll have all this behind us. I keep telling myself, I only have to take this for the next 24 hours."

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