

# When A Parent Drinks Too Much

by Jeannine Locke

Children of alcoholics can find help for their special problems in an organization called Alateen.

The eight teenagers assembling that Tuesday night in a Presbyterian Church classroom were an attractive group, well dressed and groomed, clear-eyed and apparently carefree. As they arranged themselves around a study table, there was small talk, teenage style. Ordinary, happy kids, you'd suppose, with a happy excuse for being together.

But from the moment their meeting began, there was no mistaking its purpose for fun. At a sign from the senior member of the group, they bowed their heads and prayed: "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 that the teenagers were repeating. None of them was an alcoholic; their dilemma was that they were the sons and daughters of alcoholics. They were Alateens, members of an international organization of youngsters, aged 12 to 20, who are growing up in families disturbed by compulsive drinking. They meet not to agonize over their parents, but to exchange ideas and experiences that will help them understand the nature of alcoholism and how to minimize its damage to their own lives.

The Alateens talked freely. There was a closed meeting, which I was allowed to attend on condition that I respect the participants' anonymity. The only other adult present was an attractive young mother who acted as moderator-counselor. She, too, was an insider, the wife of an alcoholic and a member of Al-Anon, the family group movement that has grown out of AA. She and the youngsters had agreed to report on their progress in coping with their common problems.

The Alateen case histories were at once tragic and heartening. The youngsters talked

without self-pity about the tensions, the squalor, and fear that alcoholism imposed on their families.

At an early age, these children had learned that home was an unsafe place to bring friends. One boy told about a formal dinner that ended with his parents hurling plates and cutlery. A girl would never forget the birthday party that was climaxed by her father collapsing with his head in the cake.

The Alateens all confessed to having used the unhappiness in their homes as an excuse for their own weaknesses and misdemeanors that ranged from laziness and disobedience at school to criminal behavior.

Mark, a handsome, mop-haired 18-year-old, had served time in a state training school for stealing a car. It was his way of "paying back" his drunken father. Jacqueline, a pretty 17-year-old, had reacted to her father's alcoholism by taking to drink herself. At 16 she would raid his liquor stocks, then invite other teenagers to join her for drinking and driving in the family car.

Jacqueline's younger brother, Jay, had turned against their non-drinking mother. He explained: "Mother was always raging and having hysterics--I thought *she* was the sick one. Dad was nice. When he was drinking he'd give us money and generally indulge us children."

It was at weekly Alateen meetings, the same youngsters testified, that they had gained insight not only into their parents' problems but also their own. Jacqueline stopped drinking. "When I understood about my father and how his drinking was a disease, I didn't get a charge any more out of alcohol," she said.

With unconscious pathos, 15-year-old Debbie, reporting her progress, said: "I used to think that if my mother really loved me, she wouldn't drink. I'd hide her liquor or throw it down the sink. But that just made things worse. Then I joined Alateen and it was such a relief to learn about alcoholism."

From her Alateen handbook Debbie had learned that "the sick alcoholic doesn't want to make his family suffer. He doesn't want to get into debt, smash up cars, land in hospitals and jails. But the craving for alcohol is too strong. Even though he doesn't admit he drinks too much, he suffers from guilt, remorse, physical illness, loneliness and despair."

Debbie concluded: "But the main thing I learned from Alateen is that we children aren't responsible for our parents' drinking, and we can't make them stop."

The organization which answered these children's urgent needs came into being only ten years ago. Appropriately, it was the brain child of a 17-year-old Pasadena, California, boy whose father was a member of AA, his mother an Al-Anon. Impressed with the way they had been helped, he got together with five other boys whose parents had compulsive drinking problems and proposed that they, too, form a fellowship. His hope was that by pooling their experience and strength they could learn to cope with the complications that an alcoholic in the family added to their normal problems as teenagers. The response to Bob's idea was so enthusiastic that Alateen was founded and named that very night. Today, around 4,000 youngsters belong to 392 Alateen chapters in a dozen countries. The greatest concentration is in the United States, where there are 194 chapters; most of the remainder are in Canada. Although its rate of growth now surpasses that of Al-Anon, the sponsor and coordinator of its work, Alateen is still a mite, by comparison with the monumental need for its services.

According to the National Council on Alcoholism, there are some 6.5 million alcoholics in the United States. Canada has upward of a quarter of a million. But for every alcoholic, NCA estimates, there are at least four others whom his or her sickness directly affects. Explains Dr. Ruth Fox, a practicing psychiatrist and NCA's medical director: "Alcoholism is a family disease. Excessive drinking of alcohol by a father or mother, or both, affects every member of the family--emotionally, spiritually, and often

economically, socially, and physically."

The result often is a recurrence of the drinking problem in the next generation. As Dr. Fox points out: "Forty to sixty per cent of all alcoholics come from the disturbed background of an alcoholic family. The child of an alcoholic pays an appalling price in bewilderment, humiliation, and often in physical neglect and abuse. The security, love, and warmth that are necessary for a child's development are rarely present in an alcoholic home. Where these do exist, they are of such unpredictable quality that the child has difficulty developing the trust and confidence in himself that he will need for future successful living."

The desperation of that need is made plain in letters--about thirty-five a week--that youngsters write to Alateen world headquarters. Some of these letters ask for general information about alcoholism; others want the address of the nearest Alateen group, and all cry out for help.

A 15-year-old girl wrote from the Midwest about the distress of her whole family. Her father is an alcoholic who had tried AA briefly, then lapsed back into drinking. Her mother, despairing, has begun to talk about a separation. An older brother and sister, meanwhile, were "plotting to leave home; they just want to get out of the house." But the 15-year-old still loves her father, and "can't bear the thought of just leaving him with nothing and no one. He might fall asleep with a lighted cigarette and burn himself up."

Another youngster, also in his mid-teens, writes about how his family, under strains imposed by the mother's drinking, has disintegrated for the second time. The boy's own father had divorced his mother "because of her drinking problem." Now his stepfather has had enough.

His letter told a domestic horror story. "My mother has been an alcoholic since I was about three. Don't get me wrong--I love her very much. I feel that if my stepfather had been a little more understanding she could have overcome her problem. But one night when

she was drunk, he locked her out of the house. He is now living with a woman who, I guess, he plans to marry when the divorce goes through. My mother was pregnant when he threw her out. I now have a baby sister who will never know her father."

But the boy had not abandoned hope. He was writing, he said, "to find out how to combat my mother's sickness." He ended: "I would greatly appreciate it if you sent this information as soon as possible."

Mrs. Timmy W., Alateen's international secretary, reads such tragic letters and realizes that "what these youngsters hope for by return mail is some magic formula that will make their parents stop drinking." Instead, Mrs. Timmy W. introduces them to a program concerned primarily with saving them, only indirectly with helping the sick parents.

What Alateen offers is much the same kind of treatment as AA prescribes. Trust in God is one of the first "steps of recovery" that both groups are encouraged to take. Then, through group education, they are helped to face up to their problems and to gain the strength and insight that will allow them to live with their problems. For a start, Alateens learn everything they can about alcoholism: that it is a disease--an abnormal sensitivity to alcohol, plus an emotional compulsion to drink--and that, to get well, the desire must come from the alcoholic himself.

"You can do nothing *directly*," their handbook, "Youth and the Alcoholic Parent," advises. "Persuasion, reproaches, bitter silences and tears--all these will only put your parent on the defensive and increase his guilt. That leads to more drinking, more trouble."

The Alateen can best help his parent by helping himself. "Fear and dread are destructive emotions; put them out of your mind. There is hope for every alcoholic, no matter how black things look at the moment. Learn to live one day at a time and live it so you will *grow*. Yours is the only life over which you have any control."

Pat, an Alateen whose family had been broken and impoverished by alcohol, was

sustained by the idea of living a day at a time. She told her story at the Alateen meeting I attended.

Pat's father, a professional athlete, began drinking soon after she was born. When she was seven, Pat was put in the care of her paternal grandparents. Her father continued to drink and drift from job to job.

Pat was in high school when her father, by now ill and unemployable, arrived at AA. He introduced her to Alateen.

"At first," Pat remembered, "I couldn't stop talking. I had to tell everything about my terrible life. I had no mother, my grandparents were old and sick, and my dad was out of work. When my grandfather died and then my grandmother--both in the same year--I came to Alateen for comfort. The kids here were the first to understand. But I got more than comfort from our meetings. I learned to care about other people and their problems and I learned to live one day at a time."

Now 17 and living with her father, who finds occasional work, Pat manages housekeeping and a part-time job on top of school studies.

"When I wake in the morning," she says, "I think: How awful it would be to live this way all my life! But I can stand it for 24 hours."

The youngsters all emphasize the healing effect of talking out their troubles. Jacqueline put it: "The tension in me has simmered down because I can discuss it. That, and taking inventory of yourself, are what help most."

It was Jacqueline who a year earlier had taken to hiding her problems in alcohol, just as her father was doing. Her arrival home one night, floundering in drink, was the shock that sent him to AA. Now, Jacqueline reports, her whole family was "on the program." Her father's efforts had encouraged her mother to seek help for herself at Al-Anon. Jacqueline and her brother, Jay, go to Alateen.

"It wasn't until we'd taken inventory of ourselves at Alateen that Jackie and I began to see our own weaknesses and how we'd been using Dad's drinking as a crutch," Jay confesses. "We had become lazy, unruly kids and we blamed everything--our bad grades at school

and our own unpopularity--on the fact we had an alcoholic at home."

Unfortunately, case histories such as this one, of a whole family working to rehabilitate itself, are rare. One of the reasons is that many parents, even those in AA or Al-Anon, still resist the idea of their youngsters' playing an active role in Alateen. Attendance would be an admission that a member of the family was an alcoholic. Moreover, parents all too often underestimate their youngsters' seriousness of purpose, their earnest desire to live successfully

in an alcoholic situation.

There is no doubting the earnestness of the Alateens whom I met. Having faced up to serious problems far earlier than most young people do, and having probed their own personalities more deeply than most of us ever do, they have achieved remarkable maturity and strength. At Alateen they have learned not only to live with alcoholism but to lay the foundation for a saner, sweeter, more productive life.

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