

# OUR BILL'S STORY

*The following account describes how one of the original members of Crystal Meth Anonymous found sobriety. In CMA, we generally try to tell our own stories instead of recounting those of other people, but at the time of this writing our friend had recently been diagnosed with cancer and was unable to write it himself. He gave us permission to adapt a transcript of one of the several recordings of his talks and reviewed it for accuracy. He has since passed away, and our debt of gratitude to him can never be repaid. We humbly submit this retelling, with our eternal thanks.*

MY NAME IS BILL, AND I AM A CRYSTAL METH ADDICT.

I don't look like it today, but I am still a crystal meth addict. And this is the only place in the world where I can stand before a group of people and say that I'm a liar, a cheat, and a thief. And when I'm done everyone will say, "Wow, wasn't he great?" It's because the members of CMA understand all of that and know that it isn't really me. I'm always comfortable around a group of crystal meth addicts because I can do something stupid and everyone knows what that's about. We get room to grow here and become the person we were meant to be.

I'm supposed to tell what it was like, what happened, and what it's like now. Well, it used to be pretty bad. What happened was that it got worse. And now it's okay, thank you very much. That's pretty much how it went. I'll tell a little more about me, and then I'll also tell about the history of CMA and how it got started.

I was born in New England, a great place to grow up. Early on I was taught that the only thing that mattered was me: My clothes were the best, my eyelashes were the best—you name it. I was the first of a generation, and in my Irish-Russian family, that meant a lot. They wanted me to be a senator or a governor, but that didn't work out because I turned out to be gay. That can really make a mess of things.

I learned early on that I could lie and get things. My parents, aunts, and uncles would ask me how much I loved them, and I would say, "A football's worth." "A basketball's worth." "A pony's worth." "A car's worth." I got all those things, so I basically learned prostitution, not in the literal sense, but rather with the idea of using other people to get what I want. Later, that same behavior would apply to getting high: Every gift I had would be turned toward getting drugs, getting a little more high, getting you a little less high, and using you to get what I needed to stay far, far "out there."

At the age of 12 I was introduced to speed, in the form of meth tabs. I used to put a meth tab in a glass of water, then drink it and go off to school so I could slow down and catch up to everyone else. I drank, too. It started with my mother's port wine, which I would mix with grape juice so it would look the same, but I later found out I prefer scotch, gin, vodka, and tequila. Eventually, though, I discovered that if I took two of the meth tabs I would feel better, and if I took a whole lot of them I would feel a whole lot better—and I could study. I could concentrate at school, read my notes once, get an A, then go home and crash.

By the time I was 15, my parents (with the help of my doctor) had a drug addict on their hands, with uppers in the morning and downers at night. That pattern set in and stayed with me until I was 40 years old, except that it turned into uppers in the morning, then downers fifteen days later. I'm not sure how that happened, but I found that two or three days of being high were so-so, a week was okay, twelve days were better, but by fifteen days I could change the world. My friends and I would move the planets around and solve the world's problems, sitting in a bathhouse doing speed.

Then somewhere along the way, someone said to me, "You know, you can shoot those things." I thought, Why not? So, I tried it—nineteen of

them. I had been high before, but I didn't really know about "high" until I started firing them up (injecting). When I ran out of meth tabs I would buy street crystal, and it became, without a doubt, the darkest place I've ever been. I was alone and homeless. Some of my friends would let me shower at their place and eat something, but they didn't let me stay there, so I would sleep in a Laundromat or a park.

I didn't understand, though, how unmanageable my life had become. One day a friend mentioned that a local celebrity was back in rehab and I made a joke that she had been shooting scotch this time. My friend said, "You can't shoot scotch whiskey," so I pulled out a syringe and did it. Another time I was sitting on a bus, all cleaned up (I thought), reading a paper. The man next to me said, "You had better go back to San Francisco. The fuzz will get you down here." I couldn't understand how he knew.

I don't want to get too caught up in the drug stories, but I do want to give you an idea of how far down I went. One time I got loaded and put on a yellow latex leotard with chain mail over it, then climbed a tree in the park, saying, "Chirp, chirp!" I wouldn't come down, either. The firemen had to come and remove me from the tree, but that's another story.

I made eight or nine attempts to stop cold turkey without success. Then one August morning, I was getting ready for my noon hit, and I couldn't get the needle in. I got frustrated and threw it away, but for some reason I didn't chase the high this time. Then twenty-four hours went by without drugs. Then another day went by. Then two weeks went by, and I started thinking, I can do this.

After a month, I was out in the mountains on a bike run when someone offered me a beer. I was about to drink it when I realized that if I took even one sip of that beer I would immediately be looking for whatever drugs I could find. I started shaking and didn't drink it. Later that night, I said the first prayer I had ever said that wasn't a bargain. I said, "Take me home," over and over.

But by that Christmas I was getting really drunk again. I had been staying with a friend of mine who was a bartender, and he would let me sweep the floor after he closed the bar, then give me some of his tips. We were walking to get something to eat when he pointed out a house that was

sitting far off the street and said it was a recovery house for alcoholics and drug addicts. The remark passed me by completely. I didn't want to hear anything about that.

Strangely enough, about three days later I found myself knocking on their door. I was met by a man who was over 6 feet tall and weighed about 300 pounds. He looked down at me from what seemed like an enormous height and said, "Welcome home." I knew for the first time in my life that one of my prayers had been answered.

All over the walls were big posters: "The Twelve Steps," "The Twelve Traditions," "Easy Does It." As I looked at them, they seemed familiar. The nuns at school had taught me to trust in God, be kind to your neighbor, and love yourself, and that's what these Steps seemed to be saying. It's a little more complicated than that, but I still think that's what they're about.

The first three Steps direct my life in any future activity. I am powerless over drugs and alcohol, and my life was unmanageable. When I realized that, I had to ask for help, so there must be something to ask. That took me to Step Two, where I came to believe there is a Power greater than myself that could restore me to sanity. I didn't know yet what that Higher Power was, just that it was there and that it could keep me from using and drinking. That is something I am absolutely sure of today.

In Step Three I was asked to turn my will and my life over to the care of God as I understood Him. I couldn't believe they were actually asking me to give it all up, but when I looked back at my life, I saw that for the past thirty years I had totally surrendered to drugs. Drugs ruled my life absolutely. Everything I did was viewed through the lens of my addiction, and if it messed with my getting high, I didn't do it. They were asking me to surrender to a Power that could keep me sober and restore my life, so I did it.

Way at the other end I saw this other Step, Ten, that said to continue to take personal inventory and when I was wrong, promptly admit it. When am I ever wrong? Maybe two or three times since 1952, but otherwise it was always you. I would wake up some mornings having been beaten up the night before and couldn't figure out why, since I didn't do anything wrong. I decided to come back to that one later.

As for the Steps in between, the first is the inventory (Four). I didn't do mine in the normal way, but I did do an inventory with the person with whom I had decided to spend my life (Five). I was certainly ready for God to remove my defects of character, just not all at once (Six). I was afraid that if He took them all, I would be like a puppet with all its strings cut. These things had become my survival skills, but God gave me a way to get rid of them (Seven).

What I got from this process was a sense of personal freedom from myself and from the liabilities within my soul. I never have to worry about waking up in the middle of the night, remembering something, and saying, "Oh, God, oh, no." Steps Eight and Nine gave me freedom from everyone else. I can go anywhere in the world now and I don't owe anyone anything. At first, though, I didn't see how I would ever make amends for all the things I had done. Most of the people involved would be dead, and there were so many people I didn't know who had been touched by what I had done, like ripples on a lake after you throw a rock into it. I was struggling with this when the same man who answered the door that first day at the recovery home said something very simple: "One day you will be standing alone, and God will tell you what to do."

Every time I work Step Ten, I touch an old behavior and ask for it to be removed so I won't do it again. One at a time, they eventually fall away, but there are still a few that keep coming back like rabbits.

Step Eleven suggested that I pray and meditate to improve my conscious contact with God as I understood Him. Well, I had already been doing that—I was the most spiritual person I knew. I had glass altars, sacraments, crosses all over my wall. I was always praying. As for Step Twelve, we do this all the time. We meet to help each other, to love each other, and to support each other's need to be sober. I still go to six or seven meetings a week to hear from other members, especially newcomers. My using was a black-and-white film noir that happened thirty years ago, and I think, Wow, was that really me? When I talk to newcomers, though, I see myself. I know where I have been and where I could be again. That's why newcomers are the most important people in meetings. Not because they are new, but because they let me know what it would be like to be new all over again.

In my tenth year of sobriety I stopped going to meetings entirely for four years, but I realized that I had completely lost touch with other addicts, and I eventually came back. I was celebrating my fourteenth anniversary at the recovery house when an 18-year-old kid walked in who was so high that he was roller-skating on the ceiling. He ended up living in the house and I sponsored him. I started taking him to meetings.

Having been sober fourteen years and away from meetings for four, I didn't know speed was still around. Other than a few hard-core addicts, tweakers had pretty much disappeared from the scene by the time I quit, but here they were again in these meetings. They would never get called on, even if they had their hands up the whole meeting. I asked the secretary once why they were never asked to share when they clearly needed to talk, and he replied, "Because they're tweakers and they disrupt the meeting."

I started thinking that I needed to start a special-purpose meeting for speed freaks, but somehow it got bigger. People kept coming up to me, even on the streets, asking when I was going to start the meeting. I kept putting it off, saying that I didn't want to be responsible for anyone's sobriety, but a friend kept pestering me about it. We fought about starting that first meeting for eight or nine months before I decided to listen to the message I was getting from God. I finally put an announcement on the board: "Crystal Meth Anonymous Meeting" at such and such place and time. I then spent the next week stealing writings from other programs to read at the meeting.

On September 16, 1994, we had our first meeting, with twelve people in attendance. It grew into other meetings, then more meetings, and even more meetings. Soon we had seven meetings in L.A., and then a group started in Salt Lake City. Phoenix followed, and then it just blossomed all over.

I have visited CMA groups all over the country, and I have discovered that crystal meth addicts are the same everywhere, because there is very little difference in our meetings. We all have the same tolerance for our newcomers. We love each other a lot. We can be irreverent when we feel comfortable that we know enough about something to make a joke about

it. The words in the “Big Book” and “Twelve and Twelve” are just words until we put them into practice; that’s when they become a program.

These books all constantly remind us that they are just suggestions, but if we are going to follow the path of the Twelve Steps, these suggestions become “musts.” We need these Steps, these writings, and these meetings, where we can come and bare our souls and sit and listen when someone really is hurting.

To those who are new, you will find nothing in CMA but love. It is in no one’s best interest to do anything except take care of you and help you get sober. If you want to do it, we can help you. We can’t do it for you, but we can sure help you. I cannot think of any movement in the last thousand years that has been so beneficial for us. Thank God Bill W., Ebby, and Dr. Bob (the founders of Alcoholics Anonymous) stopped long enough to listen to their “white light” experience, because we wouldn’t be here if they hadn’t.

Today, I am the richest man I know, because I can look out over a meeting and see clean, healthy faces that might have been in jail or in a loony bin otherwise. It is these members of CMA, folks who were badly burned by their own actions and who have turned it around, who are helping people stay sober—one at a time—and for that I am eternally grateful.