

## Alan's story

I'll give a brief reflect on my past that I wrote for the Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) book *Mainstay*. Then I'll say something about my experience of imprisonment over the last 35 years.

I had my first drink when I was eight years old: it was called a shandy. I loved the taste and the slight effect it had on me. I was allowed only one, as my father would not allow any more. It was a great time. I was full of fear, no love at all being shown by my parents. At 12 years old I was sent to a Boys Home, and that's where sexual abuse took place two or three times a week. At 15 I flogged a bottle of beer and I drunk. I was happy but scared of the Welfare seeing me in that condition, so I stayed near a drain and heaved it up. I left school at 15, achieved nothing. I was in a dumb class they called a vocational class. All my life I was called dumb. I wobbled through getting into trouble.

At the age of 17 I was discharged from Child Welfare. A couple of flatmates and I drank two or three days a week, had fast cars and women, and got into trouble with the police. I had a real bad attitude, and was put in prison for a month. I took drugs, sniffed lighter fluid that scared the shit out of me. Dope didn't really do much, just slowed me down. Alcohol was my drug. As I got older I got into even more trouble, with prison time. I was out of control. I couldn't give a rat's arse about anything.

In the 90's I went to my first rehab in Auckland with the Salvation Army. I opted out after three months went back drinking. This happened twice. I still didn't get it – I carried on. More trouble, more prison. I was proud to go to prison. Prison was my home. I never drank in prison and never missed a drink, but man I sure made up for it when released.

I always knew I would do a life-sentence, and I did. I didn't give a rat's arse in the world. That's one of my faults. I blamed everyone but me. While serving my life sentence, after six years I attended a prison course on straight-thinking. I first went to fill in the day. But something happened. I felt this strange feeling building up in me, but I kept a straight face because all my lifer mates were there too. I felt fluid run out of my eyes and I felt very uncomfortable. To cut a long story short, that day was the start of my new life. For the first time I looked at myself.

I spent hours in my cell shouting and crying. I'm getting emotional as I speak. It was the hardest thing I've ever done. My journey was up and down. I thought I was going mad. Then when my rehab came into action – that was AA, the understanding that I was an alcoholic and I knew my life or lives had become unmanageable. I give thanks to Bill and Bob (the founders of AA) and to the God of my understanding.

I went to prison for life in '94 and got released in 2009. I have not had a drink since, and my life is a lot more manageable now. I have compassion, love, empathy, and most of all I have been granted a second chance of life. I am sincerely grateful to all for this. I am giving instead of taking. In the beginning my life was a huge battle. My stubbornness saved me when released from prison – I'll tell you about that later.

When I got out of prison, after four years I got into a relationship off and on. I suffered depression, anxiety and anger. I was not drinking, but my walls were like skyscrapers. Eight months later I got into the AA programme, and did what it suggested by my sponsor. My

Higher Power was working within me, rebuilding me. My life became awesome. I hope when you read my story you can find peace and serenity in your lives.

That's my background. As I sat here this morning and listened to the prison manager, who I know personally. I thought, great, good on you, dribbling on about rehabilitation, moving things around – a big merry-go-round. Its been happening for over 100 years.

I sat in prison for five years and it was suggested I go to a straight-thinking course - this was in Manawatu Prison. The prison manager told the facilitator it would be a waste of time. For the first three weeks I sat in that class, and (as I said before) I felt my emotions. I had to hold them back because I didn't want to look weak among my peers. Strength and pride make prisoners take no shit from anyone. I was pulled aside by the leader, and I made my decision then and there I'd change my life.

But I didn't have a really great understanding of what I just said. I was sick and tired of going to prison. We worked through all this. It was really hard, really hard. I found a lot of energy within me. I segregated myself from mainstream, sat in my cell day after day, evaluated my situation and worked through things on my own. No prison guard helped me. No social worker. No caseworker. They had no idea of what I was going through. I think I was quite weak at that stage, and if I had committed suicide they would have had no idea why I did it.

I got through that, and I was ready to change, ready for programmes. But I was too early in my sentence. I did work for Corrections in Employment scheme, because I knew a few things from the outside about welding and mechanical engineering from the time I wasn't drinking or drunk. I read all the rules about the incentives and the character reference they promised to give you at the end of it.

But I never saw anything in practice about the incentives – I was on 40 cents an hour, welding all day, grinding, building prisons, and treated like a piece of shit to be buried in the ground. I was promised everything but given nothing, and expected to work because you are in prison, this is your punishment. No no no. We can retaliate, but where does that get us.

We could do nothing. You could retaliate but they always . So we used reverse psychology – said you can imprison my body but you can't imprison my mind. We told them nothing, we carried on, and we ignored them. Yes sir, no sir, that's all. That happened for years. It was false hope.

I did the restorative justice one day. It was about victims being left stranded by the perpetrators. I didn't know what I was getting into, but it gave me another avenue, a stone to move forward to the end of empathy, pride and passion. To be able to say to these people I can begin to understand what you are going through from your side. I've never before been able to understand, because before I didn't care about people. I took from society but didn't give – it was another footstone in my journey. I was moving forward. But I still had that big elastic band on me from the Corrections Department, holding me back. So I fought the system. I used the system, the Inspectors, the Ombudsman, the lot. I even took them to Court, when I was in Rimutaka prison.

At the end of the day it did not help, because you are their enemy. They have all the power in the prison and they will use it. This is what happened to me.

I tried to approach my victims in Manawatu prison, working through the police who arrested me. I was told it was all jacked up for me to meet them – quite an event for me, but it never happened. I found out five years later that the Superintendent did nothing about it. I was spewing. I was in the guardhouse ready to punch the man's lights out. I had to recoil from that.

This is what I mean about being devalued. They say they do all these thing to rehabilitate you, but its lip-service. Sure there are genuine guards. I'm not saying they are all bad. I worked for a guy in Manawatu prison – he was a joiner by trade – he was the only one who treated me like a human being. He used to bring me in food, just to reward me. There was another, a grumpy old man that nobody liked, but he and I got on great.

I was promised welding tickets because of my work, but that never happened. Even the lack of dental care - I walked around with broken teeth, not through fights but through lack of care in my other life, and they would do nothing about them. I strived to get into a self-care unit: did everything right, no drug charges in prison, not one, and I felt I had rehabilitated myself. Got into a unit – it was the hardest thing – four lifers who deserved to be there, but they put one-monthers, and three-monthers in there instead for the record – just beds and bums, all it was. We had to go through all the changes that (the shorter sentenced men) went through with dishonesty and drugs, while we were out working with money in our pockets, but next thing we had nothing. Every time we went outside working we were asked 'how can you guys deserve this? When we got back to the prison we had the same from the guards who were jealous because we were getting more money that them – they weren't into rehabilitation and reintegration. Some were, a lot weren't. This is what a lot of lifers endured, not only me.

I've been out of jail for five years and four months. I stuck to my plan. I have no faith in the justice system whatsoever.

Probation is another. I went to a Parole Board but didn't expect to get out. Went to another that wanted to release me, but I said I wasn't ready to get out. When I did get out, what I got from the probation service was disgusting. I've got a probation officer now who is awesome – she is an older woman, a drug and alcohol counselor, and she has experience in life. You do get genuine ones, but those I had at first were just waiting for me to muck up and go back to jail. They had no compassion, never felt I had a right to be in the community. They never supported me. They did nothing. All they wanted to do was to be the boss. Power. I got into a relationship, had difficulty, did nothing unlawful, but the only thing I did wrong was to talk to them about it, because they blamed her for my condition. Two probation officers called her into the office, ganged up on her, and and she came out crying. She was made to feel a criminal. They told her that if she didn't leave they would send me back to jail. Those people are there today. I went to the boss there, told him what had happened, and said that if it didn't stop I'd go to Court. It stopped.

This is what we go through. Its amazing. Sure I did wrong. I took peoples' lives. I got punished by the Judge. I was taken out of society. Its up to them to rehabilitate me, and its up to me to be willing to receive rehabilitation and to be supported from there – not to be made worthless with no incentive by power-play to the max.

What these guys (from Corrections) said today is a total load of bullshit, literally. They can't fool a fooler. I'm here today to open your eyes. It's not all bad. I'm not being negative about

this, I'm just telling you what happens: and a lot more happens. As for drugs, prisoners on work parole bring it in, prison guards bring it in. Sexual contact is there between women guards and prisoners. The day they face their accountability is the day that things will move. I was always in favour of privatizing prisons and making them accountable, but I can't see that happening.

There is a time to do programmes in prison, and there is a time not to. There is a time when you are ready and a time when you are not. It's the same with support. I knew I was ready, but I didn't ask. They need to discover why you were in prison. I was in child welfare, borstal and prisons, and I slipped through the whole network. Why didn't they do that for me in the beginning - child welfare, sexual abuse?

I never told. I was ashamed. There was a pattern in my life when I got to there. Thirty-five years. It's still going on today. I'm lucky that I've got faith in myself, the AA programme, and faith in what people like you do.

My past is a reflection of what I am today. I'm not ashamed of my past. I'm ashamed of myself. I have to forgive myself and move on. Life to me is a challenge – but it is great to me – it has given me a second chance. I know the difficulties Alison has with getting loans. I've had the same thing, I can't get insurance – they say you've got to wait seven years for a clean slate. That's not reintegration. The Department has to be honest about the whole thing. They say they care - come on! Practice it, do it, don't just talk about it. They are dealing with peoples' lives.

Another thing, I'm still an offender. When I go to the Probation Office I'm an offender. But I've been punished for what I've done. I'm a member of society, and I contribute to society. But I'm still an offender. How does that make you feel? It's unbelievable.

At the end of the day, I don't let people rent space on me. I'm still stubborn in lots of ways. But I learn as I go, and try to help wherever I can.

I'll leave it there. Thanks very much for inviting me to take part in your seminar.