



The Story Behind the Story of the Creation of The Central Kansas Foundation in Salina, May 1967, or “The Strange and Wondrous Ways God Works in Our Lives.”

By Fr. Willys E. Neustrom

It was in May 1966; when I transferred as an Episcopal priest from a parish in Central City, NE to Salina, KS, when I became the priest in charge of the Episcopal Church of the Incarnation here in Salina. I had been ordained a priest rather late in life at age 45 after serving in the commercial world as a corporation president for 14 years.

One of the greatest challenges I found in my first parish was trying to help those who had severe drinking problems. Everything I tried failed and it wasn't until I became aware of A.A. groups (the closest one to my community was 45 miles away) and their dedicated helpful recovering members, was sobriety made possible for those I failed to help on my own. So when I arrived in Salina, one of the first things I attempted to do was to become acquainted with the local A.A. groups, so I could again know where and to whom I could refer persons with drinking problems.

In 1966 there were only 2 AA meetings a week in Salina, compared to 50 today. One small group met on Saturday night (more or less a social club) and membership was by invitation only. The other was a small group that met at Christ Episcopal Cathedral here in Salina with about 8 members and all having 5 years or more of sobriety which told me that it wasn't exactly a very open group. But I still attempted to make contact. I introduced myself telling them that I had recently moved to Salina from Nebraska where I had attended AA for about 3 years. When they asked how long I had been sober I revealed I was not an alcoholic but why I wanted to make contact with them. I was bluntly informed that I was not welcome because their meetings were closed and only alcoholics could attend.

A few months before moving from Nebraska I had been invited to be one of the guest speakers at the state AA conference in North Platte, NE in August of 1966. While at this conference, I became acquainted with one of the other guest speakers, a recovering alcoholic from Hoxie, KS, who was a very delightful woman. When I shared with her my difficulty in trying to establish a workable contact with any AA group in Salina, she immediately responded, “I know what you mean. Salina has the most closed AA groups in the state, but I can give you the name and phone number of a gal in Salina to call, and to tell her I sent you.”

Hoping this would be the opening I had been seeking, I made the call but nobody was at home so I left a message giving my name and the name of the woman referring me. Several days

later my call was returned. Not by the woman called, but by her husband who demanded "What the hell do you want with my wife?" Whammy, one more door slammed shut!

Several weeks later I was grocery shopping, dressed in my clericals, when a man who worked in the bakery shop came up to me and said, "I'm an alcoholic and attend meetings at your church." I responded, "Not at our church you don't." Then I told him how I had been rebuffed. He responded, "I know what you mean. My wife and I are both alcoholics and had recently moved to Salina from California and have never felt welcomed either." Then he said, "Let's start another AA group here in Salina. I have AA's Big Book." I responded "I have the place." So the first open AA meeting was started, meeting at my Church at Max and Norton and we gave this group the name "New Hope AA Group." The name of the couple from California were Harley and Rose Cook and what a wonderful helpful couple they turned out to be, not only in getting this new group started but were so helpful in everything that followed; helping start the first Alanon, Alateen and Narcotics Anonymous groups in Salina, plus everything else that followed including the creation of The Central Kansas Foundation. Harley died many years ago and Rose is now living in the Denver area. Salina was truly blessed by their untiring efforts. God bless them.

The New Hope AA group being an open AA group grew in size rather rapidly. One method of outreach used was to start doing a half hour radio program every Sunday evening at KSAL radio station. Various AA members would tell their stories about how they had found sobriety thru AA and then take calls from the listening audience. We also advertised a phone number to call for help.

One day we received a call from a very desperate man living in an old broken down motel close to the old Union Pacific Railway Station. His name was "Whitey." When we arrived, we saw one of the sickest persons we had ever seen, living in the most horrible squalor. He desperately needed immediate medical emergency care but both hospitals in Salina refused to accept alcoholics for detoxification. All we could do was hold his hand and talk, pleading with him to hold on for a few more days until our next AA meeting. When I went to pick him up, I was informed that he had died several days earlier.

To say the least, we were devastated—no being able to help when help was so desperately needed. It was at that moment a decision was made that we must have our own half-way house here in Salina so we could detoxify in a non-medical setting, since neither hospital would admit alcoholics. Then came the big question—how can we do it and where? When discussing the dilemma in which we found ourselves with my Bishop, Bishop Davidson, I asked if there was any possibility that the large two story Victorian Home built in the early 1900's and owned by the Church could be made available for a Half-way House and bless him, he agreed to lease it to us for \$1.00 per year. This property was located at 150 South 8th just south of Christ Cathedral.

Since the large house had been vacant for many years, a tremendous amount of work was needed to make it useable for our purpose. A large number of dedicated AA people volunteered to help make it habitable and also helped to find beds, furniture and kitchen appliances. We also were desperately in need of money to do the job, but where could we ever find that kind of money? The Sisters of St. Joseph with the Mother House in Concordia came to

our rescue, all made possible because Sister Theophane and Sister Carolyn Juneman had become interested in helping alcoholics due to their attending the open AA meetings of the New Hope Group.

It quickly became obvious that we needed a non-profit corporation in order to receive tax deductible contributions. Before leaving Nebraska I had become acquainted with a non-profit corporation similar to what we had in mind. On request, they sent us a copy of their incorporation papers and with the great help of our volunteer attorney, Connie Achteberg, we were able to adapt it to our purpose and papers were filed with the state. The Central Kansas Foundation, corporate entity to manage the new halfway house—called the Pathfinder House—came into being and our first manager of the Pathfinder House, John LeComb, was hired. The original Board of Directors consisted of 4 recovering alcoholics; Joe Roth, Bob Mernahan, Harley Cook and Dwight Minear, and 4 non-alcoholics; Richard Worth, Doris McMichael, Sister Theophane and myself, who served as President of CKF for the first 4 years.

Of the 8 originally involved in the start-up of CKF, all have died with the exception of Dick Worth and myself, and our most helpful volunteer attorney, Connie Achteberg. Would both Dick and Connie please stand up to be recognized for their pioneer efforts in bringing CKF into existence.

Let us also have a moment of silent prayer of thanksgiving for the lives of those pioneers now departed this life—Harley Cook, Joe Roth, Bob Mernahan, Doris McMichael and my very dear friend, Sr. Theophane.

(silence) Amen.

John LeComb, our first manager of the Pathfinder House, came to us from Texas and was an avid dog lover which was always at his side. One thing John did was to be in Municipal Court each morning and to visit with the Judge and those who had been jailed the night before for drunkenness. Many of these men became the first occupants of the Pathfinder House, and believe it or not, some became sober and found a new life of sobriety. So CKF, that was started to fill a desperate need, came as a result of loving, caring people who had faith, hope and trust, and wanted to help those who could not help themselves.

But to make it all workable we were in desperate need of money. So, members of the Board, along with other recovering AA members from the “New Hope AA Group” went from door to door in the business and church communities begging for help—a few dollars at a time. We also started a membership campaign for CKF, who pledged monetary support on an ongoing basis. Looking back on old records, I found that within 4 years our paid membership had grown to 125 with 22 pledging \$100.00 per year, 39 pledging \$35.00 and 59 pledging \$15.00 for a grand sum total of \$4,625 per year, a huge amount of money back then.

John LeComb, our first Pathfinder manager, stayed with us a very short time, possibly 3 or 4 months, as I recall. So, now where do we find a replacement? A recovering alcoholic with a short amount of sobriety and who had been helping as an assistant manager at a halfway house in Topeka, applied. His name was Ed Sheppard. Since we were desperate to find a replacement I very, very hesitantly decided to give him a chance. Never have I been so wrong as having doubts whether Ed was the right man for the job. He became the guiding light, not

only for the Pathfinder House, but for CKF, and was chiefly responsible for all the wonderful works that followed. God love him, Ed died many, many years ago and I still miss my dearest, closest friend.

Even though Ed worked on a very meager salary as manager of the Pathfinder House, he was a master of coordinating groups of volunteers in helping alcoholics, and the number of people helped, making our outreach grow by leaps and bounds. The demands for counseling could no longer be done in the single office at the Pathfinder House, so the Board decided to move the counseling offices to a second floor facility on North Santa Fe, which called for more staff, much of it volunteer.

Very early in the life of the Pathfinder House, one outstanding dedicated volunteer was a medical doctor by the name of Dr. Donald Goering. He was our only source for medical help with the men at the Pathfinder House and was also elected the 2nd president of the Foundation, serving 4 years—in the years of 1971 to 1974, as I recall.

With our rapid growth, it became apparent that many of the people we served needed in-patient treatment and the only inpatient care available was in the State Mental Hospitals in Topeka and Larned and the private treatment facility, Valley Hope, in Norton, Kansas, each of them being more than 200 miles round trips for our volunteer drivers who admitted patients to treatment and picking them up following treatment. It soon became very obvious, for the large number of patients we were placing in treatment, we needed a treatment facility in Salina, and so the same question arose—Where? And How? Neither hospital in Salina was open to the idea.

In 1971 Ed Shepherd and I attended an alcoholism conference in Lincoln, Nebraska where I accidentally met a man named Vern Johnson who had started the Johnson Institute in Minneapolis, Minnesota. We had breakfast together. During and following breakfast he described the wonderful and effective treatment program he had devised and guided at St. Mary's Hospital in Minneapolis, Minnesota using the concept of the "Feeling Chart" that later became the basis of his wonderful book, "I'll Quit Tomorrow." As we sat there in the breakfast booth, he started drawing out the feeling chart on the back of an old envelope. I was absolutely fascinated and wanted to know more, so he invited me to spend three weeks both at the Johnson Institute and St. Mary's Hospital, which I did in 1972. I quickly discovered this type of program was our answer for an effective treatment program, even though it was a medical model within a general hospital. There were no hospitals in Kansas with such a program and neither of our local hospitals was open to the idea.

In an attempt to try to convince the local hospitals and medical community, not only of the dire need but to also become aware of a proven medical model that was extremely effective, I invited Vern to be our guest speaker at the CKF Semi-annual educational meeting to be given following lunch at the Salina Country Club. As I recall we had about 125 at the luncheon including 5 or 6 medical doctors. Again, Vern's presentation was wonderfully accepted by all, which became the basic stimulus the Foundation needed to get a local treatment center started. But again came the question where and how? Both hospitals thought such a program treating skid row bums could never be profitable.

Since I was aware that the entire 4th floor of the old section of St. John's Hospital was vacant, I asked Vern to look at it. What a horrible mess we encountered. Windows were broken out, and pigeon poop over everything. And what was Vern's reaction? He said "This would do just fine." Now we had the tough task of trying to convince the hospital administrator and board. Another concern I had—if we should ever get the okay, where would we ever find a program director to run the program? When I posed this question to Vern, he turned to me and said "You would do just fine." I was flabbergasted. I knew absolutely nothing about treatment and said so. He said, "Come on up to the Johnson Institute for about 4 months and I'll have you ready to go." I was skeptical but intrigued. But how could I ever do it? I had three parishes in Bennington, McPherson and Salina to take care of. I had a family I was responsible for with one son at K.U. and I certainly didn't have the money to finance it.

Once again the CKF board picked up the challenge, telling me that if the parishes would give me a 4 month leave of absence, they would raise the funds. The CKF had recently received some money from a memorial for a former Pathfinder client who had died, plus the Board started soliciting funds. Seven medical doctors gave \$100.00 each and the Roman Catholic Bishop and the University Methodist Church here in Salina each gave \$500. So it was decided to take the risk based on hope and many, many prayers.

The next four months with 10 to 12 hour days were not only enlightening, but also a very painful life changing experience. I also discovered there were about 5 large hospitals in Minneapolis with treatment programs and they were all making profits and not running a charity program.

I called the Administrator at St. John's Hospital here in Salina, telling him what I discovered, and suggested he fly up to Minneapolis and see for himself. He was utterly amazed at what he found and became very excited, saying I will go back and talk to my hospital board and will let you know their decision. In about 3 weeks he called saying the board decided to take a chance, and then offered me a full time position on the staff at the hospital when I finished my training, which was in March of 1973. Serving full time at the hospital, half time with the Church (still serving two parishes), I found time to oversee the upgrading of the facility on 4th floor, to hire staff and set programs. Our opening date was 5 July, 1973.

From the very beginning, we strictly adhered to the Johnson Institute model of treatment, plus being blessed with a superb counseling and nursing staff. Due to their loving, caring, no nonsense services, we witnessed miracle after miracle, after miracle, as patients and family members endured the healing pain of discovering their true selves and started living it out in a loving caring way—sober and free.

Once again CKF had accomplished what had appeared to be an impossible task—having an effective inpatient treatment program in Salina. The first two presidents of the CKF Board were in charge. I, CKF first president of the Board, became program director and Dr. Don Goering, 2nd president of the Board, became medical director of St. John's Alcoholism and Chemical Dependency Treatment Center. The fast growth of the treatment center and CKF was nothing short of phenomenal, CKF referring more and more patients and adding additional half-way houses for men, women and teens, becoming a model not only for the state but for the nation,

and the hospital program gaining fast recognition for its effectiveness in producing extremely high recovery rates.

Our patients included a slice of all mankind, young and old, rich and poor, male and female, doctors, dentists, lawyers, merchants, chiefs, even clergy. According to hospital records, in the first 7 years we treated patients and family members from 230 different communities in Kansas, plus 63 additional communities from 21 different states from New York to California.

The reason I have been sharing this abundance of information is to help make you more fully aware of the tremendous impact CKF has had on the lives of people not only in Kansas but throughout this nation, all made possible because one homeless alcoholic named Whitey tragically died because we were not in a position to help when help was so desperately needed. Yes, "Whitey's" tragic death became the very catalyst that brought CKF into being and the amazing accomplishments that followed.

I truly thank God for all the loving caring people that helped make it all possible. Yes, CKF has a rich and outstanding heritage of service to mankind. Thanks be to God.