

# **General Service Association of ABA**

## **President's Report 22 March 2006**

**March has come again**, and with it the third anniversary of our Board's incorporation under the Societies Act of the Province of Alberta. It has been another year of astonishing growth in ABA as a whole, and a year of deepening commitment of our Board to ensure that it provides the clear vision and consistent service for which ABA has elected us. Once again, I have been privileged to be part of a dedicated group of women and men who always inspire me with their wisdom, creativity and intelligent problem-solving, as well as with their patience and good humor.

### **GROWTH OVER THE PAST YEAR**

As of tonight, there are twenty-one registered ABA Groups/Meetings active in the world. Five of these are in or near Edmonton. Three more are located in the rest of Canada (Swift Current SK, Ottawa ON, Kingston ON). Eight are operating in the United States, scattered geographically from Oakland and Berkeley in California to Tampa in Florida. Two Groups are established in Europe (Luxembourg and Germany). Three Groups are thriving in the South Pacific (two in New Zealand and one in Australia).

To these numbers must be added the unknown number of meetings that may have been started by a further 21 individuals (mostly from the U.S.) who have been supplied with a "Start-Up Package," but who have not yet registered with the GSA. The Board asks people starting new meetings to be operating for at least three months before registering as a "Meeting" and six months before registering as a "Group." These guidelines are intended to ensure stability of the meeting before it is posted on our website, in the interest of protecting potential newcomers to such meetings. It could harm ABA as a whole, as well as the newcomers themselves, if they show up for a posted meeting, only to discover the building is dark and the doors locked. (In this regard, we urge all Groups to take seriously their responsibility to ensure that posted meetings are *always* held when and where our website states they are. If circumstances change, please notify the GSA office so the posting can be altered or deleted entirely.)

Who knows how many more meetings are going on throughout the world, some of them at this very moment, simply as a result of people discovering the ABA textbook and then getting together with fellow sufferers to support one another in getting sober and working through the 12 Steps? Only God knows the true number of people who have been helped in this way. But we have heard enough such reports from people everywhere, to lead us to believe that this is in fact an ongoing phenomenon. At last count, there were at least a dozen addiction-treatment centers in North America who regularly order supplies of our text and who, presumably, are using the ABA text in their program delivery or at least making it freely available to their clients. Many of the calls we receive are from individuals who have been discharged from these centers (scattered from

California through Texas, Kentucky, Arizona, Tennessee, Louisiana and Missouri in the south, to New Jersey, Montana and British Columbia in the north). Upon arriving home, they want to start a meeting in their town or city to generate support for their own continuing recovery. This is the true spirit of 12-Step recovery.

In this vein, our inventory of books (softcover) was sold out by early December 2005, leading the Board to order a *fourth* printing, this time of 2000 copies. Many of these have already been sold, which means there are in excess of 3000 copies of the ABA text distributed around the planet, carrying hope to large numbers of people we will certainly never meet face-to-face. How their lives are being altered by what they read is obviously in the hands of God alone. But we can celebrate the healing that so many sisters and brothers are finding as a distant result of our paltry efforts here in this tiny nucleus of Edmonton ABA.

The ABA book continues to sell itself, without any advertising or promotion by the Board. When I think of that fact, and of the international spread of ABA, I become tearful about the goodness of our God and about the way God includes us as active participants in carrying out his / her holy work of healing. What a design to bring human beings together to share life one with another! What a pathway to the fullness of joy for all concerned!

The book brought a number of people to Edmonton over the past year, anorexics and bulimics who were desperate for recovery and hungry for the support they sensed would await them if they actually turned up on our doorstep. Early in September, one young anorexic woman came from Calgary, bringing a friend and her parents in tow. Later that same month, two more women took the risk of showing up, one from New Jersey and the other from Florida. All of them stayed in our homes, got sober while here, acquired sponsors, and made arrangements for meal support once they returned home. They stay in touch with us, two of them are still sober today, and our Calgary friend continues to make the trek to Edmonton periodically to attend both of our weekend meetings. All these women endeared themselves to many of us, who carry them in our hearts and our prayers continuously. What a gift they have been! They allowed us to see how much God has changed us, who were once unable to care about anyone or anything except where our next binge was coming from or what lies we needed to tell to avoid eating dinner with those who loved us.

I was privileged during my travels in this past year to be invited by three ABA Groups to visit them and lend support to their efforts to spread the ABA message. Two of these Groups were in Europe and the other in Ottawa, Canada. In each place, I spoke to audiences composed of newcomers wanting information about ABA, their families, helping professionals, and other interested people from the community at large. I was deeply moved by the generous spirit of caring and sharing that I encountered in these Groups, and I applaud them for their work. Clearly, God's power is behind them, else they would not be making such headway in this no-man's-land of eating disorder recovery. I especially want to thank the "prime movers" in these Groups (Birgit G in Stuttgart, Marie-Paule C in Luxembourg, and Meagan M in Ottawa), not only for their hospitality in

welcoming me into their homes, but also for allowing God to use them as living stones in the ABA "buildings" he / she is erecting in these distant locations.

When I attend meetings here in Edmonton, I am deeply moved by the large number of people who are now sober in their eating and are being restored to sanity as they tread the Twelve Steps. It is now commonplace to see 16 or 20 women and men at any given meeting, and to find that as many as 75% of them are sober. Announcements of upcoming ABA "birthday" celebrations are often made at meetings: one year, two years, three years, even some with double-digit sobriety! Birthday meetings are glorious communal celebrations of gratitude and hope, of profound spiritual and physical healing, of the universal theme of resurrection from the dead. Family members and friends often attend, and tears of joy are freely shed. They are a place where God demonstrates just how much power he/ she possesses and how available it is to anyone who dares to seek it.

From the orders for sobriety medallions that have been coming in to the GSA office, I know that ABA members all over the world are staying sober. *The Program works*, as we all know, and it works as well in Christchurch, New Zealand, and in Luxembourg in Europe, as it does in Tampa, Florida, and in Swift Current and Ottawa in Canada.

As people recover, increasing numbers of people are available for sponsorship, and it is touching to hear how our members are taking on sponsorship commitments to newcomers, both locally and long-distance. From my personal experience in sponsoring others, I know how important this is to my recovery and how richly God blesses me as I work with sponsees. I urge all sober ABA members world-wide who are not yet involved in sponsorship to consider undertaking this work, for it opens up new streams of grace that will carry you forward in your recovery. We hope to be able to offer long-distance sponsor-sponsee matchups to many more people over the coming year, using the resources of the GSA office (more about that later).

#### **BOARD ENDEAVORS OVER THE PAST YEAR**

The Annual ABA Retreat near Edmonton has proven to be an extremely popular event, and you will hear more about that tonight in the report from the chair of the Retreat & Conference Committee, which became a standing committee of the GSA in January this year. I am grateful for the hard work of this group of people, some of whom have remained on the job of organizing the Retreat since its initiation in October 2003, and I anticipate that their future work will be made easier by having the full resources of the GSA at their disposal.

The report from the Retreat & Conference Committee will no doubt include their hope of organizing a first International Conference, to be held in Edmonton in 2008, the 15th anniversary of ABA's inception. Such an undertaking would require the active participation of dozens of ABA members locally, offering all of us multiple opportunities for service.

The Retreat speakers have been recorded for the past two years, and the CDs of these talks are now an important part of our merchandise inventory.

The Board struck another new committee this year, the Personnel Committee, and you will hear its report tonight. The chair, Bill Adams, will speak about the need that led to the formation of this body, and report on its progress to date.

Our first ABA pamphlet, one containing general information about ABA, steadily continues to be distributed around the world, so it appears to be useful to our Groups. It is designed with one blank section on the back cover, and Groups can use this space as they see fit. One popular way that our local Groups use this space is for sober members' phone numbers to pass on to the newcomer at the end of the meeting. We also stamp this space with our "Edmonton Information Line" phone number before filling local orders for pamphlets.

A second ABA pamphlet is currently under development and will be ready for printing soon. It is designed to provide information about ABA to people who identify themselves primarily as "compulsive overeaters" or "binge eaters." As a response to the discussion at last year's AGM, the Board realized the importance of ensuring that such folks know they are welcome at ABA, and that the ABA Program can lead them to a solution just as powerfully as it leads anorexics and bulimics. The Literature & Outreach Committee report contains further information about the project of developing this pamphlet.

Denise L took on the daunting task of producing an ABA newsletter this year, which she entitled *Moonstruck Magazine*. She solicited input from ABA members locally, and has printed one issue to date. The Board hopes to make this newsletter accessible to our Groups worldwide by getting it on-line in the coming year. Denise's email address will also be included, allowing ABA members everywhere to submit material for publication.

### **EXPRESSIONS OF GRATITUDE**

I wish to offer in writing my deep appreciation to each one of my fellow Board members. You are a group of beautiful human beings, from whom I learn about right living and the joys of healthy interdependence. The GSA could not exist without your selfless participation, and, without the GSA's work, ABA worldwide could not grow and thrive and stand united in recovery. People would die without ABA, and ABA would die without you, the GSA Board.

Thank you first to the Executive Committee. Denise L took over the Vice-President's position when it became vacant mid-year as a result of Jackie N's resignation. Thank you, Denise, for stepping into the breach and especially for your work on the newsletter. Pat Mackay has served faithfully as Treasurer for three years now, and is still smiling as she faces a fourth year at this onerous job. Mania Wojcichowsky took over the Secretary position this year and has performed admirably, even in the face of her laptop malfunctioning. Pat and Mania are not ABA members, and your generosity in filling these challenging positions renders me speechless.

Our other Directors who are non-ABA members (Bill Adams, Ron Boer, David Wright and Annand Ollivierre) have also been precious assets. The Board relies

greatly on your wealth of experience to guide our service efforts, and your voices have on more than one occasion reined us in when we were headed in a dangerous direction. Annand and Bill, thank you also for auditing our books this year—a tedious and time-consuming task. Bill has been fabulous in his leadership role on the Personnel Committee, and I anticipate the Board continuing to rely upon you as this Committee's important work unfolds in the next few months.

Our other Directors, ABA members Kellee O, Donna K, Jessica M, Ingrid Me, Kim O, and Chrystal F, have participated with great dedication in the Board's work this past year and have brought the essential ingredient of ABA wisdom to our endeavors and decision-making process. A special thank-you to Donna, who not only chaired the Public Information Committee, but also assumed the daunting task of matching up local members with people from abroad who call requesting long-distance sponsorship. Donna, I have some idea how time-consuming this job is, and I bless you for taking it on! Chrystal, Ingrid and Kellee did a great deal of work on the Retreat Committee. Without your efforts, our Retreat would not have come to pass, and I thank you.

I also want to offer my deep gratitude to all of the unsung heroes of ABA who are not Board members but yet have stepped forward to serve on our Committees. Your labor is essential to the ongoing vitality of the GSA and of ABA itself. The Creator is working through your hands, your feet, your hearts, and your minds. Thank you for allowing this to be, for God never forces our cooperation in anything. I trust you are receiving great spiritual gifts that far exceed the effort you are expending in this work.

### **WHAT'S AHEAD?**

As I look forward to the year ahead, I see a time of great transition, which I'm certain will bring us many challenges and an equal number of opportunities for learning and growth.

At the head of the list is the undeniable reality that the daily load of the GSA's work has now become so heavy that we need to hire an Administrative Assistant to shoulder most of it. The work of receiving and filling orders for books and other merchandise, preparing and tracking invoices, book-keeping, responding to phone calls, mailing out information packages, maintaining a data base of our Groups internationally, sending out notices to Groups etc, etc, is too important to be relegated any longer to volunteers. If our office cannot continue doing all of this in an efficient and timely fashion, ABA will lose credibility with our customers, our Groups, and with enquiring newcomers to ABA. Maintaining accurate records is critically important from a business perspective, and eases the monthly job of our Treasurer and the annual work of our contracted accountant. A job posting for this Administrative Assistant went out two months ago, and the Personnel Committee will be conducting interviews and reaching a decision within the next month or so. We hope to have this employee in place by May or June of this year, on a part-time basis for now.

One of the first tasks of this employee will be to computerize the entire operation of the GSA office. For me, this is foreign territory, so I will be relying solely on the

skills and expertise of the person we hire as we move into making ABA "electronically accessible." I can foresee the computer taking over much of what we now do manually, by mail, or by phone and fax.

The GSA will need to pay our employee and to purchase a computer, appropriate software, a printer, and associated equipment. There may be other big expenses coming up by the end of 2006, because the donated office space which we have used until now may be unavailable after December. Renting an office large enough to warehouse our book inventory, installing our own phone and fax lines, and so forth, will create a significant ongoing financial burden for the GSA. The reason our current financial position is so healthy is that we have not yet had to shoulder any of these heavy costs, thanks to the availability of donated space and equipment. We do make some "profit" on our book sales, but this money is intended primarily to finance further printings of our textbook, pamphlets, other printed materials, free mailings of materials to new Groups, and soon.

To this end, I earnestly entreat all ABA Groups worldwide to begin making regular donations to the GSA as you are able. To those of you who already support us, I offer my gratitude and my hope that you will continue doing so. Bill W, a co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous, once wrote that money and spirituality meet and embrace each other in one place only: in the basket that is passed around at meetings to receive our monetary contributions. Perhaps all Groups could spend some time reading Tradition 7 together and discussing its importance. ABA must always remain self-supporting through its own contributions, and the GSA is merely the trusted *servant* of ABA. We are a servant who receives no financial compensation for our work, yet, as any of us on the Board will attest, we are rewarded beyond measure by a God whose generosity knows no bounds.

The other big transition that I see in the year ahead is in our Board itself. Following tonight's election of four new Directors (three of whom are beginning their first term of office), we will have all sixteen possible Board positions filled. As we work together over the coming months, we need to more clearly define the scope and mandate of each of our Committees, and to track their membership accurately. I hope that each Director will participate as fully as they are able in the GSA activities to familiarize themselves with all that we actually do. This will help to ease the great change that must occur next March when a full seven of our current Board members, including the entire Executive Committee, will reach the end of their second 2-year term and will thus be ineligible for re-election, according to our Bylaws. We thus need to prepare others to receive the torch from us who will be retiring from our positions. I know that if we trust one another and the One who placed us in this work, all will be well.

Finally, I draw your attention to the Special Resolution which is the final item on tonight's agenda, regarding the sobriety requirement.

The Board wishes to amend our Bylaws to increase this requirement (currently three months) to one year. In January of 2003, when we wrote the Bylaws as part of the formation process of the General

Service Association, very few people in ABA had as much as one year of sobriety. We wanted to make our pool of possible Directors as broad as possible, so we decided to set the sobriety criterion at three months. This proved to be a wise decision, for it allowed the GSA to get off the ground with many folks participating who would have been excluded had the sobriety requirement been longer than three months.

That situation has changed, as we all know. We now have a sizeable pool of ABA members who have maintained continuous sobriety for more than one year. Those of us who—under the grace of God—have celebrated a number of birthdays, know well how much change continuous sobriety and the working of the 12 Steps brings to our thinking. We become less self-centered, less fearful of not "being in control," less rash in our decision-making, more rigorously honest with ourselves, more open to listening to others, more tolerant, more compassionate, more aware of our equality with others and of our need to show up as part of the whole. We learn of our sacred responsibility to serve others and to efface ourselves in humility, that God may shine through us more clearly. We feel more deeply the onerous responsibility—and the joy—of passing on to others what we have been so freely given by our Divine Lover. In short, God slowly transforms us into joyful and caring comrades in the journey of recovery, fully able to support one another as we move forward together: deeper, always deeper into the Heart of God, our true home.

Aware of all this, of all that sobriety brings, the Board examined its responsibility as it prepares to pass the reins of service on to a substantially new Board in 2007. We were nearly unanimous in our decision to recommend to tonight's meeting that we now require ABA members to have at least one year of sobriety before they can stand for election to the GSA. This is not about *excluding* people from participating, for there is no sobriety requirement for service on a Committee. Rather, it is about spiritual *maturity*, about ensuring the health of the GSA as it grows more and more into what God (through the voice of ABA as a whole) has commissioned it to be: the selfless, humble servants of all, ready to sacrifice all personal desires for the good of others, willing to burn up time and talents and energy in the service of God through service of ABA, like candles alight with the flame of God's love.

Respectfully submitted  
Joan M Johnston, President 2005-2006