

[SURVEY]

Percentage of area residents who...

Say they know how to peel a mango:

54

Tell a joke at least once a week:

31

Wish they were more organized:

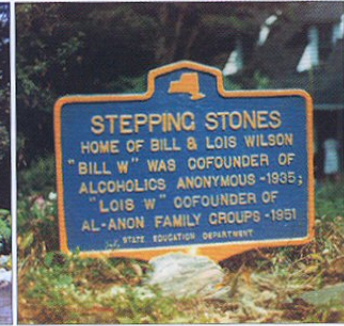
78

Give their children an allowance:

53

Have a home evacuation plan:

18



Giant Leaps

WHERE 12 SMALL STEPS CHANGED MILLIONS OF LIVES

BY | SUSAN CHEEVER

IT'S AN ORDINARY shingled house in Bedford Hills, but its cozy kitchen and double-height living room were the setting for some of the most extraordinary events of the 20th century. Here in front of the huge stone fireplace, Alcoholics Anonymous co-founder Bill Wilson met with the early members of AA, a fellowship that now numbers more than two million. At a desk near the window of a study he built above the dormered house, Wilson wrote *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, the AA handbook that has sold more than 15 million copies. Last year the house

was included on the National Register of Historic Places.

Alcoholics Anonymous, a program that Wilson developed out of his own desperate need to stop drinking, has saved millions of lives. It has also had a tremendous impact on the way we think about addiction. Once condemned as lack of willpower, addiction is now understood as a treatable disease. The writing that Wilson did on this wooded Westchester ridge engineered a major shift in our view of human nature.

Bill and Lois Wilson were down-and-out when

they arrived. By 1940 they had lost almost everything, including Lois's family townhouse in Brooklyn. They had moved 54 times in two years and were living in cramped rooms over the Alcoholics Anonymous headquarters in Manhattan when a grateful acquaintance offered them the unheated house in Bedford Hills. The price—\$6,500, payable in \$40-a-month, interest-free installments—seemed high, but one day the Wilsons drove out to take a look.

On a sunny March afternoon in 1940, Bill broke in through a back window of the empty

FROM | THE | FIELD

house and fell in love. The couple called it Bill-Lo's Break but later renamed it Stepping Stones for the steep steps that lead up to the house and for the Twelve Steps, the philosophical spine of Alcoholics Anonymous.

Stepping Stones became the center of Alcoholics Anonymous; its rooms and gardens—tended by Lois—buzzed with sober men and women. Bill, the handy son of a Vermont quarryman, rigged up a heating system triggered by an alarm clock, and plumbing that featured an attic horse trough. Meetings

THE COUPLE CALLED IT STEPPING STONES FOR THE STEPS THAT LEAD TO THE HOUSE AND FOR THE TWELVE STEPS, THE SPINE OF ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS

were held in the living room where Lois painted faux curtains because she couldn't afford real ones. A spare bedroom became the headquarters of Al Anon, the program she started for the families of alcoholics. Wilson lived there until his death in 1971 and Lois remained, presiding over the June annual picnic and hundreds of meetings until her death in 1987.

Now owned and run by the Stepping Stones Foundation, the house, which sits on 8.5 acres of foundation-owned land, is open to the public seven days a week by appointment. The grounds and gardens are open from sunrise to sunset, and local picnickers and hikers are welcome.

The program of Alcoholics Anonymous has expanded beyond what Bill

Wilson could likely ever have imagined, but the house remains the same. In the living room a shawl drapes over the piano as Lois would have arranged it, and through the kitchen door a coffeepot looks ready to pour. Perhaps Bill has just unfolded his lanky body off the couch and wandered into the room where he kept his violin. You can almost see the curl of smoke from the cigarette he left in an ashtray, and hear the sound of his fingers picking out a country tune as the afternoon sun slants down past the gardens and through the trees. ■