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Alcoholics Anonymous Founder's House Is a Self-Help Landmark



James Estrin/The New York Times

The house of Bill Wilson and his wife, Lois, in Bedford Hills.
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BEDFORD HILLS, N.Y., July 3 — The house tour was nearing an end in this Westchester County hamlet, in a region known for its historic sites, from pre-Revolutionary grist mills to Gilded Age mansions. But as the visitors entered the austere pine-paneled office that once belonged to Bill Wilson, a co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous, the tour suddenly became a pilgrimage.



James Estrin/The New York Times

The house has been open to the public since Mrs. Wilson died in 1988.

Jean Z. sat down at the smooth oak desk on which Bill W., as he was known, wrote “Alcoholics Anonymous,” or the Big Book, and smiled as her A.A. sponsor snapped a picture. Then they switched.

“This, to me, would be the equivalent of a Christian going to the [Vatican](#),” said Jean, of Long Island, who has been in A.A. for two years and gave only her last initial in keeping with the program’s tradition of anonymity. “To think that he just sat at this desk, a simple man who had a problem and wanted to get better. It’s touched my life and saved my life.”

For many visitors to Stepping Stones, the gracious Dutch colonial-style house where Mr. Wilson lived with his wife, Lois, for the last 30 years of his life before dying of emphysema in 1971, there is, indeed, something profoundly personal, even spiritual, about the experience. It has been open to the public since 1988, when Mrs. Wilson died at 97. With no children, she left it to the Stepping Stones Foundation, which she had set up in the hope that the site would educate and inspire future generations.

Set on eight wooded acres, the house was purchased by the Wilsons in 1941, several years after Mr. Wilson, a stockbroker, had his last drink and founded Alcoholics Anonymous with Dr. Bob Smith, an Ohio surgeon. So much early A.A. business was conducted here that for a time the organization subsidized some of the couple’s housing costs.

This is also where Mrs. Wilson in 1951 created Al-Anon, an offshoot of A.A. for the family members of alcoholics.

The tours were informal at first. But two years ago, the house became listed on the National Register of Historic Places. And this spring New York State added Stepping Stones to its new Women’s Heritage Trail, in recognition of Mrs. Wilson’s contributions to the self-help program that has become a model for treating addiction around the world.

A.A. is a free, voluntary fellowship of men and women who meet to help one another become and stay sober through a 12-step recovery program. There are an estimated 100,000 A.A. groups in 150 countries, with more than two million members. The Big Book, the program’s bible, has sold nearly 25 million copies. Many other 12-step programs were inspired by A.A., like Narcotics Anonymous and Debtors Anonymous.

“A.A. and Al-Anon are unquestionably among the greatest social movements of the 20th century, so it’s a very important site,” said Richard White-Smith, director of Heritage New York, a program of the state’s Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, which develops heritage trails that consist of historic sites linked by a common theme.

These days, tours are available by appointment seven days a week. “Unlike most museums, we get these hysterical phone calls,” said Annah Perch, executive director of the foundation, which owns and operates the property. “I got a call recently from a woman who said, ‘I’m in Penn Station and I’m from Ireland and this is the only day I can come.’ ”

Every June, hundreds of A.A. members arrive for the organization’s annual family groups picnic, a tradition the Wilsons started in 1952. Occasionally, a nearby A.A. or Al-Anon convention brings a crush of visitors. Last Labor Day, 1,200 Hispanic members of A.A. met at a hotel in Rye and descended on Stepping Stones throughout the weekend.

On the daily house tours, about 60 percent of visitors are members of A.A. and 30 percent are members of Al-Anon. But both Ms. Perch and state officials hope that will change. "There's an important story here for the general public to understand," Mr. White-Smith said.

Stepping Stones is now hiring an archivist to continue the work of cataloguing the Wilsons' possessions, including the most significant items, now in storage, like the first copy of the Big Book to roll off the press.

On Tuesday, the group included Frank W., of Malvern, Ohio, who has been an A.A. member for 22 years, here with three generations of his family.

"This is pretty awesome," he said, after lingering over memorabilia like a letter to Mr. Wilson from Carl Jung, and a photograph of [Richard M. Nixon](#) receiving the millionth copy of the Big Book.

"I prayed for two or three years not to drink, and I drank every day," he said, choking up. "I was going to lose my wife and my children. Everything I have, I owe to A.A."

In the house, with its mahogany antiques handed down from Mrs. Wilson's family, it seems as if the couple were still alive. In the master bedroom, a can of PermaSoft hair spray still sits on Mrs. Wilson's vanity, along with a single bobby pin. In another area, a box of Wash 'n Dri and a can of lighter fuel share space with books.

While the desk in Mr. Wilson's office was the one on which he wrote the Big Book, it belonged to a friend who had lent him an office in Newark for the project. The desk was eventually moved to Stepping Stones, and Mr. Wilson wrote later works in the studio office here, including "Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions."

There was a faded copy of that book on the desk, along with a first edition of "Alcoholics Anonymous." Jean Z.'s sponsor, Louise, touched the books as Jean took her picture. "What a gift," she said. "I could almost cry."

Ms. Perch was ready with a reassuring word: "We always say it's not a successful tour unless at least one person cries."