Columns
Spirituality



Franciscan Sr. M. Keith Marcinak's keychain holds the Alcoholic Anonymous medallions that celebrate her 47 years of sobriety. (Courtesy of M. Keith Marcinak)



by M. Keith Marcinak

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Anyone who knows me is aware of my extra long key chain with my round, brass medallions. Curious, they ask, "What are those things on your keychain?" I explain that these brass medallions are my Alcoholics Anonymous, or AA. medallions, celebrating my sobriety. Some look at the coins and congratulate me, while others simply observe the medallions in silence. Typically, it becomes a conversation

starter, leading to meaningful sharing. These brief encounters have decreased shame and guilt, normalizing the disease of alcoholism and providing reciprocal inspiration of hope and joy.

People who understand what the medallions signify often ask, "Are you a friend of Bill W?" (referring to the AA founder), and the conversation becomes very friendly and engaging. These mini meetings have occurred in various places.

When I returned to the motherhouse campus after retiring from my ministry counseling alcoholics and drug addicts, I attended a local community meeting with the sisters. Some approached me and noticed my keychain on the table. After my usual explanation, two sisters shared that they had family members who were alcoholics. Both added, "This is the first time I have said anything to anyone because I was ashamed of them." They seemed to have left our conversation feeling a little lighter in the souls for sharing their personal stories.

Then, something remarkable happened. Some sisters I met started saying things like, "My brother is in recovery," "I think I grew up in an alcoholic home," "My mother was an alcoholic" and "My father was an alcoholic, but he was unable to stay sober."

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My trips around the city now involve more chance encounters with people in recovery.

While out and about in various stores, I have observed people noticing my medallions. Once, in a deli, the girl behind the counter asked how long I had been sober. I told her that it's one day at a time, and for today that is all that matters. It turned out that she had just left a recovery house and was living in another while working.

At another deli (although it might seem like I only hang out at delis, that is not true),the manager approached me and asked about my sobriety after seeing my keychain. He understood the message, and now we chat whenever I visit the deli.

During a meeting with people from the local area, I had my keychain on the table, and a woman with a prominent community position looked at the medallions and

said, "My significant other is in recovery, and we have both found the program very helpful in our lives."

It seems that connections are everywhere. When I was walking out on the street with the keychain, a woman stared at me. Eventually, she approached me and said, "I never thought about putting my medallion on a keychain. I think I will do that since I have seen yours. Thanks."

Being open about my journey as a recovering alcoholic has given hope and freedom to others. I believe that God uses our weaknesses to strengthen others.

I trust that God will continue to surprise me with more of these encounters. I believe they will occur because every day I need to work on the first three steps of AA. I must admit that my life was unmanageable, acknowledge that there is a Higher Power (God) and turn my will over to my Higher Power (God) on a daily basis. These actions have allowed me to reach 47 years of sobriety and keep earning brass medallions.