

Lois Burnham Wilson, a Founder Of Al-Anon Groups, Is Dead at 97

By ERIC PACE

Lois Burnham Wilson, a founder of the Al-Anon Family Groups, whose members are relatives and friends of alcoholics, died yesterday at Northern Westchester Hospital in Mount Kisco, N.Y. Mrs. Wilson, widely known as Lois W., was 97 years old and was a long-time resident of Bedford Hills, N.Y.

As Lois W., she was revered as "the first lady of Al-Anon," and as a living reminder of the beginnings five decades ago of the Alcoholics Anonymous self-help movement.

Al-Anon members help one another and themselves to deal with personal problems by speaking about them — "sharing their experience, strength and hope," as they like to say — at group meetings. They also help each other on a one-to-one basis, and they read the movement's many inspirational pamphlets and books.

Thousands of Groups Formed

An executive on the staff of the Al-Anon Family Group headquarters in Manhattan, where Mrs. Wilson's death was announced yesterday, said 30,000 groups — including several thousand Alateen groups for the teen-age children of alcoholics — are in operation.

The executive, who in accordance with Al-Anon policy declined to give her name, said more than 20,000 of the groups were in the United States and Canada, with groups in about 100 other nations. She estimated worldwide membership of Al-Anon at about 500,000.

In the 1930's, Mrs. Wilson — a spirited, small woman with lively brown eyes — stuck by her alcoholic husband, William G. Wilson, who had become a self-described "hanger-on in Wall Street." She hoped he would manage to stop drinking for good.

Mr. Wilson did, and in 1935 he became a co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous. One of its groups flourished in the Wilsons' home, then an apartment at 182 Clinton Street in Brooklyn. Since those early days, Alcoholics Anonymous has grown to an international membership of more than 1.5 million. Known within that organization as Bill W., Mr. Wilson died in 1971.

A Time of Discontent

After Alcoholics Anonymous was founded, Mrs. Wilson became discontented. "It seemed I saw nothing of the man I had tried to help," she later recalled.

"He was always with his A.A. cronies" who helped him to resist alcohol, she said, adding that "I guess I was jealous and resentful that these strangers had done for him what I could not do."

A turning point for her came one day when, as she said, "I threw my shoe at

him as hard as I could."

"I was so ashamed of myself," she said, "that I went out and walked around the block several times. I soon had to admit that I needed some therapy myself."

Mrs. Wilson, who was not an alcoholic, began applying to herself the same self-help principles that her husband and his Alcoholics Anonymous friends were using.

"I shared my experience with other relatives of alcoholics, and we began to hold informal meetings," she said. "We did not discuss our alcoholic relatives, but tried to straighten out our own lives. This attitude became basic to Al-Anon."

Two Separate Organizations

Though Al-Anon is in many ways patterned on Alcoholics Anonymous, the two organizations are organizationally separate. Both groups are self-supporting; they do not accept funds from non-members. Members of both groups are supposed to maintain anonymity in the news media — which is why Mrs. Wilson and her husband were widely known only by their first names.

Mrs. Wilson was said never to have voiced blanket condemnation of the drinking of alcoholic beverages, affirming that she opposed "only the disease of alcoholism and the damage it does to a family."

She was born in Brooklyn, the daughter of a physician. She graduated from the Packer Collegiate Institute in Brooklyn, worked in a Y.W.C.A. and taught school in Short Hills, N.J., before her marriage to Mr. Wilson in 1918. After her marriage she worked for a time as an occupational therapist, wrote magazine articles and worked as a Macy's sales clerk.

After Mrs. Wilson and other alcoholics' relatives began their meetings, similar self-help discussion groups for members of alcoholics' families were founded elsewhere in the United States during the 1940's. In 1951, Mrs. Wilson, along with a friend and Westchester County neighbor, Anne B., set up a central information center for these groups. The center was initially in her Westchester home.

First Alateen Group

Not long afterward, the center moved into offices in Manhattan, and the movement took the name Al-Anon Family Groups. In 1957, the first Alateen self-help group was set up, in California, for young people with alcoholism in their families.

Mrs. Wilson remained active and prominent in Al-Anon into the 1980's, traveling on its behalf and appearing at and addressing Al-Anon gatherings. At the first international convention of Al-



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Anon, in 1985 in Montreal, an audience of 45,000 — members of Alcoholics Anonymous as well as Al-Anon — gave her a standing ovation.

There are no immediate survivors. Funeral arrangements have not been set.

Alcoholism counselor Lois Burnham Wilson, 97; in Mt. Kisco, N.Y., Oct. 5. Wilson was a founder of Al-Anon Family Groups, which provides help for relatives and friends of alcoholics. Her late husband, William Wilson, was a cofounder of Alcoholics Anonymous.

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