

## **SISTER IGNATIA GAVIN, ANGEL OF ALCOHOLICS**

Sr. Ignatia Gavin was an Irish immigrant considered to be one of the founders of Alcoholics Anonymous. As a hospital Admitting Manager, she developed a medical recovery plan that integrated the AA 12 Steps principles. Through her work, Sister was instrumental in directly helping an estimated 15, 000 people regain sobriety through the AA program of bonding with a Higher Power while bonding with ex-alcoholics.

Sister Ignatia was born Bridget Gavin in 1889 to a farming family in County Mayo. Living conditions were harsh. Meals were buttermilk and potatoes. The cottage floor was straw covering dirt. Patrick, her father, spent months in England working on British farms while Barbara, her mother, cared for her two children and planted crops. Bridget and her brother Pat could not attend school because they were needed on the farm.

Alcoholism was a major problem for many of Bridget's neighbors, both men and women. Economic problems and the sad exodus of many to the United States made drunkenness rampant. The frequent erratic behavior of many adults scared Bridget and her mother. Barbara taught her daughter to pray for alcoholics and to be compassionate toward them.

These difficult conditions made Bridget an emotionally and physically fragile girl. At age 7 she left Ireland with her family and cousins for Cleveland, Ohio. After a three-month ocean voyage, the Gavins settled in Immaculate Conception parish in an Irish immigrant neighborhood.

Alcoholism plagued Irish immigrants so much that registration at church included administration of a pledge of abstinence from alcohol. Parish pastors concurrently offered frequent abstinence support meetings for parishioners, separately for men and women. The most popular was Father Mathew's Total Abstinence and Benevolent Society and the related Knights of Fr. Mathew. This society was based on the Irish Catholic predecessor The Pioneers Total Abstinence Society of the Sacred Heart.

Finances were still tight as Pat had the most difficulty adjusting to city life in America. He was never able to find reliable, consistent work as he had little education and no previous experience other than farming.

Barbara Gavin prepared her daughter for a career in music and financial self-sufficiency. Once Bridget's incredible musical talent was discovered, the family pooled their resources for her college education. The investment paid off as she was able to significantly contribute to her family income and bring the family to the middle class through piano lessons given to 50 students per week.

Ignatia was happy in her musical career and met a successful Irish man to whom she became engaged. This engagement caused deep introspection on Bridget's part and she abruptly cancelled her marriage plans, feeling that God was calling her to religious life. In order to be available to care for her aging parents, 24-year-old Bridget joined the Sisters of Charity who cared for the sick and orphaned and chose the name Ignatia in honor of St. Ignatius Loyola.

Sister was very popular and successful as a music teacher for the orphans under the Sister's care. As a result, administrators asked her to start a private music school. Catholic children from all over Cleveland enrolled in the school. It was a phenomenal success due to Sister's incredible talent and relentless work ethic. Success brought additional responsibilities and further education which required travel and overnight stays. Her musical perfectionism and compulsion for work coupled with insomnia resulted in a physical and mental breakdown in 1927. With hospitalization lasting one year, Ignatia's kind and caring doctor advised her to give up music completely or face death.



Ending a 20-year exceptional music career, Sr. Ignatia, 39, became an admitting officer at the new St. Thomas Hospital in Akron run by her order, in 1928.

She held an important position in the years before health insurance. Sister Ignatia had to convince wealthy patients to add a gift to their hospital bills and convince doctors to choose St. Thomas for their patients, especially their wealthy patients.

Sr. Ignatia mastered the complexities of hospital admitting. Here she first became aware of the ongoing problem patients with alcohol abuse presented in the emergency room.

Always sensitive to the suffering of alcoholics because of her childhood in Ireland, she was unhappy to learn that nothing was being done medically for alcoholics. By 1934 she and a young Doctor Scuderi were secretly treating alcoholics in a tiny room next to the chapel. Dr. Scuderi administered morphine while Sister counseled and encouraged the patients.

As the admitting officer, Ignatia had full authority to move patients to beds as she saw fit. This gave her the power to admit alcoholics when few hospitals would allow admittance. Hospitals were wary of the commotion alcoholics frequently caused and management generally believed that alcoholism was a moral problem.

Sister was able to set up a small ward for experimental treatment after which she would transfer the detoxed patients to another floor. All the while she incurred the disapproval of doctors and nurses at St. Thomas.

As she began her successful new career, she made an important friendship with Dr. Bob Smith, a reformed alcoholic. Dr. Bob asked Sister to join the hospital staff, after she was removed from the roster at Akron's other hospitals

Dr. Bob and Bill Smith had been working out the principles of AA, an abstinence program since 1935. The program depended on curing patients through group therapy and the spirituality of surrender to a "Higher Power." In 1939, they published the AA Big Book outlining these principles.

In order to establish the program, they needed a sympathetic hospital. They could not grow without hospital cooperation. Thus, Sister's experimental experience was of the utmost importance. By 1939, Dr. Bob convinced Sr. Ignatia to admit the first AA patient who would be treated by Dr. Bob and supported by reformed alcoholics in a type of "group therapy." After this initial success, Sister Ignatia began regularly admitting alcoholics under diagnoses unrelated to their alcohol problems.

Sister eventually convinced hospital administrators to adopt a permanent policy for admitting alcoholics after confessing that she had been admitting them secretly. She then introduced former alcoholics to the board as sober citizens to prove her program worked. She also developed a payment plan for alcoholic patients that included donations and fundraising dinners.

Thus, she managed to create the first hospital treatment center for alcoholics, the model for AA hospital programs throughout the 1930's and 1940's.

Between 1939 and 1950, Dr. Bob and Sister Ignatia treated 5000 patients. News of their successful methods spread across the U.S. and Canada. AA groups began rapidly opening throughout the world. New groups were being added for women alcoholics and support groups were created called AL ANON to support concerned family members and friends. Meanwhile Sr. Ignatia was also providing guidance for hospitals around the country and doing public speaking.

After 24 years of service at St. Thomas, a discouraged Sr. Ignatia was transferred to St. Vincent's Charity Hospital in Cleveland. Despite the success of her AA program, her unorthodox admission



methods and poor financial management made modernization of hospital admitting at St. Thomas imperative. Sister was sent to St Vincent's by her order to assist AA in setting up an alcoholic treatment ward. Many factors worked together to make Sister Ignatia's Rosary Hall a huge success. She was able to draw on many years of experience and the help of her Akron AA contacts. Cleveland's AA raised a tremendous amount of money and its members donated construction work. The resulting Rosary Hall was the model for alcoholic rehabilitation and its processes were the prototype for hospital professionals and administrators.

Throughout this time, Sr. Ignatia's fame grew. By 1954 she was much in demand as a speaker for AA and for education on hospitalization for alcoholics.

In her acclaimed speeches she was able to also advocate for admitting new alcoholic patient types: women, teens and clergy. She gave credit to historical Irish efforts as her operating philosophy leaned heavily on the tenets of the Pioneers Total Abstinence Society of the Sacred Heart

By 1955, Sr. Ignatia was worn out. She was 70 years old, weighed 100 lbs. and was on duty 18 to 20 hours per day. Her health weakened but she continued to work even when she needed a cane, walker or wheel chair.

By 1960, financial problems due to Sr. Ignatia's lax policies resulted in Sister's second hospital removal. She had provided free care for the poor and this resulted in Rosary Hall carrying a huge debt to the hospital. The hospital management demanded change and Sister Ignatia was asked to step down. She loved her work so much that she continued as a volunteer for 5 more years.

In these late career years, Sister received many honors. In 1960, she was the key presenter at the AA silver anniversary convention. The audience of 17,000 gave her a warm reception. After her retirement, in 1963, President Kennedy chose her as one of 41 expert participants in the Conference on Alcoholism. She submitted a report on how the Department of Health Education and Welfare could best manage the epidemic of alcoholism with AA methods.

In 1965 after continuing to volunteer at Rosary Hall, Sr. Ignatia's poor health required her to retire to her order's mother house. Through visitors and letters, Sister kept a close watch on AA activities. She greatly missed her work. On April 1, 1966 she passed away.

Her funeral was held at the St. John's Cathedral in Cleveland to accommodate thousands of mourners touched by her work. She had restored 15,000 alcoholics to sobriety directly. An estimated 60,000 family members were helped to cope with the alcoholic in their lives and untold millions were supported in reaching sobriety by her groundbreaking work.

In June of 2016, 50 years after her death, the Catholic Church opened a cause for the canonization for Sister Ignatia.

(Written by Mary Peragine and dedicated to her father, Joseph McCormack)