

PRAASA 2011

Showing faces of actors who are portraying A.A. members in A.A. Conference Approved Videos

I would like to thank the 2011 PRAASA Host Committee, specifically my good friend Vernon, for this great topic and the setting of this event which is not too bad. I thought Moab Utah was pretty - this place is gorgeous and the weather is okey-dokey, too. This topic is from the 2011 Panel 61 General Service Conference Agenda under the Public Information Conference Committee Agenda Item C. The Agenda Item reads "Consider approval of the General Service Board 'Policy on Actors Portraying A.A. Members or Potential A.A. Members in Videos Produced by the General Service Board or its Affiliates.'" Wow, that is a mouthful! This issue has been around for a number years but has become a real hot button issue since the approval of the revised video "2009 Hope: Alcoholics Anonymous" at the General Service Conference. A number of A.A. members have expressed concerns about full faces of actors in PSAs or videos for a while, notably the 2007 television PSA announcement "A Force of Nature." However, questionable use of full face actors occurs in four videos, two PSAs and three full face videos of our founders. These later three videos have limited distribution to A.A. members only.

The trustees' Public Information Committee has met at least six times since February 2008 to discuss this important issue. On July 31, 2010 a subcommittee was appointed in response to the 2010 Advisory Action which basically suggested creating a policy, since we kept vacillating back and forth between showing faces and not showing faces. We know that it is pretty darn important when a General Service forms a subcommittee.

So what's this all about? As core principle "personal anonymity" has been extremely important from the beginning of our program. If I was to hold up a hand gun and wave it about you would all be very concerned; however, if I pulled out a camera you would be horrified! Core principle. The short form of the Eleventh Tradition states,

Our public relations policy is based on attraction rather than promotion; we need always maintain personal anonymity at the level of press, radio, and films.

And the long form provides even more clarity,

Our relations with the general public should be characterized by personal anonymity. We think A.A. ought to avoid sensational advertising. Our names and pictures as A.A. members ought not be broadcast, filmed, or publicly printed. Our public relations should be guided by the principle of attraction rather than promotion. There is never a need to praise ourselves. We feel it better to let our friends recommend us.

Bill W. discussed the need for anonymity in the 12 and 12 first published in 1953;

There was actually a time when the press of America thought the anonymity of A.A. was better for us than some of our own members did. At one point, about a hundred of our society were breaking anonymity at the public level. With perfectly good intent, these folks declared that the principle of anonymity was horse-and-buggy stuff, something appropriate to A.A.'s pioneering days. They were sure that A.A. could go faster and farther if it availed itself of modern publicity methods.

The idea of not liking "horse-and-buggy" thinking is partly what got us into trouble. Some at GSO were trying to move "faster and farther" wanting the videos and PSAs to reach a wider targeted audience. Reaching more still suffering is an extremely powerful goal. Full face videos carry a strong message of recovery and are very common on television and the internet. There is no question that in the past GSO determined that full faces were acceptable within our Traditions, because the actors were not actually A.A. members.

Another aspect of anonymity as expressed in the short form of Twelfth Tradition makes it clear how important it is to us,

Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our traditions, ever reminding us to place principles before personalities.

And as usual the long form of the tradition provides additional understanding,

And finally, we of Alcoholics Anonymous believe that the principle of anonymity has an immense spiritual significance. It reminds us that we are to place principles before personalities; that we are actually to practice a genuine humility. This to the end that our great blessings may never spoil us; that we shall forever live in thankful contemplation of Him who presides over us all.

The trustees' subcommittee provided clarity about full face photographs using the 1968 General Service Conference Advisory Action specifically addressing the question of what constitutes an anonymity break by a member under the Eleventh Tradition. It was determined that a full face video, even though the name is withheld is still an anonymity break. The subcommittee clarified what we all understand the phrase "press, radio, and films" is interpreted to include television, the internet, video, and other means of public communication available through new technologies.

Let's turn our attention to another issue; specifically, what constitutes a "potential A.A. member" in a video. The trustees' subcommittee concluded that portrayal of a person drinking to excess is not, in and of itself, sufficient to characterize the person as "potential member." It is only when the person is "touched by A.A." This occurs when the person is videoed making or receiving a twelfth step call, or walking into an A.A. meeting. Of course, if the character comes under the umbrella of our Traditions at any time during the video, then earlier scenes in which the character is shown is subject to any policy on showing faces. The subcommittee noted that it was their determination that of the publicly distributed videos and "2009 Hope: Alcoholics Anonymous" there are no actual anonymity breaks of A.A. members.

The issue regarding full face video is a conflict between the videographers and A.A. principle of anonymity. They like eyes because eyes tell stories. I am somewhat of an amateur photographer and a photo of a lion hunting

prey which shows vibrated sparkling eyes focused on a warthog has a much greater impact than a sleeping lion or as we called them “flat-cats” with their eyes closed.

When I walked into my first A.A. meetings I saw hope in their eyes. They were not judging, they were soft, gentle and caring. There is a very great possibility that we may not be able to represent this in a video. One of our strongest asset is one-on-one communication with newcomers. I know you have to get them through the door so that the communication can begin. Conflicting interest between the videographers wanting to tell a story and A.A. needing to preserve our principle of anonymity is the problem. No one wants to make a goofy video. Partial face or shadow videos can look strange. If we don't do it right it could go viral on the internet as a joke.

Recently it was my privilege to review a draft young people video from my home state of Utah; it was awesome - I formed tears throughout the video, moved greatly by the stories. However, there were too many eyes along with full faces. When it was sent to GSO, Mary C. agreed and it is currently being edited by A.A. members in Utah. There is a very good possibility that the final product will not be as powerful; however, our principle of anonymity will be preserved.

Another consideration of showing full faces is the perception that we at A.A. are filming our meetings. When I was attending my first meetings in the small town of Moab, Utah I did not drive my truck to Triangle House. Someone in the community might see me and then they would know I was an Alcoholic. Remember this is the town where I was gathered up by the police off the sidewalk and taken home. Where I was asked to leave all the bars in town and it was strongly suggested that I was not welcome in the future. If I saw video with recognizable individuals at an A.A. meeting, I would have been very concerned and possibly stop attending meetings. This could have jeopardized my sobriety and possibly my life.

The policy created by the trustees' subcommittee, was adopted by GSO on January 31, 2011 and has been forwarded to the 2011 Conference

Committee on Public Information for approval by General Service Conference. The policy reads,

Videos produced and distributed by the General Service Board or its affiliated corporations, Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc. and Alcoholic Anonymous Grapevine, Inc., which include actors portraying A.A. members or potential A.A. members shall not show the actor's full face, unless:

- a. The General Service Board, by substantial unanimity, agrees that the proposed video is consistent with A.A. tradition of attraction rather than promotion, and that such use of an actor or actors does not in fact or in appearance place personalities before principles, and
- b. The General Service Conference authorizes, by substantial unanimity, the production and distribution of such videos.

The policy goes on to define what a "video" is, what a "potential A.A. member" is, and that existing videos using actors to portray A.A. members or potential members may continue to be produced and distributed until retired from service. The policy also notes that "Markings on the Journey," "Bill Discusses the Twelve Traditions," and "Bill's Own Story" which show full faces of our founders can continue to be distributed to A.A. groups, since distribution is restricted to A.A. members only.

If the 2011 General Service Conference approves the policy created by the GSO there will be no more full face actors in our videos or PSAs. However, it is also a possible that future Conferences may determine that full faces of actors in videos are not attraction rather than promotion and that our cherished spiritual principle of anonymity is preserved.

Keith M.

Panel 61 Delegate

Area 69 Utah