

Doing Websites for AA

Summary:

This is a summary of Bill S taking on the job of doing the website for Downeast Intergroup, what he started with, what has evolved, where we are at now, and hopes for the future.

AA Membership

The only desire for membership is a desire to stop drinking.

Tradition One

Each member of Alcoholics Anonymous is but a small part of a great whole. A.A. must continue to live or most of us will surely die. Hence our common welfare comes first. But individual welfare follows close afterward

Bill S Purpose for doing the website

The website can be a good tool to help bring people together for strength and hope in recovery. This tool enables one who is searching the internet for help to find help. Also it can be a good tool to help those in recovery to stay in recovery by getting people together to help each other to achieve the common goal of sobriety. The ultimate goal is to get people out of their “shells” and to get people face to face. The reports from the help line is a good indicator. The folks who run the help line sure do appreciate having an accurate meeting list on-line to help those in need of a meeting.

History

Almost two life times ago, Steve P. invited me to the Downeast Intergroup meeting in 2014. After attending several meetings, they asked me if I would be willing to take over the website. All I got was the key to the files on the web host. The server was a private server and had a virus so the site needed to be moved. After much research, I settled on InMotionHosting. This has proven to be a good choice. Not once have I needed to make a phone call to them for updates or help.

The old site was written in html with the complete menu on each page. Updating the meeting list consists of going to the html page and finding the line that contained the meeting that needed to be updated. Putting a link in for the newsletter meant going to several different pages and hard coding the link in to the pdf file.

From previous training, I remember using server side includes. That was the first big update to the site was getting the menu into one file instead of duplicating it on several different html pages.

But the meeting list was still confusing. Aislinn put together a sample flyer ‘What Downeast Intergroup Does’ to let people know what DEIG is doing. She made the suggestion that several copies be printed and circulated. The group approve it and it was done!

Mellie and I found ourselves trying to update the meeting list. Gee, there were many errors. Finally, I got mighty fed up going through 200 lines of print to fix a meeting. From Aislinn's example and Mellie's encouragement, I put the meeting list into a SQL Server database with an edit capacity.

Now Millie can update the meeting list with her phone.

When it is easy to update the meeting list, it gets updated. Once I went to a step meeting in an obscure place and the only way I found it was because of the 'directions to a meeting' on the meeting list page. After a Saturday night meeting, I met with Bruce for lunch. He told me the Saturday night meeting was canceled and asked for me to remove it from the list. When I got home, I went to the database to delete the meeting and it was already gone. Sure does beat going through 200 lines of text to do the updates.

HTML is now on version 5 and css is now on version 3. Css is used for styling the html. Bootstrap has a popular way for doing drop down menus and works well when going from computer screens to devices. Since 2014 more people are moving away from computers and are now using smart phones. I have even experience a guy on a website committee who is baffled by why one needs a computer to write and maintain websites.

To move from computers to devices required more learning and coding. After much research and experimenting, I found the liquid web template. This template was used to rewrite the Downeast Intergroup site for devices. Another term for this is responsive web design.

The meeting list appears in an iFrame on the meeting list page. The actual page and code for this page is on my personal web host which is a shared hosting windows server (IIS). In my working career I worked with SQL Server and Microsoft frameworks. In those days these were good tools for working with data. That is the reason the meeting list was put into SQL Server and a aspx page. This meeting list works but it is slow. Microsoft is now moving from propriety code to open source. Their frameworks is being moved into Microsoft core. Aspx pages are now being replace with razor pages. The razor pages are now becoming blazor apps. In other words, Microsoft is moving towards html pages that work with C# and a few other languages. These change will enable the Microsoft platform to produce code that will run on any server.

In the process of learning to work with code to replace the framework, I have found that the controls in frameworks is now being replace code in the html page as for loops. This has been quite a learning curve.

In the process of making this move, I have found that SQL Express is not installed or usable by Linux host providers, so I have experimented with different databases such as SQLite, Postgres, and it looks like I will need to go with MySQL for pure speed. I do have this code working on a Linux box running Centos 8.

But last fall, I got the message that people are just using the meeting list on deig site. They are using the meeting app. This is another long chapter that will be posted later. After getting an email about a meeting that was not accurate in the deig area, I sent the information to Bill L. The error was not on our web site but with the Meeting App. Since the fall aa.org has obtained the rights to the Meeting App. After researching and getting the specs for the data export for the Meeting App, I have written a stored procedure that will produce the json file and an api web application for the Meeting App to tap into the data. The code has been submitted for adaption into the Meeting App.

In the process of doing the experimenting and learning, I have made hardware changes and have gotten many resources for learning the new tools. Since Window 7 has come to the end of its life, it was necessary to move to Windows 10. Also I moved from Ubuntu to Fedora 30 which is a much better platform for development. In working with Postgres and Apache, I found I was messing up the usability of my main operating system. In the process of setting up a virtual machine, I found that I needed a cpu with more cores. To upgrade the cpu, the motherboard needed to be upgraded as well. The cpu did not have a gpu so a video card had to be purchased. It helps to have 2 monitors so you can code on one monitor and see the results on the other. But with the new cpu and video card the old power supply did not provide enough power so that needed to be upgraded as well.

On the island the voltage can fluctuate greatly. I have had a server blow out the power supply and hard drives. The house now has a surge protector for the whole house installed and the computer is plugged into a UPS. My old work computer survived this. The server was a separate box. When using good components and keeping good air flow to the box, a computer will last a long time. Bill L is now using my old work computer with 2 monitors.

Now I have a setup that I can safely experiment with different tools, operating systems, programming languages, etc. I should have no problem in getting 7 or more years out of this setup.

Having a good machine helps with learning for much need information comes from the web. It is good to be able to have the web browser on one screen while have the ide on the other monitor. Books are on the way out but not completely. I am finding the pdf format is getting easier to use, but still I break down and purchase a book occasionally.

Also I have found lynda.com is fascinating. She started out as a graphics teacher for PhotoShop. Now she has one of the best on-line universities available. It is a little pricey but the courses are easy to follow, in short lessons which are 1 to 8 minutes each. But compared to taking live classes or obtaining enough books to do the job, it is cheap and convenient. The only real issue that I have had on this site was when they upgraded the website while I was taking a course. This left the display looking mighty bad. Tech support filled me in that the site was upgraded. By getting into the settings and making adjustments on me, I am now working well with the new layout.

Conclusion

Since 2014, I have been maintaining the deig website. It is a good opportunity to learn new tools and ways of producing websites. It is rewarding to know that the accurate meeting list (thanks to the many people who have made this happen!) is helping people find meetings that exists. I am still here but wondering who will be the 4th meeting chair will be.

