

Len.

During the late 1940s in Allston, neighborhood allegiance ran deep. Children played outside all day, every family on the block knew one another, and Sundays were for Mass and family dinner. Although Allston has changed drastically since then, one thing has stayed the same; the presence of Len Kelliher, an 83-year-old man whose fierce loyalty to his neighborhood has kept him here for all this time.

“This was a great town to grow up in,” Kelliher said. “Life is good around here.”

Kelliher has never been a quitter. He hasn’t given up on Allston, and he hasn’t given up on the causes he believes in, like women’s rights, the fight against alcoholism, and awareness of mental illness. Despite the changing landscape of life, Kelliher has remained devoted to these causes. According to Kelliher, if his story can help someone else, it’s worth sharing.

“My life is pretty much an open book,” he said.

As a severely asthmatic child, Kelliher said his illness drove him to play harder and never complain. He said this contributed to who he is now.

“I played harder and then I’d end up with two weeks in bed,” Kelliher said. “But I was determined nobody was ever going to say I was afraid of anything.”

When the Korean War broke out, Kelliher wanted to join the Navy, but knew his asthma would have prohibited it; so he lied about the illness and served for over two years. At one point he was offered medical discharge, but Kelliher didn’t want to go home.

“I didn’t want to go out labeled as a cripple,” he said.

This determined attitude has carried Len through most trials of his life. Yet he openly admits that he struggled with alcoholism for many years. For once, he knew quitting was the only option.

“I had a moment of truth. I realized there was nothing left in booze for me,” Kelliher said, recounting the night he finally realized just how destructive his addiction was.

“The great ‘I am,’ supposed to be helping everybody else, and I needed help.”

Kelliher has been sober for over 50 years, and he remains devoted to Alcoholics Anonymous. Susan Kelliher, Len’s daughter, says that his involvement with AA taught her to stand up for those who need help and be open to people from all walks of life.

“He works the program every day; the idea of community and no man is an island,” Susan Kelliher said. “He’s out there looking after all his brothers and sisters and doing great things every day.”

Susan Kelliher said that in addition to fighting against alcoholism, her father speaks about mental illness to raise awareness about it and hopefully help other alcoholics who struggle with depression or anxiety. According to Susan, he has also always been a defender of women—probably because he had five daughters.

“He is always standing up for the little guy. So that, I think, is the biggest lesson we all learned,” Susan Kelliher said.