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Traumatic experiences can leave long lasting scars and often change the trajectory of someone's life. John Underwood, a Project HEAL client, was subjected to his first experiences with violence at a young age while growing up in Jersey City. "Where I grew up was definitely not a safe place," said Underwood. "There was gang activity, shootings- I was jumped multiple times. But I always tried my best to keep out of it." Underwood's experiences with violence would eventually come full circle later in life after he was violently assaulted by a family member. This event would go on to leave long lasting effects that would require a specific type of healing to help John cope and overcome.

Growing up, Underwood remembers his mother tried her best to give John and his sister a great life, despite instability caused by their father's alcoholism. In high school, John and his girlfriend found out they were having a baby and he made the decision to drop out of school to find a job to support his new family. John did his best to find work in a local carpenters union but financial strain caused stress on his relationship and she eventually left. John started experiencing depressive symptoms after the breakup and decided to move back home with his mother for support.



John always had a strong relationship with his mother but this time together brought the two even closer. In 2016, his mother was diagnosed with an aggressive form of skin cancer, and died not long after her diagnosis. John said he felt so lost he turned to drugs to numb the pain. "I don't even remember the night of her funeral," John said. "That night, I started abusing prescription Xanax and from there everything just spiraled." What started as abuse of prescription pills progressed to heroin addiction. With their mother gone and their father absent from their lives, John and his sister were forced to rely on one another to navigate life and make an attempt at moving forward. While living in the home they once shared with their mother, the two had the limited support of family members that lived close by. However, the support would eventually turn into strife, as tensions began to mount between John, his sister, and their cousins.

In the throes of their addiction, Underwood and his sister became regularly abused by their cousin. What started out as an attempt of tough love from the 6 foot 2, heavily built man, ended up coming to a head when he hospitalized Underwood during an altercation. "He picked me up and slammed me right on my head. I was knocked out for maybe a minute or two," said Underwood. "After that I just felt different, my entire demeanor changed. The way I interacted with people, it left an impact." John's battle with addiction continued until 2019, when he was arrested for drug possession and spent multiple months in jail.

Upon release, he enrolled in a drug treatment program and began building his life back up, piece by piece. While his issues with drugs were being addressed through treatment, unresolved trauma still needed to be tended to. That's when he came to Project HEAL. Underwood was referred to Project HEAL for displaying markers conducive with PTSD symptoms as a result of the violent interaction with his cousin. Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) symptoms don't look or feel the same for everyone who experiences them. Some symptoms include nightmares, flashbacks, dissociation and hypervigilance.

"My therapist is helping me rewire my brain and how I approach certain situations," said John. "Being able to face things, work on things, and get back to a point where I can communicate with others properly." John and his therapist practice Cognitive Behavioral Therapy techniques to identify current triggers and how he notices the PTSD symptoms impacting his life. He was able to identify that verbal conflict is a trigger, even if he is not threatened or in any immediate danger. Once he became aware of how he reacts to verbal conflict, Underwood and his therapist began figuring out healthy coping mechanisms to increase distress tolerance.

John's goals are to continue to strengthen the relationship with his son, transition out of sober living housing into his own place and gain long term employment. John is now 20 months sober and hopes that with maintained sobriety and a strong support system, he will continue moving forward to achieve his goals. "Working with my therapist at Project HEAL has given me the awareness to realize that there are unhealthy and healthy ways of coping with anxiety, PTSD and triggering situations," said John. "With the tools I've developed, I'm ready to transition back into the real world. Get back into some type of career, that's the goal."



FINDING DIFFERENT WAYS TO HEAL

By Kristina Vander, Clinical Program Manager

Oftentimes, trauma survivors struggle to put into words what has happened to them and how they were able to move forward. Our team thought, let's take some of the pressure off and instead of speaking about their healing journey, let's help them create it through art. In collaboration with the JSUMC Behavioral Health Department, Project HEAL partnered with Nicole Dignazio, MA, ATR-BC, a board certified Registered Art Therapist for JSUMC's Inpatient Psychiatric Unit, to help clients and the community use a different method to explore healing.



As we have come to understand, experiencing trauma in any form changes the brain. Dr. Bessel Van Der Kolk theorized the connection between the mind and the body by exploring the neuroscience of trauma and how this can change our approach to healing. Various traditional “talk-therapy” treatment modalities can be utilized to treat symptoms of trauma, however, healing the mind and body outside of conscious cognition is an area that can increase overall progress and success post-trauma. This includes holistic approaches such as music therapy, art therapy, and other somatic/expressive forms of therapy, which gives survivors an outlet of expression that does not require them to speak of their trauma. Research suggests that one of the areas of the brain affected by trauma is Broca's area, which is the part of the brain that produces language. This then makes it difficult for a survivor to speak of their trauma. Utilizing holistic approaches that allow for creative expression in place of or in tandem with processing it verbally, provides additional evidence-based approaches to healing.



Nicole came to the Project HEAL office one evening and facilitated a group for twelve Project HEAL clients and their families. There was a ton of art supplies, music, food and so much chatter throughout the room. Everyone felt that they were a part of something so important and so healing. Each client created art related to their journey of hope and healing. One client was painting and seemed surprised at what they put on their canvas. They realized they recreated a painting that they had done when they were a child, before their trauma. The peace and sense of pride on their faces was unforgettable. Through their art, with no barriers or limits. They were able to tap into a time in their life where they felt safe, secure and happy. Experiences like this remind survivors that they did not always feel how they may be feeling now and that healing is possible. The artwork created by Project HEAL clients highlighted what hope and healing meant for them and was displayed during National Crime Victims' Rights Week at the Asbury Park Public Library.

PROJECT HEAL RECOGNIZES CRIME VICTIMS WEEK IN ASBURY



Project HEAL hosted their first community event on Friday, April 29th in Springwood Ave Park to highlight National Crime Victims' Rights Week (April 24th-April 30th). They partnered with the Monmouth County Prosecutor's Office, the City of Asbury Park, the Asbury Park Public Library, WeBuildNJ, the Asbury Park Kiwanis Club and Hackensack Meridian Health to celebrate the progress achieved in the victims' rights movement, to raise awareness of victims' rights and services and to stand with those whose lives have been forever altered by crime. In addition to the event, Project HEAL placed 294 flags in both Springwood Ave Park and Sunset Park to represent the number of individuals compensated after a victimization in 2020. This accounts for only 5 percent of the total reported victimizations that year. Most people are not aware of their rights and do not know there are resources to help them. Project HEAL and its partners felt creating an event to promote awareness and provide information and resources was essential.

The event featured resource tables, a community art therapy project, healthy activities, music, free meals, raffle prizes. Mayor John Moor, Councilwoman Yvonne Clayton and the City of Asbury Park officially recognized National Crime Victims Rights' Week with a proclamation that was signed by the City Council and presented to the Project HEAL team. "Project HEAL, along with other local agencies, have been working tirelessly to stem community violence and provide trauma-informed, wraparound services for victims of violence in Monmouth County," said Jon Moore, Mayor of Asbury Park. A Project HEAL client, Kim, shared her story with those in attendance. Kim recently completed services through Project HEAL, and with their help, worked on her sobriety, mental health treatment, and enrolled in driving school to get her CDL trucking license. Kim celebrates more than one year of sobriety and is currently in the process of completing training for a full time job position.

Reverend Lydelle Akins from Triumphant Life Church and The Monmouth County Prosecutor's Office organized the community for a candlelight vigil, led them in prayer and called for a moment of silence to remember those impacted and lost to community violence. It was amazing to see so many community partners and residents come together with a shared purpose and Project HEAL is committed to sponsoring an annual event to highlight National Crime Victims' Rights Week.



MEET THE STAFF: KRISTA PEOPLES CLINICAL THERAPIST



Growing up in Asbury Park, Project HEAL Clinical Therapist, Krista Peoples, knows all too well the impact of living in family strife while facing community problems ranging from poor education, to lack of employment opportunities and crime. “The house was always cold and sometimes the only meal we would eat during the day was lunch at school,” says Krista. “My mom worked late so we’d have to wait until 11pm to eat again.” Krista explained that Asbury Park was once dubbed “Dark City” on account of the post-riot urban decay the area experienced in the late 1970’s into the 1980’s. As a result of her experiences, Krista would go on to pursue an education that would eventually lead her into the helping profession.

After graduating from Asbury Park High School, Krista’s initial passion was in electrical engineering, to which she started classes at Rutgers University. However, she found the nature of the work to be quite isolating and would go on to find her niche elsewhere. It was when her grandmother became ill and required care, that Krista left college to take care of her. In that time, she discovered her passion for helping others, whether it be physical or mental. “Coming from my background where I wish somebody had stepped in to help us when we were little and nobody ever did,” said Krista, “it fueled my passion to help people, especially those who don’t know how to help themselves.”

Krista obtained her Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN) in 1998 and continued working as a nurse until 2012. Krista went back to school to complete her Master’s in Social Work in December 2018 at Rutgers University. While working at Hackensack Meridian Health’s Behavioral Health Department in Neptune, Peoples path would lead her to being introduced to Project HEAL. “After speaking to Project HEAL’s Medical Director, and I found out the population we would be working with, I was immediately on board,” said Peoples. “Being from the community, I knew so many people who wanted to make the right turn, but took the wrong one.” Aside from Peoples professional qualifications, her passion for serving people that reside from her community brings an added level of empathy and understanding.

Peoples receives glowing praise from her clients as well as her team members with how much she invests herself in the work and goes above and beyond for her clients. Peoples believes the problems in the area are historically systemic, and typically this population is overlooked by entities that could step in and help, and that’s where Project HEAL can function successfully. “We need to continue to connect with the community and its advocacy groups to build a network that will help people, I think that’s what will make the difference long term.” said Peoples.



PROJECT HEAL JOINS JSUMC TRAUMA IN STAND AGAINST GUN VIOLENCE



In the wake of the horrific shootings in Buffalo New York and Uvalde Texas, the annual gun violence awareness display that occurs at Jersey Shore University Medical Center was more important than ever. Gun Violence Prevention Awareness Day is a day that aims to raise awareness of the prevalence of gun violence. “Every time we do this event, people express to us how moving it is,” said Tracy Nerney, Trauma Injury Prevention Coordinator. “Once we get people gripped with emotion, we are able to immediately bring them over to our advocacy tables, where we can all learn how to make a difference.” In 2017, after learning that 91 people a day die by gun violence, a social awareness art display titled “91 of us”[©] was created by Caileigh Nerney. The visual was created to represent the impact of people lost everyday with 57 red t-shirts represented suicide, 32 blue t-shirts homicide, and two yellow t-shirts unintentional shootings. The unmarked chairs represent an increase in deaths per day, which has now risen to from 91 to 124.



The Project HEAL team was deeply affected by the tragedies that occurred recently, as they understand the impact that gun violence has on the population they serve. Between January 2016 and August 2019, Jersey Shore University Medical Center’s internal medical data shows that they treated 408 violent injuries in a variety of different capacities, specifically, 84 injuries by gun. “Something has to be done to address these shootings in our communities and our country,” said Lisa McDermott, Program Manager for Project HEAL. “Children should not be going to school or walking down the street in fear that a shooting will be taking place, we have to do better.” As Project HEAL is tasked with combating community violence, the program supports any and all legislation that will help regulate the purchase of firearms and support programs that will deter those from picking one up in the first place.