



PROJECT HEAL

A community partnership
to Help, Empower and Lead



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Having that moment of vulnerability and a readiness for change looks different for everyone, this is especially true for survivors of violence and traumatic experiences. For Kim, it took a serious drug relapse and blacking out, which ultimately led to a violent episode with her daughter that inspired this story. “When I accidentally stabbed my daughter, it woke me up. That was it for me,” said Kim. “I was so blacked out; I didn't know who she was. I thought it was somebody trying to hurt me. Then I woke up in jail.” While her daughter's injuries were minor, the event triggered Kim to be ready for change. That's when she came to Project HEAL.

Kim's addiction and behavior can be traced back to trauma endured at an early age. This can be said for many of the clients supported through Project HEAL. Born in Freehold, New Jersey, Kim was raised in a strict household, where alcohol abuse and beatings were frequent. Kim recalls being asked to throw away beer cans before sneaking sips from them, never being allowed to wear makeup, and being kept inside instead of being allowed out to play. At 6 years old, Kim was estranged from her biological father. Her mother, in an attempt to move on, began to date. One of the men that Kim's mother had brought home became Kim's abuser. The man later threatened to kill Kim and her mother if they sought out help. Kim believes these events eventually led to her addictions as well as her engagement in other risky behaviors throughout adolescence.



Kim began sneaking out as a pre-teen, often hanging out and drinking with people much older than her. “I spent a lot of time drinking down by the train tracks. That’s where everybody hung out.” said Kim. “One thing led to another and I ended up pregnant at 14, left home, dropped out of school at 16, and was homeless by 19.” Kim’s substance use began with alcohol, but then led to hard drugs. Kim found herself swept up in the crack cocaine epidemic that tore through communities in the 1980’s and the early 1990’s. This led Kim down a path of a continuous drug addiction battle, a series of abusive relationships, and ultimately, a violent encounter of self defense that would result in her incarceration.

“I always felt like I wasn’t worthy of anything. Anytime I tried to do a program, I was there just because I had to be there,” said Kim. “I was there because of parole or probation. I never wanted to go for me. So I always relapsed.”

After the episode involving her daughter, Kim knew she had to fully commit herself to getting help in order to change her patterns of behavior for a healthier future. In May of 2021, a strong community partner, New Jersey Reentry Corp, identified Kim as a survivor of violence and immediately referred her to Project HEAL.

During her first visit with Project HEAL, Kim indicated to the team that she was already 65 days sober and living in a sober-supportive halfway house. As a result of her recent release from incarceration, Kim had little income and was struggling. Kim was immediately provided with a gift card for emergency food, a toiletry bag filled with gender specific items, and transportation services. After this, Kim got involved in weekly therapy sessions to begin addressing the symptoms related to her long history of trauma. Kim’s health was also assessed by Project HEAL’s Nurse Navigator, who was able to help address and coordinate care for long-neglected medical issues that were limiting Kim.

“Coming to Project HEAL, I was able to cry finally, able to express my feelings and feel them, and get to the bottom of what was going on with me. My feelings of worthlessness,” said Kim. “I was able to identify my patterns of behavior, and figure out why I continue to do the same things.”

After addressing her pressing mental health challenges, Kim was then ready to enter the 2nd stage of treatment which focused on sustaining her progress and independence. With Project HEAL’s support, Kim was able to obtain a driver’s license and purchase a used car. Education became another key component when Kim showed interest in completing CDL training school to become a truck driver.

Kim is now almost a year sober, and has successfully completed therapeutic treatment services through Project HEAL. Kim has left her halfway house, found a supportive sober living environment, and completed her CDL courses. She is currently engaged in behind the wheel training to reach her end goal of gainful employment.



Kim’s success has not gone unnoticed. She recently became the focus of a news story on [CBS New York](#), highlighting Project HEAL and her success within the program. “I’m working on my program now. I have a sponsor, a network, and I know I can reach out to Krista at Project HEAL if I need it,” said Kim. “I’m just really grateful for Project HEAL. I’m going to be driving a truck! If it was not for them. This would not be possible!”

PROJECT HEAL PROVIDES HOLIDAY GIFTS FOR CLIENTS IN NEED



Christmas time at Project HEAL

Project HEAL continued its mission by making sure that clients felt secure and cared for during the holiday season. While Thanksgiving focused on providing meals for clients and their loved ones, the December holidays felt like a great opportunity for clients to receive gifts that would allow them to focus on themselves. Clients were gifted Christmas bags with a variety of goodies and essentials that included gloves, fleece blankets, a first aid kit, hand warmers, and an oil diffuser with multiple therapeutic oils.

“Clients were excited and extremely grateful for the contents. We were giving more than just a “hand out”, but rather the gift of self-care,” said Kristina Vander, Clinical Supervisor for Project HEAL. “Any Project HEAL clients that came through our doors the month of December were able to explore new components of healing by having an oil diffuser and oils that are specific to mood improvement and relaxation.”

The Project HEAL team wanted to provide clients with items that meet basic needs, but also continue to promote holistic healing and self-care. Whether it's in the form of providing help with a Thanksgiving meal, or being given a holiday gift bag, the Project HEAL team believes these personal gestures are beneficial to the clients overall recovery and quality of life.

MEET THE STAFF: VALERIE JOHNSON - NURSE NAVIGATOR

From a very early age, Valerie Johnson knew that she wanted to be a nurse. “Since I was 3 years old, I had a little doctor's kit, and I would help everybody with their medicine,” said Johnson. “Everybody was getting their shots, I'd even help with my grandmother's insulin.”

Following her calling, Johnson would go on to attend Norfolk State University before eventually transferring back to New Jersey and finishing her degree at the Ann May School of Nursing at Jersey Shore University Medical Center. Johnson, who is the Nurse Navigator for Project HEAL, has over 30 years of experience in the nursing field with a wide variety of skills and qualifications. Johnson has been the Nurse Manager of a psychiatric crisis unit, worked in inpatient psychiatry, is a college professor, and has been a forensic nurse with the Ocean County Prosecutor's Office for 22 years.



Valerie Johnson, Nurse Navigator for Project HEAL

Johnson's position at Project HEAL is designed to assess clients' health at their initial screening. This allows her to then coordinate any necessary referrals and follow-up appointments throughout their treatment process. Survivors of violence often have serious health issues that have been neglected, which may be negatively impacting their mental health. Johnson works in coordination with Project HEAL clinicians and case managers to create an individualized treatment plan to effectively meet client needs. Johnson believes her many years in treating victims of violence and listening to their pain has given her a special set of tools to treat a unique population.

“At Project HEAL, It's not just putting a bandaid on it, and just following up with somebody else in two weeks,” said Johnson. “We're in the trenches; we're there in the beginning and will follow clients all the way through. We're putting a spin on the process; a new way of approaching things.”

ENDING THE CYCLE OF HURT PEOPLE, HURTING OTHERS

By Kristen Ryan LAC

(Please note, the content in this section may be difficult to read but speaks to the power of healing and change.)

It is a common experience as a trauma professional that survivors of violence often become perpetrators of violence. Quite simply, hurt people, who have not had the opportunity to heal, hurt people. Such is the case for a Project HEAL client that goes by the name of Freddie. After enduring hardships early in his life, he found himself in a desperate situation which led to him serving 10 years of his life in jail. Freddie's life of violence, both physical and mental, can be traced back to an early age. As Freddie reflects on how violence has impacted his life, he recalls something said to him by his mother, who was his abuser. "She said to me, If I wanna kill you, if I wanna beat you, I'm gonna beat you, your grandmother and uncles are not gonna be able to save you." recounted Freddie.



Kristen Ryan, Clinical Therapist at Project HEAL

When working with clients who have survived traumatic events it is imperative to utilize a trauma-informed approach. This does not refer to any specific intervention, but rather the lens through which the client is viewed. A trauma-informed therapist always considers the impact of trauma on an individual's emotions and behaviors. All clients that are referred to Project HEAL have experienced some degree of trauma, so the role as a Clinical Therapist is to always enter sessions with this trauma-informed approach.

During the first session with Freddie, we learned just how deep his wounds were, beginning with childhood physical and psychological abuse. A significant amount (37%) of Project HEAL clients have reported some type of abuse in their youth, whether physical, neglect, or sexual abuse. [The HAVI White Paper](#) explains that "results from the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study revealed that traumatic experiences early in life significantly increase the risk of engaging in violent behavior and/or violent victimization, as well as a range of other harmful behaviors and adverse health outcomes". Freddie is no exception since he went on to sell drugs, develop alcoholism, and became incarcerated for aggravated assault and homicide.

It was essential to first establish strong rapport in order to instill a sense of trust and safety, given his history of childhood abuse and other traumatic experiences. Simply bearing witness to someone's story non judgmentally and validating their feelings can be extremely powerful. Freddie also participated in a 'Neuroscience of Trauma' group, which provided psycho education on how trauma impacts the brain and body. The hope was that learning more about the brain's natural response to trauma would help normalize some of Freddie's experiences and reactions.

Once a trusting relationship is formed, the therapist uses a cognitive behavioral approach in order to focus on the connection between thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Working closely with Freddie in order to bring awareness to situations that trigger maladaptive thoughts that ultimately lead to destructive behaviors for him in the past. He has recognized that "before coming to Project HEAL, I was seeing those hazes of red. Those moments of violent anger towards my father". The hope has been for Freddie to be able to recognize when those hazes begin to turn bright red and utilize positive coping mechanisms, rather than acting on those hazes impulsively."

Freddie is now on his way to living a life that he can feel proud of. He is preparing for discharge from Project HEAL as a result of his progress and to continue his long-term journey with healing. Freddie has maintained his sobriety, has not engaged in any instances of violence, and feels confident enough to rejoin the workforce to feel like a productive member of society.

PROJECT HEAL VOLUNTEERS AT COMMUNITY TOY EVENT



Residents line up outside BlackBird Community Commons

On a cold, winter's day on the 18th of December, a line was stretching from Black Bird Community Commons all the way down to Springwood Avenue in Asbury Park. Project HEAL was in attendance for a community toy distribution that was taking place as a result of a chance partnership between the Asbury Park Kiwanis Club and WeBuildNJ, two non profit organizations from the Asbury Park community. Amanda Fitzpatrick and Renee Lehrman, who connected only two weeks before the event, quickly realized they shared a common interest in holding a toy event for members of Asbury Park and the surrounding community. "I wanted to do a toy drive on the 18th but I had nothing. I had no toys. Then Renee and I met each other on the 1st or 2nd of December, hit it off, and immediately started planning," said Fitzpatrick, who serves as Director of WebuildNJ and Partner of Black Bird Community Commons.

WeBuildNJ operates as the community outreach arm of BlackBird Community Commons, a building centrally located in Asbury Park which hosts private events in addition to providing a space for community initiatives. So even being in possession of a space to host an event, Fitzpatrick was still missing the key component, the toys themselves. The Kiwanis of Asbury Park, an organization affiliated with Kiwanis International with an emphasis on helping local communities and its youth, already had the infrastructure in place for toy collecting for the holidays.

Lehrman, A Kiwanis club member and local organizer, reached out to various community members, local businesses, and the police department to participate. "Once we solidified the toy collection, the distribution plan became the problem. Where are we going to distribute? That's when Amanda and I met and came to an agreement," said Lehrman. "Blackbird Community Commons would donate their space for the event. So a partnership began between us, and we just worked so well together. It was meant to be."

The event provided not only gifts, but a welcoming atmosphere of Christmas spirit involving a variety of community organizations coming together to contribute. Project HEAL was invited to volunteer, and provided winter beanies to families in need as they waited in line for their presents. "The toy drive was organic, it just happened. Before I knew it, we had like 26 volunteers show up to help," said Fitzpatrick. A DJ was present to provide music entertainment, volunteers assisted children with fun activities, and Santa Claus was there for pictures, free of charge. Lehrman reported that over 250 families showed up for the event, leaving with 715 gifts, with some left to spare for other donation organizations.

Project HEAL is proud to support long-standing community organizations in working towards the common goal of creating a safe and healthy community. "Our organization is very fluid and looks to work with everybody when bettering the community," said Lehrman. "It is healthy for the kids to see community organizations working together," added Fitzpatrick. People looking to support these local initiatives can visit <https://webuildnj.org/> and <https://k20377.site.kiwanis.org/>



Event organizers and volunteers come together for a picture