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Kefa's Journey: Recognizing the Power of Gratitude

Gratitude can be defined as the heartfelt acknowledgment of the positive aspects of life, a recognition of kindness, and a sense of thankfulness for both the blessings we have and the people who contribute to our well-being. It goes beyond mere politeness, cultivating a deeper sense of appreciation that can lead to increased happiness, improved mental health, and stronger relationships. In this article, we explore the transformative power of gratitude through the inspiring journey of Kefa, a resilient survivor who embodies the essence of gratitude in the face of adversity.

Growing up in Asbury Park, safety was a constant concern for Kefa in her neighborhood and while at school. "I remember my mom telling me at a young age if you hear this sound," she recalls, mimicking a gunshot, "you need to get on the ground." Determined to avoid becoming a statistic in her community, Kefa embraced her education and individuality, even if it meant being labeled a "nerd" by some. Her commitment to education deepened, as she understood that knowledge was her way out of a turbulent environment. To escape the challenges of her neighborhood and seek broader horizons, Kefa ultimately made a life-changing decision. "I

joined the Army," she reveals, "'cause I didn't wanna be stuck here, drinking and partying. The shootings, the neighborhood. I wanted to get out."

Kefa's six-year journey in the military took her across the country, where she learned valuable life skills and forged lifelong bonds with her fellow soldiers. It was a period of growth, independence, and self-discovery. After her time in the service, her path was forever altered when she became a survivor of an unprovoked assault by individuals she knew, and at one point, she had even invited into her home. The trauma left her hypervigilant and always on edge. She felt betrayed and struggled to find closure. "To this day," Kefa reflects, "I have no idea why these girls attacked me. Unprovoked, and I knew them. I didn't really get closure in that regard."

After her attack, she was contacted by Randy, Case Management Supervisor from Project HEAL, who offered assistance specific to survivors of violence. "Randy had called me," Kefa recalls. "I never knew about any help for assault victims. When he called, I said that I wasn't sure about it, but at the same time, I was willing to check out Project HEAL to see if it could help me. I'm glad he reached out."

Kefa's gratitude is a powerful force in her journey. She acknowledges, "My gratitude towards any situation is just being able to live." Despite the trauma she endured, her sense of gratitude remains intact. "I am grateful that this wasn't as bad as it could have been," she says with a sense of relief. "Nothing broken, my organs are okay. It's just the mental aspect I'm working on healing." Kefa's long-term aspirations are a testament to her unwavering determination. Her ultimate goal is to complete her education and become a drug and alcohol counselor, driven by a deep desire to aid others in their struggles while providing a stable life for her son.

Kefa's story is one of resilience and hope. She believes, "I can say to others, even though you've gone through trauma, this is not the end, it's the beginning. It's just a chapter. One moment in time." With gratitude as her guiding light, Kefa is determined to keep moving forward, inspiring all who hear her story.



Project HEAL's Elevate Hosts Thrilling 3-on-3 Basketball Tournament: A Day of Fun, Family, and Community Spirit

By Kateria McMillion, Elevate Program Coordinator

Project HEAL's at-risk youth program, *Elevate*, recently hosted an exciting 3-on-3 basketball tournament that brought children, families, and the community together for a day of safety and fun. With more than 80 people in attendance, including participants, staff, volunteers, and spectators, the event was a huge success.

The event was organized with the hope of strengthening the bonds within the community by encouraging parents to support their children, while also learning about Elevate's services and mission. It aimed to provide a positive and safe activity for the youth, promoting healthy recreational activities and showcasing the importance of positive engagement in the community. With a total of 25 participants, the competition was fierce and spirited. In the end, there were two winning teams, and each of the winning players received a fantastic reward - a \$100 Nike Gift Card, just in time to get some new items for back to school.

The Elevate Team made sure that every participant left with a smile, even if they did not secure the top spot. Any participant who participated but did not win received a \$25 Nike Gift Card, ensuring everyone felt appreciated and acknowledged. Additionally, In the spirit of giving back to

the community, Elevate distributed book bags with school supplies to children who attended the event as spectators, ensuring that all young attendees left with something to brighten their day.

This event would not have been as successful without Elevate's collaboration and support from their community partners, which included: Triumphant Life Church, Asbury Park Police Department, Asbury Park PALs, Neptune Township Police Department, Macrobites, Everybody Eats, Young DJ LA, and more.



Elevate's 3-on-3 basketball tournament was more than just a sporting event; it was a celebration of community, positivity, and the spirit of togetherness. The involvement of parents, partners, and community members showcased the power of unity in making a meaningful impact on the lives of the youth. It served as a reminder that the possibilities are endless when a community comes together with a common goal. Please take some time to enjoy some [video highlights](#) from the event!



Project HEAL's Leaders attend the Annual HAVI Conference in Chicago

At the end of September, Project HEAL's leadership team, Lisa McDermott, Kristina Vander, and Randy Scales, traveled to Chicago, IL, for the annual HAVI (Health Alliance for Violence Intervention) Conference. This was the first conference since 2019 that was able to be held in person. There, over 700 violence intervention workers, from multiple disciplines across the country, were able to gather for three days to share experiences, best practices, and communal passion to continue to drive violence intervention work toward a sustainable future.

Project HEAL, in partnership with Montclair State University, presented at the conference discussing the work being done as part of the NJ HVIP cohort that was rolled out in 2020. "It was an honor to be able to share all the progress our program has made over the past three years with those in the field," said Lisa McDermott, Clinical Operations Manager for Project HEAL. "Coming together to collaborate and share best practices that will ultimately help the clients was truly wonderful." Project HEAL is one of the original NJ HVIPs funded, and continues to be seen as a flagship site as a result of its success.



Project HEAL team raises \$1,200 toward local walkathon

On October 8th, Project HEAL joined their community partner, Community Affairs & Resource Center's (CARC) Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault program, to acknowledge Domestic Violence Awareness Month by participating in their annual walkathon. CARC is a strong community provider and is considered to be an integral member of Project HEAL's efforts to create a Coordinated Community Response (CCR) within Monmouth County. CARC aims to provide culturally competent services to families in need who are experiencing any kind of domestic and/or sexual violence.

The theme of this year's walkathon was, "You deserve to thrive, not just survive." Project HEAL was able to raise over \$1,200 towards CARC's efforts. In total, CARC was able to raise over \$16,000 dollars during this year's event. At the walkathon, community members came together for a shared passion. Project HEAL was joined by Asbury Park Library's Social Worker Jen Cubias completing the walk that spanned from Ocean Grove to Bradley Beach. It was an amazing opportunity to collaborate on a larger scale to help survivors thrive. Project HEAL is looking forward to participating again next year.

Domestic Violence Awareness Month, observed every October, is a critical campaign aimed at raising public awareness about the pervasive issue of domestic violence. Project HEAL has created an [awareness video](#) in hopes of reaching individuals who may have been impacted by

domestic violence and encouraging them that there is help out there, and where they can find it. Of the 540 clients Project HEAL has served in its 3 and a half years of operations, instances of Domestic Violence makeup 24 percent of all reported victimizations.



Reclaiming the Present: Grounding Techniques for Healing and Resilience

*By Krista Peoples, LPN, MSW, LSW
Clinical Therapist for Project HEAL*

As trauma-informed clinicians, we rely on a variety of techniques to help our clients process trauma and alleviate their mental hardships, enabling them to better manage their lives and everyday tasks.

With that, I'd like to shed light on the transformative power of grounding techniques, particularly the 5-4-3-2-1 method, and how they can be integrated into our daily lives for healing and resilience. Let's explore this technique and its potential to provide a sense of stability and presence amidst life's challenges.

For example, a recent client, whom we will refer to as Michael, found success with this very method. In his early years, Michael found a sanctuary in performing. He would dance and sing to music as a way to cope with the chaos and heartbreak surrounding him. These creative acts were his attempts to mend the fractures in his family, a courageous young boy's way of trying to save his world from falling apart. Today, Michael is the loving father of his own children, a testament to his strength and resilience. However, certain songs and melodies from his past

continue to hold powerful sway over him, transporting him back to a time when he believed he had to perform to keep his family together.

The 5-4-3-2-1 grounding technique is a simple yet powerful tool for connecting with the present moment, inviting us to engage our five senses and anchor ourselves in the here and now. To start, you identify five things you can **SEE** in your immediate surroundings, focusing on these visual cues to bring your awareness to the present. Next, explore four things you can **TOUCH** or feel around you, connecting with the physical sensations and textures to ground yourself in the tactile world. Shifting your awareness to sound, you name three things you can **HEAR**, listening attentively to the auditory landscape around you. Delving into the olfactory sense, you identify two things you can **SMELL**, enriching your experience of the now. Finally, turn to **TASTE**, describing one thing you can taste or recalling a recent taste experience to complete the sensory journey.

The beauty of the 5-4-3-2-1 method lies in its versatility. While often introduced within the context of therapy, it can also be a valuable tool in everyday life, offering an anchor to the present moment. Consider Michael's story, who found solace in performing as a child but continued to grapple with his past, especially when triggered by certain music. The 5-4-3-2-1 method became a transformative part of his healing journey, helping him reconnect with the present and rebuild his life.

Incorporating grounding techniques into daily life is not only possible but beneficial. The 5-4-3-2-1 method is a tool that can guide us back to the present moment, allowing us to navigate life's challenges with resilience and strength. Exploring these techniques can help individuals find their own anchor in the midst of life's storms, embarking on a journey toward healing and self-discovery.

In the realm of trauma-informed therapy, it's the stories of individuals like Michael that inspire and reaffirm our commitment to helping those on their journey toward healing. They also provide us with a way to cope with our own trauma by exploring these beneficial techniques together.