



# PROJECT HEAL

A community partnership  
to Help, Empower and Lead



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In the bustling streets of Casablanca, Morocco, Ali’s journey began as a testament to resilience and transformation that spans continents and confronts the shadows of a traumatic past. Ali remembers his earliest years fondly, “Before the divorce, my brother and I were extremely close to our father—unbreakably tight.” However, after his parents divorced, things quickly changed. Ali’s father, a successful businessman, cut off financial support to his mother and left Ali’s family to fend for themselves.

“My father practically severed ties with my mother. We sold everything to try and survive,” Ali recounts the struggle that ensued, oftentimes leaving Ali and his family on the streets. The divorce forced Ali’s mother to make a difficult choice—she left for America, promising to bring her children over once she could. Little did Ali know that the four years that followed would be among the most challenging of his childhood. “The abuse was predominantly towards my older brother and I,” Ali reveals, adding that his father’s remarriage and battle with alcoholism added layers of complexity to an already turbulent situation. After four long years, Ali and his brother were reunited with their mother in America, and while this brought hope, it also came with challenges. “Coming to America came with a lot of baggage, a lot of anger. A lot of triggers that I didn’t realize until time went on”. Despite attempts to forgive, historical issues within the family remained unaddressed. “Deep inside, there is this untold anger.



If we were at a big table with all the family, every family member that was involved in that Morocco to USA phase, everybody has a chapter of anger towards somebody else," Ali shares, underscoring the complexity of familial dynamics.

A turning point came with a near-fatal wake-up call that forced Ali to reassess his perspective. "When everybody tells you you're supposed to be dead, it was a wake-up call. I started looking at everything from a different perspective," he reveals. This moment of reckoning spurred Ali to focus his attention on other things. Business, faith, self-discovery. This led him to embark on a 17-year journey in business. Leading to the growth of several successful internet start-ups.

"I used to be able to control my emotions, as a business operator. In personal situations that avatar would take over the person. But that little kid inside me would be getting upset, the tank would start to fill," Ali confesses. The breaking point came in an explosive outburst, witnessed by his son—a stark reminder of the impact of unresolved trauma.

After seeking support from his primary doctor and revealing his history of violence in childhood, Ali was eventually referred to Project HEAL. "I was very skeptical coming here in the beginning," he admits. "Eventually, Krista, my therapist won me over." Through trauma-informed therapy, Ali gained a profound sense of awareness and shed self-blame for the traumatic experiences of his youth. In addition to his therapy, Ali began training in mixed martial arts.

In our last newsletter, the 5-4-3-2-1 grounding method was highlighted by Krista Peoples, Ali's trauma-informed therapist. This method was employed during Ali's treatment process and helped him reduce the urge to drift and shrink into these historical moments of trauma, where he would have feelings of being a scared boy in Morocco again.

"In addition to the treatment here, mixed martial arts has made me feel physically empowered for the first time in my life," Ali shares. "Martial arts have allowed me to stand up for myself." This newfound strength manifested in an amateur MMA tournament, where Ali faced not only opponents but also symbolic representations of those who had hurt him in the past. "My family has never shown up for me," Ali reveals. However, during the MMA tournament, "my entire family showed up for me for the first time in my life." This moment of collective support, combined with months of therapy and martial arts training, became a celebration of healing.

"It felt amazing. It was a healing moment," Ali expresses, reflecting on the culmination of his journey. "I'm in a good place in my life right now." Grateful for his Project HEAL therapist Krista, Ali's story stands as an inspiring testament to the power of therapy, self-discovery, and the healing potential of embracing one's past.

For Ali, every piece of his remarkable journey is woven into the tapestry of resilience—a narrative that encapsulates the strength to turn adversity into triumph, reclaim one's narrative, and find peace while still carrying the past.

## HOLIDAY WELLNESS BRUNCHES FOR ALL



Project HEAL and Elevate recognize that the holidays can be quite triggering for those who have experienced trauma. In order to meet the needs of their clients, Project HEAL and Elevate, with their strong partnership with Triumphant Life Church, organized two Holiday Wellness Brunches, where the focus was on healthy relationship building and the importance of self-care. One brunch took place for the adults served through Project HEAL, and another took place for the youth served through Elevate.

During Project HEAL's brunch, clients and their families were able to share a hot meal, practice self-care by creating their own candles, and receive much-needed emergency winter clothing items needed to stay warm. In addition, Project HEAL facilitated an internal toy and clothing drive. This gave the Project HEAL clients with children the ability to give their children a gift this holiday season, something that relieved a great deal of stress for them.

This event would not have been possible without the unwavering support of our community partners, MacroBites and The Candle Social. MacroBites supplied the delicious food for the event, while The Candle Social assisted the clients in making their own candles with the use of natural products and essential oils. This allowed the clients to have a safe space to nourish their bodies and minds.

"What took me aback was the kindness. I'm just so grateful that there are organizations like this that actually help people in need when the struggle is real," expressed Dawn, one of the clients. She continued, "I was given a couple of jackets, one for my grandson, one for my daughter. And just some toys to put under the tree for the kids on Christmas. The grits were amazing."



Elevate also hosted a holiday wellness brunch at the Brick House Tavern in Neptune, NJ. Here, the youth served by Elevate and their families were able to enjoy a hot meal in a safe and fun environment. While the adolescents were able to engage with one another and the Elevate staff, their parents and guardians took the opportunity to mingle. "It's heartening to see our clients and their families enjoying themselves at events like the holiday brunch. These experiences truly highlight the spirit of support and care that defines Elevate," said Katiera McMillon, Elevate Program Coordinator.

Each Elevate client left with a Wellness Basket, thoughtfully curated to enhance their well-being during the holiday season. These baskets included confidence-building reading materials, poppens, colored pencils, stress balls, Dr. Teals bathroom calming accessories (lotions, creams, and bath balms), hot chocolate kits, hand-held massagers, and comfortable blankets. Elevate Clinical Therapist Steve Billingsly was also present, adding, "As a clinical therapist, I find immense value in the social aspect of events like the holiday brunch. It adds a layer of joy and connection that complements the therapeutic journey our clients are on."

## MEET THE TEAM: DOMONIQUE WILSON



Project HEAL is happy to introduce Domonique Wilson, the newest member of the Project HEAL family. Domonique is our dedicated Mental Health Specialist, whose homegrown journey from Neptune, NJ, reflects resilience, determination, and a passion for making a difference. Domonique's childhood in Neptune, straddling the border with Asbury Park, instilled in her a unique perspective, growing up "down the hill," where challenges were plenty, but community bonds ran deep. Navigating through adolescence and unexpected motherhood at 16, Domonique's trajectory was altered with the intervention of a supportive high school guidance counselor. "My counselor told me, 'Girl, you gotta do better. You have a baby now to take care of. Let's get a plan going and get your stuff together,'" she recalls.

After graduating from Monmouth University with a degree in social work, Domonique obtained a case manager position, which ended abruptly due to unprofessionalism within the agency, leaving her disenchanted with the field. However, a few odd jobs later, she found her way back into social work, eventually joining Project HEAL. Describing Project HEAL as a breath of fresh air, Domonique notes the positive work environment and the team's unwavering dedication. "The work environment in Project HEAL is a big difference from what I've been used to. It's completely positive. This is the healthiest environment of a job that I've been in," she shares.

In her role as a Mental Health Specialist, Domonique has not only met expectations but exceeded them. Case management numbers have nearly doubled since her arrival, showcasing the impact she makes in violence intervention work. Domonique's commitment extends beyond numbers; she genuinely enjoys connecting with clients. "I like my clients here. Just something as simple as sitting down and having a conversation and letting them be themselves for a little while," she says.



Domonique's time at Project HEAL has also ignited a personal drive for further education and professional growth. Witnessing colleagues expand their credentials has motivated her to pursue certifications like her LCSW. Her overarching goal? To expand within the field, grow with Project HEAL, and contribute to every person's journey towards healing from trauma.

## EMPOWERING PARENTS: BRIDGING GAPS FOR AT-RISK YOUTH



**K**atiera McMillon, Program Coordinator for Elevate, has introduced a Parent Group to address a significant gap identified in programs serving at-risk youth. Noting limited interaction between parents/guardians and Peer Specialists, the initiative seeks to extend support beyond the youth's immediate environment. "Our Parent Group acts as a bridge, ensuring the positive changes we instill in youth extend seamlessly into their home environment," said McMillon. This recognition underscores the importance of incorporating parents into the support system, ensuring that the positive changes implemented with the youth are also integrated at home.

The Parent Group, which typically meets via Zoom, offers a monthly platform for parents to express themselves freely, share advice, and gain insights into their children's progress. With active participation from approximately 4-5 parents each session, the meetings delve into topics chosen based on positive youth changes, common concerns/behaviors observed among clients, and specific needs/concerns voiced by parents. Topics covered so far include realistic consequences, family dynamics, and communication, creating a supportive community guided by Katiera McMillon.

If you or somebody you know is struggling as a parent with a child who might be at risk for violence, do not hesitate to reach out to Project HEAL to get you in touch with its Elevate program. **732-897-8190**

## SUSTAINED SUPPORT: MURPHY PLEDGES FURTHER FUNDING FOR CBVI ORGANIZATIONS

**E**levate was one of 30 organizations across the state to be awarded grant funding to support Community-Based Violence Intervention Programs (CBVI) in December 2023. Governor Phil Murphy and Attorney General Matthew J. Platkin announced \$15 million in grant funding, which was made available through the State Fiscal Year 2024 Appropriations Act. This financial boost not only solidifies the organization's mission but also positions it to expand its reach and strengthen its initiatives in addressing the root causes of violence at the community level.



In 2021, the inception of the CBVI program marked a groundbreaking moment, with a \$10 million investment—the largest single contribution to community-based violence intervention and prevention in the state's history. Present CBVI funding stands as a pivotal element in the Murphy Administration's commitment to addressing the underlying factors of violent crime and enhancing public safety statewide.

The spectrum of services provided by CBVI includes street outreach, group and individual counseling, trauma recovery services, mentoring, career development, cognitive behavioral therapy, case management, after-school programming, and community referrals. CBVI grantees cater to school-age children at risk of violence, older youth aged 16 to 24, and adults facing a high risk of violence or victimization. Project HEAL was again awarded funding to continue their hospital-based violence intervention work, through funding awarded by the NJ Office of the Attorney General (NJOAG).

## NJ SUPPORT CONT.

Governor Phil Murphy expressed confidence in the success of the New Jersey Community-Based Violence Intervention program, emphasizing its impact in disrupting cycles of violence and supporting vulnerable survivors. Patricia Teffenhart, Executive Director of the Division of Violence Intervention and Victim Assistance (VIVA) within the NJOAG, highlighted the state's commitment to empowering communities with the skills and resources needed to interrupt cycles of violence. "With these grants, our network of service providers will continue to help create a safer New Jersey," said Teffenhart.

Project HEAL and Elevate extend heartfelt gratitude to Governor Murphy, Attorney General Platkin, the VIVA office, and everyone involved in sustaining this crucial violence intervention work.

## UNDERSTANDING EMPATHY

By Tracy A. Jones



**E**mpathy. The ability to understand and share the feelings of another person. It involves putting oneself in someone else's shoes, recognizing their emotions, and responding with compassion. Empathy enables individuals to connect with others on a deeper emotional level, fostering understanding and support in interpersonal relationships. In November 2020, I was the second employee hired by Project HEAL. I was working as an Access Service Representative supporting Jersey Shore University Medical Center's Surgical Services. Before coming to Hackensack Meridian Health, I worked for Catholic Charities in the Emergency and Community Services Department where we provided the residents of Ocean County with food, clothing, and shelter.

That's where I received my first taste of working with the emergent needs of people. I really enjoyed it. The assistance provided to the people was immediate and I enjoyed being part of a team that helped.

I often said if I could find a job with a small non-profit that had the stability of a large corporation, I would feel fulfilled professionally. Working for Project HEAL has provided me with the best of both worlds. It's so rewarding to work for a large company like Hackensack Meridian Health and support the community like a smaller nonprofit.

As the Secretary of Project HEAL, my voice is the first one clients hear representing our organization. My job requires a great deal of empathy and understanding for the clients who walk through the door. I've received a vast amount of training alongside our clinical staff that has afforded me the tools to properly navigate our clients and their trauma in a way that best supports the program and the team. When a client steps into the office of Project HEAL I welcome them warmly and make a connection so they're comfortable. Just like with you and I, some days are better than others so, I do this each and every time I connect with them. I want them to feel like they're always welcome and that we care about what they're going through each and every time they come.

My goal is to present the program like no other. Our staff is second to none. We all really care about helping people - that's the goal.