



# PROJECT HEAL

A community partnership  
to Help, Empower and Lead



*LATEST NEWS, UPDATES, & STORIES*



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Before Susan was a client of Project HEAL, her story began in Wayne, NJ. While her basic needs were met, emotionally, Susan did not always feel the love and affection she so desperately wanted and needed. Susan reflects, "We were taken care of growing up but there was not a lot of love in the house. It was just mechanics." While Susan states her parents did their best, she particularly struggled in her relationship with her father.

Susan describes her father as a former marine, whose time in the military left him with emotional scars that unfortunately affected their relationship. Coupled with his alcoholism, Susan's strained relationship with her father drastically impacted her perception of herself and overall self-worth, laying the foundation for her own struggles with alcohol in the years to come.

During her high school years, Susan was a cheerleader and maintained decent grades, but she identifies this time where she began to explore substances. Susan states, "I just loved to party. Smoking, drinking, you name it." The escape from reality that substances provided gave her relief. Susan's partying lifestyle continued into her young adulthood and it eventually caught up to her once she entered college. This strong desire took precedence over her studies and she eventually stopped attending classes altogether.



Her college dreams were abandoned as she fell into a cycle of partying and working odd jobs in the local college town. Susan began to utilize alcohol as a coping mechanism to deal with life's challenges.

Eventually, she was able to maintain a 9-year period of sobriety which allowed her to get back into school and obtain her degree in nursing. This led to a very promising career. However, it was not long before Susan's addiction began to resurface. The pain of feeling left out and the desire to be loved and liked took control. She confesses, "I had gotten comfortable and stopped going to meetings and I relapsed and drank myself out of the nursing profession." Her addiction disrupted her professional aspirations, causing her to lose the nursing career she had worked so hard to achieve.

Susan's life took a darker turn when violence entered her relationship. "Once the violence started, I just wanted to be drunk all the time. That was my life now." Living in a hotel, struggling financially, and battling her addiction, she felt trapped in a cycle of despair and dependency.

Amidst the darkness and struggles, Susan found a glimmer of hope when she sought help and entered therapy at Project HEAL. She acknowledges, "Some of the things I'm doing here at Project HEAL have been so life-altering." Through trauma-informed counseling and case management, Susan gained invaluable insights, discovering the deep-rooted trauma and flawed coping mechanisms that have shaped her behaviors. Susan expresses gratitude, stating, "I'm just so grateful; in one hour with Kristen, I'll get a tool that will help shape the rest of my life. And that is priceless."

Through perseverance, hard work, and the support of Project HEAL, Susan now stands as a testament to the power of resilience and the potential for growth and transformation. Her story serves as a reminder that even in the darkest moments, there is always hope for healing and a brighter tomorrow.



## PROJECT HEAL PARTICIPATES IN COREY BOOKER'S CVI SUMMIT



Senator Cory Booker invited the Project HEAL team to participate in a roundtable to discuss community violence intervention and prevention strategies. Dr Aakash Shah, Medical Director for Project HEAL, discussed how Hackensack Meridian Health treats violence as a public health issue and the key role that health systems and hospitals play in these efforts. "It is such an important voice to have," said Senator Booker, of the Project HEAL approach to community violence.

Project HEAL was one of four Community Violence Intervention and Prevention Initiatives (CVIPI) grant awardees, through the U.S. Department of Justice, to participate in Thursday's roundtable. This forum served as the final stop on Senator Booker's annual Summer Road Trip, a 7-day, 21-county tour through the State and was hosted in Newark, where Booker served as Mayor before becoming a U.S. Senator.



Newark Mayor Ras Baraka, building on Dr Shah's comments, emphasized treating violence as a public health issue and added that it is important to target interventions based on what the data in a particular city or municipality shows. Baraka compared this approach to how the State tackled the COVID-19 pandemic, arguing that violence should have the same focus and attention. Participants also talked about the key role that community trust and engagement plays in these efforts.

Also participating in the roundtable were members of the NJ Urban Mayors Association, including Perth Amboy Mayor Helmin Caba and Plainfield Mayor Andre Mapp, within HMMH's service area. Patricia Teffenhart, Executive Director of Division of Violence Intervention and Victim Assistance in the New Jersey Office of the Attorney General, also participated.

## PROJECT HEAL ELEVATES SURVIVORS' VOICES DURING NATIONAL CRIME VICTIMS' RIGHTS WEEK



In April 2023, Project HEAL hosted a transformative event that aimed to highlight their clients' voices and uplift their personal healing journeys. Hosted at the Blackbird Community Commons in Asbury Park, NJ, a welcoming local community space known for its inclusivity, the event offered a safe haven for survivors of violence to come together, connect, and share their stories. "Being a survivor of violence can cause a lot of embarrassment and shame, and it can be difficult to navigate different systems to find support," said Kristina Vander, Clinical Program Manager for Project HEAL, highlighting the importance of providing accurate information and creating a safe space for clients to open up.

From the moment clients arrived, they were warmly greeted by the Project HEAL staff they see week in and week out while on their healing journeys. Every client then received a gift bag with necessities and care items, symbolizing the program's care and appreciation for each individual. The heartwarming gesture set the tone for the day, making it clear that this gathering was truly about the clients and their experiences.

As the event went on, attendees were treated to a catered meal, creating an atmosphere of camaraderie and support over shared plates and meaningful conversations. The sounds of music floated in the air, adding to the sense of unity and celebration. Clients eagerly engaged in raffles, adding an element of excitement and joy to the occasion. Additionally, an activity table containing an array of scents allowed clients to craft their own room fragrances—a representation of reclaiming safety and control in their personal spaces. This was not possible without the support of a local, female, Black-owned business, The Candle Social.

The mingling aromas served as a testament to the resilience of those who had emerged from dark times and found solace in their growth. The true power of the event took place when Project HEAL clients found the courage to take the stage, step up to the microphone, and share their own personal stories of healing. As each client spoke, a sense of compassion, empathy, bravery, and community filled the room. The Project HEAL staff stood proudly by their sides, humbled to have been a part of their journeys.



## EVENT CONT.



"A friend told me, you need to go to Project HEAL. So I called, I came in, and I saw Kristen, my therapist, for 6 months, and she made me feel like I was good enough. And all anybody wants to be is good enough," shared Lisa, one of the attendees, whose words resonated deeply with those present. The collective experience of listening to the individual stories of pain that had been overcome by healing, left a profound impact on the hearts of those present, reinforcing the importance of providing a safe and supportive space for survivors to express themselves. "I got my CDL license and now I drive a bus for NJ Transit," shared Kim, one of Project HEAL's clients, whose journey served as an inspiring testament to the program's impact.

"Seeing their progress and hearing their stories, and the strength it takes to tell their stories, there is nothing like it," said Lisa McDermott, Project HEAL's Clinical Operations Manager, further emphasizing the significance of the event. The event's significance was further emphasized by the presence of the Monmouth County Prosecutor, Raymond S. Santiago, who shared words of encouragement and dedication to making the community safer for everyone. His heartfelt address resonated deeply with the attendees, underscoring the importance of collaboration between law enforcement and support programs.

As the sun set on this unforgettable day, it was evident that Project HEAL's event had etched a lasting impression on those in attendance. The celebration of resilience, the sharing of stories, and the spirit of togetherness instilled hope in every heart, leaving behind a shining testament to the power of community and healing. "In our hearts, we think survivors of violence should be recognized every week of every year," remarked Randy Scales, Case Management Supervisor for Project HEAL.

## MEET THE ELEVATE TEAM



Last year, Hackensack Meridian Health was awarded a \$500,000 grant from New Jersey's Office of the Attorney General to expand services further into the community to break the cycle of violence in Monmouth County. Project HEAL partnered with Triumphant Life Church and Montclair State University to launch Elevate, a community-based initiative that is coordinating with school districts and other community partners to engage with youth (ages 12-20) at risk of violence victimization and/or perpetration. The program is attempting to provide support, mentoring, counseling, and other resources for youth to engage in healthy alternatives to violence. Elevate has a team of individuals who live in the same communities they serve and have been personally impacted by violence, to make meaningful connections and instill hope that youth can make positive changes in their lives to achieve their goals.

**Katiera McMillion** is Elevate's new Program Coordinator. A native of Neptune, Katiera brings resilience and compassion to her role. Despite facing challenges and growing up in an area where crime was prevalent, she maintained a close bond with her family, especially her five brothers and one sister, who were all raised by her grandmother. Katiera's life took an unexpected turn when she became a mother while attending college and while she originally aspired to be a prosecutor after her best friend's tragic death, Katiera found her calling in social work, gaining a fresh perspective on addressing community violence.

After graduating from Rutgers with a degree in social work, she now aims to create a safe space for youth; providing resources, mentorship, and challenging stigmas surrounding mental health in the community. Katiera's unwavering commitment is driven by the desire to reach those experiencing "silent cries," offering support and hope for a brighter future. "What brought me to this work? Those 'silent cries'... they come from somewhere, some type of trauma. And that's where I want Elevate to help," she emphasized, hoping to guide youth away from harmful paths and embrace positive change.

**Steve Billingsley**, Elevate's Clinical Therapist, brings a wealth of experience and dedication to his role in transforming the lives of at-risk youth. As a Camden native, Steve faced challenges himself while growing up, including bullying within his neighborhood and in school. After graduating high school, Steve earned a bachelor's degree in Psychology from William Paterson University, pursued a master's degree in counseling at Rutgers, and later a master's in Social Work. Steve's journey led him to work with individuals with severe mental illness before transitioning to work specifically with at-risk youth. When Steve joined Elevate as a Clinical Therapist, he played a collaborative role in helping build the program in its early stages to ensure it meets the needs of the community.

## MEET THE TEAM CONT.



Now a full-time resident in Asbury Park, Steve passionately strives to expand Elevate's reach and make a profound impact on the lives of the youth, guiding them toward the future they envision for themselves. "I'm happy to be part of a team that is helping to change the outcomes for some of these youth and put them on a different path moving forward," he expresses, exemplifying the heart and soul he invests in Elevate's mission.

**Lovester Wright**, Elevate's Peer Specialist, also began his journey in Neptune, NJ. After tragically losing his father at the age of 5, Lovester faced challenges that led him down a troubled path. As a teenager, he began hanging out with older kids and was introduced to drugs. This eventually led to becoming involved with drug dealers and multiple incarcerations from there. However, during his last prison sentence, Lovester found redemption within a therapeutic community program, where he made a conscious decision to change his mindset and put in the work to better himself. His transformation inspired him to become a Peer Specialist for Elevate in order to use his lived experience to help change the outcome for someone else.

Embracing accountability, Lovester acknowledges his role in contributing to community challenges and passionately seeks to empower at-risk youth, sharing his story of redemption and hope. "I'm definitely part of the reason that our community is the way it is and I'm taking accountability for my actions. So now I'm looking to play a bigger part to fix it," he asserts, envisioning a future where Elevate touches the lives of countless young individuals, offering them a path to positive change and healthier alternatives. Lovester's commitment to community engagement extends beyond his role as a Peer Specialist. He actively organizes food and clothing drives and provides support to those in need; embodying the transformation he wishes to see in the world.

## JSUMC TRAUMA PREVENTION PARTNERS WITH PROJECT HEAL FOR ANNUAL GUN VIOLENCE AWARENESS EVENT

By Tracy Nerney, BS, MMBA, RN



**G**un Violence Prevention Awareness Day is a significant occasion that focuses on creating awareness about the profound impact of gun violence on individuals, families, and communities, while also advocating for crucial measures to prevent and reduce such tragic incidents. At Jersey Shore University Medical Center (JSUMC), this day holds particular importance, as the Trauma Injury Prevention Department takes the initiative to host an event aimed at fostering understanding and change. Our message is that **Better Recognition, Response, and Referral** may help to save those who might become victims of gun violence. The goal every year is to provoke emotion with our display.

## GUN VIOLENCE AWARENESS EVENT CONT.

If we can get our team and our community members to feel the impact of the number of lives lost daily, we can then direct them to our resource tables to learn how we can all make a difference. The impactful art display titled "91 of US"®, created by my daughter, Caileigh Nerney in 2017, powerfully represents the staggering number of lives lost daily to gun violence. The visual installation featured 57 red T-shirts symbolizing the number of people who die by suicide, 32 blue T-shirts for those lost to homicide, and two yellow T-shirts for unintentional shooting victims. These percentages have remained the same since 2017. Additionally, unmarked chairs illustrate the increasing death toll, which escalated from 91 in 2017 when 91 of US® was created, to 134 fatalities per day today.

Examining the data between January 2016 and August 2019, it becomes evident that JSUMC treated a total of 408 violent injuries, including 84 injuries caused by firearms. This stark reality underscores the urgent need for continued efforts in gun violence prevention.

At this year's event, Project HEAL partnered with JSUMC to provide crucial support. Eight educational topics were highlighted, bringing team member volunteers together with other community agencies such as the Society for the Prevention of Teen Suicide and the Neptune Police who taught about safe gun handling. JSUMC staff and community partners joined to offer resources and demonstrate solidarity in the collective fight against gun violence. One highlight of the event was Project HEAL's interactive board, where attendees could share ideas on how citizens could actively contribute to reducing gun violence in their communities. Lisa McDermott, Clinical Operations Manager for Project HEAL, commented that the feedback received and the participation was remarkable. The board produced a wide array of suggestions and it resulted in some meaningful dialogue not just with our staff but amongst attendees as well.



Our Trauma Team works diligently to save lives after someone in our community is shot. Our Trauma Injury Prevention program is all about identifying those at risk and working with as many of our local partners as possible to reduce those risks. We very much appreciate that Project HEAL has become our strongest partner in the 91 of US® event every year. We appreciate all that Project HEAL has done for the community and we enjoy collaborating with them wherever our Trauma Injury Prevention Program can join forces to. I also appreciate Caileigh welcoming us to use the program and artwork that she created to make a difference.

Gun Violence Prevention Awareness Day serves as a crucial reminder that we all have a role to play in making our communities safer. By fostering open dialogues, supporting sensible gun laws, and engaging in preventive efforts, we move closer to a future where the devastating impact of gun violence can be reduced. Together, let us advocate for change, honor the lives lost, and work tirelessly to create a world where gun violence is but a distant memory.