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National Alliance on Mental Illness

Mercer MESSENGER

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NAMIWalks Mercer County, May 20, 2023



By Elizabeth Kepniss
Director of Development

All aboard! Are you ready to “Seas the Day” at NAMI-Walks Mercer County? Gather your friends to create a team for our Saturday, May 20, event at West Lake Park in Robbinsville.

NAMIWalks Mercer 2023, co-chaired by Board members Stephanie McCarthy and Courtney Davis, is the largest mental health awareness-raising event in our area and NAMI Mercer's biggest fundraiser.

Since all our programs and services are offered at no charge so that cost will not be a barrier to participation, we rely heavily on philanthropic giving and the revenue raised

through our fundraising events. Your peer-to-peer fundraising efforts support our services year-round.

Register online today at www.namiwalks.org/mercercounty; there is no fee to participate in the event. Contact walk@namimercer.org or call 609-799-8994, ext. 13, for help with registration or setting up your fundraising page.

Are you a captain helping your crew navigate their way to mental health for all? Then save the date for our Walk Kickoff and Captain Information Session on Monday, April 3, at 6:00 pm. Invitations with full event details will be sent at a later date.

Join the crew and spread the word that you are ready to “Seas” the day by walking for mental health on May 20.

Compelling Conversations Goes on the Road

NAMI Mercer brought Compelling Conversations to the Presbyterian Church of Dutch Neck on January 26. The objective of this new program is to break the code of shame and silence about mental illness through open dialog between volunteer “communicators” (persons whose lives have been affected by mental illness) and small groups of participants.

Our three communicators on January 26 were Amanda Buchner (above), Rob Dolnick (right),



and Tom Pyle (far right). Amanda spoke about living with generalized anxiety disorder. Rob and Tom shared personal stories about their sons with mental illness.



Special thanks to Rev. Jan Willem van der Werff and Adult Education Co-chair David Redman for hosting our program at their church.

Executive Director's Message

Saying YES to the NEW



Janet Haag

It is hard to believe we are already two months into the new year, but here we are. There are some definite benefits to “new” — to fresh starts, blank pages, and wide-open days stretching in front of us. Being adventurous is invigorating. New opportunities invite us to overcome our fear of the unknown and tap into our creativity. I encourage all of us to try something new in 2023. We might be pleasantly surprised at what unfolds and how much a unique experience can enhance our sense of wellbeing.

This brings me to NAMI Mercer and our innovations for 2023. To address several specific health issues, we have introduced a series of support groups that we call “affinity” groups.

The Empathy Network meets in person twice a month and is directed toward those who are affected by depression.

Mending Mindsets now meets virtually once a week, for those coping with anxiety.

Weight Is Not Worth is back, reconceived as a mini-support series for six weeks, starting on March 1.

Other 2023 initiatives

Story Share: Wisdom from Experience, recently introduced by one of our interns at Meadow Lakes, is a group for seniors, inviting them to reminisce, share good mem-

ories, and address issues like grief and loss. We will launch another group at the Hamilton Senior Center in June.

Working on Wellness (WOW) is about to start in March with a new corporate partner. WOW is a new employee support group that fosters mental health in the workplace.

Compelling Conversations, received with rave reviews at its premiere during Harvest of Hope, is being offered in response to new invitations from various community groups. Compelling Conversations enables small groups of participants to engage in open dialog with persons whose lives have been affected by mental illness.

Collaboration for Caring Communities is a new outreach initiative in Trenton that we are undertaking with support from our wonderful partner, Janssen.

Finally, with a generous grant from the Bunbury Fund, we are embarking on a new strategic planning process. You will be hearing more on this front in the coming months.

All this is to say, we are alive and well at NAMI Mercer! Your confidence, support, and involvement in saying YES to new experiences, ideas, challenges, and opportunities has put us on a path of growth. The proverb, “fortune favors the bold” seems particularly appropriate as we continue to push the limits of what is achievable when it comes to mental health and wellbeing for all – in 2023 and beyond.

Nerds for NAMI

For the sixth successive year, Andrew Agress organized a “Nerds for NAMI” telethon in memory of his mother Kathie Formoso, who was a NAMI Mercer volunteer for many years. Thirty-two donors contributed a total of \$1,182, making this year’s event the most successful Nerds for NAMI so far.

The online fundraiser, which had 293 viewers, was held for 24 consecutive hours from Saturday, November 12 at 8 pm (EST) to Sunday, November 13 at 8 pm. The production team comprised fifteen persons from New York, San Diego, Los Angeles, Miami, Chicago, and Seoul, South Korea.

The theme for Nerds for NAMI VI was “Gobble Ghouls,” since the fundraiser took place between Halloween and Thanksgiving. Online activities included Halloween/Thanksgiving trivia, fanfiction reading, a Garfield talk, pumpkin pie polymer food-making, dramatic bunny readings, autumnal-embodied meditation, cosplay, sketch

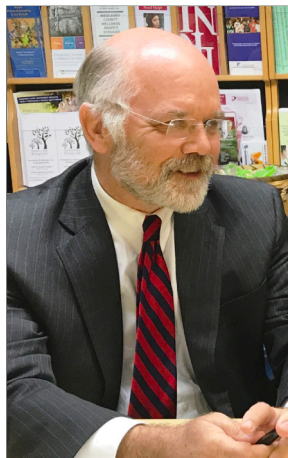


comedy, a murder mystery, and Jeopardy for non-celebrities, along with several fall-themed video games.

Andrew conceived the fundraising idea when he was a senior at Brandeis University majoring in theater arts and history.

Andrew recently earned his MFA degree in Dramaturgy from Columbia University.

What is Happening to Our Children?



Believe it or not, this is my fourth and final year as your NAMI Mercer president. At 70 years of age, I am a man who has been buttressed and battered by many life experiences and the insights they yield. At this marked time of my life, many thoughts about the state of our society's mental health are flooding my mind. Maybe you have similar thoughts?

The COVID lockdown's effects on children: My friend is a third-grade teacher. After two

years of "Zoom School," his students are now in class for the first time, and they are having a lot of trouble adjusting. The children can't settle down or focus, and their socialization skills are retarded. This extreme deprivation of early-age school time may result in mental health deficits for an entire generation.

Social media's effects on youth psychology: Social psychologist Jonathan Haidt expresses alarm at the mental health effects of social media and smartphones on Generation Z. Not only are youth anxiety and depression soaring (especially among girls), but the use of electronic devices is widening our typical generation gap into a chasm. Haidt expects a continued decline in education, income, religiosity, marriages, families, friendships, and civic engagement. These effects on society's mental wellness could likewise be enormous.

Unmanaged immigration's effects on mental health services: Forbes Magazine recently reported that in 2022, U.S. border authorities encountered more than 2 million unlawful migrants. Surely the strain of such large numbers of unplanned and unprocessed immigrants, many also mentally traumatized, will overwhelm the already insufficient social infrastructure resources vital to American families currently battling mental illness, such as low-cost community housing, mental health facilities, and Medicaid funding for psychiatry, just to name a few. How are we to serve these migrants and the communities receiving them given our already inadequate resources? What is to be done to address this potential mental health care system crisis?

Paternal absenteeism's effects on family mental health: The National Fatherhood Initiative (NFI) reports that 18.4 million children (1 in 4) currently have no biological, step, or adoptive father at home with potentially devastating effects on their mental wellbeing. NFI says that children raised in a father-absent home experience:

- four times greater risk of poverty
- more behavioral problems and greater likelihood to abuse drugs and alcohol
- more propensity to commit crimes and go to jail

- a seven-fold increased likelihood for teen pregnancy
- two times greater risk of obesity
- twice the probability of dropping out of school.

The inevitable devastating effects on the wellbeing of affected loved ones and their families are self-evident.

Legalized cannabis's effects on those with schizophrenia: Recently, New Jersey legalized recreational marijuana. Informed by my graduate education in Psychiatric Rehabilitation and a plethora of research literature, I believe this is an exceptionally bad idea for individual, family, and community mental health. For users battling schizophrenia and other psychotic illnesses, legalizing recreational use of a psychoactive substance like marijuana is like holding a lit match near a barrel of gasoline. And how about the impact of this additional health risk on caregivers—the long-suffering family members and the already fragile and highly stressed mental health care system?

"Victim" identity's effects on mental illness recovery: In a departure from classical liberalism, in which personal identity is based on human dignity, equality and potential, today's intense identity politics centers identity on ideological and secular concepts of power and oppression and group associations by race and gender. It causes many to view themselves as victims.

Whatever its philosophical basis, the concept of victim as an identity is antithetical to good mental illness treatment. Psychiatric rehabilitation holds that individuals with psychiatric disabilities can achieve recovery based on their personal agency, empowerment, and self-directed and supported adaptation. Viewing themselves as victims is profoundly unhelpful since it leads some to regard their illnesses as intrinsic aspects of their identity and therefore untreatable. Loved ones and their family members should always hope—and work—to be victors, not victims, in the battle against mental illness.

What is to be done? As loved ones, family members, and mental health advocates, we have a lot of work before us this year and beyond. Our world may seem ever more stressful and our culture ever more contentious with detrimental effects on mental wellness. Thus, we of NAMI Mercer, with firm resolve and enduring hope, must remain radically inclusive and nonjudgmental supporters and advocates for everyone navigating mental illness.

In 2022, the Bureau of Labor Statistics projected that employment for substance abuse, behavioral disorder and mental health professionals will grow 23% from 2020 to 2030, which is much faster than the average for all other occupations.

“A Need for Integrated Behavioral Health Services in Long-Term Care Facilities”

by Dr. Sharon S. Joag, Master's Student in Social Work at Columbia University

As a podiatrist with my own private practice from 2002 to 2022, I also provided coordinated care for the elderly in skilled nursing facilities (SNFs). During my regular visits, I got to know my patients quite well. I realized that I was spending more time just talking to them about their day, their lives, and their families than caring for their feet. While I performed my examination and nail debridement, my patients would share their personal stories.

Even prior to COVID, many of my patients expressed how lonely they were since moving into the SNF. Some left their single-family homes because they were no longer able to live independently; others moved to be closer to their children. They missed their families, and they missed their communities. If they shared a room in the SNF, they sometimes complained about their roommates as well as the difficulty of making new friends.

Others said that it was hard for their family members to visit because of the distance and their busy schedules. Many were depressed about the changes in their lives. Although there were some organized activities at the SNFs, residents felt deflated and not motivated to join in the group activities.

I would ask my elderly patients if they had spoken to their primary care physician about their unhappiness; most said that they did not because they forgot or because their interactions with the doctors were quick, and there often was a line of others waiting to see them. When I inquired if there were a clinical social worker, psychiatrist, or psychologist to provide counseling services, the nurses and staff said they were doing their best to accommodate the patients.

I could see that there were inadequate behavioral health protocols and programs in place for individuals with diagnosed mental health disorders. Sadly, the undiagnosed patients were left untreated.

The bottom line is that there was no behavioral health specialist apart from the psychiatrist who prescribed medications to those with severe mental illness in the Memory



Care Unit. All nursing home patients should be screened by a behavioral health specialist on a regular basis, but this does not happen in most nursing homes. Doctors from different specialties need to communicate and collaborate with one another to create a plan to care for the whole person. This is especially true when considering the complexity of treating the elderly and the interrelationship between physical and mental health in the aging population.

As a physician, I wanted to learn more about mental health and the mental health system. I felt that studying the field of social work would give me the knowledge to interact more effectively with my patients, to work for systemic change, and to make a real difference in the lives of people in long-term care facilities. Therefore, I started my journey to attain my master's degree in Social Work (MSW) at Columbia University in September 2021.

I am currently doing a one-year internship at NAMI Mercer, assisting with outreach events, volunteering on the Helpline and co-facilitating the “Hearing Voices” and “Mending Mindsets” support groups.

I am also piloting a group for older adults called, “Story-Share: Wisdom from Experience.” This group provides a safe and supportive space for elders to share their memories and past experiences to improve their cognitive function as well as receive emotional support and stress relief.

As an advocate for improving the lives of older Americans living in long-term care facilities, I propose the following policy changes:

Policy Change #1: ALL long-term facilities should have a team of mental health professionals.

Policy Change #2: Integrate medical and behavioral services by facilitating communication and collaboration among healthcare providers for each patient. Implement a multi-disciplinary provider team that meets on a regular basis to discuss the health care issues of specific patients who have diagnosed mental illness and/or who have declining mental health status.

By implementing these changes, doctors will become more efficient, and older Americans living in SNFs will have a better quality of life. We owe this to our parents and grandparents.

Interview with New Board Member Olive M. Joseph Giles

By David McNair
NAMI Mercer Volunteer

On January 4, 2023, I had the opportunity to interview NAMI Mercer's newest Board member, Olive M. Joseph Giles. Musician, educator, and advocate, Olive found NAMI Mercer ten years ago when her son suffered a mental health crisis. He is doing much better now and taking steps to enter the medical field. Olive's favorite quotation rings true: "You were raised with unconditional love by mujeres guerreras/women warriors. You can be your full self. You can heal. And, you do."

MCNAIR: How did you find out about NAMI Mercer?

GILES: My husband Michael and I were introduced to NAMI Mercer through a friend, Karen K., who happened to be the mother of my son's co-worker. Our son developed a mental illness during his first semester in college. We were unaware of his illness when the college sent him home. After a difficult time readjusting, he was admitted to a mental health institution. At that time, I did not have any experience with the mental health system and was not given good guidance by my son's initial practitioners. No longer a college student, my son did not have health insurance. After my first NAMI Mercer IFSS Family Support Group meeting, I was floored by the number of people going through similar issues with their loved ones and the amount of support provided to and by everyone. There truly is strength in numbers. This experience validated what we were going through. Once we settled in, NAMI Mercer felt like being at home.

MCNAIR: What made you want to become a Board member?

GILES: I have a strong sense of activism and am enthusiastic about supporting all of NAMI Mercer's programs by attending as many classes and events as possible. Serving on the Board allows me to bring my experience and perspective as a caregiver to a different level. Being on the Board also aligns with my desire to advocate and teach about mental illness through public education and legislation to aid my local community.

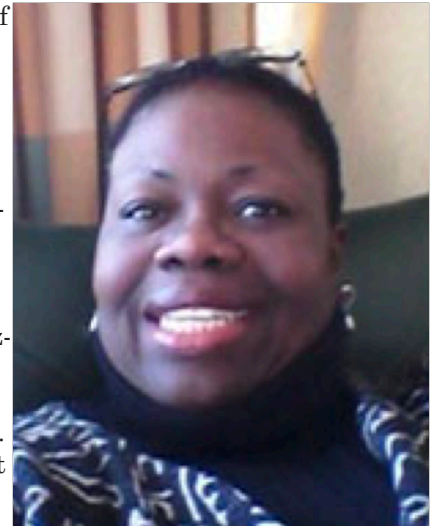
MCNAIR: What are your goals as a member of the Board?

GILES: As a Board member, I want to connect the dots—to bring the resources of NAMI Mercer to the places where there are gaps in education and care. Public schools need the support that NAMI can provide to both students and staff. We all go through difficult times, and everyone needs to acknowledge that mental illness is real. Instead of fearing it, we need to understand it and learn about all the resources that are available to help us.

MCNAIR: As a member of the NAMI Mercer family for over five years, what resonates the most with you?

GILES: When I returned from my first NAMI Mercer

meeting, I was in awe of the guidance and information shared and the relationships among staff, volunteers, and fellow participants. Absolutely everyone is empathetic and brings something to the table to help others to solve their mental health puzzle. In some cultures, mental health is never discussed or recognized. We can pray for comfort but cannot pray the situation away. We have to put mental health on the table, discuss it, work with our loved ones, and let them know that it's not anyone's fault. Removing the stigma would go a long way to make our mental health discussions more meaningful and productive.



Olive Giles

MCNAIR: What attracted you to working in the field of education in your professional life?

GILES: I have always had a great love for learning new things, sharing information, reading and research, and teaching others. There were a lot of books in my childhood home, and I began reading at three years old. My parents are from the Caribbean, and although they didn't have higher education, they valued it greatly. (My father was able to converse in five languages.) I would be a professional student all day, every day, if I could.

MCNAIR: What are some of your personal interests?

GILES: My personal interests include reading, learning about different cultures, travelling, and music. I started playing the piano at age three, learned the clarinet at age nine and the French horn at 13. I attended gifted and talented schools in New York, including a specialized arts high school. While in college, I majored in music composition and vocals. I have always believed that music helps the community to come together.

MCNAIR: Who inspires you and why?

GILES: My late parents still keep me going. They gave me words of wisdom I truly use as a resource in my life. When I was three, my parents introduced me to my music teacher, Professor Wilson, who was the first black professor at The Julliard School. His teachings and lessons also inspire me. Today, I am motivated by my dear husband (he is also a musician), along with our two sons and our grandchildren. Like NAMI, we are all better together than alone.

Night Out with NAMI Remembered



From left: Rob Johnson, Kim Deal, Natalya Johnson, Zoleene Hill, Squire Servance, James Gee.



From left: Barbara and David Livezey.



From left: Laurie Gordon, Tanya Luddy, Jill Sutton, Michelle Santoro.



Seated (l to r) Cathy Pike, Madeline Monheit, Jacalyn Chadwick. Standing (l to r): Rita Pepperman, Charlene Green, William Agress, Lucretia Davis, Danita Saunders-Davis.

After two years of virtual galas and more challenges than we care to remember, Night Out with NAMI was once again IN PERSON! NAMI Mercer staff, volunteers, and supporters gathered on Sunday evening, November 6, 2022, at The Boathouse at Mercer Lake for a Venetian ball-themed murder mystery dinner: Midnight at the Masquerade.

Attendees, transported (in their imagination) to the canals of Venice, enjoyed an Italian feast and the theatrics of The Mystery Co. Dressed in our finest, friends worked together to solve the “who done it?” while supporting NAMI Mercer.

Night Out with NAMI was also an opportunity to honor the mental health champions who make a real difference in the community. A top legislative insider, NAMI Mercer friend, supporter, and past president, Jason Redd received the NAMI Mercer Pillar Award for his longstanding com-

mitment to advancing our mission. NAMI Mercer’s Visionary Award was presented to Assemblywoman Verlina Reynolds-Jackson for her outstanding dedication to mental health advocacy and her support of our organization.

Thank you to our 2022 Night Out with NAMI sponsors:
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Sherlock Holmes Sponsors
New Brunswick Development Corporation
The NJ State Policemen's Benevolent Association
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NAMI Mercer 2022 Awardees

Visionary Awardee — Verlina Reynolds-Jackson

At “Night Out with NAMI” on November 6 at the Boathouse at Mercer Lake, NAMI Mercer paid tribute to the Honorable Verlina Reynolds Jackson. She received the organization’s 2022 Visionary Award for leveraging her position of leadership in the NJ State Assembly to set an example for increasing awareness, promoting understanding, and improving the lives of people affected by mental illness.

For the past four years, Verlina has represented the 15th Legislative District. Like our NAMI affiliate, most of Verlina’s 225,000 constituents live in Mercer County, an ethnically and economically diverse community. No matter our differences, we are all vulnerable to mental illness. Verlina understands this challenge and has used her political power to increase awareness, reduce stigma, and increase mental health services.

She has sponsored multiple mental health-related bills, including:

- Creating a Crisis Response Support Program to make mental health services available to police responding to mental health emergencies.
- Requiring public school instruction in suicide prevention in grades kindergarten through 12.
- Requiring each school district to report on the number of mental health professionals and school safety specialists they employ.



Mercer County Prosecutor Angelo Onofri, Executive Director Janet Haag, Jason Redd, Representative Verlina Reynolds-Jackson, NOWN Chair and Board Member Michelle Santoro.

- Changing the term “postpartum depression” to “perinatal mood disorders.”

Grateful as we are for Verlina’s legislative advocacy, NAMI Mercer recognizes her strong personal commitment to the mission of our organization. A Walk participant since 2018, Verlina formed her own team this year, “The Blue Stars,” attended the kickoff in March, and braved the scorching heat on May 21 to deliver an inspiring speech at the Walk in Robbinsville. Verlina’s passion and dedication to our cause came through loud and clear. She is a beautiful person both inside and out. We were happy to bestow her with this honor.

Pillar Awardee — Jason Redd

On November 6, 2022, Jason (Jay) Redd became NAMI Mercer’s 11th Pillar awardee for his extraordinary, long-term contribution to the organization’s mission through volunteerism, leadership, advocacy, and charitable giving.

An accomplished attorney and dedicated community leader, Jay was elected to the NAMI Mercer Board of Trustees in June 2013. He served through 2021 even after relocating to Washington DC. As Board president from 2017-2018, he helped to navigate some very difficult challenges to our organization.

Jay’s two passions have been raising awareness about mental health and fundraising. Over the years, Jay has played a very active role in shaping creative and exciting ways to “stomp out stigma” and to raise money for our annual NAMI Walks Mercer County. Over the years, Jay has raised an amazing \$32,702 for NAMI Mercer.

Jay has consistently engaged his network by dressing up in fun-themed costumes, including:

- Wearing a fancy bright orange tuxedo on Walk Day and on the NJ State Senate floor;
- Roaming different events dressed as a huge NAMI shark and sending out videos over social media;

- Posing as Alexander Hamilton and making numerous stops in Mercer County with his dog Jackson.

Jay came to the Board with a demonstrated history of successfully working in and with government at all levels. In 2021, he and James Gee co-founded Stono Public Affairs (named for a 1739 slave rebellion in South Carolina).

According to its website, “the most powerful voices in any public policy debate are the very communities most impacted,” and Stono’s mission is to amplify the voices of the community.

Jay gained wide experience with political strategy, legislative advice, issue advocacy, and consensus building as senior counselor to Senate President Steve Sweeney, deputy executive director of and general counsel to the Senate Majority Office, chief of staff to Senate Majority Leader Loretta Weinberg, associate counsel to Assembly Speaker Joe Roberts, and deputy policy director for Jon Corzine’s 2009 gubernatorial re-election campaign.

Redd earned a Bachelor’s degree in Public Health from Rutgers University (where he was president of the student body), a Master’s in City and Regional Public Planning (MCRP) from the Rutgers University Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy, and a Juris Doctorate from the Brigham Young University J. Reuben Clark Law School.

NAMI Mercer Outreach at Community Wellness Events

Next Generation Festival

Grace Cathedral Fellowship Ministries, Trenton - July 16, 2022
(150 participants)

The festival featured many activities including music, a bounce house, a large water slide, face painting, and a food truck serving free food to attendees. We joined other organizations in distributing literature about many services for youth in the community.



Danita Saunders-Davis, Shivam Nangia, Liz Kepniss

Back-to-School Extravaganza

Trenton Board of Education - August 26, 2022 (500 participants)

During this outdoor event, school staff and community agencies gave away school supplies, uniforms, and more. Health screenings and vaccines were available. Marching bands and dancers were on hand to entertain the children, who had a chance to meet their teachers. It was a good opportunity for us to promote our programs and services. (Volunteers not shown in photo: Frances Lochen and Julie Reyes.)



Morgan Ongradi



Julie Reyes and Raye-Ann Quarcoopme

Rehoboth Pentecostal Church 50th Anniversary

Rehoboth Pentecostal Church, Trenton - August 27, 2022 (100 participants)

In celebration of its 50th anniversary, the church gave away back-to-school supplies, provided food and entertainment for kids, as well as health screenings. Families stopped by our table to learn more about what NAMI Mercer has to offer the community. (Volunteers not shown in photo: Brenda Blanc and Andrew Fan.)

Hopping Back into the New Year

Klockner Elementary School, Hamilton – September 1, 2022 (90 participants)

Students and their families were able to meet school staff, build connections, receive information on community resources while having fun in a safe and friendly environment. NAMI intern Julie Reyes and volunteer Stephanie Chiaralanzo were on hand to reach out to the community about our organization.

Lawrence Library Community Outreach Event

Lawrence Library, Lawrenceville – September 15, 2022 (15 participants)
Our volunteers raised awareness about our programs and how to join in.



Frances Lochen and Jennifer Del Rosario

Cadwalader Park Fall Fest

Cadwalader Park, Trenton – September 29, 2022 (400 participants)

The festival included crafts, a talent show, and multiple vendors. Our volunteers were able to raise awareness about mental illness and to familiarize attendees with NAMI Mercer.



Deidre Grier, Katie Faure, Jennifer Del Rosario



Lucretia Davis and Sharon Joag

Janssen Pharmaceuticals Mental Health Salon

Janssen Headquarters, Titusville – October 12, 2022 (500 participants)

This was a peer-led event which highlighted mental illness in the workplace. We displayed tools that consumers have used to overcome their struggles. It was an effective outreach opportunity for NAMI Mercer to educate Janssen employees about mental health. (Volunteers not shown in photo: Mia Gomes and Lindsay Bishop)

Heart to Hearts Inc. Healthy Brain Conference

Heart to Hearts, Lawrenceville – November 5, 2022 (50 participants)

During this event, there were two workshops about brain health. Interns Elizabeth Dimino and volunteer Gargi Chanda staffed a NAMI table to introduce attendees to our programs.

Mercer County Veterans Day Expo

Mercer County Veterans Services, Ewing – November 10, 2022 (150 participants)

County Executive Brian Hughes and his team commemorated Veterans Day by inviting veterans to learn about county services for them. This expo enabled us to introduce ourselves to this community that is at risk for mental illness.



Danita Saunders-Davis and Adam Satzman



Jordan Hansen and Sharon Joag

Reach Out Speak Out

Community Wellness Center, Trenton

December 15, 2022 (16 participants)

This event showcased the Community Wellness Center's peer support services and innovative wellness groups. It was a good venue for NAMI Mercer to do outreach.

The Friendly Women at the Front Desk

By Jordan Hansen
NAMI Mercer Intern

You get only one chance to make a good first impression, and at NAMI Mercer, our chance depends on the individuals at our front desk. Receptionists are essential members of nearly every organization as they perform the vital duty of interacting with the public. NAMI Mercer has five wonderful volunteers who work at the front desk, answering the phone and attending to the needs of visitors.

These women, who are "the face of NAMI Mercer," met with me recently to share a bit about themselves, how they came to volunteer, and why they enjoy working at the front desk.

Pearl Elias — When Pearl retired 20 years ago, she began looking for places to volunteer. Three years ago, she found NAMI Mercer and has been a valued addition to our team ever since.

She offers several tips for becoming a good receptionist: "be professional, look the part, be a good listener, and always be welcoming to anyone who calls or walks into the office." Pearl's warmth as a grandmother and great-grandmother conveys to her role as a NAMI Mercer communicator.

Frances Lochen — With just one year of experience, Frances brings a much-needed skill to the front-desk team. Her fluency in Spanish greatly enhances her effectiveness as a receptionist since 18 percent of the County's population is Hispanic.

Frances views herself as a "gal Friday," eager to help around the office wherever she is needed. Through her volunteerism, she has developed a better understanding of mental illness and deepened her relationships with her loved ones who are affected.

Suzanne Ream — A three-year veteran on the NAMI office team, Suzanne chose to volunteer because of her close connection to our organization's mission. She has participated in many outreach events and attended some of NAMI Mercer's support groups.

According to Suzanne, "volunteering has kept me busy, given me a routine, and enabled me to make many good friends." Suzanne's outgoing personality helps her to welcome and support whoever walks through our doors or calls on the phone. Suzanne enjoys doing whatever she can to benefit staff and the community.

Deidre Grier — Didi has been involved with NAMI Mercer for twelve years and has been volunteering at the



front desk for three. She found NAMI Mercer through the "In Our Own Voice" program where she has been able to share her story with others.

She takes her job and image very seriously. "Every day when I wake up, I ask myself how am I going to present myself to others. Despite what is going on in my personal life, I want to represent this organization in the positive way it deserves."

Didi recommends volunteering for a cause you believe in because the rewards outweigh the sacrifice of your time. A fun fact about Didi is that her cat is her best friend, a loyal companion who is not judgmental. Everyone should strive to behave this way.

Brenda Blanc — Our newest receptionist, Brenda has been a volunteer at NAMI Mercer since August 2022. Recent statistics about the prevalence of mental illness and NAMI's mission inspired Brenda to donate her time. Her passion to educate and support persons affected by mental illness runs in the family; one of her two daughters also works in the field of mental health.

According to Brenda, her best assets at the front desk are her love for people (whether they are sad or happy) and her love of personal stories. Her advice is to treat others in the same way that you want to be treated.

Pearl, Frances, Suzanne, Didi, and Brenda all urge others to volunteer if you believe in a cause and have the time. Volunteering has a plethora of benefits including an increase in self-confidence, self-esteem, and life satisfaction. It can help to combat depression and keep you physically healthy. Some words of wisdom from self-help writer Edmond Mbiaka apply to everyone: "We are constantly reminded about how short life is. Please try to leave your best positive impression on everyone that you meet."

NAMI Mercer

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NAMI MERCER PROGRAMS

NAMI Mercer NJ Programs & Services

Up-to-date information can be found on the NAMI Mercer website at namimercer.org. Program sliders on the homepage are hyperlinked to meeting platforms and/or registration.

The NAMI Mercer Helpline

Our warm-line for compassionate listening, information, and resources remains "open" for responding to inquiries. **609.799.8994 x17** or email helpline@namimercer.org.

Family Support Groups

For caregivers of adults (over age 18), offered in partnership with IFSS (Intensive Family Support Services) of Oaks Integrated Care, meet on Mondays via Zoom and on Tuesdays, in-person and online, 5:15-6:30 pm.

Families Coping with Schizophrenia is being held virtually once a month on the 2nd Wednesday and **Families Coping with Personality Disorder** on the 4th Wednesday, both meetings are hybrid and begin at 5:15 pm.

The Parent Support Network (PSN)

For parents/caregivers of youth (under age 24), offered in partnership with the Youth Mental Health Project, meets in-person and online. Visit our website for the link to register for PSN Central NJ.

Family to Family

A multi-session course to educate and support caregivers, will be held in person at the NAMI Mercer Center, April 20 – June 8, 6:30 – 9:00 pm. Registration is required. Family and Friends, an abridged version, will be offered periodically.

Connection Recovery Support Group

Meetings for individuals living with

All NAMI Mercer support groups, workshops and classes are offered at no cost to participants. Registration is required for The Parent Network, Family to Family, Mending Mindsets, and Weight Does Not Equal Worth.

mental health conditions are held 1st and 3rd Mondays at 2:00 pm in a hybrid format and 2nd and 4th Thursdays at 7:00 pm, virtual only.

The Hearing Voices Support Group

Meets in person at the NAMI Mercer Center on the 2nd and 4th Thursdays of each month, 1:00-2:00 pm. Attendance must be confirmed by phone before 10:00 am the day of the meeting.

The Empathy Network

A depression support group, meets in person on 1st and 3rd Tuesdays, 2:00-3:00 pm at the NAMI Mercer Center. Attendance must be confirmed by phone before 10:00 am the day of the meeting.

Mending Mindsets

An anxiety support group, meets virtually on Tuesdays, 7:00-8:00 pm. Registration for the group is required.

Weight Does Not Equal Worth

A peer-led mini support series for those coping with an unhealthy preoccupation with food, weight, or appearance will meet at TCNJ for six weeks, beginning March 1. Registration for the group is required.

Just Friends (JF)

Members are gathering again for in-person activities. NAMI Mercer membership and attendance at a JF Meet and Greet are required.

Community Education

Check the NAMI Mercer website for details or to request Ending the Silence, In Our Own Voice, Compelling Conversations, or any other customized presentations.

**The NAMI Center
of Mercer County**

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(609) 799-8994

<https://namimercer.org>



Become part of a
powerful, life-changing community!

Join or Renew your membership with NAMI Mercer today!



Scan the QR code
or visit www.namimercer.org/get-involved/join