

## Harvest of Hope Celebrates Its 15th Birthday

**N**AMI Mercer reaches an important milestone when we host our 15th annual Harvest of Hope Wellness Conference on Saturday, Sept. 30, 2023.

Our theme for 2023 is “Building Bridges of Hope.” Over the years, the mission for the conference remains unchanged—to provide our community with a day of camaraderie, education, and hope for recovery. More than 2,000 participants have attended 125 different workshops since the conference’s inception in 2009.

### Conference Venue

We will return for our second year to the Conference Center at Mercer County Community College (MCCC) in West Windsor. The Center offers 38,000 square feet of comfortable, media-rich, high-tech space. Attendees will enjoy a buffet breakfast and hot buffet lunch, prepared by the Center’s culinary staff. Parking is plentiful and convenient.

### This Year’s Special Guest

NAMI Mercer is excited to welcome Ashley Judd as our keynoter for 2023. Instead of a traditional keynote address, Ashley will engage in a “fireside chat” with David Lee White, local playwright/performer and 2023 NAMI Mercer Visionary awardee. Their informal conversation will offer an intimate view into Ashley’s life as an award-winning actress, advocate for social justice, global humanitarian, and daughter whose mother Naomi died by suicide last year.

### About Ashley Judd

Ashley is a well-known Golden Globe and Emmy-nominated actress. A feminist and social justice humanitarian, she is the UNFPA Goodwill Ambassador, advocating for the sexual and reproductive rights and health for girls and women worldwide. She has traveled to 22 countries, spending time in brothels, refugee camps, hospices, and slums. Her *New York Times* bestselling book, *All That Is Bitter & Sweet*, chronicles these journeys.

Ashley graduated from the Honors Program at the University of Kentucky and earned an MPA from Harvard’s John F. Kennedy School of Government. Her paper, *Gender Violence: Law and Social Justice*, was awarded the Dean’s Scholar Award at Harvard Law School.

She serves on several boards, including the International Center for Research on Women, the Rape and Incest National Network, Demand Abolition, and the Gloria

Steinem Sex Equality Fund to End Trafficking in Women.

She is a sought-after public speaker and frequent OpEd author. Recently, she wrote in the *New York Times* about her beloved mother’s death by suicide and the need for privacy laws in such tragedies. Ashley was *Time*’s Person of the Year in 2017 as one of the Silence Breakers. In 2019, the United Nations honored her as Global Advocate of the Year.



**Ashley Judd**

### Compelling Conversations Returns

Conference attendees also will have the experience of engaging in “Compelling Conversations,” an anti-stigma program developed by NAMI Mercer last year to normalize conversations on mental health. The program connects people who have lived experience with mental health challenges (called “communicators”) with very small groups of participants who will have an opportunity to learn through open dialogue. NAMI Mercer is the proud recipient of a 2023 NAMI National Innovation Grant to continue our work with this program.

### More About the Conference

As in the past, conference goers will get to choose from a variety of workshops. Seek answers to your questions from a psychiatrist; explore the therapeutic effects of Tai Chi; learn the basics of Zentangle art therapy to create a mandala; explore how friends and family can incorporate Dialectical Behavioral Therapy (DBT) in interactions with loved ones, and increase your understanding of bipolar disorder.

### Conference Registration

The conference is offered at no cost to the public, but donations are suggested. Register online from our event page at <https://namimercer.org/learn-more/harvest-of-hope-wellness-conference/>.

Registration closes on September 22. For more information call 609-799-8994.

## Executive Director's Message

# Collaboration for Caring Communities - A New Initiative



**Janet Haag**

Dear Friends,

If you happened to be with us for NAMI Mercer's annual meeting and picnic on August 6, you may remember my saying we had received a grant from Janssen for a new initiative we are calling Collaboration for Caring Communities. I promised then to share more, and this seems like a good opportunity.

Our goal with this program is to reach members of vulnerable and underserved communities in urban Trenton to promote greater awareness of mental health resources and break down the cultural stigmas associated with help-seeking behaviors.

We have attempted similar outreach in the past, but this time we are beginning by bringing community stakeholders to the table so we can listen and learn from them. We are adopting this open-ended approach recognizing that we don't have answers to questions and concerns we do not fully understand. Although it is not clear exactly where we will land, we do know that relationship-building is foundational to whatever will come afterwards.

To help us effectively implement this project, we have

contracted with Shakira Abdul-Ali from Alchemy Consulting. She is very knowledgeable and well connected in Trenton, so we are pleased to have her on board.

Following several productive internal meetings, we have now scheduled two cross-sector roundtables that will include community leaders like pastors, educators, city council members, and more. We know the need is great; we want to see in what ways, if any, NAMI Mercer can be of assistance and support.

As an organization that understands the value of shared lived experience, we are counting on partnering with mental health champions from within these Trenton communities to address their unmet nonclinical mental health needs.

While we can't solve all the challenges facing underserved communities, we can certainly show we care and shine a light from our area of expertise. We are excited about this venture and will keep you posted as things unfold.

Hope to see you at Harvest of Hope on September 30!  
Best,

*Janet M. Haag*

## NAMI Mercer's Picnic and Annual Meeting

More than 100 guests enjoyed a sunny afternoon at NAMI Mercer's picnic and annual meeting on Sunday, August 6. The event was held at Liberty Lake Park in Bordentown where amenities included swimming, paddleboats, minigolf, horseshoe pits, and more. Outgoing President Tom Pyle shared the results of Board elections. Guests received copies of NAMI Mercer's 2022 annual report. This document is available online from the "Meet Us" tab of [namimercer.org](http://namimercer.org).





## President's Message

### NAMI Is Totally Inclusive



Tom Pyle

Dear Friends,

September marks my last month as President of NAMI Mercer. It has been a distinct honor to serve. As I prepare to relinquish this cherished role, I'd like us to think together about something increasingly on my mind: that NAMI Mercer always remain "totally inclusive."

According to NAMI National's Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) commitment statement, "we believe a diverse, inclusive and equitable organization is one

where all employees, volunteers, and members—regardless of gender, race, gender identity, ethnicity, national origin, age, sexual orientation, education, disability, veteran status, or other dimension of diversity—feel valued and respected."

NAMI Mercer has adopted these DEI principles as our organizational North Star. And yet, as our society struggles with increasingly harsh polemics, politics, and polarization, we must never compromise our pledge to uphold these values. Mental illness is an equal-opportunity afflicter. It can affect loved ones, no matter their background, identity, or ideology. To remain true to our mission, we must serve anyone with mental illness, even those who do not conform ideologically or politically to currently prevalent viewpoints or experiences. If they need us, we must welcome them.

Two episodes during my presidency bring these thoughts to mind. A loved one with schizophrenia suffered

from persecutory and condemnatory hallucinations. Bullied in high school, his fevered mind conjured very dark thoughts, especially about being attacked by someone of a different race. This distorted thinking led him to verbally assault a police officer with racial insults and to scrawl racial epithets in permanent marker on his own bedroom wall. Nevertheless, despite the loved one's unfortunately bigoted expressions, we determined to keep our doors open wide. Totally inclusive.

Some time ago, our HelpLine Plus assisted a family by connecting them with an advocate for the developmentally disabled at the Arc of New Jersey. It turned out that the advocate had a son with floridly hallucinating schizophrenia. Very recently, she went to visit her son who, at that moment, had the horrific delusion that his visitor was a vicious demon. Out of control, the son attacked and killed his mother. He was arrested and remanded to Ann Klein Forensic Hospital, a psychiatric facility for violent patients in the criminal justice system. With both parents dead and no siblings, this tormented man has no family support? Who will speak up for the protection, treatment, and care of this mentally ill, alleged murderer? If no one else emerges, likely it will be NAMI Mercer. Totally inclusive.

During the American Revolution, Tom Paine wrote: "these are times that try men's souls." We might say the same about the mental health challenges that America faces today. Sadly, mental illness is a "growth business." Fortunately, NAMI Mercer is here to continue leading, educating, and advocating for all loved ones with mental illness and their families. As we approach our 40th birthday, let us rededicate ourselves to being good and faithful servants to a totally inclusive community.

### "HelpLine Plus," the Tale of The Two Dominics

by Tom Pyle, MBA, MS

Although I served as president, my most important role at NAMI Mercer has been as a HelpLine volunteer. In the course of this work, I address institutional barriers, blockages, and bureaucratism that too often bedevil loved ones and family members in need. Their cases can be complicated and require intensive networking, support, and intercessions. In assisting with these difficult problems, we call upon our own lived experiences to bring a little extra to the table — a service we informally call "HelpLine Plus".

Some of our HelpLine Plus successes are astonishing. Networking with NAMI's NYC and Brooklyn, we managed to find a wayward South Brunswick loved one with schizophrenia who had absconded from home. With NAMIs in Tennessee and Arkansas, we found an East Windsor loved one in Little Rock, AWOL from his group home in Memphis. Contacting NAMIs in Alabama and Montgomery, we reunited a psychiatrically distressed runaway daughter of a West Windsor father with her mother in Alabama. And

with the support of NAMI Reading in PA, within six hours, we were able to arrange urgent psychiatric care for a family following a horrific road accident sparked by a loved one's decompensation.

Other HelpLine Plus cases take far longer to resolve and often remain open. Such are the cases of two friends named Dominic.

#### Dominic B. ("DB")

We first heard from DB five years ago when he called our HelpLine from Northern State Prison in Newark! DB was about to be released after a four-year drug-related sentence. He had multiple issues: bipolar disorder, a physical disability, and addictions. Persistent in his search for housing, DB would call us repeatedly because of the 10-minute limit for calls from prison.

We met DB in the prison, where staff had no viable discharge plan for him. Through Oaks Integrated Care (Oaks), we helped DB arrange for a place in Trenton and secure a state sub-

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# Nandita Hareesh Goes for the Gold

By **Maia Leonard**  
NAMI Mercer Intern

**N**andita is a rising senior at West Windsor-Plainsboro North High School who has been involved in Girl Scouts since third grade. For her final Girl Scouts project, called a Gold Award Project, she decided to work with NAMI Mercer to improve youth mental wellness in her community. During her spare time, Nandita enjoys bowling, bullet journaling, and learning about STEM.

## Why did you decide to stay with Girl Scouts for so long?

Girl Scouts is so fun! I've learned many new skills during my experience—camping, earning badges, cooking, crocheting—all these abilities really enrich my life. The community Girl Scouts provides has helped me create so many bonds within the organization.

## What is a Gold Award?

Girl Scouts has three awards that you can earn—a Bronze Award, Silver Award, and Gold Award. They are all based on community projects. The Bronze Award is on the smallest scale. For my Bronze Award, I worked with my troop to distribute cookies to the community. For the Silver Award, I

worked with another girl scout, but due to the pandemic, we had trouble forming connections and making the project into a reality. The Gold Award is the most difficult to achieve. From start to finish, the project requires 80 hours of service by a scout who identifies a problem in her community, figures out a way to address that problem, and leads a team that puts her plan into action. I have noticed that many kids struggle with their mental health. There's a lot of pressure to achieve and a tendency to compare oneself to others. For me, art is a great way to relieve stress. So, I've been going to speak at different schools, trying to incorporate art in as many ways as I can. I spent time in Trenton, where initially, many kids weren't excited about making art, but became more engaged by the end of the session. Kids mentioned that creating art was empowering.

## What made you decide to choose NAMI Mercer?

My high school had a school-wide mental health day when students could attend workshops. NAMI Mercer was one of the workshops that I attended. Mrs. Haag was so interesting, and I felt that NAMI Mercer would be a good source of knowledge for my community outreach.



**Nandita Hareesh**

## Do you have any plans beyond high school?

I plan to go to college to study biomedical engineering. Within this field, you need a lot of creativity to solve problems in the real world, which is what drew me to it. I'm specifically interested in tissue engineering.

## Who is inspiring to you?

A few people! Janet Haag is so impressive. Seeing how she contributes to her community and holds many roles is incredibly inspiring. My troop leader, Ms. Margaret Redman, has done so much for her community. I've known her since I began Girl Scouts in third grade. My parents are always encouraging me to do my best and supporting me through my interests and school.

# Farewell to Distinguished NAMI Leaders

**David F. Hagen** died on April 13, 2023. He was a NAMI Mercer leader during the early 90s, serving on the Board for several years and working to find new premises when our affiliate outgrew its space on Lake Drive.



**David F. Hagen**

David was also a member of the Greater Trenton Community Mental Health Board. His board service came to an end abruptly in 2001, when he lost most of his hearing owing to a fall.

Former NAMI Mercer Board member **David M. Doran** passed away on June 11, 2023. Dave stepped down from the Board in 2020 due to illness after four years of service. He was a beloved member of the Robbinsville community where he volunteered for ONE Project and the Hibernians, founded the Robbinsville St Patrick's Day Parade, and coached recreational soccer teams.



**David M. Doran**

**John Ross Lasley**, who worked with his wife Kay and several others to establish our organization, died on June 30, 2023. In the 1980s, MAMI (our former name) provided housing for loved ones with mental illness trying to live independently. After Kay's death in 2011, John and his second wife Dottie continued the tradition of hosting a summer picnic for the NAMI Mercer community at their home in Princeton.



**John Ross Lasley**

# Interview with Robin Li, NAMI Mercer Board Member

By David McNair  
NAMI Mercer Volunteer

On July 31, 2023, I had the opportunity to interview NAMI Mercer's newest Board member **Robin Li, PhD.** Robin is a licensed clinical psychologist with a private practice in Princeton. Mental health advocate and martial arts practitioner, Robin became involved with NAMI Mercer serving as a member of the Let's Talk Mind Matters team, responding to the questions and concerns of middle and high school youth.

## How did you find out about NAMI Mercer?

I became involved with NAMI Mercer because I have a family member who lives in NY who also serves as a NAMI volunteer. I wanted to support the organization and reached out to the New Jersey affiliate in Mercer County. As a community provider, I was asked to participate in a fireside chat with local students from colleges, universities, and preparatory schools and joined the Let's Talk Mind Matters team.

## What made you want to become a Board member?

I was honored to be asked to fill in as an interim Board member in 2023 by Executive Director Janet Haag and was later elected as a standing Board member to support the organization.

## What are your goals as a member of the Board?

As a Board member, I want to demystify and destigmatize mental illness, remove the shame that exists in communities, and help people understand what it means to have a mental health diagnosis. I believe that mental health should be treated the same way as physical health with supports and treatments readily available and accessible to people of all backgrounds and abilities. People should not have to be in a mental health crisis to access mental health resources.

## As a member of the NAMI Mercer family, what resonates the most with you?

What resonates with me most is the mission of NAMI Mercer, which focuses on helping others. NAMI offers hope by showing us that we are not alone and have access to resources and supports to help us navigate our path to wellness.

**Today's youth have faced significant challenges recently, especially in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. What do you see as being the most prevalent mental health concerns of our youth, and how can communities help them overcome these challenges?**

Our youth face a barrage of mental health challenges; however, COVID-19 magnified and exacerbated them because of the isolation young people experienced. Today's youth are also confronted with brand new issues that previous generations did not face, such as social media, negative or unrealistic messages perpetuated online, gun violence and the possibilities for artificial intelligence technology.

Some youth do not have resources to cope with these challenges. When they struggle on their own for too long, some end up in crisis. NAMI Mercer is positioned to increase access and opportunities for those who need help.

## What influenced you to become a licensed clinical psychologist?

I am introspective and maintain a sense of curiosity by observing, listening, asking questions, and striving to understand others. My area of specialty is assisting individuals that have complex trauma, anxiety, and depression. I work with a wide range of groups of many different backgrounds and needs.

## What are some of your personal interests?

I enjoy engaging in different forms of movement because they are therapeutic for me. I have been practicing the martial art of Brazilian jiu-jitsu for a few years. I also like yoga, running, being outdoors, and reading to advance my knowledge in my field of psychology.

## Who inspires you and why?

My favorite quote is "A mind that is stretched by a new experience can never go back to its old dimensions," by Oliver Wendell Holmes. It reminds me of the benefits of interacting with people at work, in my community and elsewhere. What inspires me is seeing others show compassion, courage, and love for one another. Life is hard, and the circumstances that some individuals face make it extra hard. For people to come forward from dark, hidden places to take the reins of their own mental health journey takes courage and strength.



**Robin Li**



# NAMI Mercer Outreach at Community Wellness Events

## Day to End Rape Culture (DERC)

The College of New Jersey (TCNJ), Ewing – April 4, 2023 (200 participants)

DERC was an expo-style event to educate the campus community about rape culture through interactive presentations. NAMI Mercer interns distributed mental health awareness resources.



Interns Jenna Bechtel and Joshua Muenzer at DERC

## Public Health Communication Club Event

The College of New Jersey (TCNJ), Ewing – April 6, 2023 (100 participants)

The purpose of the TCNJ Public Health Communication Club event was to demonstrate the important connection between mental health and public health. NAMI Mercer interns hosted an outreach table to raise awareness about resources in the community.



Interns Jenna Bechtel and Joshua Muenzer at TCNJ Thrive

## Annual THRIVE Wellness Expo

The College of New Jersey, Ewing – April 12, 2023 (300 participants)

The THRIVE event provided students with a therapeutic break from their academic routines and allowed them to take time for themselves by engaging in wellness activities designed to improve mental health. NAMI Mercer interns shared our mission, provided information about mental health resources, and promoted our robust internship program.

## New Jersey Department of Labor Diversity Day

John Fitch Plaza, Trenton – June 22, 2023 (550 participants)

This was a tabling event for Dept. of Labor employees. Many in attendance showed interest in NAMI Mercer's mental health programs and services.



Interns Maia Leonard and Matthew Michibata at Dept. of Labor Diversity Day



Volunteers Suzanne Ream and Frances Lochen at the 4-H Fair

## Mercer County 4-H Fair (Head, Hearts, Hands, and Health)

Howell Living Farm, Hopewell – July 29-30 (1000 participants)

Guests of all ages at the Mercer County 4-H Fair enjoyed hayrides and pony rides, animal exhibits, blacksmith demonstrations, concerts, food, and fun. NAMI Mercer interns met many people seeking information in support of loved ones living with a mental health disorder.

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# Patience and Acceptance

**By Jim Gaven**  
**NAMI Mercer Volunteer**  
**Founder/CEO of Key of Awesome Music**  
**([www.keyofawesomemusic.com](http://www.keyofawesomemusic.com))**

**E**ver since I have known my uncle Bob, he has struggled with mental illnesses. The first time I remember something different about him was when I was six or seven. My dad and I drove into the heart of Trenton one Saturday morning to pick him up from a homeless shelter after he called our house unexpectedly. No one had known where he was for a long time. We took him out for breakfast at McDonald's. It was nice, but very out of the ordinary. When I was older, my dad told me that my uncle had been in a car accident at age 18 and had never been the same since. He went MIA for a while, either hitch-hiking or taking public transit to Montana to be a park ranger for several years and then moving down to North Carolina where my grandmother (his mother) was living.

Uncle Bob is my godfather. Formally diagnosed with bipolar disorder and schizophrenia, among other mental illnesses, he has always seemed a bit different. But aren't we all different? We are all unique in our own way, and that is what makes us beautiful. If we were all the same, life would be boring. Thank God we are not. If there is anything I have learned about mental illness, it is that it is not boring.

There are notable characteristics of my uncle's behavior. He thrives on routine. For example, he must eat lunch at exactly 12 noon, take a nap at about 2 pm (depending on company), and on the days that I visit, play a board game at least twice. He also has certain go-to phrases in conversation that seem robotic and mechanical. I have a feeling

that he leans on these phrases because they are familiar, comfortable, and in his control. Otherwise, his mind seems out of control. Sometimes, he is in his own world, deep in thought or just blankly staring off into space. Then, when a thought pattern gets into his head, he immediately shares it, excitedly repeating it three or four times.

It is worth mentioning that my uncle would never hurt a fly. Sometimes he gets agitated with wanting to eat (his life is based around food these days), but he never really raises his voice. However, if something is out of the ordinary at home, he does not do well. Going outside of home is beyond his comfort zone. Last Thanksgiving, he lasted only an hour at my sister's house, which is nearby. My uncle has put on a lot of weight, then dropped a lot of weight, been in and out of various day programs, and tried lots of different medications over the years. Nothing seems to stick for him other than his illness. The constant change of his medications may have been a factor in his developing dementia at age 60.

My uncle Bob has been living with my grandmother for the last decade. His care has taken a toll on everyone in the family, especially on my grandmother who is now 85. We go over to stay with him so she can run errands and enjoy a little normalcy in her life, but she lacks any true freedom. My family worries that if something were to happen to her, God forbid, would my uncle know what to do? The answer is no, and this is frankly terrifying.

We have come to accept that Uncle Bob is Uncle Bob. Spending time with him is exceedingly difficult at first but can become an excellent learning experience where he is the teacher, and we are the students. He is helping people become better versions of themselves without even realizing it. He has inspired me to work in the human services field, serving and supporting those with developmental/physical disabilities, branching out to supporting those with mental illness and dual diagnoses. Observing my grandmother take care of him is inspiring. To me, she is a living saint. Both she and my uncle have shown me what it means to be truly patient, accepting, compassionate, empathetic, and unconditionally loving.

Thank you for showing us the way, Uncle Bob. We love you.



**Jim Gaven**

**A registered composer and publisher with the performing rights organization, BMI, Jim's music can be heard in 6 of the 7 continents across the world in TV shows/commercials/background and in-store radio retail channels, and in-flight entertainment systems.**



**Jim Gaven: portrait of a man and his music**



# NAMIWalks 2023 Remembered

By Elizabeth Kepniss  
Director of Development

On Saturday, May 20, 2023, hundreds of walkers on 64 teams braved the rain for the 16th Annual NAMIWalks Mercer County at West Lake Park in Robbinsville, NJ. Together we raised awareness and more than \$142,000 to help end the stigma and promote “Mental Health for All!”

Co-chaired by Board members Stephanie McCarthy and Courtney Davis, the 2023 theme was “Seas The Moment.” Embracing the nautical theme, we made Captain NAMI our mascot and encouraged walkers to take him/her with them on their travels. Our captain appeared across the globe in places like Ireland, Spain, Nashville, and Portland.

The annual walk kickoff luncheon on April 3 was hosted by Janssen and included a visit from Captain Obvious, who reminded us that “not all illnesses are obvious.” Team captains were given tools to share with their teammates for a successful walk. NAMI Mercer welcomed 36 corporate sponsors, including five new partners! Thank you to everyone who fundraised, walked, and donated to NAMIWalks Mercer County 2023. Keep an eye out for NAMIWalks 2024.



## Walk Statistics

### Top Five Teams

1. Janssen Neuroscience, \$11,371.00
2. Mental Wellness Warriors!, \$9,006.00
3. Presbyterian Church of Lawrenceville, \$7,718.50
4. Stigma Stompers, \$6,913.00
5. Team Chela, \$5,100.50

### Top Five Fundraisers

1. Jason Redd, \$5,788.00
2. Carol and John Marsland, \$4,340.50
3. Patricia Demers, \$4,000.00
4. Danielle Ingeri, \$3,335.00
5. Michelle Santoro, \$3,043.00

### Star Walkers

21 walkers each raised \$1,000 or more.



Carrier Clinic Staff on Stigma Crushers Team, led by Jennifer Del Rosario (third from right)



Representatives from the Agnes McCarthy Charitable Foundation, a Walk sponsor



Stigma Stompers Team





**Penn Medicine Sponsor Table**



**Mental Health Warriors! Lemonade Stand Raised \$322**



**New Sponsor First Bank of NJ Awareness Alliance Team**



**Director of Operations Danita Saunders Davis and Dawn Dannebrink**



**Retire the Stigma Team**





## Two Dominics, *continued from Page 3*

sidy to pay his rent. Things did not go smoothly. The unit's location was in a drug-infested area, leading DB to relapse. Independent living without sufficient ancillary care also led to bad behavior, DB's arrest and three-week jailing in Bucks County, and subsequent eviction. All the while, DB contended with a persistent and life-threatening MRSA blood infection resulting from previous bone surgeries after a suicide attempt.

We continued to advocate for DB, working with Oaks a second time to find a different subsidized apartment. Things improved, but then deteriorated again. Depression returned. Relapses occurred. DB was evicted. Staring homelessness in the face, DB was accepted into an Oxford House sober-living home for men. This too failed. Several hospital admissions followed, in part to tend to his MRSA infections, in part to forestall his sleeping on the street.

Ultimately, DB's underlying self-medicating addiction had to be addressed. DB entered a rehab in Vineland, but, after discharge, failed at living alone. Finally, he found his way to a 90-day stint at John Brooks Recovery Center near Atlantic City. Fortunately, at this time, he is in an aftercare men's group home in Galloway. Though not yet out of the woods, DB seems to be receiving sufficient therapy and support in a safe abode. Things are looking up for the first time in a long time.

### Dominic F. ("DF")

Diagnosed with schizophrenia, DF had been living a quiet recovery at home with his father and his dog. He was connected to a local outpatient program that was prescribing his meds, particularly the lithium that had successfully stabilized DF's situation. But the outpatient program forgot one critical thing: to order routine lithium-toxicity testing. After several weeks, serious physical symptoms landed DF in the hospital.

When they did their diagnostic bloodwork, the ER doctors were aghast to find significant lithium poisoning. They ordered an immediate stop to the lithium, without prescribing a suitable psychotropic replacement. DF's physical symptoms improved, but after discharge, psychiatric decompensation set in. One thing led to another. In a delirium, DF harassed a local convenience store attendant while brandishing his son's toy gun. When police arrested him later in his car with the toy gun resting visibly on the pas-

senger seat, the officers imposed a mandatory weapons charge punishable by 10 years in prison.

Because of an outpatient clinic's derelict failure to test for lithium toxicity, a Kafkaesque nightmare ensued. Still unmedicated, DF was remanded to the county jail. There he endured many weeks, mostly in protective solitary confinement. His uncontrolled psychosis led to four beat-downs by inmates whom he had inadvertently provoked. A sympathetic jail employee brought his case to the attention of NAMI friend Michele Madiou, Mercer County's Mental Health Administrator. She arranged for DF's transfer to Trenton Psychiatric Hospital (TPH) for stabilization, and she called NAMI Mercer for support.

Still things weren't going well. Undermedicated, DF would not sign releases. Therefore, TPH did not communicate with DF's father for two weeks. NAMI Mercer interceded first with TPH's chaplains, who facilitated necessary permissions. Then, we intensively engaged DF's father, hearing his many complaints, helping him understand the hospital's own challenges, and connecting him with senior TPH staffers for more direct responses. Stabilization achieved, DF was remanded back to the county jail, where for the next eight months with proper meds management, he transformed into a model prisoner.

Meanwhile, DF's legal case is still pending. To avoid a 10-year prison sentence under New Jersey's harsh gun laws, DF's lawyer directed DF to accept a "Not Guilty by Reason of Insanity (NGRI)" plea. While this decision may preclude a prison sentence, it may lead to similar length-of-stay in a psychiatric hospital.

None of this should have happened. Ripped from his peaceful recovery at home because of an outpatient clinic's medical negligence, DF's hapless fate now rests with the county judge. We interceded with a letter fully explaining the tragic details of DF's case. Communication is now much improved among the treatment team, DF, and his father. Hopefully, the judge will soon release DF back to his father's loving care.

And so, NAMI Mercer's HelpLine, with true dedication and considerable effort, goes the extra mile to advocate and intervene for loved ones and families. This is the essence of HelpLine Plus, a service that helps us to achieve our organizational mission to listen, lead, educate, and advocate, empowering families and individuals affected by mental illness to build lives of quality and respect, free of stigma and discrimination.

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## NAMI Mercer Outreach, *continued from Page 6*



### Mercer County Community College (MCCC) Wellness Festival MCCC West Windsor Campus – May 2, 2023 (300 participants)

MCCC hosted a wellness festival to commemorate Mental Health Awareness Month. NAMI Mercer interns spoke about our programs, services, and volunteer opportunities.

Left: interns Sharon Joag and Stella Petrou at the MCCC Wellness Festival



# NAMI Mercer

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## NAMI Mercer NJ Programs & Services

Up-to-date information can be found on the NAMI Mercer website at [namimercer.org](http://namimercer.org). Program sliders on the home page are hyperlinked to meeting platforms and/or registration.

**The NAMI Mercer Helpline** (our warmline for compassionate listening, information, and resources) is open for inquiries, staffed both in-office and remotely.

**Helpline Plus** provides an added layer of assistance/systems navigation for those with more complex needs. Call 609.799.8994 x17 or email [helpline@namimercer.org](mailto: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, are meeting on Mondays via Zoom and on Tuesdays, in-person and online, 5:15-6:30 pm.

Three new groups are being held once monthly online, beginning at 5:15 pm: **Families Coping with Mood Disorders** (3rd Tuesdays), **Families Coping with Schizophrenia** (2nd Thursdays), and **Families Coping with Personality Disorder** (4th Thursdays).

The **Parent Support Network** for parents/caregivers of youth (under age 24), offered in partnership with the Youth Mental Health Project, is meeting in person at the NAMI Mercer Center on 3rd Mondays. Visit the webpage 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 on Thursdays,

September 14 – November 2, 6:30 – 9 pm. Registration is required.

**Connection Recovery Support Group** meetings for individuals living with mental health conditions are being held 1st and 3rd Mondays at 2 pm in a hybrid format and 2nd and 4th Thursdays at 7 pm online only.

The **Hearing Voices Support Group** is meeting in-person at the NAMI Mercer Center on the 2nd and 4th Mondays of each month, 1-2 pm. Attendance must be confirmed by phone before 10 am the day of the meeting.

The **Empathy Network**, a depression support group, is meeting in person on 1st and 3rd Wednesdays, 2–3 pm, at the NAMI Mercer Center. Attendance must be confirmed by phone before 10 am the day of the meeting.

**Mending Mindsets**, an anxiety support group, is meeting virtually on Tuesdays, 7-8 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 is being held in person on the TCNJ campus in partnership with CAPS (Counseling and Prevention Services). Registration for the group is required.

**Just Friends (JF)** members are gathering 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.

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

**The NAMI Center  
of Mercer County**

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**(609) 799-8994**

<https://namimercer.org>



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# *Hold Your Horses! & Mark Your Calendar*

for Night Out with NAMI 2023 on November 18

