



nami

National Alliance on Mental Illness

Mercer MESSENGER

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2024 NAMIWalks Mercer County, May 18

Pack your bags and hit the road! Passport to Mental Health for All is the theme for the 2024 NAMIWalks Mercer County.

Gather your friends and form a team for our Saturday, May 18, event at West Lake Park in Robbinsville. Co-chaired by Board members Stephanie McCarthy and Courtney Davis, the walk is the largest mental health awareness-raising event in our area and NAMI Mercer's biggest fundraiser.

NAMI National has designated May 18, 2024 as the Spring **United Day of Hope**. NAMI Mercer will be one of 29 affiliates across the country to host NAMIWalks on this date.

To ensure that cost is not a barrier to participation, all of our programs are offered at no charge. As a result, we heavily depend on philanthropic giving and the revenue generated from your peer-to-peer fundraising efforts.

NAMI Mercer's inaugural Walk was held on October 7, 2007 at Mercer County Park. We netted \$73,000 on that day. Our total Walk revenue to-date for the past 16 walks is \$1.8 million.

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.



On May 20 last year, 64 teams braved the rain and raised \$142,000

13, for help with registration or setting up your fundraising page. Captains, save the date for the Walk kickoff on Monday, March 25. Details to follow.



Walks

Passport to

Mental Health for All



"NAMIWalks is the walk that has no finish line...only countless new beginnings for the people we serve – as we raise funds to power NAMI's life-changing free programs and fuel growing awareness of our cause."

Executive Director's Message

The Art of Listening



Janet Haag

Simon Sinek, author and inspirational speaker, writes “Listening is not the act of hearing the words spoken; it is the art of understanding the meaning behind those words, creating an environment in which the other person FEELS heard/seen/understood.” We value this kind of listening at NAMI Mercer. It is at the heart of how we connect with people, enabling us to do all the good that we do.

Think about it . . . our Helpline specialists listen to callers, offering a compassionate ear and pointing them in the direction of the specific services they have requested. Those in our individual and caregiver support groups listen to one another to lend insight and encouragement. The clear goal of Collaboration for Caring Communities is to listen to people from underserved communities in Trenton to respond to their needs more effectively.

Recently, a local school reached out to us with a request to come and listen to their staff, parents, and

students so everyone can better understand what is contributing to the burgeoning youth mental health crisis. Our newest community education program, Compelling Conversations, is all about open dialogue in which people talk and listen.

Sinek points out that listening replaces judgement with curiosity. By asking questions and encouraging someone to speak honestly about everything on their mind, we help them feel heard.

Listening is THE WAY to build trust – and trust is THE WAY to find common ground. Those who typically listen well to others can also listen deeply to themselves. Listening is the key to empathy.

In the mental health space, we have long encouraged people to tell their stories, to end the silence around mental illness. However, for every person who is going to talk, someone needs to listen. It is a road that must be well-traveled in both directions. So today, take a moment to listen, really listen!



Tips for active listening

1. Be an intentional listener — avoid distractions — focus.
2. Make eye contact — lean in.
3. Don't interrupt but encourage with words like “I see.”
4. Echo back what people say to make them feel validated.
5. Ask clarifying questions.



Lianna DePinto (in center) engaged in a Compelling Conversation with 2022 Harvest of Hope participants.

Welcome to Sharon Joag

NAMI Mercer is pleased to welcome Sharon Joag to our management team in a part-time, grant-funded position as Program Marketing & Community Engagement Assistant.

Sharon is already known to us since she was an intern last year. She holds a DPM degree and had a successful practice as a podiatrist but chose to change career paths. She will be graduating with an MSW degree from Columbia University in May. She hopes to continue her studies, pursuing a doctorate at Rutgers.

Sharon will be working a flexible schedule of 10-14 hours per week, beginning Feb. 8. We look forward to having Sharon contribute her talents and skills to further expanding our reach and advancing our mission.



President's Message

Planning ahead

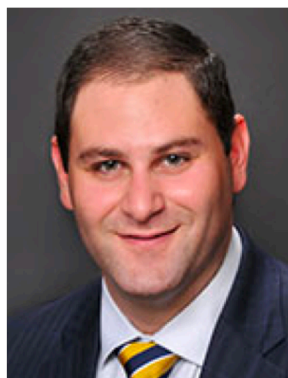
It's been just a few short months since I was elected Board president of NAMI Mercer, and the Board has been very busy.

We've enjoyed two successful events to round out 2023—our Harvest of Hope (HoH) wellness conference and our annual gala, Night Out with NAMI.

HoH was made possible by NAMI Mercer staff, conference Chair Maddy Monheit, many hard-working volunteers, and the support of our event sponsors.

Kudos for securing Ashley Judd as our keynote speaker. If you missed the wonderful 2023 event, please save the date for this year's event on October 5, 2024. Remember to register this summer.

Thank you to NAMI Mercer staff and our gala event committee, chaired by Michelle Santoro, for a successful Night Out with NAMI. Those who attended this Kentucky Derby-themed fundraiser had a blast at the Trenton County Club. Although our guests bid on horse races with



Jared B. Oberweis

“play money,” NAMI Mercer raised a substantial amount of real money to continue funding programs for our local community.

The new year got off to a quick start with our annual Board retreat on January 6, 2024 at NAMI Mercer headquarters. Facilitated by Allison Trimarco of Creative Capacity LLC, the retreat focused on strategic planning for the organization's future.

While this was my first opportunity to participate in a retreat as the NAMI Mercer president, I think I speak for all Board members when I say that we left feeling confident about the direction in which NAMI Mercer is heading. Board members were given opportunities to share their vision for the future and how they visualize our growth as an organization. This meeting also allowed us to develop a variety of goals in an effort improve our service to the community in the years to come.

With a collaborative and energetic Board, coupled with great staff and volunteers, I have the utmost confidence in NAMI Mercer moving ahead. I am excited to see how 2024 unfolds, and I look forward to greeting you at our events this year.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jared B. Oberweis", with a long, sweeping horizontal line extending to the right.

Participants in the Board Retreat on January 6



Seated (l to r) Olive Giles, Madeline Monheit, Courtney Davis, Michelle Santoro

Standing (l to r) Janet Haag, Jared Oberweis, George DiFerdinando, Mary Michael, Karen Marquis, Stephanie McCarthy, Robin Li, Liz Kepniss, Danita Saunders-Davis

Community Conversations

NAMI Mercer recently participated in four “Mental Health Community Conversations” at the invitation of Trenton City Council President Crystal Feliciano. The purpose of these dialogues was to raise awareness about the traumatic impact of violence on young people living in Trenton.

Each event began with a viewing of one of two documentaries: “I’ve Been Shot” or “Why I Carry.” The first is a short film that takes you along the journey and into the minds and emotions of five young adults who have experienced gun violence firsthand. “Why I Carry” examines why young men in urban communities feel the need to carry a firearm.

Both films were produced by the James R. Halsey Foundation for the Arts, a 501c3 nonprofit organization that provides an alternative to sports programs for youth who wish to pursue a creative outlet. Filmmaking is one such program.

The documentary viewings were followed by panel discussions about how to make the community more aware of trauma and how it affects mental health. The lively discussions yielded innovative ideas such as a mental “healthmobile.” NAMI Mercer Board Member Tom Pyle and Director of Operations Danita Saunders-Davis served on these



Trenton City Council President Crystal Feliciano

panels.

The four conversations were organized by Councilwoman Feliciano in partnership with Assemblyman Anthony Verrelli, Mercer County Commissioner Nina Melker, and Trenton’s Acting Health and Human Services Director Maria Richardson.

About 100 people attended the conversations on Oct. 21, 2023, at Calvary Christian Fellowship Ministry in Ewing; on October 28 at 200 N. Broad Street in Trenton; November 9 at the Trenton City Hall Atrium; and December 9 at the Trenton Boys and Girls Club.

The following NAMI Mercer volunteers staffed tables at these events: Emily Tubbs, Jeff Hrusko, Tashanna Ellis, Corey Ingram, Nick Gonzalez, Pearl Elias, Emily Bell, David Cohn, and Swati Iyengar-Hrusko.



Panelists and community conversation participants at the Trenton Boys and Girls Club

We Love Our Volunteers!

NAMI Mercer staff and members of the Board expressed sincere appreciation to the 47 guests who at-

tended our annual “We Love Our Volunteers” luncheon on Valentine’s Day, February 14.



**Mother and daughter volunteers
Lucretia and Aneira Davis**



**NAMI Mercer staff Sharon Joag, Liz Kepniss, Janet Haag
and Danita Saunders-Davis**



**Diane Pingatore at the volunteer
luncheon**

Compelling Conversations for East Windsor Police

NAMI Mercer brought Compelling Conversations to the East Windsor Police Department on January 16 and 18, 2024. Twenty-seven police officers engaged in small group discussions facilitated by NAMI Mercer “communicators,” that is, persons with lived experience with mental illness.

The objective of the Compelling Conversations program is to “normalize” conversations about mental illness. Sadly, social stigma associated with this subject leads many people to suffer alone in silence, often ashamed to seek the treatment they need.

Since NAMI Mercer launched the program in April 2022, about 200 persons have participated in dialogs with communicators about their personal experiences with PTSD, depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, post-partum depression, pre-menstrual disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, autism, and addiction.

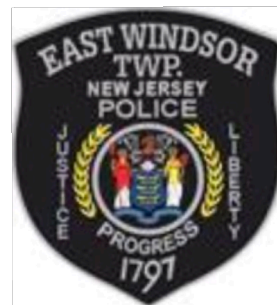
More than 20 volunteers are currently trained as communicators. Rob Dolnick, Tamara Peters, Jennifer Del Ro-

sario and Adam Satzman facilitated conversations with the East Windsor Police. Three of the four had had encounters with law enforcement in connection with mental illness.

In inviting NAMI Mercer to speak with his officers, East Windsor Detective Sergeant /Training Officer Paul Wille commented, “Training in mental illness is crucial for law enforcement to ensure officers possess the knowledge and skills needed to handle situations involving individuals with mental health conditions. This training fosters better understanding, de-escalation techniques, and promotes compassionate and informed responses, ultimately enhancing public safety and minimizing the risk of unnecessary use of force.”

NAMI Mercer also engaged the officers about their own mental health. According to Blue H.E.L.P., a nonprofit that provides information and support for law enforcement officers, more law enforcement officers, firefighters and corrections workers are lost to suicide each year than to on-duty crashes, accidents, and assaults combined. Charles Ramsey, CNN law enforcement analyst and former chief of the Metropolitan Police Department in Washington, DC, says that stigma regarding mental health remains ingrained in police culture,

If you are interested in scheduling “Compelling Conversations” for your organization, please contact NAMI Mercer Executive Director Janet Haag at 609.799.8994 ext. 11 or jhaag@namimercer.org.



Tamara Peters and East Windsor police officers

NAMI Mercer Outreach at Community Wellness Events

Mercer County Constituent Services Fair

Mercer County Office Park, Ewing – August 23, 2023 (100 participants)

Congresswoman Bonnie Watson Coleman (D-NJ 12th District), Congressman Andy Kim (D-NJ 3rd District), and County Executive Brian M. Hughes brought together more than 42 federal, state, county, and local agencies to enable constituents to meet with service providers. NAMI Mercer was among the service providers to inform attendees about resources available to the public. It was also a good opportunity for service providers to learn about each other and to consider partnerships.



Interns Danielle Brenner and Maia Leonard



**L to r: Anya Kawlekar,
Rajvi Desai, Danita
Saunders-Davis, and
Aneira Davis**

Trenton Back-to-School Extravaganza

Trenton Board of Education Building – August 25, 2023 (900 participants)

Trenton Public Schools hosted its 8th Annual Back-to-School Extravaganza. Mobile health vans were onsite to offer free immunizations required by the school system. Eye exams, dental, and other health screenings were also available. Students received free backpacks filled with school supplies, school uniforms, and much more. NAMI Mercer volunteers had the chance to interact with many of the students and their families and provide mental health information and tool kits along with giveaways.

Latin American Legal Defense (LALDEF) Hispanic Heritage Month Health Fair

St. Mary's Cathedral, Trenton – September 9, 2023 (100 participants)

At its joint heritage and health fair, LALDEF offered COVID-19 back-to-school vaccines, breast cancer screenings, health insurance enrollment, family support, and mental health services. NAMI Mercer provided giveaways and shared information about our programs and services.

Volunteers: Adam Satzman and Frances Lochen

Bordentown Soccer League Outreach Event

Friendship Field, Bordentown – September 9, 2023 (300 participants)

Opening Day for the soccer league was full of fun for children from Pre-K to 9th grade. The event included a speech by Bordentown Mayor Jennifer Sciortino, music by a local DJ, and lots of games. NAMI Mercer was able to share information about good mental health and about our programs and services.



Interns Emily Tubbs and Kelly Maneri

**Juvenile Justice Commission Recovery Walk: Living My Best Life
Johnstone Juvenile Detention Campus, Bordentown
October 5, 2023 (200 participants)**

The Juvenile Justice Annual Recovery Walk was held in recognition of National Recovery Month, celebrating residents' journeys to healing and wellness. NAMI volunteers spoke to many substance abuse counselors about the mental health component of recovery.



Maryanne Evanko and Emily Bell



Emily Bell and Paul Grumelli

**Capitol County Children's Collaborative Resource Fair
Hamilton, NJ – November 8, 2023 (27 participants)**

The Mercer County Care Management Organization invited NAMI Mercer to its event that focused on improving wellness. Our volunteers introduced NAMI Mercer's mental health services and toolkits.

Volunteers: Kelly Maneri and Julia Roman.

**Union Baptist Church Presents: Minding Your Mind
Trenton – November 22, 2023 (30 participants)**

The workshop topics included: Learning about Intergenerational Trauma; Managing the Care of Family Members with Mental Illness; Healthy Skills and Activities to Decrease Stress and Manage Symptoms of Anxiety and Depression; Chair Yoga; Planting for Stress Relief; and Writing for Therapy. NAMI Mercer representatives participated in the workshops and shared information about mental health.

Volunteers: Nikolas Gonzalez and Emily Tubbs



**At left: Congregants
of Union Baptist
Church**

Night Out With NAMI in Review

By Liz Kepniss
Director of Development

Night Out with NAMI was a Kentucky Derby-themed gala of good food, good company, and great fun when friends of NAMI Mercer gathered at the Trenton Country Club on November 18, 2023.

The evening kicked off with a cocktail hour set to live bluegrass music by the Stone Mountain Band.

After a buffet dinner featuring southern cuisine, we honored two mental health champions who make a real difference in the community. Past President Thomas H. Pyle was named NAMI Mercer's 12th Pillar awardee for his extraordinary, long-term contribution to the organization's mission through volunteerism, leadership, advocacy, and charitable giving.

NAMI Mercer's Visionary Award went to David Lee White, who used his position of leadership as an example for increasing awareness, promoting understanding, and improving the lives of people affected by mental illness. For more information about this year's awardees, go to namimercer.org/meet-us/meet-the-pillar-awardees/.

The night concluded with an interactive, virtual horse racing game. Attendees pledged donations and placed bets on their favorite horses, working together as a team at each table. The ballroom was lively as teams cheered on their favorite horses.

Thank you to the Night Out Committee, chaired by Michelle Santoro, and to our business sponsors:



Pillar Award winner Tom Pyle with Executive Director Janet Haag

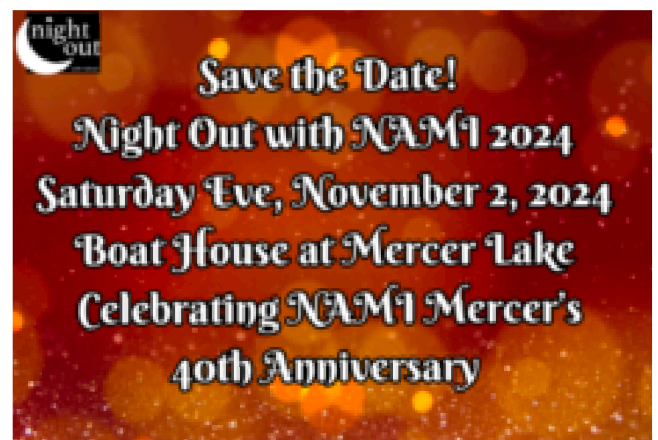
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Visionary Award winner David Lee White with Janet Haag





Jennifer and Ethan Evans



Jennifer Del Rosario and Ian Bussmann



Brian and Gina Garrahan, Cindy and Vince Sullivan



Adam Satzman and Cooper



Second-place team celebrating their virtual horse-racing victory, from left: Adnan Kayani, Olivia Barna, Tanya Luddy, Laurie Gordon, Jill Sutton, Farzana Khan, Michelle Santoro, Jay Redd

Rider Dance Ensemble Raises \$1,300 for NAMI Mercer

The Rider University Dance Ensemble designated NAMI Mercer as the beneficiary of \$1,300 in donations received at its “Dance the Night Away Fall 2023” concert at the Yvonne Theater on December 2-3.

The Ensemble, a student organization under the direction of Christine Colosimo, is open to anyone interested in dance. The 2023 benefit concert included 25 dance numbers, selected, choreographed, and performed by students, including NAMI Mercer intern Emily Tubbs.

Emily, a senior at Rider, who is majoring in psychology and minoring in social work, was one of our interns for the 2023 fall semester. To fulfill an academic requirement of her major, she chose NAMI, where she hoped to make an impact during her practicum. After graduation, Emily intends to take a gap year and then go on to graduate study in social work.

During her internship at NAMI Mercer, Emily worked with our Just Friends social support group to coordinate parties, staffed our table at community outreach events, and created a “tool kit” about movement therapy (see toolkit cover at left).

A member of the Rider Dance Ensemble since her freshman year, she nominated NAMI Mercer to receive the proceeds of the 2023 musical performance. Last year, the Ensemble chose to benefit “Michael’s Feat,” a foundation that supports families with seriously ill newborns.

Emily has been dancing since she



Rebecca Sharp and Emily Tubbs at a NAMI table

was a child in her home city of Rochester, NY, where she studied tap, ballet, jazz, lyrical and hip hop. During high school, she performed in the choir and musical theater and studied music theory for three years. For December’s Rider University show, Emily choreographed and danced with Ian Kent, Jared Hiller, and Marissa Stelatto to Clinton Kane’s “Remembering Mornings.”

After graduation, Emily hopes to maintain a relationship with NAMI and continue to combine her interests in social work and dance.



Emily Tubbs, Ian Kent, Jared Hillier, and Marissa Stellato perform to Clinton Kane’s Remembering Mornings

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. Program sliders on the homepage are hyperlinked to meeting platforms and/or registration.

The NAMI Mercer Helpline (our warmline and resource hub) is open for inquiries, staffed 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

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 online and on Tuesdays, in-person and online, 5:15-6:30 pm. Three new groups are being held once monthly online:

Families Coping with Mood Disorders (1st Wednesdays at 6:30 pm)

Families Coping with Schizophrenia (2nd Thursdays at 5:15 pm)

Families Coping with Personality Disorder (4th Thursdays at 5:15 pm).

Just Parents (formerly The Parent Support Network) for parents/caregivers of youth (under age 24), is meeting in person at the NAMI Mercer Center on the 3rd Monday. Visit the webpage for the link to register.

Family to Family, a multi-session course to educate and support caregivers, will be held in person at the NAMI Mercer Center on Thursdays, April 4–May 23, 6:30–9 pm. Registration is required.

All NAMI Mercer support groups, workshops, and classes are offered at no cost to participants. Registration is required for Just Parents, Family to Family, Mending Mindsets, The Hearing Voices Support Group, and Empathy Network.

Connection Recovery Support Group for individuals living with mental health conditions is being held on 1st and 3rd Wednesdays 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. Registration is required for this group.

The Empathy Network, a depression support group, is meeting in person on every Tuesday, 2-3 pm at the NAMI Mercer Center. Attendance must be confirmed by phone before 10 am the day of the meeting. Registration is required for this group.

Mending Mindsets, an anxiety support group, is meeting online on 1st and 3rd Tuesdays, 7-8 pm. Registration for the group is required.

Just Friends & Becoming Friends members are gathering for in-person activities. Membership with NAMI Mercer and attendance at a “Meet and Greet” are required.

Working on Wellness (WOW), a workplace mental health initiative, is provided to corporate partners upon request.

Community Education – Check the NAMI Mercer website for details or to request “Let’s Talk Mind Matters,” “Journey of Resilience,” “Compelling Conversations,” or any other customized presentations.

**The NAMI Center
of Mercer County**

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life-changing community!**

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February is Membership Month at NAMI Mercer.

Visit www.namimercer.org