



On November 8, 2025, Elizabeth (Liz) Hagen becomes NAMI Mercer's 13th Pillar awardee for her extraordinary, long-term contribution to the organization's mission through volunteerism, leadership, advocacy, and charitable giving.

Liz has the distinction of being the NAMI Mercer volunteer with the longest, continuous span of active service—more than 25 years. Liz's journey began in Johannesburg, South Africa, where she grew up and attended school, earning her bachelor's degree with distinction in English, French, and literature from the University of Cape Town and Rhodes University. Before settling in the United States in 1969, she lived in Zimbabwe, Zambia, and England.

After arriving in the US, Liz proudly ran a picture frame store for 10 years before selling it in 1981 to pursue a career as an editor, working with the New Jersey Press Association for 15 years. Liz also volunteered with the National Organization for Women. There, she helped establish a daycare center on the Princeton campus to support teachers and young parents, ensuring they had access to childcare while pursuing their education or careers. She also traveled throughout the country discussing a study called "Dick and Jane as Victims" which found that parents can raise children with their own sense of potential and without stereotypical restrictions. Throughout her life, Liz has dedicated herself to advancing opportunities for women and uplifting talents too often stifled by outdated conventions.

After retiring in the 2000s, Liz found her new calling at NAMI Mercer. Here, she met Chomy and Tom Garces, who at the time were leading the organization from their home. Liz quickly became a vital part of the team, offering her help in public relations and serving as a driving force behind the production of NAMI Mercer's newsletter *The Messenger* for an incredible 25 years. Acting as editor, writer, interviewer, layout editor, and photographer, Liz poured her heart into every issue. *The Messenger* received the "NAMI NJ Outstanding Affiliate Newsletter Award" in 2009, reflecting the excellence of her work and the impact of her dedication. In 2024, Liz had to step down when her eyesight began to fail. Liz was a member of the NAMI Mercer Board from 2001 to 2006, performing the role of secretary from 2004 to 2005. She contributed to the Membership, Development and Night Out Committees and was central to communications—managing press releases, maintaining the website, photographing events, and of course, publishing *The Messenger*.

Liz's commitment to mental health was rooted in her personal experience of seeing a relative live with bipolar disorder without receiving the support they needed. This fueled her lifelong dedication to advocacy and community, and she often reflected on how meaningful it was to work alongside such remarkable colleagues at NAMI Mercer as Ellen Heath. For Liz, the greatest gift of NAMI Mercer was the sense of community—the simple yet profound ability for people to gather, share, and support one another. Her favorite part of volunteering was always the connections she built with others, as well as the joy of creating what she hoped would be a beautiful and worthwhile publication. Ever humble, she welcomed feedback with gratitude, knowing the effort it takes for people to respond.

Looking back, Liz shares her heartfelt thanks to NAMI Mercer for giving her many years in which to make a small contribution to a very good cause. Her parting wisdom for our community is simple, yet powerful: "Always listen more than you talk and be kind."

We are forever grateful to Liz Hagen for her extraordinary service, her remarkable spirit, and her enduring legacy within NAMI Mercer.