

Workforce Development News

Integrated Healthcare Recovery Support Specialist Institute

Tucson, Arizona March 14, 2019



Certified Peer Support Specialist Graduates

Back Row left to right: Brent (Logan) Del Mastro, Aaron Avery, George Gonzales, Melissa Smith, Annette Bennett, Kireina Thayer, Karen Waterfall

Middle Row left to right: Salvador Estrella, Dora Rollins, Shannon Puerta, Sue Harris-Wille, Sharon Robinson, Cheri Carr, Leah Kalish, Daniel Morelos

Front Row left to right: Sydney Coulter, Susie Riesgo, Lindsey Everett

Hope is Very Important

George Gonzales, CRSS



My experience of hope started on November 15, 2018. I had spent the past week in motels using and drinking and I was in the process of losing all hope for myself. On that day I made a call that would be a turning point in my life. I called the CBI crisis line and a crisis team was sent to my location. They evaluated my situation and took

me to CBI detox. I stayed in detox for 6 days, still feeling hopeless and at no time were words of hope spoken to me. On November 21, 2018, I was admitted to Unhooked Recovery residential treatment center. I met with staff, and this is when I received hope. Kim Simpson is the staff member that did my intake. At one point she asked, "What do you expect to get out of this place?" My answer was, "I hope to get my recovery journey on track." She then stopped what she was doing and said, "Hope is a very important, if not the most important aspect in recovery." At this point I made a call to my mother and she affirmed my hope by saying, "You must have hope for yourself." As long as there is a breath in her, she will always have hope for me. I am 2 days away from having 120 days clean and sober, and I am still in the recovery home and my hopes and dreams are being fulfilled in my recovery one day at a time. It all started with a lady (Kim) I've never seen before in my life telling me there is always hope, and my mother telling me she will always have hope for me.

Most important to me is I MUST have hope for myself.

Hope Made its Way Back Into My Life

Annette Bennett, CRSS



My loss of hope revolves around two different major events that have happened in my life. The first was when my two boys were taken from me by CPS. There were the lies and purposefully twisted words and actions by those I thought of as friends and family had said about me. I went

through a lot and it was meant to humiliate and shame my very person. What no one, not even myself realized at the time, was that I was severely depressed and not at a point of functioning.

The second major event that stole my hope was when my Mom, my best friend, died from lung cancer. I felt alone, orphaned, with no parents left living in this world with me. I was lost without my Mom. I would forget, just for a second - when I had passed a tough exam or needed to talk about life, I would dial my Mom's phone number to talk to her, and to share with her my success.

I have found my hope, and the want to live life again. It did not come back with a big bang. Hope has slowly made its way back into my daily life. Going to Camp Wellness and having something to do each day for myself, and losing about 150 pounds has helped me to have hope that I can be, and that I am, important to myself and others.

Hope Restored My Life

Aaron Avery, CRSS

Hope, to me, is the idea and promise of a better tomorrow. In my downward spiral I felt completely worthless and hopeless that anything in my life was ever going to change. I tried many things and nothing worked, and I became increasingly frustrated. In July 2017, with the hope and support of special family and friends I was able to keep moving until I gained enough momentum to see a positive future. It was hope that restored my life.



Inspired to Change

Salvador Estrella, CRSS

The importance of hope; I believe it is essential when starting the recovery process. If you don't have hope, what else do you have to go on? Nothing.

I had two different experiences that played a big part in my own recovery. When I was in rehab and surrounded by staff who were also in recovery, seeing how well off and happy they were made me want what they had, and inspired me to want to change because it was possible. Another time was being out with our street team (outreach) and seeing how well I communicated with individuals who were still in their active addiction, talking to them, and helping them find their way. It gave me hope and inspiration.



Self Belief, Commitment and a Positive Mindset

Kireina Thayer, CRSS



Throughout my life, I've had moments of hope that transpired into faith. I wasn't exactly sure where the outcome of my actions would lead me to, but I had to make a decision to trust myself and continue to move forward in the direction of positivity. Just a short time ago, I had a fulfilling career doing what I love and making a good income at it. Then suddenly...it was as if my world came crumbling down. One of my biggest challenges was finding the strength to

look beyond the situation I had put myself in; I had to self-reflect, and with that I felt grateful for the experiences and obstacles that had challenged me to become stronger. I have hope that everything will be okay, and I have hope that life is a journey with obstacles that must be overcome with self belief, commitment, and a positive mindset.

My personal experience of hope occurred when my recovery coach informed me about this very class. I now feel as if I've been given a second chance to improve both myself and the lives of others that I come into contact with. My good friend Eddie and my Recovery Coach Jim both played a role in me finding hope and turning a new chapter in my life. The turning point came to me through both inspiration and desperation; I looked myself in the mirror one morning after a shower and knew deep down inside that I had more value to offer to myself and to the world. I've been blessed to have a strong support group in my family and friends; they continue to encourage me to fulfill my passions and invest in my dreams. I am very grateful to be a part of this program and I look forward to a bright future.

My Personal Experience of Hope

Brent (Logan) Del Mastro, CRSS

I'd have to say that my personal experience of hope occurred when I was about 23. I was still recovering from my body's chemistry being "turned upside down", from an allergic reaction to a medication as my doctor put it, when about six months later I discovered that the chemical reaction had not yet finished. While most of my body's chemistry had been affected, I was unknowingly experiencing my brain's chemistry becoming unbalanced as well. During this time I would experience episodes where my heart would start racing, my body would lose physical energy, and I felt like I was going to pass out and start seizing. Since I didn't know what was really happening to me, and neither did any of my doctors, I felt like my body was giving out more and more each day, to where it was slowly on its way to not operating at all. I actually thought I was dying. I would go to sleep most nights actually hoping and praying that I wouldn't wake up the next morning. Every day I felt more afraid and crippled than the last. I couldn't drive, hangout with friends, work, or even hold a deep conversation. The episodes seemed to be triggered by anything, and I got to a point that I couldn't even bear to feel anything negative because I was so exhausted. I felt like I was dead already, like a robot.

Until one day, I noticed that the one thing I had no problem doing was laughing when something funny happened. I literally couldn't stop myself from doing it. It was the only thing I could actually feel, and I thought how beautiful that was. How I hit such a rock

bottom to where I couldn't feel anything bad anymore, but no matter how bad things got, I could never feel too exhausted or terrible to keep myself from feeling happy when I laughed. It blew my mind. Through this whole thing I felt alone, especially spiritually. Like my ties to the universal and spiritual connection I had built had been severed. I thought that I would never get that back into my life, until I noticed this experience with laughter. I realized I had come this far, so far in my journey already at such a young age. All the things I had experienced and accomplished then traveled down until I hit my rock bottom. Yet through it all, I was still alive. I had lived past the point of depression, sadness, and hopelessness, because I couldn't even feel those things anymore. The one thing I could feel was happiness when I laughed. It gave me hope. It gave me hope to realize that no matter how bad things had gotten there was obviously life beyond all the bad. That no matter how "lifeless" it all felt, there was always happiness left with laughter. Nothing could stop it, it was unstoppable, I was unstoppable. To this day whenever things get tough and I feel cornered like there's no way out, I remember where I've been thanks to my trauma. Thanks to this terrible life changing experience, I remember how far I went down. That I hit the bottom and still found life. That life gave me hope, and hope gave me the willpower I needed to make changes in my life. I took things one step at a time, and held on to hope. Eventually I found

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Internal Hope

Dora Rollins, CRSS

When I started to think about emotional pain and struggle as a way to relate to people and grow, because failure is how I learn, my outlook started to shift from stagnant misery to possibility. The transition is ongoing because it takes constant effort-fueled practice, and the answers I need are a fusion of emotion and logic tempered by external support. Participating in a Dialectical Behavior Therapy class with an empathetic, encouraging instructor and insightful students willing to share their battles was one of the most influential reminders of that source of internal hope. Meeting with a Vocational Rehabilitation Specialist and Behavioral Health Therapist who listened to my frustration with the past and helped me figure out a path toward redefined sustainable goals was also key. Volunteering in a meaningful role with a trifecta mentor, role model, and friend rounds out my major influences but does not complete my list because there are and will continue to be others every day.



My Personal Experience of Hope, by Brent Del Mastro, continued...

a doctor who could help my body, found knowledge that could help my mind, and I found my spirit and a new and improved connection with it. I even eventually found a therapist who helped me beyond putting my mind back together, and assisting me on this journey of opening it to an entire new perception of reality that I could never have imagined. Hope is all I had at times to keep me

going, and I realized how it eventually would become a cornerstone to a whole new world of possibilities. One that I can't even explain, just because that's how "far out" it really is. Hope kept me alive, through hell and back more than once. It helped me rebuild in many different ways, and especially brought me to a new journey in life that I am so excited to experience every single day. Without hope, I wouldn't have held on and I wouldn't be here. It's because of Hope that I get to truly live, and grow forever.

Be My Most Creative Self

Sharon Robinson, CRSS



I had a few hard life experiences that were emotionally devastating, as well as some serious medical events, even death from septic shock once. As a result, I had pulled back and felt like I had no ability to love anyone except my dog, that there was very little I could do to help anyone, and that I was too old to try more school or a job. I have fibromyalgia, so I had episodes of extreme pain and fatigue and other symptoms interspersed with times of being pretty healthy. So anything that required reliability was not really thinkable. Then I found myself standing on the periphery of someone else's life about to end in suicide, probably by heroin overdose. My old social service ethics popped into gear and I started

the emergency intervention chain of contacts I had learned a while back. I busted my butt to get the social services involved that could help her, and I also kept talking to her by text. Not because I could prevent her suicide, but so she would know that somebody was caring about her, and secondly to find out where she was hiding so the crisis people could offer her help. While all this was happening, I was able to stay detached, even though I knew there was a strong chance she would not survive, and remembered the ethics and boundaries I had learned before. She did survive and is now working very hard to rebuild her emotional life and finances, etc. She is in some classes for probation that she is using as a sort of secular 12-step program. What I had wanted most for her was to be with other people who had similar things to deal with, so she could see she was not alone, and she could share hope and recovery tools. I am very proud of her. I still know that recovery is never a guaranteed or finished thing. But here is the miraculous thing that happened for me. I was not happy that she was in such a bad situation. But I remembered and re-experienced how much I loved this process of trying to do what the situation seemed to require and to make contacts with various agencies and be my most creative self. I had HOPE that I could again be a useful, caring, involved person that might make a difference here and there. And the idea that my experiences in the really hard times in my life might actually serve a purpose is absolutely amazing!

A Vision

Daniel Morelos, CRSS

This took place last December. I felt absolutely hopeless. A lost cause, yet I still had a dream. A vision of how I wanted it to play out. It was quite simple: My two dogs, my own house, a respectable relationship, a job which I thoroughly enjoy, being financially comfortable and most of all, being clean and sober. My question to myself was, "How in the world am I going to get there?" I knew it wasn't going to happen overnight and I really didn't have the willpower to put in the effort to change.

Thankfully, my mother had had enough and decided to kick me out of the house. After years of experience with going in and out of detox, I knew that was an option. I knew I didn't want to go back to prison, I knew I didn't want to couch-surf. Maybe this was my chance.

As of today I am 97 days clean and sober, with a whole different outlook on myself and life in general. I'm happy, confident and have a sense of calm. I finally feel somewhat centered. My



emotions are raw and real. I know technically all I have is today. I'll deal with tomorrow if and when it comes. As for today, I'm going to live as if it were on purpose.

Hope

Cheri Carr, CRSS

Hope is a plan to achieve one's goals and maintain wellness.

Hope is empowerment.

Hope is having choices.

Hope is the first step towards success.

Hope is the first step towards recovery.

Hope is the first step towards making changes.

Hope is necessary to emphasize strengths.

Hope is the belief that support is always there for you, and you are not alone.

Hope promotes integrity.

Hope is getting well, staying well and changing negative environments; this belief holds a vital key to success.



The Key I Needed

Susie Harris-Wille, CRSS



It's difficult for me to remember exactly when I met the woman who extended her hand to help me and thereby brought hope. I know that she sat next to my beloved and me during Sunday worship services, but I can't recall when or why we began talking of mental illness and the stigma - general and specific - it carried in the Christian community. Nevertheless, we struck up a warm, ongoing conversation and soon became quite friendly.

One day I shared with her some of the difficulties I had been having getting help for the persistent depression with which I had been dealing for a long time. She was

aghast. After thoroughly questioning me about my experience with my mental health providers, she asked if I would mind if she came to my next visits as an advocate. I said no. In fact, I added, it would be great. (If nothing else were accomplished, I thought, I would have a witness to my experience.)

I listed my friend as the contact person for my psychiatric appointments. As a result, she was the person the office phoned with the appointment times and dates, and any other communications from the physician who was working with me. She got the call confirming the time and date of my appointments, and relayed that data to me. You can't imagine her surprise then, when she and I arrived for my next scheduled appointment and were told that there was no appointment scheduled for me. (I had mentioned that the issue of scheduling had been a problem at times in the past.) We "rescheduled" an appointment while we were both there in the office. That "not scheduled" appointment was the first of many roadblocks to necessary and efficient care that my friend encountered with me as we navigated the mental health system.

My friend went with me to appointments and was not only a witness and a voice on my behalf, but helped interpret "the system" and its quirky workings to my understanding. She gave me social insight too. I hope I never forget the day when she (not a woman of color) told me that one of

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Hope

Shannon Puerta, CRSS

I was at a place where I had no idea what I was going to do with my life. My criminal record had held me back from decent jobs, and the thought of working in fast food for the rest of my life made me extremely depressed. I had just lost my daughter and was living in complete despair. I isolated myself so much that I had no idea how to step outside of my life of seclusion. Then one day at the COPE office, a caseworker that I had never met before asked me if we could speak for a few minutes. I completely broke down during our conversation. What was supposed to be a couple of minutes turned into almost an hour. He told me about the vocational rehab program and the RSS institute. He said that people like me are helping other people, and that my criminal record was experience that I could bring to the table. This sparked curiosity in me. So I set off to do some research. For the first time in many, many years, I was beginning to feel hope. Now that I have been in the institute, my eyes and heart have opened up and I realize now that I can help people like me. I've never seen that RSS again, but I am truly grateful for him.



The Key I Needed by Susie Harris-Wille, continued...

the problems I was having was that my "affect did not match the seriousness of my illness." In other words, she said, I didn't appear "sick enough" in the eyes of some of the people who were working with me because I was soft-spoken and articulate in a way that was not normal for most people, and especially was not the stereotypical norm for a woman of color. It was as though someone had opened a window in a dark and airless room. All of a sudden, many encounters and experiences I'd had made sense. While it was not the whole picture, her recognition of the stereotype I was unknowingly battling against was a key I needed in order to be able to independently navigate the system

for myself. It was also a turning point in reflection where I thought that I would like to be for someone else the kind of influence she was for me. She was a person who walked with, listened, assessed, and when invited, shared her perspective.

Eventually (with proper medication, time and therapy) I was able to navigate and negotiate the system myself, and my friend was no longer my advocate.

Later I heard about the opportunity to be trained or educated as a Peer or Recovery Support Person. I asked if I could be a part of the program, and, to make a long missive brief, here I am.

Eternally Grateful

Karen Waterfall, CRSS

My personal experience of hope is when I met Sandra Morse, my spiritual guide and counselor, in July of 2018. That is when she imparted to me her knowing that people with co-occurring disorders can use their experience, strength, and hope to help others recover. She told me that people like me are in a unique position to help heal humanity. She gave me hope by providing me with opportunities to be involved in a loving community that has held a safe and caring space for me where I can practice being sober, and where I can be my own unique self. Our community is active in dance and gathers together often to celebrate and support each other through life. Because of this support network, I am now able to be in the Recovery Support Specialist training and have a great framework to turn my experiential knowledge into experiential expertise. For that, I am eternally grateful.



Thankful

Susanna(Susie) Riesgo, CRSS

To me hope means to be able to live your life without worrying about the mistakes you might make, and not being afraid to take chances. I've learned that everyone makes mistakes, even without meaning to, and that sometimes there's nothing you can do to fix certain mistakes. However, you are always more than able to learn from them, and in order to move past them you have to remain positive and hopeful that you can and will do better. Sometimes you may even repeat a certain mistake, but that still doesn't mean you should give up on trying to better yourself. It's an everyday process in life to keep learning and to be able to move forward in a positive direction that you feel comfortable living, not how others think you should. Without being hopeful in my life, I feel like it would be hard for me to be able to make any positive changes for myself



or for my future. Each day I wake up thankful to start a new day and remain positive that nothing negative comes my way, and if so I deal with it to the best of my ability.

Hope

Leah Kalish, CRSS



Hope was always somewhat elusive to me during the times I felt low. I did hope that someday things would get better and I strived for that, but I think my persistence is what kept me going. Not until I became pregnant with my son did I finally know what hope really was.

January of 2017, I found out I was pregnant with my wonderful son and it shocked my heart into action. At first I did nothing, and my mom stepped in and called CODAC because she was concerned about my mental health. At first, I was angry and went to CODAC to tell them I was fine. They offered medication for me but I declined.

After a few months I could feel myself mentally sinking into a dark place. That is when I made an appointment with COPE and was evaluated. Soon after I started taking medication. This whole experience showed me that I needed help. I have struggled with my mental health at times, but my son is my priority and in order to be there for him I need to be there for myself, and that's what I have done.

Hope, Fit Like a Glove

Melissa Smith, CRSS



obstacles that I needed to overcome to get to where I'm at today in my recovery. Through it all I never gave up hope and allowed my addiction to heroin and meth to consume me. I have so much hope in the process to recovery. I moved here to Tucson, Arizona from Indianapolis, Indiana back in 2012. At that time I was most hopeful. I wanted to come out here to get into treatment and have a fresh start. I was absolutely AMAZED at all of the recovery opportunities that Tucson offered! Because of the fact that I was so hopeful, my hope fit like a glove to everything we have out here. I was able to get into treatment because of a counselor I had, who truly wanted to see me recover. I got into treatment at Casa de Vida, which was a 6 month program at that time. It was at that time that I knew there was more to life for me other than being addicted to drugs.

Thank you so much and God bless you.

My belief that recovery was real and obtainable started back in 2012. Within this 7 year journey of recovery there have been ups and downs, challenges and

A Passion for Helping Others

Sydney Coulter, CRSS

Throughout a series of traumatic events that had occurred in my teens and young adult years, I began not only to feel hopeless but also believed that I was hopeless. The feeling was so intense and all consuming that I began to use Adderall and alcohol as an outlet. My addiction progressed over several years, making my life unmanageable. I was incapable of holding my job of four years; I stole, lied, and betrayed my friends and family. I had dug myself into such a deep, dark hole that I was determined the only way out would be to drive from my hometown Anchorage, Alaska to Tucson, Arizona to live with my grandparents.

During the drive, I was more convinced than ever that this was the change which I needed in my life in order to obtain sobriety. 5 days later, I relapsed in Portland, Oregon and continued drinking until I got to Tucson. When I first got to Tucson, I attempted to stay sober solely relying on my own guidance. This method of excessive self-reliance did not work in my favor. In fact, it led to my rock bottom. After 5 weeks of non-stop drinking, I found myself at my first rehab with no prior experience or knowledge on recovery or AA.

This is where I experienced the "turning point" in my life. The BHTs I encountered at that rehab opened my eyes to a whole new perspective on life. They taught me



that past trauma, alcoholism, and addiction do not define who I am and that it is not about fault or shame; it's about rediscovering the strength, power, and hope I had lost. This newfound hope completely changed my life, as well as instilled a passion for helping others experiencing the same sense of hopelessness that I once did.

A Heart Beating Hope

Lindsey Everett, CRSS



The idea of having hope began for me when I was pregnant with my first daughter; left alone to care for her and raise her, scared on my own. I struggled with finding a name for her, until I realized the feeling I was carrying along with her inside of me: Hope. When I finally came to the realization that that feeling was going to carry me through such a trying time, I instantly felt a little lighter.

It wasn't until Hope was four years old, brilliant and now with a one year old little sister, that I lost my way again in life. After her sister was born, I had to have a surgery and was given prescriptions for heavy opioids, as well as medications for migraines I was suffering as a result of previous seizures. The doctor I was seeing at the time started prescribing me four different medications (that I would later find out should have killed me from the combination alone) in very large quantities. My health quickly declined, as I lost a total of 95 pounds in 7 months, and I started having several grand Mal seizures.

I experienced severe stomach issues and finally, due to the barbiturates in one of the medications, severe depression which caused my personality to completely change. I completely lost hope, as well as the support of my family, who thought I was simply abusing opioids. Eventually, I wrote a short note and swallowed over 100 pills. My mom found me just in time, as I apparently flat lined in the ambulance on the way to hospital. I spent my 33rd birthday in a coma, surrounded by my family, whom couldn't understand how I'd gotten there or how I'd leave behind two beautiful little girls.

To this day, I can never find the words to express how it haunts me to remember coming to from that coma. I can still picture it like I was waking up this morning. Every day, while doing my job as an Outreach Coordinator, providing services for patients with substance use disorders, walking into patient's hospital rooms is a silent reminder of what I did and what I took away and what was saved. However, I remember most importantly, what was given to me after years of therapy and being blessed with the job I do: HOPE. I have found hope again. I have hope that I can help save a life, hope that I can be a comforting shoulder, hope that I can be a nonjudgmental person that walks into that patient's room, where the walls can come down for them as they know I've been there, too.

I'm almost 4 years sober. I still suffer from major depression and severe anxiety, but I live a happy, healthy life with my girls. Each day I wake them up and get them ready for school, and as little girls do, they watch their mom get ready for work. My daughter Hope is very proud of the tattoo her mom has of her name as a daily reminder of her heart beating Hope. The only problem is my other daughter, Tatum, wants to know where hers is...

Workforce Development Program

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Workforce Development Program

Tucson AZ 85719

(520) 621-1642

Fax (520) 626-7833

Trainers

David E. Delawder, CRSS, CPRP

Rita Romero, CRSS, CFSP

Stephanie Tellez, CRSS, BHPP

Program Manager

Adria Powles, LBSW

Administrative Associate

Veronica Lopez

Consultant

Beverly McGuffin, RN, MSN, CPRP

The Integrated Healthcare Recovery Support Specialist Institute is administered by the Workforce Development Program in the Department of Family and Community Medicine (DFCM) at the University of Arizona. The Institute is funded by Cenpatico Arizona. Cenpatico Integrated Health of Arizona (Cenpatico) services are funded through a contract with the Arizona Department of Health Services/Division of Behavioral Health Services (ADHS/DBHS) and AHCCCS.

Workforce
Development News

Rita Romero,
EDITOR

Patricia Philbin,
DESIGN

UA Workforce Development Program promotes recovery and expanded opportunities for people with mental illness, substance use, and dual diagnosis by employing a collaborative approach to advocacy, service, education, and research.



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