

Workforce Development News

Integrated Healthcare Recovery Support Specialist Institute

Tucson, Arizona April 25, 2019



Certified Peer Support Specialist Graduates

Back Row left to right: Jerry Myers, Seth Goldstein, Brendan White, Antonio Martinez, Elwood (Erruudo) Brown, Ryan Robb, Julian Padilla, Willie (Will) Walker

Middle Row left to right: Ilana (Lani) Shapiro, Tori Cammarano, Angela Brace, Brandi Olivares, Kersey Makepeace, Taylor Nunez, Darcy Etzel

Front Row left to right: Jessica Gallagher, Claudia Acedo, Melissa Mendoza, King Randell

A Time to Fully Let Go

Claudia Acedo, CRSS



It took me a long time to get on a good path and to get in touch with my higher power. I was in a dark place for so many years and I was in so much pain. I was so angry, and I tried masking those feelings with drugs. When I went to rehab the first time I started learning about getting back in touch with my higher power. I started praying by asking God for forgiveness and guidance on my new journey. But there was still something missing. Even though I did my 30 days in rehab, I still felt like something was missing. After being out of rehab a few months, I relapsed. I decided to go back to rehab again.

I listened more, I prayed more, and then I realized what I was missing the first time. I had to forgive myself for the pain and hurt I went through. Telling myself it wasn't my fault for the way others treated me, or for the way my exs would beat me up until I was purple and blue. I had to remind myself I couldn't keep holding onto the past, I couldn't change what had already been done,

and it was time to let go fully. I've learned to forgive, I've learned to stop looking for love in the wrong places, and most of all I've learned I am not alone.

When I heard about the peer support position and about the classes, I was ecstatic. I never thought someone like me, someone who had a history of substance use disorder could do something so rewarding. I applied and was accepted into the RSS classes, and from that moment on I knew there was no stopping me. I feel like it was meant for me to make a difference in someone's life, whether it is one person or a hundred. I believe everything in life happens for a reason, and there is a time and place for everything. When I step back and think about the reason I'm doing what I'm doing in life right now, I think about other people out there still struggling, not knowing there is hope out there.

I never had any high standards for myself or felt like I've accomplished anything. But today I am proud to say I hit 5 months and 23 days clean. To me, that is an achievement. I took personal responsibility for my life and where it was going. I gained knowledge and education about my addiction and my medications. I learned to advocate for myself and for my recovery. When I sit back and feel down about not being supported enough by family, I remind myself I have plenty of supporters who know what I am going through every day. I am my biggest fan and I remind myself that I have to keep taking it one day at a time. Motivation can walk through the door, but you have to walk through that same door to gain success! #HardWorkEqualsSuccess

Antonio's Personal Experience With Hope

Antonio Martinez, CRSS



My journey to hope occurred January 15, 2019. It was a rainy day, literally pouring. I was feeling hopeless after losing 3 commercial contracts due to my addiction to alcohol. Alcohol was the reason I lost business, relationships, and finances. It was a major contributing factor to almost every single one of my poor decisions. I had lost my girlfriend, was losing my three bedroom two bath home in a nice neighborhood, and I had lost my vehicle. A total loss of ALL motivation. I had not yet realized that I was numbing myself. So not only did I not

know at the time that I was trying to numb myself, but I didn't know the reasons why, the underlying causes.

My brother convinced me to go to my first rehab center, The Arc. He told me that he would watch over my dog, pack up my house, and drop me off. He had already called them and made arrangements. He convinced me that it was for the best, how my life would result in an even further downward spiral. I took his advice on how it would feel to be healthy again, to be sober me...the me who most people prefer. I decided to go. January 16 was my first day at The Arc. Immediately I fit in and learned valuable lessons. After detox, I was in the residential facility. Two weeks later I was kicked out for fraternizing. I'll never forget what the director told me after I begged to be given another chance. She replied, "If you mess up your recovery, you were never serious about getting clean in the first place."

That fueled me to stay sober and to join the RSS program! I met a lot of great people and learned valuable lessons. The Arc actually did me a favor by kicking me out. I cannot thank them enough, specifically Roxanne. I prayed every day and read my bible while in there. I do believe JESUS and JESUS alone took away my cravings and addictions. I thank my brother and my mother and my family for their prayers and solid support system!

Hope and Focus

Angela Brace, CRSS

There was a time when my husband and I both lost our jobs. We were faced with massive bills: car insurance, rent, electricity, and food. None of our family was able to help us. We soon lost our apartment, but at the same time we faced losing everything we had worked hard for. We spent two months living in a car. Maybe eating once a day. We tried reaching out to several organizations for aide and they turned us down due to having a large group of people they were assisting. This happened 10 years ago. I focused on my higher power and refused to look at the negativity around me. I focused on one thing and that was continuing with my education and skills, which enabled me to find another job that helped us get back into another apartment. From there, it gradually improved.



Belief in Hope

Brandi Olivares, CRSS

For me, hope is an essential component of my recovery. Near the end of my 90 day course of treatment at The Haven Residential facility, along with 44 other recovering women and their children, is the moment I chose to accept life on life's terms. This willingness of acceptance toward life's events inspired within me the feeling, the belief in hope. It has assisted me in establishing realistic goals and personal motivation, which will ultimately result in a greater sense of optimism. The moment I decided to choose hope, is the moment I knew that anything is possible!



Change, in the Blink of an Eye

Brendan White, CRSS



My journey of recovery and hope started what feels like a lifetime ago and with a moment that changed everything in the blink of an eye. That one blink took away my love, my world and my hope. My fiancée and my best friend were lost within days of each other and the goodbyes were never said. After those devastating events, I then lost my truck, my apartment and my job. Thirty days was all it took to change me from who I was into someone that had become hopeless, someone who found waking up in the morning almost impossible.

I could talk for hours on how I descended into my addiction and into what was called the

“insanity” of my life, but that would be going backward. Instead I want to talk about how I got here and how I found the strength to fight for my recovery and the hope that I had lost. It was the regaining of those things that put me on this path, and have brought me back to a happiness I can live with.

How did I find hope? For me, I found it in one word: daughter. My daughter. She has been my lighthouse, my beacon of light that guides me through the times that I struggle and pushes me to be better than even I deserve to be. She instills in me not only the will to live, but the desire to be around for as long as I can (just for her).

Now do not get me wrong, there are times that I struggle with getting out of bed in the morning. But as I go through each day in sobriety I find that there are moments when I do not even have to think about getting out of bed. It just comes naturally and without the negative thoughts. I look forward to the mundane things that most people take for granted; sitting with my daughter and talking about her day, being there for her when she needs something and just hearing her voice and seeing her face. I have hope because of her. Her beautiful view of the world and of me (despite my faults) is the foundation I need to build the next chapter of my life.

Turning Points in Life

Kersey Makepeace, CRSS



I have had many turning points in my life. One that specifically comes to mind is when I made the decision to come to Tucson, Arizona. I went back home to the house I grew up in to rekindle with my family, whom I had not seen or had any communication with in a long time. No one was home and the house I once knew was not what I remember it to be. It was foreclosed on and things that were once sentimental to my mother were abandoned and left behind; I feared that she may have finally taken her own life. Growing up I saw her in 2 comas from attempting suicide. My mother is a person with a diagnosis of SMI and suffers greatly, still to this day. Watching her suffer has been one of my greatest pains.

I was devastated, to say the least. My neighbor let me know that my father was in Arizona at the Salvation Army seeking help for his drug and alcohol addiction, and that my mom and

brother were alive and safe in Michigan. I knew I was going to die from my drug addiction. For the past couple of years I had lived on the streets in L.A. and Denver, I was in and out of different motels, hospitals, rehabs, and jails. I was fully dependent on heroin from the time I was 16 years old, and I didn't know what was wrong with me. The God I was taught to believe in seemed like a very cruel and punishing God. I thought I must have a weak will. I lived in a hopeless state of mind for many, many years. My drug addiction progressed to higher and larger quantities. I overdosed 4 times, I knew heroin would eventually take me and I almost welcomed that idea. By the grace of God, I was brought back every time and am forever grateful to all the paramedics that I will never know.

When I arrived in Tucson, I continued using and living on the streets. I was admitted into another hospital due to having MRSA for the third time. My grandmother came to visit me. She has 40 years sober in Alcoholics Anonymous. She asked if I would be willing to come live with her and recover, and I said yes because I was tired of the way I was living. I had a little job, worked no program, and was miserable before relapsing at 6 months. I kept my using a secret. I was at another turning point. I knew I was going to leave back to live on the cold streets in L.A., because that is where my addiction takes me. I knew going back there was a bad idea but I was completely powerless over it. I intuitively knew that I was headed on a suicide mission. As I smoked a cigarette, I turned to the beautiful night sky and desperately cried out for help. I sincerely asked whatever was out there to

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Done Fighting

Ryan Robb, CRSS

My personal experience of hope came to me in the package of defeat. I experienced hope when I finally gave up fighting what was my drug addiction. After on and off struggles with heroin addiction, my brother helped me get into a treatment center in Tucson when I had finally had enough. Sitting in a rehab 2400 miles from home, I felt a wave of ease and comfort reading the big book of Alcoholics Anonymous. I closed the book after reading a few chapters and felt peace. I closed the book and took in the Arizona sky, and knew everything was going to be okay. I was done fighting. I finally accepted the fact that I had no power over my situation. The 'pull yourself up by the bootstraps' mentality kept me sick for years. I simply could not. Accepting help and finally understanding that I could not do this on my own has changed my life, and I hope other people with addictions can find a similar solution; there is a way out.



Turning Points in Life, by Kersey Makepeace, continued...

put someone or something in my life that could help me. I believe something or somebody heard my heart because the next day I was able to be honest about my using with grandmother, which isn't something I would normally do.

That day I went into my last detox center. While at Pasadera, I met a staff member who was in recovery from drug and alcohol addiction. They shared their experience with me and although we have different stories, they were just like me. They didn't use or drink anymore, and used their experience to bring hope

to the still suffering like myself. They spoke the language of the heart. They grabbed hold of my hand and didn't let go. They didn't judge me, but instead accepted me for where I was at. I believe God uses people, because this person was an open channel to bring me to the truth and the light. This June I will celebrate 3 years of continuous sobriety. I couldn't have done it without this person, my grandmother, Alcoholics Anonymous, and most importantly a loving God of my own understanding. There is a way out and my only hope is to help others like me. What a great purpose and gift I have been given after all.

My Personal Experience of Hope

King Randell, CRSS



I am so happy to be writing this paper, because for a very long time in my life I didn't have any hope that I would ever be more than what I was told or what was beaten into me. My self-worth was destroyed, my self-esteem...well, there was none. I believed what others told me, that I would never have a normal life. My way of dealing with the hurt and shame of past abuse and trauma was self-medicating with heroin, and in many other harmful ways. I was at a point in my life where I would much rather have been dead. But there was this thing I felt tucked far away, something I stopped listening to and believing in, but I found it again. A sliver of HOPE; but where to start?

Well, I realized that the first thing I could do (not had to do, but could do), was get clean and sober. Now this did not happen overnight, didn't even happen in years, it took time. I believed it was possible. It was a

super long road in and out of detox, hospitals, experiencing the death of loved ones, and even prison before I was truly ready. With a lot of self-care and forgiveness for others and myself, I started growing. Putting the pieces back together after a life time of destruction, I did not know just how many parts there were to put back together. And wouldn't you know it, the longer I kept believing, the more that little flame of HOPE grew and grew.

Now I am here, a place I kind of always knew in my soul I would be. There is no way I went through all that for nothing. This is and has always been my calling; I am just so glad that I made it. My life could have went in so many different directions, but it brought me here to this point to share my strengths and hope with others, to better assist them with their pursuit of happiness and wellness. It doesn't matter what it looks like, as long as they are the ones that see their peace in it, like I have found in this program. I have found my purpose after all. I don't have all the answers and I am kind of sure I will never know them all. I have learned so much from this program, with my own personal experience and knowledge, I have empathy and compassion and a strong will to see others find their peace and wellness. I am looking forward to this next glorious chapter of this amazing life I have found through HOPE and RECOVERY. I am looking forward to the challenges that might arise and for the chance to learn even more. This is not the end by any means, it is only the start of so much more. For the first time in I don't even know how long, I can truly say I am happy with where and who I am. My life will be forever changed by this, and that gives me even more HOPE.

A Living Testimony

Tori Cammarano, CRSS

My personal experience of hope began in 2017, when I went to jail for the last time. Unlike previous times, I found myself sitting alone in that jail cell, grateful to be there. After many years and overdoses, I finally felt a huge sense of relief that I had never felt before. After almost 10 years of suffering from addiction and chaos, I finally found a drive, and desire to change my life. I knew that there was something more to life than what I knew. My days of feeling hopeless and alone were over.

After I served my time in jail, I went to a program called Teen Challenge, and found God. From jail, to Teen Challenge, many people came in and out of my life who were divine appointments, and served as huge assets and supports in my recovery. After completing the program, I found a meaning and a purpose for my life. I want to have an impact on people and serve as a walking, living testimony to those that struggle with mental illness or addiction like I have.



I Have Hope

Elwood (Erruudo) Brown, CRSS

Meth, alcohol, coke, spice, heroin, pills. I abused them in order to die. I did not want to live. When asked why I have never killed myself, my answer was, "I'll suffer in hell the same as here." I gave up my dream of helping people as a psychology doctor. February 2019, I had been sober from my latest addiction, meth, for a year and two months. I regained my life, started my dream path. Once more, I have hope and am pleased to be alive.



The Fundamental Element of Success

Julian Padilla, CRSS



The word hope is defined as “a feeling of expectation and desire for a certain thing to happen,” or even more simply put, “a feeling of trust.” An Abraham Miller quote reads, “A man begins to die when he ceases to expect anything from tomorrow.” Martin Luther King Jr said, “We must accept finite disappointment, but never lose infinite hope.” Hope is essentially what gives us the strength to face each new day with resilience and tenacity; to faithfully put one foot in front of the other and continue forward in confidence, regardless of previous failures and disappointments. For many of us, it was a feeling of hopelessness that led us to the depths of rock bottom, to make decisions that we knew were self-destructive; we had somewhere along the line given up hope. In

the same way, hope is the only thing that can bring any person who has experienced much trauma and hardship, who cannot seem to find the silver lining in a dark cloud that has covered their life, out of that woeful place of disparity. A hopeless individual can once again find hope through connecting with another human being who has overcome a struggle similar to the one that person is experiencing.

It was 10 years ago that I came into recovery, beaten down and hopeless, after a long road of hardship and what seemed like endless struggles, and found hope in the recovery rooms through hearing other peers’ personal testimonies. After listening to complete strangers retell my life story through some of their own personal experiences, and how they overcame those struggles; I began to believe that I too, could one day persevere. Ten years ago I realized that my ultimate goal was to become an RSS, so that I could inspire hope in others the same way. Although I continued to struggle in my recovery for many years, I never gave up the small ounce of hope that was instilled in me that day, and I continued to strive toward becoming the best version of myself. Today I am incredibly blessed to say that my dream of becoming an RSS has become an actuality through the support of my peers and by staying connected to a community of passion, and I have once again found purpose and meaning in my life; to give away that which was so freely given to me, the gift of hope.

Experiencing Hope Unveiling

Ilana (Lani) Shapiro, CRSS

My personal experience and sense of HOPE occurred when I was a child. As an adult, diagnosed with a mental illness, I had an extremely tumultuous life. Yet, even throughout the toughest times, I held steadfast to hope, never giving up, even when I felt like I almost wanted to. HOPE was and is a spiritual grounding for me. Never really having a strong support system, and after many years of struggling, a turning point began to occur in my life and things began to unravel in a healthy way. As a result of a physician finding the right medication for me, healthy relationships, a healthy lifestyle and acceptance into the RSS program, I began to experience "hope unveiling" and a sense of a much more fulfilling life!

Goals began appearing more attainable to me. I am very grateful for the RSS program at the University of Arizona and what it offers, because throughout my life I had a very sporadic job history, as a result of my mental illness. Being unable to find employment as a Certified Medical Assistant and a Behavioral Health Specialist led me to become very discouraged about ever finding employment for myself. I very much desired a lifelong, rewarding career.



I am very ecstatic about the development of Recovery Support Specialists within the Behavioral Health System. Although no one wants to see anyone struggling with mental illness and or substance use, as an RSS, I would be humbled and honored to be able to help individuals in recovery, with a sense of equality and reciprocity!

Finding Hope in Life Again

Darcy Etzel, CRSS



I started my chemical recovery in Las Vegas, Nevada, and was also diagnosed with bipolar/ADHD, anxiety and depression. Okay, I thought, so now what? They told me what it was and I read a little here and there, but never really knew what any of it meant, so I never followed up on things. Since then I moved out here to

Arizona and have met some very unique friends. One even told me about a place called Art Awakenings; to go you have to belong to a Mental Health agency and be on AHCCCS. So I figured yeah, I can do that, and I got a referral and got hooked up. From there, I started to go and talk to a case manager about a few things, and let some things off my chest that I've been going through for about two years now. I also learned about DKA, a job training, and then I heard about RSS. I found out some information about it that really got my interest. The information I learned in class about myself and all the other information has, in just a three week time period, had me thinking things through, in a different manner, a more positive attitude and with a whole lot more forgiveness. My stressors seem to be a little silent, and my inner judgment has come to a halt. I wake up knowing I can make a difference just by smiling at a person who is not. I learned that I can help someone who has traveled a road that doesn't look clear, and I can make a difference just by letting them know there is hope. I can help them with some avenues to find what it is they are looking for.

Thanks for the opportunity of finding HOPE in my life again.

Spiritual Tools for Life

Willie (Will) Walker, CRSS

So my story starts on June 30, 2016, checking myself into what was then Pasadera (now called CBI) rehabilitation program. For the record, I came in afraid, broken, vulnerable, and mentally, spiritually, and emotionally bankrupt. The first thirty days of what was then a ninety-day program was a challenge for me, and it was difficult to focus on what I was doing and why I was there. The feeling of being overwhelmed coupled with fear was almost paralyzing.

Yet I persevered with persistence. One day two people with an H&I service commitment brought a twelve step recovery meeting in the form of CA into the rehab to share their experience, strength and hope. As I actively listened to the story being shared, I could hear and see so many similarities between myself and the person sharing their story. It brought a calm sense of quiet confidence within myself. The speaker's experience, strength and hope resonated with me. I came to the realization that whatever he was doing, if I applied those same spiritual tools in my life, I too could achieve a



level of confidence, freedom and courage. This experience gave me the hope, courage and motivation to begin my journey of recovery and to carry the message to the person with addiction who still suffers.

Hope

Taylor Nunez, CRSS

Having a substance use disorder is difficult as it is. Finding out you are pregnant on top of that, can make you feel helpless. A nurse practitioner at my clinic gave me hope when she educated me on my options. There is so much stigma around the use of methadone for treatment of opioid addiction. Some say it is worse than being on illicit drugs, while others won't even consider you being sober while taking it. The truth is, methadone saved my life. It gave me great realization that recovery is 100% possible. I was given my life back. I can only hope to share with others that they, too, can recover fully.



Hope

Jessica Gallagher, CRSS



My personal experience of hope occurred when I arrived at my second rehab, after being abandoned by my first. My first rehab had so many doubts in my recovery, making me ask myself why they gave up on me when I wasn't relapsing, and all I wanted was to get better. The second rehab was where I received a diagnosis, and when I did my evaluation, they listened to what I was saying, not my family. This finally led to a correct diagnosis and to beginning the correct medications. When I was having severe effects of being a zombie, they were quick to adjust things so I could participate in groups and learn. There were peers there constantly to help me identify what I was imagining and what was real. With each week, I made improvements. The biggest moments of hope were when I was able to sit through a full class, and I was able to stop using the MP3 player to drown out the noises and voices. My housemates all began to say the difference they could see. That was when I was new, there was hope for me. That was my first glimpse of hope, and what I have held onto.

Inspirational and Motivational

Melissa Mendoza, CRSS



Hope occurred in October of 2002, when I prayed for my DUI and received it exactly one week later. Hope is an inspirational and motivational word, and without it, I would not be able to live life today. In 2003, I was on a new journey to recovery, on probation and my license suspended for three years. It took a lot of hope and prayer to succeed with the ending of my drinking, at that time. It was the turning point to my recovery with alcohol and although I relapsed a few times, I am now the sober person I am today. This sobriety has made it possible for me to be able to assist others with their needs, and most importantly be a role model to them. Hope will continue to play a huge positive role in my life and will therefore continue to help me to assist others.

Faith and Hope

Jerry Myers, CRSS

My personal experience of hope has been an up and down journey consisting of many years. Hope, to me, is that willingness to believe and that feeling of faith that everything is going to get better. There have been many times in my life that I didn't feel as though it was going to get better. I would be hoping my situation was going to change or I was going to stop what I was doing, only to fall back even worse than I had before. Those times often made it hard for me to believe in hope. The one time I felt real hope was when I was hospitalized, and a gentleman came and spoke to me and convinced me to come to a group. He later pulled me aside and we went and talked. He didn't judge me or tell me what I needed to do, and surprisingly, he could relate to everything I was going through. It was amazing that someone could have very similar problems as me and be where I wanted to be in recovery. I look back on that moment and truly feel that by being able to bring hope to someone else, I will also be reinforcing my faith in my own hope. That half an hour of his time telling me his real world stories of his recovery forever changed my life, and I am hoping I can do that for someone else.



Pink Cloud

Seth Goldstein, CRSS

My first real memory of hope was twenty two years ago. I was thirty two years old and had been living with substance use disorder for twenty years, and it was time for me to try something different. I attended my first twelve step meeting and was living at a half-way house here in Tucson. I managed to stay sober for six months and was happier than I had been since I was a small child. I think the term "pink cloud" comes to mind, and a real sense of hope that there might be a better way of life for me.



Workforce Development Program

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Workforce
Development News

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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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