



RESPECT Institute graduates transform lived experience into education and advocacy

By Melanie Dallas, LPC

I've written previously about the importance of people with "lived experience" in helping others in their process of recovery from mental illness and substance use disorders. Someone with mental illness or addiction who is living in recovery has high credibility with individuals dealing with the same challenges, and can offer practical advice on coping strategies and life skills.

Most important, by showing others it is possible to live in recovery – by being an example to others – individuals with lived experience give others hope. And it is very difficult, some would say impossible, to recover from mental illness or addiction without hope.

Many people living in recovery lead what some call 'normal' lives – working, raising families, involved in their communities – so successfully others might not realize they have a mental illness or substance use disorder, which is one of the goals of recovery. Many others use their lived experience to help others, becoming mental health or substance use recovery peer specialists.

Highland Rivers Health employs many peer specialist for precisely that reason. We currently have certified peer specialists that lead outpatient mental health and substance use peer groups, that work in our intensive community-based programs, and in our supported housing and employment programs, among others.

In June, several of our peer specialist employees, as well as several individuals that participate in outpatient peer groups as part of their recovery, attended the RESPECT Institute of Georgia, a collaborative project of Slack Consulting, Georgia Mental Health Consumer Network, Mental Health America of Georgia, and the Georgia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities.

The Institute, which is a three-and-a-half day training, helps participants develop the skills necessary to transform their experiences of mental health and substance use challenges into educational and inspirational presentations. Participants realize their personal lived experience has value and deserves respect, and learn how to be advocates for recovery.

Through this recognition and acceptance, participants reclaim their sense of self. They own their lived experiences, without shame or embarrassment, and become instrumental in eliminating stigma in the general public, in advancing the message of recovery and in educating their communities.

REPSECT Institute graduates learn to develop their personal experiences of recovery and independent living into compelling narratives they can share in diverse venues such as management meetings, legislative meetings, employee orientations, university classrooms, civic meetings and continuing education programs and many others.

To date, the RESPECT Institute of Georgia team conducted more than 125 trainings statewide and graduated over 1,000 individuals who have shared their stories with more than 100,000 Georgians.

Among the Highland Rivers employees that graduated from the REPSECT Institute last month are Connie Hooper, a certified peer specialist that works as peer navigator in our Bartow outpatient clinic; Cam Parks, a certified addiction recovery empowerment specialist who manages our Addictive Disease Support Services program; and Alicia McKinley, a certified peer specialist with our Home for Recovery supportive housing program. Congratulations to them, and to all the Highland Rivers employees and peer group participants that graduated last month.

The idea that wisdom gained through lived experience can be valuable in helping others is the foundation of the peer movement in mental health and addiction treatment. But regardless of whether or not someone living in recovery chooses to acknowledge their illness or share their experience – doing so is an individual decision – lived experience and living in recovery deserve our respect.

If you are interested in having a RESPECT Institute of Georgia graduate share his or her recovery story with your organization, visit the Highland Rivers Health website contact page at <http://highlandrivershealth.com/contact-us>, and fill out our online contact form at the bottom of the page. There is perhaps no better way to understand recovery – and why it is essential to our communities – than to hear from those who are living it.