

ACT Team Peer Specialist Overcame His Own Challenges, Now Helps Young People Struggling with Behavioral Health Issues

Before getting the help he needed, Jeff Michaels spent most of his time alone. Sleeping 12 hours a day and living in his parent's basement, Jeff was consumed by anger and his disease – schizophrenia.

He didn't know how to interact with people and lived in constant fear of being attacked whenever he ventured out.

He was in and out of treatment for years, including lengthy hospital stays, until finally he found the winning combination of psychiatrist, therapy and medication that started him down the path to gaining control of his life. Jeff only wishes that it had happened sooner.

Over the year prior to their admission, ACT Team consumers as a group had 291 psychiatric hospital admissions, compared with just 14 after they joined the program.

Today, Jeff is a Peer Specialist in Beech Brook's Assertive Community Treatment (ACT) Team for transitional youth, providing support to young people with mental illness. He is living proof that there is help out there, and most of all, there is hope.

Beech Brook's ACT Team is the only one of its kind in Cleveland and one of the few nationwide that deliver 24/7 mental health treatment and support for individuals 16–25 and their families. The program functions like a hospital without walls, with most services provided in the home or community. Jeff has been working in the program since its inception 8 years ago, making him the longest acting member of the team.

Epitomizing the very definition of "peer," Jeff relates to his clients on a very personal level. He knows exactly what they are going through

– and more importantly, what will help them. "My experiences have made me hate the disease," Jeff explained, "that's why I continue to fight not only for myself, but for others."

Beyond visiting clients in their homes and making sure they're taking their medications and keeping appointments, Jeff knows

first-hand a lot of little things to help them manage. For example, putting your finger in one ear can temporarily help alleviate auditory hallucinations. Jeff's ability to relate to some of the toughest clients often helps him break the ice and get through to individuals with really guarded exteriors. He can say things like, "Oh ya, I was on that medication

once." As ACT Team Director Marc Osipchak put it, "Jeff has a lot of 'street cred' with our clients."

Everyone in the ACT Team faces many challenges that come with severe mental health disorders, but, Jeff said, "They're mostly good kids. I like helping them." He humbly joked that recently he made such a nuisance of himself and "irritated" one girl so much that she actually finished high school and earned her diploma!

On a more serious note, Jeff went on to explain that many of the young people he works with are schizophrenic and/or bipolar and have come from abusive families, struggle with homelessness, been raped, robbed and a host of other unspeakable things. Simply stated, "You have to be extra nice to them." They've earned it.



To bring a little levity into the lives of some of his clients, Jeff Michaels, an amateur magician, often performs card tricks for them.

A few years ago, Jeff was with a friend in Chicago who worked with the homeless population. She asked him what she could do to help them. Jeff started to tell her how she could refer them for various services. She said, "No – how can I HELP them?" He said, "You need to be really nice to them – for a *really long time.*"

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A Message from the Executive Office



Debra Rex, M.A., M.Ed.
President and CEO

As you may know, over the last year we have seen unprecedented changes in the way we do our work, along with new and creative ways in which we do business with our partners and other providers. With the

child welfare system moving toward an integrated approach to physical and behavioral health care, Beech Brook has launched a major culture shift in preparation to move forward with integrated care.

To that end, I want to share some exciting news about a major step we're taking toward that goal. We know that children who have experienced trauma or who are struggling with mental health issues often have unaddressed physical health conditions that can have a major impact on their overall growth and development. Left untreated, these children will grow into adults with a life expectancy that is 11-25 years shorter than the general population.

So here's the good news: Through our partnership with Care Alliance, Beech Brook will now be able to offer families a "one-stop shopping" experience at our Family Drop-In Center, which we will be renaming the "Beech Brook/Care Alliance Family Health Center." (The Drop-In Center and Care Alliance are located at the Carl B. Stokes Social Service Mall in Cleveland's Central Neighborhood.) In addition to the support services and parenting programs offered there, we will now provide therapy and access to primary health care right there on one floor.

This new programming – along with other Beech Brook services like Independent Living and the ACT Team (featured on the cover) that help transitioning youth continue to get the treatment and resources they need to become healthy adults – illustrate our commitment to a wider, more holistic approach to serving children and families.

Although many details surrounding integrated care are still developing, we believe the changes that are emerging will be very good for the population we serve. And we're excited about new opportunities to pursue our mission in ways that can make an even greater, lifelong, impact on children who struggle with mental illness.

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That anecdote speaks to how in tune Jeff is with people who are hurt, people who are struggling – sometimes fighting for their very lives. He knows mental illness is a long-term battle, and that those who suffer from it need long-term support and kindness. And that's what he delivers.

(Today, Jeff is married, works two jobs, does volunteer work, and has a busy social calendar. According to Jeff, "Life is so good, there should be two of me." These are words he thought he would never hear himself say.)

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3737 Lander Road
Pepper Pike, Ohio 44124

Weizer Building
11801 Buckeye Road
Cleveland, Ohio 44120

Lorain County Site
Midway Plaza
347 Midway Boulevard
Suite 204
Elyria, Ohio 44035

Summit County Site
323 South Main Street
Suite 201
Akron, Ohio 44308

Family Drop-In Center
Carl B. Stokes Social
Services Mall
6001 Woodland Avenue
Cleveland, Ohio 44104

Reflections on a Wonderful Retirement Send-off

By Mario Tonti

On Dec. 9, 2013 I received a retirement send-off that for me felt like a world-class event. It was everything and everyone I could ask for coming together to wish me well as I transition to the next phase of my career.

The event was orchestrated by Deb Rex and supported by many, many people at Beech Brook. They include Venita Barham, Nancy Kortemeyer, Nancy Martin, Jim Tamburro and others.

Deb and I had discussed my preference for a small gathering of friends and colleagues. The evening met my expectations in so many ways. Almost every person who I wanted to be there was there. Many friends attended from different parts of my career, along with Beech Brook staff and, board members. A special treat for me was my family members – my wife Roberta, daughter, Jenni, my son, Mathew, granddaughter, Hami and my brother, Bob and sister-in-law, Alicia.

The group honored me with their very kind remarks, and my son and daughter led the group in wonderful singing of a slightly altered version of Carole King's *You've Got a Friend*.

There were several wonderful gifts including a new title of President Emeritus, my picture next to the other leaders of Beech Brook, a gift certificate to United Airlines toward a vacation



Roberta and Mario Tonti, along with their granddaughter Hami

to Hawaii and the renaming of the road into Beech Brook as "Mario Tonti Drive."

Topping all these gifts and honors was a tribute that took my breath away. An anonymous donor established the Mario Tonti "Fund for Excellence in Community Service." This fund will provide an annual award for the person or persons who have demonstrated special investment and skill in the provision of community services. I will lead a committee of individuals with community-based experience to choose the



Roberta and Mario Tonti's children, Jenni and Mathew

recipient of the interest on the dollars, which will be held in trust so that this award will be an annual event. While the initial gift was substantial, I am awe struck by the many subsequent gifts that we have received to add to the amount that will support this prize.

I have spent my life's work helping children and families in communities. I am very proud of the organization that we have built at Beech Brook and the many thousands of young lives our wonderful staff reach every year. That has been and remains the greatest gift that Beech Brook has given me.

To all who participated in this event and the subsequent community service award, I offer my deepest gratitude in giving me an evening I will never forget.



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Beech Brook's Mission

To advance the well-being and self-sufficiency of children, youth and families by providing effective, innovative physical and behavioral health, permanency, educational and related services and by serving as a strong voice for children, youth and families.

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Beech Brook is a contract agency of the Alcohol, Drug Addiction and Mental Health Services Board of Cuyahoga County.

It's Tiki Time!



The Beech Ball April 11, 2014

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9801 Carnegie Avenue
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