



Starfish & Keys

Two seemingly unrelated objects play a vital role in celebrating achievements in recovery.

A Starfish...

Also called “a sea star,” a starfish is an amazing creature. So fragile in its appearance, yet resilient and complex. A starfish can also have significant personal meaning, as explained in this story:

A young girl was walking along a beach upon which hundreds of starfish had washed ashore. When she came up to a starfish, she would pick it up and throw it back into the ocean. People watched her with amusement.

*She had been doing this for some time when a man approached her and said: “Little girl, why are you doing this? You can’t save **all** these starfish. You can’t begin to make a difference!”*

The girl seemed crushed. But after a few moments, she bent down, picked up another starfish, and hurled it as far as she could into the ocean.

Then she looked up at the man and replied: “Well, I made a difference to that one!”

To someone recovering from a mental illness, a “Starfish” is that one person who made a difference – the person upon whom they relied for strength to get them through the toughest of times.

And a Key...

A key, on the other hand, is just a simple piece of metal. But a key is crafted with an important purpose in mind: Opening a lock. To that same person in recovery, the symbolism of opening a lock represents entering a new phase of life.

OMH clients and staff know these seemingly disparate objects are closely related. Many OMH facilities and programs present a “Keys to Recovery” award as part of a ceremony to celebrate the achievement of a client who is moving forward in their lives. On the award is this inscription:

*Opportunity presents itself as a door to a new level of success,
A door that many knock and knock on, but never get through.*

*You have found and earned the keys to your success, the keys that have and will continue to unlock
New opportunities and take you to places you may have never thought possible.*

*Thank you, through finding your keys,
You inspire others to find theirs.*

Upon receiving their award, a client, in turn, names a “Starfish” – which can be anyone from a treatment professional to maintenance staff – who helped them along their journey.

In this edition of *OMH News*, we’ll share stories from some of our Key and Starfish award recipients. We hope you’ll find them as inspiring as we did.

We invite you to share your thoughts and stories with us at omhnews@omh.ny.gov.



Empowerment: The value of celebration in recovery



"It's important to celebrate one's recovery – especially on a personal level," said **Tony Trahan**, Deputy Director of OMH's Office of Consumer Affairs.

"Not only for one's self," he added, "but for the staff and for the community as a whole. Receiving an award can make individuals feel good about themselves, and confirms that their lives do indeed have value. For everyone involved in that individual's life, this is a happy moment."

Starfish and Key award ceremonies have become popular throughout the nation because they're a wonderful way of recognizing a personal accomplishment, the completion of a challenging process, and the end to a long journey that for many started in a place of hopelessness.

This movement toward celebrating recovery is also the result a major turn in the treatment of mental illness and substance abuse. Throughout much of our nation's early history, it was assumed that recovery from mental or substance abuse disorders was nearly impossible. This focus on recovery has been prevalent only within the past four to five decades.

Moment of passage

Most OMH facilities hold such celebrations at least once per year, some hold them more frequently. Presentations are most often held at community or facility meetings.

The "Keys to Recovery" award is intended to honor a person who had been under care in the facility and has moved on. In practical terms, the award marks a moment of passage from a level of care in which the individual was dependent to one in which this same individual is living back in the community.

Because the journey of recovery is an ongoing process, the award also marks an important step in an individual's personal growth. "An award can also serve as an incentive and a motivator," Trahan said. "It can encourage someone else to say: 'Recovery is indeed possible and I want that for myself, too.' It's a moment of empowerment."

The "Starfish Award" is presented to a staff person who made a difference in the life of a Key recipient. The Key recipient identifies the characteristics, qualities, and situations in which the person helped them achieve their "A-Ha!" moment. It's someone who helped the client to discover their own strengths, treated them like a human being, respected their beliefs, and helped them make the turn from illness to recovery.

Hope is the starting point

An essential component of recovery is hope. Similar to cancer survivors, when people are diagnosed and can see others who have survived, it makes recovery real and achievable.

"We should be on the lookout for opportunities to plant seeds of hope," Trahan said. "We sometimes need to carry the banner of hope for people when they are not able to believe in themselves. We need to promote the scientific fact that recovery is the expectation, rather than the exception."^{OMH}



Tony Trahan

Jonathan Espinal: 'I got my life back!'



Jonathan Espinal, holding the cake, celebrating with GBHC staff. From left, **Debbie Lombardo**, **Jessica Baker**, **Dan Rogers**, and **Scott Friedman**.

With support and encouragement from Greater Binghamton Health Center (GBHC), **Jonathan Espinal** earned a Certificate of High School Equivalency. He's now living in an apartment of his own and is working on becoming a certified nursing assistant.

"My long-term goal is to work with children who are suffering from cancer," Espinal said. "I want to give them the love and encouragement that I got from the staff at GBHC." He presented seven Transitional Living Residence staff with Starfish Awards in recognition for their service:

Debbie Lombardo, **Jessica Baker**, **Dan Rogers**, **Andrea Verrechio**, **Scott Friedman**, **Jessica Sample**, and **Dan Young**.

"It was awesome to have so many people believe in me," Espinal said. "They talked about goals and where I was in life. About a month into my stay here at GBHC, I really felt like I could do it. I feel like I got my life back!"

Since then, Espinal has moved Florida to be with his family again. He called the center this past summer to report that he was working full time and doing very well.^{OMH}

Lawrence Euell Jr.: 'When I couldn't turnaround'



For **Lawrence Euell Jr.**, the turning point of his life came when he woke up in a Long Island hospital with third-degree burns to his arms and face.

"At the time of the fire, I was using substances," Euell said. "At that point, having survived my accident, I knew was going to be okay. I saw that I have a reason for living and that I also have a lot to offer to my family and peers."

'I stepped out of a mental cage that gave way to clearer thinking'

Euell was first diagnosed at age 19. "I was in complete denial for three years," he said. "I finally came to realize there was a problem when I was 21. I felt like I had the weight of the world on my shoulders. When I was symptomatic, I felt like no one loved me, that I was alone. I would isolate myself from my family and friends."

His family didn't understand his illness at first. But over time, they started to, especially when he started to take charge of his recovery and could better explain his feelings.

Euell, an aspiring rap artist, also had time express his thoughts about his turnaround through his craft:

*What led my desire for recovery?
I didn't want to end up dead and leave a lot of regret behind for me
and my family.
My family worried about me.
My turnaround was when I **couldn't** turn around
in a hospital bed with 3rd degree burns all around.
It was my rock bottom.
An absolute disgrace.
But then also an awakening.
I knew something had to save me
For a reason back then.
Had to find out
What
When.
Why
And How.
I was on Earth to have a big voice
And speak out Loud.*



'Had to realize, Life ain't sweet sugar-coated or buttery'

Euell spent four months in the hospital recovering from his burns, and was then sent to Mid-Hudson Psychiatric Center. "I had to spend time in the system for a crime that was committed," he said. "It was my fault. But at the time, I was in total denial and didn't want to believe there was anything wrong." After four years at Mid-Hudson, he was transferred to Pilgrim Psychiatric Center, where he spent the next four years.

He credits his relationship with his parents and step-parents for helping him to maintaining his strength. "I've particularly developed a close relationship with my father through this. He's my best friend."

*Can't forget staff too.
They let me know
It was a world waiting for me
Where more than cash rules.
And it's more about pacing yourself
And making intelligent moves.*



Lawrence Euell Jr.: "I was motivated by the positive people around me doing positive things."

"To me, 'recovery' means overcoming obstacles in my life," Euell said, "and getting a second chance to live the life that I deserve and to be a positive influence for my younger siblings and peers."

After living for a short time in community residences, Euell is now in his own apartment, volunteering in the Outpatient Division at Pilgrim to work toward receiving Peer Specialist Certification.

His long-term goal is to become a Peer Specialist at Pilgrim to help others who are going through a difficult time and to be role-model to show that recovery is possible, "because I **am** the evidence."

*And right now, I'm in a place
Where I feel like I'm winning life's race.
Traveling at my own pace
moving like a shooting star.™*

Daniels and Murawski: 'Not letting rejections derail her'



For 25 years, **Jackie Daniels** of Westfield worked at the Western New York Developmental Disabilities State Operations Office in West Seneca. At the same time, she owned and operated a doughnut shop in her hometown that was open around the clock.

"I basically lived on power naps," Daniels said. "But I absolutely loved it! Personally, I was most elated when I was working. I guess I've always been considered to be a workaholic."

But then she went through a very difficult time in her life, resulting in several financial and personal hardships, before she found her way to Buffalo Psychiatric Center's Lakeside Recovery and Treatment Center in Fredonia.

Through the center, Daniels became involved in individual and group counseling. With treatment and support, she learned to recognize helpful versus harmful ways to cope.

"She's been courageous in her ability to be brutally honest with herself and with others when needed," said **Alecia Murawski**, who was a Rehabilitation Assistant 2 at the time. "She's become a leader and voice of wisdom for our Women's Group, championing the idea of "radical acceptance" to others.

Three years ago, Daniels began working with Murawski to find part-time employment. "Alecia was so focused and determined in helping me find a job," Daniels said. "I was on a fixed income and was feeling hopeless. But Alecia kept giving me hope and support. Well, it paid off! I was hired by Wal-Mart!"

Murawski then took Daniels shopping to help her purchasing the required uniform colors and footwear, with an approved \$100 allowance from the psychiatric center.

An inspiration and a survivor

"Jackie is an example of a person who had truly lost everything and managed to rebuild herself, all the while with a good nature and kindness," Murawski said. "She's an inspiration as a survivor, a leader and role model. She assumed progressive independence in life, with her return to work, follow-through with care responsibilities to her family, and seeking out ways to support others in the community."

As an example, Daniels will recount the anxiety she initially felt during her first trip to New York City and how she tackled this fear head-on by learning to enjoy herself there. She'll remind others that they, too, can conquer intimidating events in their lives – such as leaning new technology or returning to the workforce – if they can find their own inner strength: "You have to find the 'NYC' in yourself and never apologize for who you are."^{OHM}



At the award presentation this past autumn. From left: Buffalo Psychiatric Center Director of Peer Services **Stephen Nawotniak** presented the Starfish Award to Rehabilitation Assistant 2 **Alecia Murawski**, and **Jacqueline Daniels** received a Key to Success Award from Executive Director **Celia Spacone, Ph.D.**



Lakeside Recovery and Treatment Center in Fredonia.

Gina Misner: 'Being honest with myself'



“Our experiences – both good and bad – show us what we’re made of,” said **Gina Misner**. “They’re also the reasons to love ourselves in the end, by accepting and sharing the good parts of ourselves, as well as the bad. After all, nobody’s perfect!”

Misner received the Keys to Success Award from Capital District Psychiatric Center in 2016. “I was given the award as a direct result of what I’d like to call my ‘brutal honesty and will to survive,’” she said.

This marks the seventeenth year that Misner has been receiving services through OMH. Misner has survived a difficult childhood and has battled co-dependency. She was stalked by one roommate with whom she never had anything but a platonic relationship. She was also stalked by another man with whom she had a three-year relationship that was ruined by the use of drugs and alcohol, along with problems of co-dependency by both partners.

She’s received treatment at Mid-Hudson Forensic Psychiatric Center and then at CDPC, where she’s accomplished a great deal the past seven years to help herself, her fellow peers, and the staff, for whom she has gained a great amount of respect. She said she’s learned to try harder to do better in order create a brighter future for herself and, in the process, has encouraged others to try to do the same.

Support and strength

Misner is thankful for the strength she had received through her faith and for the support she’s received from her peers, clinicians, and her family. “My family members were willing and able to stick by my side through the guilt, shame, and remorse that I felt for some of the poor decisions I’d made in the past.” She especially credits CDPC Therapist **Thyra Gilbert** for her help, presenting her with a Starfish.

Recovery has also sparked Misner’s creativity. She’s submitted several of her works to OMH art exhibitions. She loves to write, and is working on publishing her autobiography. Exploring her Native Indian heritage, she developed a coloring book for gay pride using the deity of Kokopelli, and is still working on a website to help her peers and her sell their goods and services online.

“It’s been a long hard road,” Misner said. “Many times, I’ve had to be honest with myself and remind myself that it’s not the one I necessarily chose. However, it’s the lessons in life that I’ve learned from this that have made me the person I am, who is loved and respected by others.”



Gina Misner discusses her work during an arts reception at the OMH Central Office in Albany.

One of Misner’s works, which was on display at OMH’s Central Office in Albany.



Misner and CDPC Therapist Thyra Gilbert during the 2016 award ceremony.

Louisa Odonos: Helping clients beat addiction



When South Beach Psychiatric Center on Staten Island held its Employee Recognition Ceremony this past fall, **Louisa Odonos**, a Rehabilitation Therapist at the facility's Power Center, was certain to be named recipient of a Starfish Award for her many efforts to help mentally ill patients who are clinically addicted.

Odonos has been working as a mental health professional for 15 years – the past three years at South Beach, where she started and currently runs a successful Alcoholics Anonymous meeting.

"I've always been motivated by a desire to help people," Odonos said. "I like to see people turn their lives around. Helping patients get off of drugs, alcohol, and tobacco – and seeing them stay off – gives me a great deal of personal satisfaction."

Having quit smoking, herself, nearly 25 years ago, Odonos is very firm with her patients about smoking cigarettes. "Research has shown that smoking is often the first form of addiction for an alcoholic or drug addict," she said. "I always try to teach my patients that, if you continue to smoke, the more likely it is you're going to relapse with drugs and alcohol. Your brain just doesn't understand the difference."

Patients have praised Odonos for her helpfulness and for the respect she shows them. "She puts a smile on everyone's face with her personality," said one patient, adding, "She's inspirational. She kept me straight from drugs and alcohol. She's very loving and quick to give a shoulder to lean on."

"Every day our patients have something to teach us," Odonos said. "We often have no idea of the trials and tribulations they had to deal with on a daily basis. The potential for relapse is always there, which is why they need us to be there for them." OMH



Louisa Odonos



Anthony Wade: An inspirational voice

Also honored at South Beach was **Anthony Wade**, an MHTA on the Inpatient Unit. One client praised Wade for "getting us up early in the morning with an inspirational voice."

Wade's known for his enjoyment in working with clients and for using references from music. "He uses rhyme schemes to amuse people," said another client, adding, "He's very positive and motivating, encouraging people to do good things with their lives here and afterward." OMH

Wade (left) receiving a Starfish award from South Beach Executive Director **Doreen Piazza**.



Michael Yannone: 'Learning boundaries, getting better'



"Before I sought care, my life was unmanageable," said **Michael Yannone**. "I was an angry person. I'd threaten people when I wasn't getting my way. I'd ended up homeless and thought I'd never be able to make a life for myself."

Yannone's family suspected there was a problem when he was younger and brought him to counseling. "I would improve, but when counseling was completed, I'd go back to my old behaviors of denial and dishonesty."

The first time he sought care on his own was in 1992 for drug and alcohol addiction. His mother had intervened, sending him to St. Peter's Addiction Recovery Center in Albany, then to McPike Addiction Treatment Center in Utica, and then to community treatment. But because of his lingering depressive symptoms, he went back to institutional care in 1993 at Samaritan Hospital in Troy.

'They built me back up'

This was one of several setbacks Yannone had experienced during the 1990s. "My biggest setbacks were when I committed crimes in 1994 and 1995, ending up in jail and then in treatment at Mid-Hudson Psychiatric Center. I'd been in and out of Capital District Psychiatric Center through the late 1990s because of my addictions."

The turning point came when he was sent to a Criminal Procedure Law unit program at Mohawk Valley in 2011. "There, they broke me down, then built me back up," Yannone said. "They helped learn about boundaries and respecting others. They taught me to practice mindfulness and acceptance — which was the most helpful."

Yannone credits **Dr. Aaron Shupp**, a psychologist at Mohawk Valley, "for helping me to get to know myself and to realize that I must move forward and get better." When Yannone was presented with a Keys award in 2017 by CDPC, he named **Dr. Leonard Hoss**, a psychologist on Unit K, as his Starfish. "Dr. Hoss always encouraged me to never give up. I'd relapsed four years ago and I knew I'd broken my own boundaries. I told myself I have to get back on track. That experience helped me to realize I must keep going to recover."

'Not giving up on myself'

He also credits his mother, Alcoholics Anonymous sponsor, and other recovering alcoholics for their support. "They've encouraged me to reach out for help, seek advice, and not give up on myself."

Yannone is now working at the University at Albany and is looking to move to a community residence. "I've done a lot of work in my recovery, but there's more work to be done," he said "I keep moving forward in my life and remember I don't have to be the person I used to be years ago. Because I'm invested in my own recovery and I've had people who helped me to believe in myself, I have a life to live."



Michael Yannone: "The "Keys to Success" award meant a lot to me. It tells me that my peers trust me and look to me as being motivated in my recovery. Every time I may feel discouraged, I look to the award as a way to not give up on what I am doing."

What's Great in Our State

A forum to celebrate Children's Mental Health Awareness

2018



Office of
Mental Health

Council on Children
and Families

Healthy Minds, Healthy Children and Youth

Tuesday, May 8, 2018 • 1:30 p.m. to 4:30 p.m.

Huxley Auditorium • New York State Museum • 222 Madison Avenue in Albany

Join us for a reception and recognition event to celebrate Children's Mental Health Awareness Day and thank those in our state who support children's social-emotional health and well-being.

Here's your opportunity to recognize someone who's doing outstanding work!

Our planning committee is seeking nominations to honor an individual, program, school, or organization within New York State that's making a difference in the field of children and youth mental wellness. For information on nominations, contact **Kathryn Provencher** at: Kathryn.Provencher@omh.ny.gov.

We're also interested in learning what your community is planning to promote Children's Mental Health Awareness Week and will help promote your events on our Facebook page at: [@ChildrensMentalHealthAwareness](https://www.facebook.com/ChildrensMentalHealthAwareness). For information, contact **Joelle Monaco** at: jmonaco@mhanys.org.

Sponsored by these state agencies:

- Council on Children and Families
- Department of Health
- Education Department
- Office of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Services
- Office of Mental Health

And these not-for-profit organizations:

- Early Care & Learning Council
- Families Together in New York State, Inc.
- Mental Health Association in New York State, Inc.
- National Alliance on Mental Illness - New York State
- New York State Network for Youth Success
- Research Foundation for Mental Hygiene, Inc.
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