A TIME OF REFLECTION
by Oryx Cohen, NEC Chief Executive Officer

Winter is often a time for reflection as we prepare for those new ventures in our lives. Last year in December, we were happy to host an informal virtual community gathering at Kim’s Coffee House, where dozens of people attended to receive and offer support to others in our community. It was a beautiful experience of connection to be in a space with all those involved, sharing from their hearts about their lives.

We just got through the winter holidays, which while enjoyable and meaningful for many people, can be equally difficult for others. And for some, it’s more of an incredibly nuanced space to navigate.

Nuance is something that many peers know well and recognize in facing many life situations. Working in the field of mental health can bring a lot of meaning, joy, and value in our lives. At the same time, we acknowledge that it can also include challenges and barriers for peers. As an organization, we’re taking time to reflect upon not only best practices in workplace settings, but also what we can do to strengthen our collective voice to continue to champion the work and legacy of those who came before us, all the while striving to support and empower the youth today and the next generations to come.

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A TIME OF REFLECTION
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Last year in December, we also lost a giant in our movement, Celia Brown. As we celebrate Black History Month and so many other great Black leaders, we want to take the time to honor Celia, a great leader in her own right. Celia was on our Board of Directors and was involved in many different ways in the movement. Beyond what she did, and though she wore many hats, anyone who knew her can attest to how down-to-earth she was. Celia was a mentor to me and very patient as I grew from an immature twenty-something to the man I am today. Celia, I miss you every day. The best tribute to Celia is to continue the work she was most passionate about. In the meantime, I hope you get some time to reflect and rejuvenate in ways that honor your authentic selves.

In Remembrance of Celia Brown

Pictured from left: Celia at the microphone; Celia with Dan Fisher; Celia with Shira Collings.

“Celia was just a wonderful human being. I always just loved seeing her, and working with her and being with her. She embodied so much of our movement...When you’re with her, you felt like you were important to her, and I think that was really true.

She was such a bridge in different factions of our movement. Our movement needs to really embrace people of color more. We’ve been too white as a movement. She was always pushing, but in her very kind and caring way, for more inclusion.

She also was on our board of the National Empowerment Center for 12 years - a very steady, very supportive, and understanding soul.”

-Dan Fisher, NEC Board of Directors

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"When I first was learning about the peer movement and getting involved in peer activism at the age of 20, Celia was one of the first peer leaders I connected with. I had just recently had some traumatizing experiences within the mental health system, and I felt driven to use these experiences to create change but wasn’t sure how. Celia listened to and held space for my story with such empathy and compassion. She almost immediately offered to mentor me and provide some guidance in finding ways to channel my lived experience into advocacy for a more trauma-informed, rights centered mental health system.

Throughout my time in the peer movement, I have greatly appreciated getting to know and learn from Celia. It’s hard to imagine anyone more dedicated to the peer community and advancing peer liberation than she was. She worked tirelessly to fight for the rights of people with mental health diagnoses. As a young person in the movement and NEC’s youth coordinator, I was especially moved by her dedication to mentoring and empowering young people in the peer movement and helping them use their voice.

Celia will always be an inspiration to me. I know that her memory will inspire me to honor her legacy by continuing to lift up youth voices and advocate for youth leadership within mental health. I am so grateful to have known Celia and I know that she will forever be remembered by our community."

-Shira Collings, NEC Youth Coordinator

"I remember Celia as always being an encourager and supporter. As a woman of color in the movement, she always encouraged me to use my voice and to feel empowered to share my story and experience.

She felt like an auntie, a tía- that I could talk to about anything. I am so grateful for her presence in my life. She’s been an inspiration and one of the last things she said to me was, ‘Tanya, you are a gift and don’t you forget that.’ I wish I would have had the opportunity to say the same to her. She was a gift in my life, and a gift to all of us."

-Tanya Ryder, NEC Chief Operating Officer/Project Director
In December, we piloted a training for Mental Health America (MHA) of Central Carolinas, with a focus of teaching emotional CPR (eCPR) not only to help improve their support of the people they serve, but also to help develop staff cohesion and psychological safety at work. The training was a huge success and we look forward to bringing eCPR for the workplace to diverse organizations across the country.

Check out Kim’s interview with Rebekah Bagley from Mental Health America of Central Carolinas on the importance of wellness and psychological safety in the workplace.

Click here to view.

PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY IN THE WORKPLACE
by Shira Collings, NEC Youth Coordinator

During this time of increased disconnection and emotional crisis in our communities, it is so important to talk about psychological safety in the workplace, especially for peers. The past couple years have led to a high rate of burnout, and so many people have undergone trauma or intense distress related to the pandemic and other aspects of our sociopolitical climate. Unfortunately, it is all too common to fall into hopelessness and doubt one’s own capabilities to make change or provide support to others during a time of widespread collective trauma.

It is now more important than ever to foster a sense of psychological safety in the workplace. Psychological safety means that individuals feel safe to express themselves and be vulnerable with their colleagues and teammates. It means that each person feels valued and supported, and welcome to express their ideas and perspectives. This is a key protective factor against burnout and hopelessness. Feeling heard and understood in the workplace cultivates a sense of meaning, connection, and belonging, which can support people in maintaining their passion and drive to create change even in times of societal crisis.

It gives individuals the skills, knowledge, and experiential learning to listen deeply to one another, share authentically from the heart, and be truly present. Emotional CPR has the potential to transform workplaces into spaces where each person feels heard and understood by their team, which can renew peers’ hope and reinvigorate our passion.

During my time as an eCPR trainer, I have had the amazing opportunity to bring eCPR to several different peer-run organizations and teams of peers. I have witnessed countless participants walk away feeling much more understood by their colleagues and a deeper sense of connection to their team, and as a result of the work that they are doing. Over the past several years especially, I have seen trainings take peers from a place of hopelessness, numbness, and burnout to a feeling of empowerment and purpose.

This is a time that more than ever, we need to be reminded that no matter how hopeless things seem, we each have the power to help one another feel less alone and support each other through collective trauma. Creating trauma-informed, psychologically safe workplaces for peers is a major part of this. I am grateful to be a part of eCPR and look forward to continuing to bring about connection, empowerment, and revitalization in workplaces.
WORKPLACE WELLNESS RESOURCES

The U.S. Surgeon General’s Framework for Workplace Mental Health and Well-Being


Mental Health America: Workplace Mental Health Toolkit

RECENT NEC EVENTS:

Finding Your Rhythm: Infusing Music into Crisis Settings
Tuesday, January 31st, 2022, 2:00 – 3:30 pm ET (eastern time)

Presented by: Travis Atkinson

Music and art play a vital role in a person’s wellbeing, and an even more critical one in a person’s recovery, yet self-expression is never given the priority that psychopharmacology and interpersonal therapy are given in crisis settings. In this webinar, learn about meaningful and creative ways to bring music into crisis treatment settings, from songwriting and singalongs to intimate performances. The webinar participants participated in writing a song that you can hear!

Click here to view recording.

For information on other upcoming events by any of our partner national technical assistance centers, please visit their websites by clicking on their logos below.
WELCOMING NEC'S NEW CONSULTANTS

Juan Vélez Court (he/him/his)

Juan Vélez Court is a proud husband and mental health advocate who is open about his lived experiences and challenges from his past, with the purpose of motivating others towards a positive future. Residing in Puerto Rico, Vélez is a consultant for the Mental Health and Anti-Addiction Services Administration of Puerto Rico, as well as the National Empowerment Center. His work focuses on the integration of Peer Support services, promoting inclusive work environments and promoting wellness in the workplace. Vélez also incorporates his digital production background to support the development of podcasts and social media content focused on motivating others to explore new adventures, expanding their perspectives, and increasing their quality of life and social connectivity.

With a passion devoted to educating and empowering others, he is a certified Peer Support Specialist trainer, eCPR trainer, and has been certified with other practices such as Wellness Recovery Action Plan (WRAP) and Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training (ASIST).

Joana is a parent, writer, peer supporter, trainer, consultant, and disability rights advocate. She moved from the Philippines to the United States at the age of eight and speaks Tagalog fluently. She values finding ways to explore, honor, and celebrate neurodiversity, creativity, meaningful connections, and resiliency. Joana's career journey includes having led peer support specialists, managing a peer-run mental health respite home in California where she worked from 2015 to 2020. She is currently employed by a mental health nonprofit organization working within a transition age youth (TAY) program. She is a Master Trainer of the Honest, Open, Proud program and Master Facilitator of Core Gift Discovery.

"My Core Gift is helping others find the courage to navigate their world. I give it by helping them to feel valued for who they are, express themselves from a space of authenticity, connect what is within and outside of themselves, and give from the heart to build strong foundations in their communities."

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