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JOURNEYS

Look for that potential everywhere

It looks like any other storefront, you think, until you step inside the front door of Hands Across Long Island (HALI) in Central Islip. Immediately, you hear the buzz of activity, see smiling faces, and sense the warm connections between and among people. You see inspiring messages of hope everywhere, like Bob Marley's, "You just can't live in that negative way . . . Make way for the positive day."

Under the leadership of Ellen Healion since 1993, HALI had its beginnings in 1988 as grassroots organization by and for people with psychiatric disabilities. It grew from the experiences of a community member and her family who felt painful isolation and stigma following a mental health hospitalization. A self-help group she got off the ground evolved into weekday drop-in centers. That gave way to a weekend gathering place for people "who had no where to go."

This turned out to be an important catalyst for change. It was the place people could socialize, attend Double Trouble group, participate in arts and crafts, and have a home-cooked meal. Those persons who took on jobs were assigned points and the proceeds from the \$1.50 per person meal were used after expenses to pay people at the rate of 25 cents a point. "The highest point value was for the cook," Ellen laughs, noting how we all like a good meal.

Ellen tells story after story, each building on the other, about how HALI has evolved. One endearing story highlights the pattern of success breeding success. In reaching out to persons who were homeless with mental illness, HALI identified three men, each of whom lived on the streets and each of whom loved music. They traded in their drinking and drug-taking one night a week to have the chance to jam together on instruments donated by community members. Two teachers volunteered their time to work with these men, who "the more they came, the more they saw how other people were making it." Seeing that they wanted what these other people had, the men stayed clean of drugs and alcohol additional days, until they were coming in to jam four to five nights a week.

With a promise from HALI of studio time to cut a CD in exchange for staying clean, sober and engaged in their music, the men did meet their goal. They gelled as a band. They went on later to don tuxedos and proudly perform an original score they wrote, titled *Recovery in Action*. The score was performed for the Eglevsky Ballet in honor of HALI's 10th Anniversary.



Judy Dubois, left and Ellen Healion

The New York Times noted the partnership between the Ballet Company and HALI as one celebrating "the role the fine arts have in mental health and human inspiration."

Poignantly, Ellen describes how the celebration became all the more meaningful that October day. During the reception, she was approached by an older man who said, "I want to thank you. I never thought I would get my son back."

But, the ballet was not the end; it was just one more beginning. HALI struck a deal

with band members. In return for HALI finding gigs, maintaining the instruments and taking on the operational details, band members agreed to a financial split in earnings. They also committed to serving as mentors to new musicians who would ultimately join their group.

This model of partnering is one that has served HALI well over the years. When asked how things might have been different if the State had given HALI a sack of money early in its development, Ellen thoughtfully replies, "We would not have been pushed to think outside the box." Indeed, she adds, HALI did not want to take funding and it did not want to be bound by requirements that would not let it "meet needs the way we thought they should be met."

Sitting beside Ellen is the Deputy Director Judy Dubois, who has a gleam in her eye. You can see that she is as energetic and committed to HALI as Ellen and its other staff members. Together, arm in arm with HALI participants, Ellen and Judy have been forging new relationships in the community, providing strong leadership, and serving as ambassadors of wellness and stigma busting.

If you have the chance to visit HALI, you should. What you'll find is a quiet force for transformation. You'll see that its values of inclusion and caring are reflected from within and throughout the wider community—whether through housing options in one of the homes or apartment buildings HALI has bought, refurbished, and established by and for persons recovering from mental illness. Whether through its recognition that people who have mental illness and are returning to their communities from jail or prison need support through their transition. Or, whether through its innovative peer-determined approaches to recovery-oriented services.

What you'll find at HALI is real-life expectations. "When you raise the bar," Ellen finds, "people meet it."