

# OP NEWS

The Opportunity Project Newsletter • 2023-2024



**OUR NEW ACCESSIBLE VAN PROVIDES CRUCIAL TRANSPORTATION!**

A Clubhouse Program Empowering People with Brain Injury

**WE CONTINUE ON OUR JOURNEY TO SUCCESS... THANKS FOR YOUR SUPPORT!**

## HIGHLIGHTS:

- ▶ Message from the Chairman
- ▶ Letter from the Interim Executive Director
- ▶ Clubhouse Programs
- ▶ Member News

# Message from the Chairman

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www.opportunityproject.org

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## Opportunity Project Team

- Michael Moran, MS, OTR/L, CBIS**  
*Interim Executive Director & Program Director*
- Elizabeth Daugherty, BS**  
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- Julie London, BS**  
*Development Coordinator*
- Jennifer Harry, LCSW**  
*Social Work Coordinator*
- Emma H. Kaplan MSOT, OTR/L**  
*Occupational Therapist*
- Melissa A. Moyer, MS**  
*Health & Wellness Coordinator*
- Jacqueline Marino-Rizzi, CBIS**  
*Mental Health Support Specialist*
- Tom Shea, PsyD**  
*Vocational Specialist*
- Michelle Slepp, MA, CCC-SLP**  
*Speech-Language Pathologist*



**Marc E. Berson, Esq.**  
*Chairman*

Opportunity Project has provided programs and services to people with brain injury for over 29 years and remains the first and only freestanding Clubhouse program in New Jersey. We continue to stand strong as an organization and to lead the way in the brain injury field nationally. I am always impressed by the success of our programs and our talented and dedicated staff who assist members to accomplish their goals.

As you review OP News, you will see photos and read comments from members who are succeeding in all areas: vocational, nutrition, cognitive, occupational therapy, speech and language and so much more. In a post-pandemic period of transition at the Clubhouse, our team has continued to demonstrate dedication and

adaptability propelling the organization forward. We are proud of our continued expansion and partnerships including wellness initiatives; mental health workshops and the Caregivers' Group, which provide critical support to our members and their families; essential services including yoga, a music therapist and Speech and Language Pathologist who assist Members with wellness, self-expression and communication skills. Once again, CARF (Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities) has certified Opportunity Project with the highest ratings and ranked OP's Community Integration and Employment Services in the top 3% of rehabilitation institutions for delivering "quality standards enhancing the lives of persons served."

Opportunity Project has served nearly 700 adults with brain injury and the demand for our services continues to grow. Clubhouse membership is lifelong and our doors are always open. Even with diminished government funding, no survivor of brain injury is ever denied services due to a lack of financial resources. Our programs and services have expanded to include both in-person and virtual platforms so that survivors of brain injury may participate in a hybrid manner and with individualized levels of comfort.

The 2022 Annual Golf Classic raised over \$307,000 and Brain Injury Awareness Month events continue to grow focusing on building new community partnerships. Annual brain injury awareness events and fundraising activities continue to be a critical part of the Clubhouse's efforts and we thank our many stakeholders and community partners without whom this would not be possible.

It is only with your continued support that we are able to provide the much needed programs and services to those living with brain injury. We look forward to the future with great anticipation and thank you for all that you do for Opportunity Project.

Marc E. Berson  
*Chairman*



*Opportunity Project Founders:  
Marc E. Berson, Rita Yohalem and Lisa Goldman*

# Letter from the Interim Executive Director



It is my great pleasure to update you on some of the exciting developments at Opportunity Project. As Interim Executive Director, I am proud to share that we have made significant strides in furthering our mission to support our members.

As we navigate this new post-pandemic phase, our focus has turned to expanding our services within the community. Thanks to the generous support of the Healthcare Foundation of NJ, we were able to purchase a brand-new, accessible van so that we can provide a more inclusive and reliable form of transportation for our members. This new addition has been an incredible asset to our program as it has enabled our members to fully participate in community activities and work towards achieving meaningful goals.

Thus far, we have served a total of 48 members in 2023, the most ever in a single year. We also have six potential members currently going through the screening and intake process. This increase in referrals and membership is a direct result of our active outreach to former members and the facilitation of more frequent informational sessions to our referral sources, such as Kessler outpatient facilities, DVRS offices, brain injury support groups, and involvement in community events. We are moving in a positive direction towards reaching our goal of 100 members in 2025.

We have also made significant progress in further aligning our Clubhouse with the standards outlined by the International Brain Injury Clubhouse Association (IBICA) by redefining and restructuring our Clubhouse units. This important initiative was led by our Opportunity Project Member Committee and program staff. The implementation of our new work units has improved clarity surrounding individual responsibilities and roles at the Clubhouse and will increase the efficiency of our operations, helping us achieve better outcomes.

Finally, we have strengthened our outreach efforts to address social determinants of health for our members and caregivers by conducting frequent screenings. These screenings have allowed us to identify specific areas of need, including access to housing, transportation, and food. We are fully committed to expanding upon this initiative to ensure that all members have access to the resources and support they need to thrive.

We want to express our heartfelt gratitude to all of our supporters and are proud to have received recent funding for major initiatives from the County of Essex, Healthcare Foundation of New Jersey, Smart Family Foundation, Investors Bank Foundation, Fred C Rummel Foundation and Lillian Lorber Charitable Trust. Thank you for your unwavering commitment to Opportunity Project's mission. Your generosity and support have made it possible for us to continue to provide critical services to our members and help them lead fulfilling lives.

Michael Moran, MS, OTR/L, CBIS  
Interim Executive Director & Program Director

## About the Clubhouse

The Opportunity Project Clubhouse is a community intended for members with brain injury to create and engage in meaningful activities in order to attain their goals and sustain daily functioning of the program. Recently the OP Member Committee assisted with the reorganization of the units at Opportunity Project in order to improve focus on functional tasks. Members choose which work unit(s) to participate in based on interest and experience and structure their day around their individual goals and the required Clubhouse tasks. **Our program is comprised of five units, incorporating all operations and activities:**

**Maintenance Unit:** Responsibilities include supporting the overall functioning of the physical Clubhouse space and equipment including, organization, inventory, and sanitizing.

**Communication Unit:** Facilitates the exchange of Clubhouse information including, technology support, member outreach, leading meetings and contributing to the Member Newsletter.

**Recreation Unit:** Focuses on creating and executing social activities and events.

**Health and Safety Unit:** Assists with physical and mental health and wellness including, providing peer-to-peer support, accessibility checks and emergency preparedness.

**Administrative Unit:** Contributes to the interior management of the Clubhouse, such as answering phones, welcoming guests, sorting and delivering mail.

## LEADING CAUSES OF BRAIN INJURY FOR OP MEMBERS

41%	STROKE
27%	MOTOR VEHICLE ACCIDENT
11%	ANOXIC/HYPOXIC
8%	ASSAULT
8%	FALL
5%	TUMOR

*Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) is an alteration in brain function, or other evidence of brain pathology, caused by an external force. Acquired Brain Injury (ABI) is an injury to the brain that has occurred after birth. Examples include stroke, aneurysm and tumor.*



5.3 million people in the U.S. live with long-term disabilities as a result of brain injury. Effects of TBI can include impaired thinking or memory, movement, sensation (e.g., vision or hearing), or emotional functioning (e.g., personality changes, depression). These issues can have lasting effects on individuals, families and communities.

# PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

## Mental Health

Brain injury often brings about drastic life changes and recovery is a life-long process. Social support, coping skills, self-care and self-esteem are vital components in building strong emotional well-being, interpersonal relationships and meaningful roles in society.

**Jacqueline Marino-Rizzi, Mental Health Support Specialist**, helps members improve self-care and mental health, and develop and maintain meaningful relationships. Opportunity Project's Caregivers' Group, The OP Resilience Squad and Reverse Mentorship programs provide additional critical support and resources to help members and their families adjust to life's changes throughout brain injury recovery.

Group sessions such as Life Beyond Brain Injury and Team Building help promote inclusion, communication and creativity while boosting morale, all of which lessen the incidence of mental health disorders and behavioral health related illnesses.

In addition, Jacqueline also serves a critical role in building brain injury awareness and advocacy as a New Jersey Crisis Intervention Trainer (CITNJ) and NJ Disaster Response Crisis Counselor.



*Jacqueline educates first responders at The Crisis Intervention Team of New Jersey (CITNJ) on strategies to keep people safe and build rapport and trust between law enforcement and the community.*



*Members take the Make It Okay pledge to spread awareness in honor of Mental Health Awareness Month.*

## Nutrition, Health & Wellness

Members' wellness is an integral part of the Clubhouse. **Melissa Moyer, Health & Wellness Coordinator**, leads various initiatives focusing on all aspects of wellness. Members work together to encourage each other to make healthy decisions and participate in a variety of activities including small fitness groups, nutrition and health education classes and healthy cooking classes.

Our new Food and Culture Class has become a favorite among our members! We explore different countries making our way around the world learning about history, cultural influences and local food trends. Studying different regions not only expands our culinary palate but also raises awareness and empathy about the needs and struggles affecting these areas. Members carry over what we have learned from Food and Culture class to healthy cooking groups by cooking some of the dishes from the countries we have explored. This program provides inspiration and encourages a growth mindset.

In addition, members are enjoying wonderful music therapy groups led by our new Music Therapist, **Megan McDonald**. Megan is a Board-Certified Music Therapist (MT-BC) and Neurologic Music Therapist (NMT) with experience serving a wide range of diagnoses and utilizing a variety of instruments. Welcome Megan!



*Member Chris cooks Colombian Arepas.*



*MJ prepares a healthy and delicious meal.*



*Members enjoy a wonderful music group led by OP's new Music Therapist.*

## Occupational Therapy

**Michael Moran and Emma Kaplan, Occupational Therapists**, work to help members achieve full access to the daily activities that make life meaningful. Members work on skills to promote independence in time management, meal preparation, home maintenance, budgeting, pre-vocational tasks and other valued activities. In-person services at the Clubhouse focus on skill building and guided practice. Teletherapy provides the opportunity for members to carryover these skills in their own homes.

Members also participate in various occupational therapy groups including Weekly Life Skills and the After Hours evening group. Groups offer the opportunity to discuss relevant topics and practice skills so members can learn with and from each other.



*Member Angel works on improving fine motor coordination through engagement in a preferred leisure activity.*



*Member Ray practices using adaptive equipment (touch screen pen) to promote independence in technology use.*

## Social Work

**Jennifer Harry, LCSW, Social Worker**, improves self-advocacy and the overall quality of life for members by providing counseling sessions and adjustment groups on various topics, including the importance of gratitude and managing expectations.

OP members and their families also receive assistance with authorizations and intake procedures for enrollment into the Opportunity Project Clubhouse. In addition, OP provides support with securing various types of funding, housing and other essential community resources.

We are thrilled to share that member Tim was the recipient of a new heating and cooling system installed in his home free of charge! Thank you to the wonderful professionals from Pipe Works Services and Lennox. We appreciate this gift from the Feel the Love Program!



*Thank you Pipe Works and Lennox for member Tim's new heating and cooling system. We feel the love!*

**Potential new members should contact Jennifer Harry, LCSW at [jharry@opportunityproject.org](mailto:jharry@opportunityproject.org)**

## Speech-Language Therapy

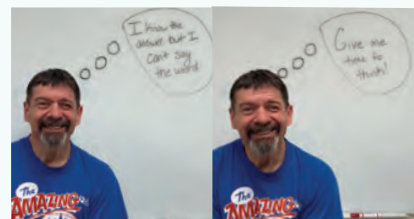
**Michelle Slepp, Speech and Language Pathologist**, assists OP members create connections by targeting cognitive skills needed for job or school success, language skills needed to engage in meaningful conversations and relationships and the speech intelligibility required to deliver a message effectively.

Our latest group topics include The Clear Communication and Hot Topic Group where we discuss topics based on the latest news cycle. We are very excited about our newest Book Club group where we work on reading and comprehension and members enjoy discussing their perspectives with their peers.

Members have reached new milestones in areas including: confidence building, communication skills, public speaking and cognitive abilities and were thrilled to have the opportunity to present their brain injury stories to Montclair University graduate students. In honor of better hearing and speech month, members created and shared a creative social media awareness series on the challenges of living with a communication disorder after brain injury and tips for improved interactions.



*We are enjoying a discussion in Book Club!*



*Members offer tips for improved interactions.*

## Vocational Training

The Vocational program had an excellent year! We grew Vocational membership by 33% through outreach to the Department of Vocational Rehabilitation offices and introduction of our program to a new generation of vocational rehabilitation counselors.

These new OP members have hit the ground running, completing an assortment of assessments, skill evaluations and work interest inventories. Members are benefiting from our new testing tools that allow us to better assess members' fine motor skills and spatial memory. To build their work skills, they also attend individual therapy sessions with Opportunity Project's staff including our Speech and Language Pathologist and Occupational Therapist.

While integrating our newest members, we also provide ongoing job coaching and support. We proudly report that all of our Vocational members retained employment over the past year

and one of our newer members began work as a cashier in the concessions department at the Prudential Center.

**Tom Shea, PsyD., Vocational Specialist**, is currently establishing volunteer opportunities at our partner sites, such as Children's Specialized Hospital in Union, and developing employment opportunities including those initiated during Restaurant Week.



*Congratulations Davante on his 7 year anniversary at the Home Depot!*



*MJ is on his way to his new job at the Prudential Center!*

**If you are interested in becoming an employment or volunteer partner, please contact Tom Shea, PsyD., Vocational Counselor at [tshea@opportunityproject.org](mailto:tshea@opportunityproject.org)**

**Thank you to our employment & volunteer partners:**

The Beth Greenhouse  
Newark Beth Israel Medical Center  
Carpet House  
Children's Specialized Hospital  
Home Depot  
La Strada Nuova  
Millburn  
Millburn Free Public Library  
Montclair Art Museum  
New Eyes for the Needy  
The Prudential Center  
Rock 'n' Joe of Millburn  
RWJBarnabas Health  
Sage Eldercare  
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Whole Foods



# 2022 Annual Golf Classic

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*The Golf Classic raises funds that go directly towards*



*our brain injury programs and awareness activities.*



*In 2022 we raised over \$307,000!*

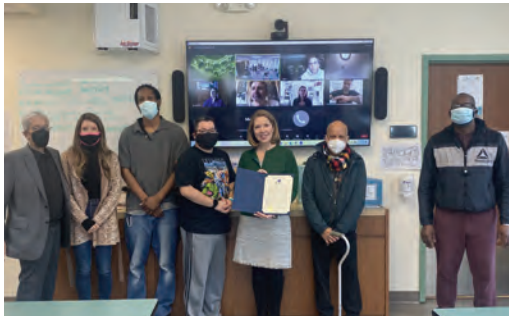


# 2023 Brain Injury Awareness Month

Thank you for your help in raising \$49,000 for  
Brain Injury Awareness Month!

Funds go directly towards our brain injury programs and prevention.

**Brain Injury Awareness Month launched with Millburn Mayor Maggee Miggins' proclamation presentation declaring March 2023 Brain Injury Awareness Month in Millburn.** Throughout the month, Opportunity Project invited the community to a variety of enjoyable awareness and fundraising events. The first-ever **Restaurant Week** in collaboration with Explore Millburn-Short Hills was very successful and helped create partnerships and vocational opportunities for OP members! We had a great time at the **OP Dance Party** and rocked our **Charity Ride at CycleBar!** Members were thrilled to help design a special bracelet to raise funds for survivors of brain injury and promote mental wellness. Finally, organizations and supporters hosted successful **Blue Jean Green Days** in support of our brain injury programs!



Mayor Maggee Miggins presented the proclamation.



Thanks Children's Specialized Hospital for hosting a Blue Jean Green Day!



The OP Dance Party was a fun-filled event!



Thank you for riding with us at CycleBar!



Member Mike was thrilled to participate in Restaurant Week. Thanks BoxCar for supporting OP's Vocational Program!



Thank you La Strada for employing OP members!  
Thanks Explore Millburn-Short Hills for a great Restaurant Week partnership!

To participate in March 2024 Brain Injury Awareness Month  
email: [jlondon@opportunityproject.org](mailto:jlondon@opportunityproject.org)

Thank you to the OP Administrative Team: Beth Daugherty, Tracy Lahey and Julie London!

Thank you  
to our sponsors!



## Restaurant Week Sponsors

Bank of America Private Bank  
Newark Beth Israel Medical Center

## Dance Party Sponsor

Sharp Management

## Charity Cycle Ride Sponsors

Sobel Family Foundation  
Sudler Family Foundation  
Valley Bank

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## Blue Jean Day Sponsors

Children's Specialized Hospital  
Chiesa Shahinian & Giantomasi PC

Thank you to Mr. Martin L. Lepelstat on behalf of the Lillian Lorber Charitable Trust for the grant in support of brain injury awareness initiatives.



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Visit the Opportunity Project YouTube channel

## Member News

The Opportunity Project Member Committee (OPMC) had a productive year identifying areas for improvement and developing strategies to support the needs of our members. Recently the OPMC led an initiative to restructure the Clubhouse units to better align with International Brain Injury Clubhouse Association (IBICA) standards. The new work units improve focus on members' functional tasks and boost the efficiency of Clubhouse operations. The input and guidance from the OPMC has helped create a more inclusive and supportive environment that empowers members to achieve their goals and improve their quality of life.

Members have planned various events including the Gertrude Hawke fundraiser and have implemented several suggestions received from our satisfaction surveys. They are also focusing on improving their executive function, memory, visual abilities and fine motor skills by creating educational videos. View our creative videos, featuring our talented members, on Opportunity Project's YouTube channel.

One of the all-around favorite projects was the member designed special bracelet to raise funds for survivors of brain injury and promote mental wellness. Members designed the *Survivor* bracelet to represent their experiences as brain injury survivors. "It is meaningful because it's for everybody who has been through life's struggles" - Erica



Members help design a special "Survivor" bracelet to raise awareness and funds.



Members nominate the 2023 OP Member Committee.



Your support has made an everlasting difference.

Please consider a tax-deductible gift by December 31<sup>st</sup>.

Mail your gift in the enclosed envelope or visit [www.opportunityproject.org/donate](http://www.opportunityproject.org/donate)  
jlondon@opportunityproject.org

Thank you!