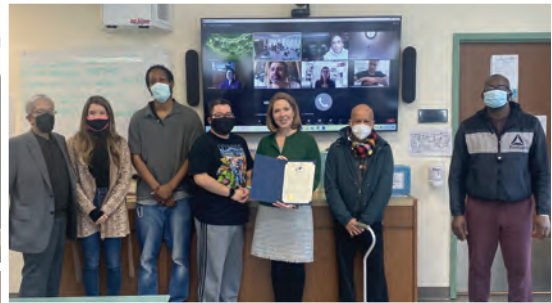




OP NEWS

The Opportunity Project Newsletter • 2024



WE PAY TRIBUTE TO OUR FOUNDER AND CHAIRMAN EMERITUS, MARC E. BERSON



A Clubhouse Program Empowering People with Brain Injury

**THANKS FOR 30 GREAT YEARS...
WE COULDN'T HAVE DONE IT
WITHOUT YOU!**

HIGHLIGHTS:

- ▶ Message from the Interim Board Chair
- ▶ Letter from the Executive Director
- ▶ Brain Injury Awareness Month 2024
- ▶ Member News

Message from the Interim Board Chair

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Jacqueline Marino-Rizzi, CBIS

Mental Health Support Specialist

Tom Shea, PsyD

Vocational Specialist

Michelle Slepp, MA, CCC-SLP

Speech-Language Pathologist



Kerri B. Levine
Interim Board Chair

community reintegration services were nonexistent. Ultimately, Marc and the team identified a nationally recognized model for OP programs — the Clubhouse model of community support.

Initially, the Clubhouse served five members in an office space in Downtown Millburn. It has improved the day-to-day lives of more than 750 individuals affected by traumatic brain injuries and their families and now occupies a 14,000-square-foot facility in Millburn.

Marc's empathy, kindness and dedication to OP were limitless. He was a down-to-earth man who always made time to join our community events, celebrate achievements of our members, and share his pride in all the OP family has accomplished.

Those who knew Marc personally are well aware of his extraordinary achievements as an attorney, developer, entrepreneur and philanthropist. But Marc himself always thought of the creation of Opportunity Project to be one of his proudest accomplishments. His vision and commitment have transformed lives, and that commitment never wavered. For many of us, OP remains Marc's most enduring legacy.

In this edition of OP News, you will find testimonials and images from members who are succeeding in various areas such as vocational counseling, nutrition, fitness, cognitive, occupational therapy, speech and language, mental health and more. We take pride in our ongoing growth and collaborations, encompassing wellness initiatives, mental well-being, caregiver support, yoga, and music therapy.

Once again, OP has received top ratings from the Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities (CARF), placing OP's Community Integration and Employment Services in the top 3% of rehabilitation institutions for delivering "quality standards enhancing the lives of persons served."

The demand for OP services continues unabated and our importance to the community we serve is greater than ever. Despite reduced government funding, no individual with a brain injury is ever turned away due to inability to pay. Our programs and services have expanded to incorporate both in-person and virtual platforms, allowing our members with brain injury to engage in hybrid programs and in new community engagements.

Clubhouse membership is lifelong, and our doors are always open.

Our 2023, 15th Anniversary Golf Classic raised more than \$265K, bringing the total raised over the years to more than \$3M. Fundraising events and activities during Brain Injury Awareness Month remain crucial to the Clubhouse's efforts, and we are extraordinarily grateful to the numerous stakeholders and community partners who make our work possible. Not surprisingly, we are always seeking to expand those partnerships and find new ways to work with the communities we serve.

It is only with your ongoing support that we can continue to provide the much-needed programs and services to those living with brain injury. As would Marc himself, we look forward to the future with high hopes and great enthusiasm. On behalf of everyone connected to the Clubhouse, I thank you again for all that you do for Opportunity Project.

Kerri Berson Levine
Interim Board Chair

This edition of the newsletter is dedicated to Opportunity Project's co-founder Marc E. Berson, my father, who passed away at the end of 2023.

OP has been offering programs and services for individuals with brain injuries and their families for more than 30 years. We are the first and only freestanding Clubhouse program in New Jersey, and our efforts set the national standard of brain injury care and support that enable our members to achieve their goals.

After my brother Gary suffered a traumatic brain injury in 1993, Marc and our co-founders Rita Yohalem and Lisa Goldman, recognized the significant gap in community and post-medical care services available to individuals with brain injuries. Excellent acute medical care and rehabilitation services were available, but effective transitional and



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

Letter from the Executive Director



Eduardo Plata, MA, CFRE
Executive Director

I am excited to introduce myself as the new Executive Director of Opportunity Project and provide you with an update on our organization's recent developments. I am immensely grateful for the Team Members and Board of Trustees at OP, who have helped us grow our programs and reach new audiences to support our mission.

This edition of OP NEWS is special as we pay tribute to our Founder and Chairman Emeritus, Marc E. Berson. Since 1993, he invested significant time and resources into the organization and with support of friends and family, has successfully grown the program from its beginnings in a conference room to its now 14,000 square foot facility. His vision and dedication have been a driving force behind the success of OP and in establishing the 2019 partnership with Children's Specialized Hospital in the RWJBarnabas Healthcare System. Founding Opportunity Project was his "proudest accomplishment."

We continue to grow and make significant strides in our strategic plan, positioning OP as a leader in member services. Our national advocacy efforts on Capitol Hill have raised awareness and secured crucial funding support for individuals with brain injuries from research, education, prevention and direct support. Community engagement activities, such as Restaurant Week and Brain Injury Awareness Month events, provide a platform to share our work and raise critical funds. The OP leadership team's focus on employee development has been a key driver of our success, with initiatives such as a unique professional development summit, appreciation days and Team Member spotlights on social media.

We currently serve a record number of nearly 60 members, with a goal to reach 80 by the end of this year and 100 by the end of 2025. The increase in referrals is a testament to the trust our partners have in our work. These organizations include the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation Services, Kessler Institute, RWJBarnabas Health, Hackensack Meridian Health, Brain Injury Alliance of New Jersey, and other community organizations.

We are also working towards expanding services while aligning with the Clubhouse model. We have initiated strategies for a first-ever Caregiver Council to increase participation and foster much-needed support. Our OP Member Committee has been collaborating with the team to develop new support initiatives, including leading groups and sharing their stories in panel discussions.

An acknowledgment goes to our generous grantors, including Essex County, Healthcare Foundation of New Jersey, Smart Family Foundation, Overlook Foundation, Wallerstein Foundation, Catholic Human Services Foundation, Investors Bank Foundation, Citizens Bank Foundation, Wawa Foundation, Integra Foundation and Robert and Joan Dircks Foundation. Your support has significantly impacted our members.

Thank you all for all you do and I look forward to seeing you at OP!

Eduardo Plata, MA, CFRE
Executive 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 the daily functioning of the program. 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

43%	STROKE
29%	MOTOR VEHICLE ACCIDENT
10%	ANOXIC/HYPOXIC
7%	ASSAULT
7%	FALL
4%	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

Approximately one in five individuals experience mental health symptoms up to six months following a brain injury and an estimated 44% develop mental health conditions such as depression and anxiety. Long-term side effects of brain injury influence a person's emotional, psychological and social well-being, significantly increasing the risk of developing a mental health disorder.

Jacqueline Marino-Rizzi, Mental Health Support Specialist, helps members identify and cope with challenges, restore self-esteem and self-confidence as well as improve vital skills to build emotional, interpersonal and meaningful roles in society.

OP's Caregivers Support Group, OP Resilience Squad, Reverse Mentorship and the new Peer-to-Peer Brain Injury Warm Recovery Line programs provide additional critical support to help members and their families adjust to life's changes throughout brain injury recovery.

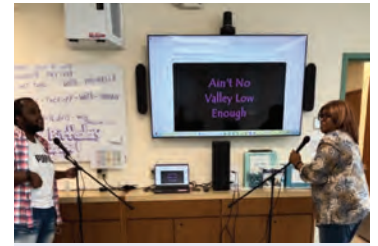
Targeted groups like Mental Health Mondays, Life Beyond Brain Injury & Team Building Fridays help promote

inclusion, communication and creativity while boosting morale, all of which lessen the incidence of mental health disorders and behavioral health illnesses.

Jacqueline also serves as a leader building brain injury awareness and advocacy in the community as a NJ Crisis Intervention Trainer (CIT-NJ) and NJ Disaster Response Crisis Counselor with The NJ Division of Mental Health & Addiction Services & Disaster and Terrorism Branch.



OP's Dance Party Group brightens everyone's day!



Karaoke group is an all-time favorite!

Nutrition, Health & Wellness

Melissa Moyer, Health & Wellness Coordinator, leads various initiatives focusing on overall wellness. Members motivate each other to make healthy decisions and participate in a host of activities including fitness and music therapy groups, nutrition and health education classes and healthy cooking classes.

This year in our popular Food & Culture Class, we explored North, Central, and South America, the Caribbean and Europe. Members have learned about different cultures, their histories, traditional food and historical places. We also cooked many delicious dishes from these regions in our Healthy Cooking Group.

OP recently introduced the new snack cart as part of our work adjustment training initiative. Members manage the snack cart to gain skills such as budgeting, inventory tracking, sales, money management and more.



We explored Moldova and cooked Moldavian meatballs.



Thank you Common Market for donating food pallets for many of our members.



Member MJ leads the snack cart initiative at the Clubhouse.

Occupational Therapy

Michael Moran and Emma Kaplan, Occupational Therapists, work with members on overcoming the obstacles that interfere with meaningful daily tasks. In occupational therapy, members work on a variety of skills including memory strategies, planning and organizational skills. They also learn skills for using their affected side in functional activities, sleep hygiene, managing health conditions, fall prevention, budgeting, and social and leisure participation. Members participate in OT services in-person at the Clubhouse and from home through teletherapy.

Members also engage in the Weekly Life Skills group and the OT After Hours evening group where they discuss and practice skills in an engaging and supportive environment. Recently, members participated in a presentation by The New Jersey Travel Independence Program (NJTIP) at the Clubhouse where they learned how to navigate public transportation systems.



Member Erica works on self-assisted range of motion for improved use of her affected side in daily activities.



Member Tracy practices an adaptive method for tying her shoes to increase her independence.

Social Work

Jennifer Harry, LCSW, Social Worker, assists members and their families so they can improve their overall quality of life by providing counseling in order to identify areas where members need assistance. This may include sourcing additional mental health services, applying for state funding and insurance, financial services and more. Navigating these resources can be cumbersome and overwhelming. OP provides support for every step of the process in order to assist members and their caregivers obtain these essential services.

Jennifer also leads Saturday adjustment groups, which provide a safe and welcoming environment for members. The goal of these groups is to continue to enhance social and emotional growth. Participants discuss and share ideas, thoughts and feelings related to adjusting to life after a brain injury. This past year, topics included self-awareness, growth mind-set, healthy coping skills, effective communication strategies and self-care. Members are always encouraged to recommend discussion ideas.



Jennifer and Michael represent OP at the BIANJ Annual Professional Seminar for "Improving Equity in Brain Injury Care and Prevention."

Potential new members should contact Jennifer Harry, LCSW at jharry@opportunityproject.org

Speech-Language Therapy

Michelle Slepp, Speech and Language Pathologist, assists OP members create connections and improve confidence 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.

Michelle provides support through individual sessions at the Clubhouse or via teletherapy. Sessions also focus on building skills in groups such as Clear Communication Group, Hot Topic featuring current event discussions and Book Club where everyone comes together to discuss perspectives with peers while working on reading and comprehension. Recently, members had a great evening at OP's first-ever Movie Night at the Clubhouse featuring a movie on the latest book Club story.

Many members had opportunities to shine while leading presentations about insights on their brain injury recovery journey with speech-language pathology students. Thank you to our partners at Montclair State University for the warm welcome.



Members participate in a speech and language panel discussion at Montclair State University.



Erica leads a presentation for speech and language graduate students.

Vocational Training

Tom Shea, PsyD., Vocational Specialist, assists members who are seeking to reintegrate into the community through paid employment.

Vocational program participants continue to inspire everyone at the Clubhouse with their amazing achievements. This year, four members began paid employment while four of our members maintained employment. In total, 40% of vocational rehabilitation members are currently employed which is 7% higher than the national employment average for people with disabilities.

This year, OP's vocational team applied for and received approval from the Department of Rehabilitation Services to provide Pre-Cognitive evaluations and Cognitive Rehabilitation services. We are proud of this authorization as it recognizes OP's interdisciplinary collaboration to provide unique compensatory strategies in the workplace, broadens the scope

of services and provides an additional source of funding for individuals with brain injury.

OP aims to expand the Vocational Program by 33% over the next year. The team will accomplish this through ongoing outreach to the Department of Vocational Rehabilitation and collaboration with a new generation of vocational rehabilitation counselors.



Congratulations to Ari for obtaining employment as a Therapy Aide at Children's Specialized hospital!



We are proud of member Joseph who began his new volunteer position at the Millburn Library!

Thank you to our employment & volunteer partners:

The Beth Greenhouse
Newark Beth Israel
Medical Center
Carpet House
Children's Specialized
Hospital
Home Depot
Kumon Math and
Reading Center of
Millburn & Maplewood
La Strada Nuova Millburn
Millburn Free Public
Library
Montclair Art Museum
The Prudential Center
Rock 'n' Joe of Millburn
RWJBarnabas Health
Sage Eldercare
WAE Center
Walgreens
Whole Foods

If you are interested in becoming an employment or volunteer partner, please contact Tom Shea, PsyD., Vocational Counselor at tshea@opportunityproject.org



2023 Annual Golf Classic

15th ANNIVERSARY SPONSORS

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The Golf Classic raises funds that go directly towards



our brain injury programs and awareness activities.



In 2023 we raised over \$265,000!



2024 Brain Injury Awareness Month

**Thank you for your help in raising over \$56,000 for
Brain Injury Awareness Month!**

Funds go directly towards our brain injury programs and prevention.

Thanks to our members and team for proudly representing OP at various awareness initiatives including the Brain Injury Awareness Proclamation presentation by Millburn Mayor Annette Romano, our brain injury prevention table at the Millburn Library, several brain injury symposiums and the exciting trip to Capitol Hill to advocate for funding on behalf of individuals with brain injury.

The second Annual Restaurant Week in collaboration with Explore Millburn Short Hills, to raise funds and create more visibility for our mission was a huge success! Additional celebratory highlights included displaying beautiful member art at the Montclair Art Museum event, hosting the Intergenerational Orchestra and a Bingo fundraiser at the Clubhouse. Thank you to all of our supporters including those who also hosted private fundraisers for the cause.



Mayor Annette Romano presented the proclamation.



What a great Wellness Fair. Thanks NJPAC!



The Montclair Art Museum Event was spectacular!



Thank you for joining our Bingo Fundraiser!



Advocating for funding on Capitol Hill.



Thank you to all of our Restaurant Week supporters!

Thanks Explore Millburn-Short Hills on a great Restaurant Week partnership!

**To participate in March 2025 Brain Injury Awareness Month
email: jlondon@opportunityproject.org**

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

**Thank you
to our sponsors!**



Restaurant Week Sponsors

Newark Beth Israel Medical Center

Montclair Art Museum Sponsors

Chiesa Shahinian & Giantomasi PC
Sobel Family Foundation
Sudler Family Foundation

Bingo Fundraiser Sponsor

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*Thank you to Ms. Anne Estabrook
for a donation to support brain
injury awareness programs in
memory of Marc E. Berson.*

*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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Member News

We are thrilled to share the exciting developments within our Opportunity Project Member Committee (OPMC). With a renewed focus on enhancing member engagement and empowerment, the OPMC has undergone significant changes to better align with the needs and aspirations of our Clubhouse community. This strategic move has empowered our members to assume leadership roles within various work units, thereby fostering greater participation in daily Clubhouse tasks and enabling them to oversee the operations firsthand. Integrating OPMC members into the fabric of our Clubhouse has strengthened collaboration, fostered a sense of ownership and cultivated a more inclusive environment.

The OPMC has been at the forefront of driving positive change at Opportunity Project by identifying areas for improvement, planning social events, sharing their stories with the community, and helping to advance our strategic plan, including offering important feedback on the redesign of our logo.

As all of the members reflect back on their journey to recovery, they have a deep appreciation for our Founder and Chairman Emeritus, Marc E. Berson and would like to share this message ...

We pay tribute to our Founder and Chairman Emeritus, Marc E. Berson

His kindness was limitless. He was down-to-earth and always made time to visit us at the Clubhouse to join in our community events, celebrate our achievements and share how proud he was of the Opportunity Project family. He remains forever in our hearts and we thank him for helping to create and build OP into the wonderful place we call family and our second home.

Love, the OP members



UPCOMING EVENT

**Please join us at
 our Annual Golf Classic
 on September 16th!**

For details visit
opportunityproject.org

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 an everlasting difference.**

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 commitment with a
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 envelope or visit
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Thank you!

