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Stepping out of her childhood home for the last time at 11-years-old, Aurora remembers the final words said to her at that time. “You will not survive out there, You know nothing about the streets.” The words bellowed from her strict and religious father, who was not accepting of her sexuality and lifestyle. These events started a chain-reaction that led to a life of survival, involving prostitution, physical abuse, and drug addiction. Fast forward 37 years and you will find an individual embarking on her journey as a trans woman, with an internship as a peer recovery specialist, a healthy support system with the help of Project HEAL and New Jersey Reentry Corp, and a recently awarded title as “Miss Gay Asbury Park.” However, her journey has been anything but easy.

“I want to be an example for those in the LGBTQ+ community that feel they can't make it,” said Aurora, “I want them to see me, with my background; where I came from, and what I've been through. I want to be an inspiration for them.” Aurora grew up in Neptune, NJ, but after leaving home found herself on the streets of Asbury Park, which during the early 1980's was still trying to recover from racial riots of years past. Aurora became swept up in a town that had been plagued with limited economic opportunities, nonexistent social safety programs, little housing and healthcare options, and rampant government corruption. Despite all this, Aurora eventually found solace in the gay community.



Aurora speaks at a NJRC graduation event in Asbury Park

“The gay community I came up with, total embrace, always uplifted me.” said Aurora. “We became a family of gay mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, we looked out for each other.” Despite her communal support system, Aurora was still doing what she could to survive, including engaging in prostitution to afford a hotel room. This led to her first arrest at the age of 18, which included an impactful incident of violence and homophobia at the hands of the arresting officer. “There is nowhere near the level of training and understanding that there is now with police,” said Aurora, “Back then, officers were free to act however they wanted.”

According to the NJ Uniform Crime Report, there were 380 bias incidents against LGBTQ+ individuals between 2019 and 2020. This accounted for 15% of all bias incidents against racial/ethnic and sexual groups throughout New Jersey. While great strides have been made in protecting the LGBTQ+ community, they are still at risk for violence and victimization. A recent study from UCLA found that LGBTQ+ people are nearly 4 times more likely to experience violent victimization, compared to non-LGBTQ+ people. It was also found that about half of all victimizations are not reported to police.

Following her first incarceration, Aurora lived a life of ups and downs, cycling in and out of jail and drug rehabilitation programs. However, it was not until the passing of her father, with whom she connected with later in life, that she decided to make foundational changes in the way she was living. Following her enrollment with NJ Reentry Corp, Aurora was referred to Project HEAL to help aid her in the next steps of her healing journey. “Coming here makes me feel grounded. I need that.” said Aurora, “Krista, my counselor, I love her, She is phenomenal. She has given me the right tools to really assess my impulses and thinking.” Aurora's clinical therapist, Krista Peoples, is a lifelong resident of the Neptune and Asbury Park area. This gives her a personal understanding of the area and the struggles people have and continue to endure there. “There are times where I reach out to Krista, and she just makes herself available” said Aurora. “Days I don't even have a session, she will pick up the phone when I call.”

Since starting with Project HEAL in March of this year, Aurora has engaged in regular trauma-informed counseling sessions, received assistance to access food and clothing, connected with medical care providers and explored desired educational opportunities.



Aurora with her clinical therapist Krista at an event in Asbury Park

Currently, she is focused on getting thirty-year-old charges expunged from her record, working an internship as a Peer Recovery Specialist at NJ Reentry Corporation and preparing further her education in the medical field.

While Aurora acknowledges that her journey consists of progress and backslides, she is now committed to her healing journey. “Everyday is a recovery, You have to thank God for that one day.” said Aurora.

Project HEAL is proud to support members of the LGBTQ+ community. Interested readers, looking to show support to local LGBTQ+ initiatives, can explore organizations like <https://www.gardenstateequality.org/>



## PROJECT HEAL PROVIDES HOLIDAY MEALS FOR CLIENTS IN NEED



Prepped Thanksgiving baskets for Project HEAL Clients

Project HEAL believes that no one should have to struggle to provide a meal for themselves or their families during the holiday season. With this in mind, the team decided to put together meal baskets for clients who found themselves in a difficult situation. Baskets contained all the essentials for a satisfying meal, including stuffing, corn, mashed potatoes, macaroni and cheese, and a whole turkey. While clients come to Project HEAL for a variety of clinical and case management needs, the team feels it's important to remember the human aspect of the work and know that gestures like this can make all the difference in people's lives.

"At the end of the day, humans are social creatures by nature and we are not meant to do life alone," said Kristina Lee, Clinical Supervisor for Project HEAL. "Food equals love and family in my mind, whether that's biological, friends, or Project HEAL family. Everyone is worthy of that connection." Meals were provided to 4 Project HEAL clients, who were more than thrilled to receive the gesture. Lee feels that gratitude and appreciation the clients displayed shows how a small act can make a huge difference. The team feels that regardless of someone's circumstances, everybody is worthy of a meal that celebrates the holidays. "I hope this continues to show that Project HEAL is here to build meaningful, genuine relationships with our clients and our communities," said Lee. Interested readers, looking to donate to families in need this holiday season, can consider finding a local food pantry or donation at <https://www.foodpantries.org/>

## PROJECT HEAL MEDICAL DIRECTOR ACCEPTS ROLE AT US DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES



Dr. Aakash Shah receives a parting gift from the Project HEAL team

The Project HEAL team said a temporary goodbye to its Medical Director, Dr. Aakash Shah, in August. Dr. Shah, who founded Project HEAL, was appointed to the 2021-2022 class of White House Fellows and is spending his fellowship year embedded within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The fellowship program is designed to bring exceptional talent from different professions to gain first-hand, high-level experience in the federal government.

Dr. Shah helped treat some of the earliest confirmed cases of COVID-19 during the pandemic. He also served as the Director of Addiction Medicine at Jersey Shore University Medical Center as well as the Medical Director of New Jersey Reentry Corp. His past work has resulted in several reforms, including the elimination of prior authorization requirements for medications for opioid use disorder.

Dr. Shah's White House Fellowship will continue for one year, after which he will return to his positions at Hackensack Meridian Health. The Project HEAL team will miss Dr. Shah's leadership, commitment and expertise but could not be more proud of him. Project HEAL welcomes Dr. Ramon Solhkhah, Chair of the Department of Psychiatry at JSUMC, as Interim Medical Director in Dr. Shah's absence. Dr. Solhkhah has been a key supporter of Project HEAL and will be instrumental in its growth moving forward.

## PROJECT HEAL RELEASES OCTOBER QUARTERLY REPORT



Project HEAL is happy to announce the release of its [October Quarterly Report](#). As the year comes to a close, the Project HEAL team reflects on opening its doors in March of 2021 and the services they were able to provide to over 90 clients. The Quarterly Reports reviews the program's statistics but also highlights the important work behind the scenes. Project HEAL provided clients with emergency assistance for food, clothing and shelter. Team members were out in the community, accompanying clients at various social service agencies, to support and empower them while also promoting self-advocacy. Clients were able to apply for and receive benefits from The Victims of Crime Compensation Office with Project HEAL by their side to submit the necessary documentation.

The clinical team of Project HEAL provided over 370 trauma-informed counseling sessions. During individual counseling sessions, each client created individual recovery goals, where Project HEAL could then intervene and make the appropriate referrals to support clients in meeting their personal goals. Project HEAL provided transportation support to ensure that clients were not only taking care of their mental and social health, but of their medical health as well. Clients were able to attend wellness visits, follow-up on underlying medical issues, and complete surgeries without the stress of coordinating their own transportation. The goal of Project HEAL is to not only heal clients' past traumas, but to steer them on a path of recovery and self-sustainability by supporting them with the necessary tools. Those looking to explore volunteer opportunities within Project HEAL can access our [website](#) for program information, or contact our main office at 732-897-8190.

## HOUSE PASSES BUILD BACK BETTER ACT WITH \$5 BILLION FOR VIOLENCE INTERVENTION PROGRAMS

Work continues in Washington, D.C. to provide federal funding for community violence intervention programs (CVIs). On November 19, The U.S. House of Representatives passed the Build Back Better Act, a \$1.8 trillion package which includes \$5 billion for CVI. While the bill is awaiting Senate debate and action, if the legislation is enacted in current form, it will provide significant lift to programs such as Project HEAL, by providing funding to support program infrastructure and resources to better reach communities affected by violence.



Hackensack Meridian Health has actively engaged in efforts to support this important funding, after Robert C. Garrett, its Chief Executive Officer, co-signed, with 17 other chief executives nationally, a letter to congressional leadership urging inclusion of these funds in the social services package.

The Health Alliance for Violence Intervention, an HVIP oversight organization, also strongly supported the inclusion of this funding in the Build Back Better Act., "To say this funding will be transformative for community-based violence intervention would be an understatement," said Fatimah Loren Dreier, Executive Director of the HAVI in an email to supporters.