

A Brief History of the Peer Employment Training Class

We'll open this story by first telling you how the Peer Employment Training course came into being. As with many great things, it had a humble beginning. St Luke's Charitable Health Trust joined forces with ValueOptions and Arizona Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) and offered local behavioral health companies, like META, an opportunity to provide new and innovative programs. This was in 2000, when there weren't any recovery projects to be found in Maricopa County. Come to think of it, there weren't many interesting employment opportunities either, especially not where people could use their first hand knowledge about recovery to help others recover. In fact, in those days, most people in our community didn't even think that recovering from serious mental illnesses was a possibility.

Here at META, we were beginning to understand that recovery from mental illnesses was possible. Gene Johnson, our founder and CEO, had already hired a very special person to help us develop recovery-oriented services – Marianne Long. Marianne came with good credentials. She was receiving services for a serious mental illness and she had been both a case manager and a team leader in the local service system. Marianne describes her job interview with Gene in the summer of 1999:

“About 15 minutes after Gene and I started talking, I knew that I wanted to work with him. He had a vision for META that included a Consumer Services Department and consumers working all through the company. He offered me the job as Director of Consumer Services, I accepted on the spot – and we were off!”

Soon after this, Gene found out about the funding mentioned above and wrote a proposal for the Peer Employment Project. To make a long story short, we got the funds and started training the first class of 15 peers. Marianne describes these events as follows:

Gene responded with a proposal to train peer support specialists. Then he responded to an expanded version that said we'd train 100 people a year, and try to employ them. The META Management team volunteered their services and we had everyone from the CEO and CFO to the QM Director, and many others in between assisting with the proposal. Our QM, Pamela, went into labor with her first child while we were writing, so she excused herself for a couple of days, but promised to keep supporting us.”

We were able to hire two other terrific people to assist in this Project -- Lisa St.George and Ann Rider – both were people with lived mental health experience and excellent backgrounds. Lisa remembers her first days this way:

“I arrived for my first day of work with excitement and anticipation. This feeling remains with me still. That morning we were preparing for the first Peer Employment Training class to begin. We put the training materials in binders and the following Monday, I started in the class as both a participant and a facilitator. At that time, building a WRAP was part of the training. (It's now the

only prerequisite for the training). So, I was required to build mine. I could never have imagined at that time...the wonderful journey I was beginning. The WRAP and the training enhanced my own wellness. Within 5 weeks we were watching the first graduates receive their certificates and within two weeks we were getting feedback from the people they served about the wonderful work they were doing to help people reconnect to themselves, their community and gain new meaning and purpose in their lives. Since then, we have moved forward at an amazing pace.”

(Marianne now operates the Living Room Programs at META; Lisa St. George, currently operates the Peer Advocacy Service providing hospital and community support programs with a peer workforce; and Ann Rider, taught the Peer Employment Class before taking a job with the Center for Disabilities Law as a special advocate.)

As Marianne, Lisa and Ann developed the curriculum, Gene and Lori served as the reviewers/editors. We wanted to have a peer training program that would prepare peers to work along side of professionals, adding their special message of hope for a successful recovery to the healing process. We made some important decisions about employment issues too: pay a good salary so people could afford to take the jobs; offer a good benefits package; expect “real job” performances as opposed to sheltered work; provide constant support and feedback to help improve job performance; don’t accept resignations unless the person is absolutely sure they want to resign, and don’t give up on anyone.

Marianne, Lisa, and Ann continued to read everything they could find on recovery and Gene and Lori continued to be reviewers – you know, the ones who kept asking, “what about adding this? What about that?” For the most part, since we didn’t have much experience of our own, we used material developed by people who were the recent recovery pioneers – particularly from the nationally known experts who had agreed to serve on our Advisory Board at the Recovery Education Center. From Mary Ellen Copeland, the author of WRAP, we included pieces of her wellness concepts; from Leroy Spaniol we included some of the excellent material on connectedness and recovery concepts; from Shery Mead we included information on peer support and trauma; from Bill Anthony, we included definitions and systems concepts. We also included information Dan Fisher had developed on recovery; and from Pat Deegan we made available her story “Journey of the Heart”, and so on. You’ll notice us continuing to quote these folks many times in this handbook. They are great people who provided us with a solid foundation upon which to build our own knowledge base. Over the past four years, we’ve been integrating what we’ve learned from them into what we’ve learned from our experience. We recommend you do the same. This will help you apply what you learn in class to your own personal and professional growth process. Yep! That’s what recovery is really about -- learning and growing.

The first class graduated in October 2000, after which the content was revised, using the information we had learned from the first students to enrich and broaden the information

in the Peer Employment Training handbook. It continued to be revised after each class as we learned more and more from the students and the recognized experts in the field.

In the beginning, we still didn't have enough confidence in our own experiences and rapidly developing knowledge base to trust what we ourselves were learning. We caught a glimpse of this after the first year when our mentors at Boston University reviewed our curriculum and asked if they could use it in their training program. This was a huge compliment, since BU is widely known for being the premier training program in psychosocial rehabilitation and recovery and is recognized world-wide for their expertise. So we polished up our little handbook, and reviewed it one more time before dropping it in the mail. It was during that last review that we made an interesting discovery. Marianne, Lisa, Ann and Lori each had a copy and were scouring it for any final undiscovered typos when Lori looked up and said, "It isn't in here." "What's not here?" "The real part - the magic that happens in the class." HMMMMMMMM. What we discovered was the curriculum was good, but it didn't cause or capture the magic that happened in the classes. We saw it happen over and over again -- the magic that is -- and we all agreed that it wasn't captured on the pages. At that point we realized that the magic was what happened between people in the class and it couldn't be captured on paper. We still believe this, but after a couple more years of experience we've gotten better at accurately describing "the magic" in writing. Now, there's a lesson right here that we don't want you to miss, so let's push the "*pause*" button for a minute and discuss it just in case it escaped you. You see, we didn't recognize that we were continuing to grow and learn important lessons about recovery, peer support and peer employment. We want you to know that it may happen to you this same way too. Speaking from experience, we want to encourage you to look up from what you're doing now and then and take stock. Ask yourself, "What's happening? How am I changing? How is my thinking changing? Do I see myself differently that I did a few weeks ago?" This will help you gain a clearer understanding of the recovery process as it happens within you and you'll be able to speed up the process by working with it on a purposeful level.

A More Recent History

This latest revision of the handbook took place early in 2004 after Lori received a call from Mary Ellen Copeland early one chilly November morning in 2003. Mary Ellen had just reviewed the handbook and suggested we update it. Gulp! Well, it was a little out of date. In her most supportive voice, Mary Ellen said, "You haven't included all the things you folks at META have been learning over the last couple of years. I think you ought to seriously consider a re-write." Gulp again! But Mary Ellen was right. The handbook needed to be revised and updated to include all the things we had learned since our humble beginnings. We also realized that we needed to include the voices of the students who had made this Project such an inspiring and miraculous experience. It really helps to get feedback from supporters to move ahead and make improvements.

So it was in early 2004, we sat down and began to re-write the handbook for you. We had to stop and think about all the things we'd had an opportunity to learn from over four

hundred people who had taken the class. We had to think through what we'd learned about employing peers, and what helped or hindered their recovery process. We looked carefully at our concept of recovery and how our understanding about recovery had evolved over the years as we learned more about it. We felt grateful for the input and material we'd received from our mentors early in our development. Yet, we recognized the value of telling our own story. By now we understood the value of learning from each other's experiences of recovery, so we decided to include many individual stories in the handbook to explain what we'd learned through being surrounded by people who were recovering on a daily basis.

When you read through this material, you'll find we have relied heavily on what we've learned from people much like you. We've also drawn on what we've learned about ourselves and how having this opportunity to learn more every day about recovery has changed us. Leroy Spaniol, one of our mentors says, "We are just beginning to scratch the surface of knowing about recovery." We agree. We know we still have a lot to learn and we have come to understand the importance of staying open to new possibilities and of learning from ourselves as well as you about this journey we're on. The more we can learn from our own experiences the better we'll be able to keep helping others as they begin their own journey of recovery. When newcomers say, "If you did it, maybe I can too" we know we've done something right. We're actually *living* and *being* recovery in a way that inspires others and helps them see their own potential to recover and have their hopes and dreams come true.

Here's a story from Suzanne K. who gives you an idea of what to expect from the class:

I had lost everything, including myself, and was living in a 24-hour dual diagnosis residential facility when I first heard about META. Two Peer Support Specialists came to our program and did a Recovery Planner presentation. I began to experience a little more hope so I sought out the WRAP class that META provides and was amazed that there was so much more to learn about recovery. I became interested in the Peer Support Training and entered the class in May of 2003. I sat down the first day and wondered if I would have anyone to talk to and was feeling very alone. I was amazed to find out that the other members of my class were feeling the same, but were ready to move forward in their own recoveries and to eventually go out there and help others as we had been helped. The facilitator in the class, who is now one of my personal heroes, was caring, loving, a sharer of hope, a great listener and one of the best teachers I've ever had in my life. We all supported each other during class and over the phone. We gave each other hugs on a daily basis. We felt so cared for and loved that it was easy to be vulnerable and share our own personal stories without feeling ashamed or embarrassed. All of these components led to an even richer recovery for me. I had my self back, but am even a better self than the one before.

Broadening our scope

We began to realize that learning about peer support is just one part of what we teach people in this class. We also teach you how to further your own recovery. We teach you how to be a good employee. We teach you how to teach others how to recover. We teach you leadership and role modeling skills. You can look at the *Table of Contents* for the bigger picture. You will learn a great deal about peer support, and you'll also learn about many other issues that will enhance your ability to make your contribution, get the job you want, do it well, and keep it.

We liked adding the word “employment” to the course title because it accurately identifies one of our most important outcomes. If we taught the class without expecting this outcome, students would still recover. Employment, however, even volunteering, provides an opportunity for people to put their recovery to work. It gives them a chance to practice recovery skills and to role model the most important message of hope, “If I can do it, so can you.” Another key aspect of employment in our culture is it provides you with a *valued social role*. This is one of the key ingredients that can galvanize the recovery process.