

Help and Hope for the Mentally ill, Addicted, and Homeless



Hello, my name is Christopher Bartz, Program Administrator/Property Manager at Recovery Innovations and I would like to share with you a message of hope, a message that recovery from even the most difficult and dire of situations, is possible.

From as early as elementary school, I had trouble fitting in to social groups and always felt like an outsider. This did not get any easier as I got older; in fact, things became much more complicated. By the age of 12, I remember feeling so different, and at that age I didn't have words or concepts to help me identify what I was going through. I think it's an awkward and confusing time for anyone at that age, but as I look back, I see that I was really struggling with some significant challenges.

These challenges were later defined and diagnosed as depression, mood disorder, and severe anxiety. Additionally, I had spent a year with a family member that was verbally and physically abusive. Within that next year just after my 13th birthday, I was to be given cocaine, alcohol, and was sexually assaulted by the parent of a childhood friend. I would not speak of this again until I was 22 and in treatment.

I didn't realize it at the time, but how I had once seen myself had been reshaped by my experiences. The stage was being set for my life to change in ways I could have never imagined. I felt as though I had no control over things that happened to me. I became angry: I suppose at some point I thought that anger would protect me from being hurt and that it gave me a sense of control. But the anger only led to more problems, being suspended and even expelled from schools, and more trouble at home. I began to experiment with many different substances and seemed to find comfort—or at least what seemed to be a sense of temporary peace—which didn't last long as I was admitted to the hospital for 30 days at 16 years of age to be treated for substance abuse and depression. I managed to stay clean for two weeks, but the anxiety and depression was overwhelming, and I returned to use.

By the age of 18, I found myself in the midst of a full blown methamphetamine addiction and was homeless. I had become an I.V. user and my world had become transformed. I had no insurance and couldn't seem to find help. At the age of 22, I had become homeless for the second time and had been in and out of jail on several occasions. In fact, I had just finished a year and a half and was entering a long term treatment program by order of the courts.

I will never forget the day of orientation sitting in a large room with 30 other people when a large man walked into the room. In a thick southern drawl, he stated his name, said he was the program director, and then he said, "And I know who you are, you're all a bunch of liars, cheats, and thieves". He also said, "Only 1 in 10 of you will recover, the rest of you won't make it. I remember my internal response to this at the time, **"I am not that lucky and therefore have no hope in recovering.**"

I'll just throw liar, cheat, and thief on the pile of all of the other labels people have been so generous to give." The program used a type of behavioral modification approach which involved various ways to humiliate its clients. In the time I was there I wore signs around my neck, was asked to yell at trees, made to sit on logs, etc. An expression of anger would earn

you an essay on anger, typically written from several self-help books you were told to read. Not expressing your anger was seen as you masking your feelings and could lead to additional essays, self-help books, staffing, etc. Day in day out for 16 months I endured this on the promise that I could escape a prison sentence.

I did manage to string together 5 years of sobriety but found myself homeless and struggling with depression and addiction once more, when a relationship I was in became toxic and ended. The cycle began again, I would find myself staying in halfway houses, shelter, parks, and being incarcerated. At times I would enter treatment and they had a one size fits all approach meaning, this is the only way you will recover. If you don't do it this way you won't find recovery, if you leave, you will be back. I remember knowing in my heart this wasn't going to work because it didn't resonate with me.

Despite how I felt, I gave it a try. Other times I would enter a program and with white knuckles stay sober for two or three days and then relapse. The program would then kick me to the street. This never really made sense to me, my condition was complex and my addiction chronic, spanning many years of my life. Looking back, to expect that I would enter a program and never use again because of a rule was very unrealistic. If I could have woken up one day and said I'll never use again I would have never needed to enter the program. It seemed as though there was no place for me to go, and everyone had given up . . . including me. **I had become “uncomfortably comfortable” identifying myself with all the labels and judgments of family, friends, and professionals.** I didn't seem to qualify for services because of eligibility and not having insurance. The all too familiar thought of taking my own life once again presented me with an option.

In 2006 I heard of a Permanent Supportive Housing program for homeless individuals with substance use and mental health challenges. I entered the program broken, seeing myself labeled as a drug addict, junkie, criminal, failure, a homeless bum, and had no real hope for a life free from what I knew. I saw no real value in who I was, nothing that felt purposeful or worthy of anything, even love, and **I was mistrustful of everyone,** why wouldn't I be?

The first person I was introduced to was a peer support specialist who welcomed me with genuine kindness and without judgment. He didn't ask if I was using drugs, how long I had been using, what kind of drugs I had used, whether or not I was stable or if I thought I could live on my own, he just spent time talking with me. He didn't present me with a list of rules or tell me what I had to do to recover, **he talked about me having choice in what services I wanted, what I wanted my recovery to look like** and that his role was to empower me to take those steps. **He treated me with respect and dignity,** and always came from a place of mutuality. If I had made a choice that didn't work out well, it was treated as a learning opportunity. If I were to have a relapse, I didn't lose my housing, it was a conversation without judgment. What do you think led up to it, what could you do differently next time, who can support you through the process? Overtime, as a result of the nature of our relationship and the other staff, I began to trust again. The trust that I had allowed me to begin to believe in how the staff saw me. At every opportunity they had had been identifying strengths in me that I couldn't see. **They didn't spend time focusing on what was perceived by others to be my illnesses and deficits, rather what was well and strong in me.** The old labels fell away giving space to new ways to see myself. As I began to see myself differently and discovered how big I truly was, my recovery completely flourished. For the first time in many years, I began to have real hope that my life could be

different. **I went through a transformation that year** and there doesn't seem to be any signs of slowing down. Although I had a permanent housing program, **I knew in my heart I could make it and I didn't want to rely on subsidies and benefits**, I wanted to stand on my own in the world. **I was no longer a victim, but a strong and capable adult** with a new outlook on life and was also filled with so much gratitude for the opportunity I was given, that I asked to graduate from the program. Through my process of recovery, **I also came to discover a passion I never knew existed, I wanted to help people struggling with the same challenges I had;** and to pass this on. I took Peer Employment training, became employed as a Recovery Coach and within a year and a half became administrator of two housing programs, one of which was the program I had graduated from. Since then **I purchased my first new vehicle, bought my first home, but most importantly, I married my wonderful wife, reconciled with my family, and I brought two beautiful little girls into this world.**

It is truly a privilege to be able to work with people in a way that recognizes individuals for the strong, talented, and gifted human beings they are. I have made it my personal commitment to carry the message of hope and to do my part to **break down the stigma associated with people who are struggling with mental health and substance abuse challenges** and to serve them in a way that fosters independence, self-efficacy, and helps people reconnect to who they truly are.

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As the Administrator at RI International I have managed multiple housing programs, including the transitional Restart living environment; Community Building which in 2015 was determined by SAMHSA as an Evidence Based Practice, and the Another Chance program in cooperation with both HUD and the Arizona Regional Behavioral Health Authority. My duties with these programs include overseeing grants as well as local applications, managing several budgets, annual progress reports, forming partnerships at both the federal level with HUD representatives. Additionally, I held a position as the Wellness City West Manager for RI International where I had oversight and led a multidisciplinary team of multiple employees to provide of a variety of outpatient services. These services included Wellness Recovery Action Planning, The Peer Recovery Team, Co-occurring services, Health and Wellness, and housing.

In 2015 I assumed in conjunction with my duties for supportive housing, the role and responsibility for RI Property Management. This role draws on my previous experience in property maintenance and management prior to working in behavioral health. An integral part of RI International for almost a decade and the services it provides to thousands of individuals in Arizona, my story is a testament to the very recovery and empowerment I strive to model to those facing homelessness, psychiatric, and substance-abuse challenges. The success I have achieved both professionally and at the individual level speak to the efficacy of this approach in my leadership. Forming and maintaining good partnerships throughout the industry; along with higher expectations of staff, a focus on accountability, and employee recognition are cornerstones of my approach to realizing greater outcomes. It is my honor to serve those in need with my unique skills in the field I call my home.