

# Recovery Support Specialist News

February 2014  
RSS Institute 37

## The Possibility of Recovery is 100%

By Taylor Wardwell

My name is Taylor Wardwell and I am a 22-year-old graduate student attending the University of Arizona studying to receive a master's degree in rehabilitation counseling. Recently, recovery support specialist has been added to my vocabulary.

As an intern for the Workforce Development Program, it is an honor to have been able to attend the RSS Institute and hear the experiences and listen to the stories shared by the other members. Attending the Institute feels like being part of a secret club where the password is "the possibility of recovery is 100%."

No textbook would have taught me nearly as much as what this Institute has taught me. Because of this newfound knowledge, a whole other perspective can be integrated into the counseling field. Advocating for peer support and recovery support specialists because they are of the utmost importance in the behavioral health field should be on every counselor's to-do list.

It boggles my mind some people do not understand this concept of how essential peer support is. To me, it is rather simple. Who better to validate and understand someone's feelings, than someone who has felt those same feelings? Although I will admit, I had no idea what a recovery support specialist was prior to attending the Institute, but now that I am aware, this knowledge can be applied to inform people about RSS's and what they can do to help others.

My fellow counselors should join the club and know the possibility of recovery is 100%. We, as members of the behavioral health field, should never feel there is no hope for the people who walk through our doors. There is always hope.

**Additional  
Institute  
Scheduled!**

**Begins March 10th**

*MORE INFORMATION ON  
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## Additional March Institute! continued from previous page

*The Workforce Development Program requested for CPSA to agree to an additional 7 Day RSSI. We are doing that in March for students, some who have been waiting since July of last year. We were able to fill the RSSI immediately. Look for the next News to arrive quickly!*

## Seeing the Greater in All

By Myshell Saenz, CRSS

I was in treatment for many years before I found hope for the first time. Hope to me is when you come to the realization that you have an opportunity to find yourself again. Hope to me is that you are able to look ahead and see the greater in all. Hope is the forgiveness of all and the gratitude of achievement. Hope is when you can look at yourself in the mirror and see that you are someone. Hope came to me the first time when I realized that I wasn't just a statistic and that I wasn't just a diagnosis. I realized that I could be something other than that and that with hope there was a future for me. With hope I have pulled myself out of a very bad depression and have put myself back into the work force in hopes to help others find their

hope in life. Hope to me is when I was in the RSS class and I was given the skills to look into the mirror and tell myself I am worth something. For many years I have put everyone a head of me and have taken myself for granted and now, slowly but surely, I will have the strength to hold myself up high and be the woman I am meant to be. I will only be able to do this because I know what hope is and what it can do for me.



# A Bigger Purpose

By Yolanda Velardez, CRSS

For the longest time hope was a word and a feeling that in my world didn't exist. I was just at a loss to life, the here and now, the future or even if I was going to see even tomorrow.

I always knew I was much more than what I was at the time. I always knew there was a bigger purpose to me being here and for my life. On November 29, 2012 I made the choice to pick up and move to Tucson, Arizona. I knew as long as I stayed in my old world that there was no way I could change and make a better life for me!

I saw hope in my view but something was missing, something more needed to happen for me to realize I had to change in order to live and no longer have a death sentence. That wish came rushing to me when I received a phone call saying my father didn't have long to live.

April 30, 2013 placed so much into focus for me. That day will be forever ingrained into my mind as the day "hope" showed up. I made a choice to take my life back and also the day I saw pride and overwhelmed joy in my father's eyes. He saw that I was healthy, happy, at peace and doing the best for me and my children and that I was staying clean and sober.

Recapturing my life and finding my way through the fog, seeing that my father fought to hold on to life so he could make sure I was OK, he refused to leave me here still broken, he held on so he would be there for me. Because he always knew I had it in me. He also knew he had the power to get through to me. To know my daddy held on to life, so he could see the day that I choose to fight my way back to life is the day I found **HOPE**.



# Connecting to the Source of Hope

By Lesa Gambill, CRSS

I kept putting this essay off, because sometimes it is difficult to look at what you have to go through in order to see hope. If we didn't have problems; we wouldn't need hope.

As a child and youngster, I lived with a mother I love dearly, but who suffered with Manic Depression (bipolar disorder). As a little girl, I did not understand why my mother was always leaving for days and weeks to go to hospitals. All I knew was that my mother was leaving me.

When she was home, I spent a great deal of time sitting on the couch trying to be still and quiet, hoping if I were good enough, she would not go away again. I suppose it was during those times on the couch that I first started living in a fantasy world inside my head. Throughout my life, I lived fantasies to escape uncomfortable situations, or feelings of rejection, etc. Much of the time I didn't really feel that I was participating in life at all, just kind of going through the motions and watching my actions from behind my eyes.

I began using food to comfort myself, and this became a problem as my mom worried about my health as I put on weight and tried to help me by putting me on diets all the time. So I began hiding food, getting up at night and eating in the middle of the night trying to cover up anything I had eaten, planning my route home from high school or work, depending on which fast food restaurants I would stop at. I hid in my car behind the restaurants and ate so no one would see me eating. Then the guilt and self-hatred would fill me, and I would stand in front of my mirror spewing hateful words to the person on the other side of the mirror and eventually this turned into physical assaults on my person. I became physically and verbally and emotionally abusive to myself.

I married right out of high school and followed him in the army. My weight continued to climb, and so did my guilt and shame... and self-abuse. The expectations I had of my husband were so unreasonable he began to pull away. Rejection again. The cycle of self-harm could



be broken from time to time when I would escape into fantasy while walking through the day. But I always felt hopeless that anything would ever really change, and depression became a constant companion.

Soon I had 3 children and devoted my time staying home to care for them. It was simply the grace of God that they turned out as healthy as they are! I could only see the negative things I did, and never the areas that I had done a good job with them. I still continued to live in fantasy daily, in my head.

We fast forward a few years, my health had gotten pretty bad from the stress of all the weight I had gained. When I had gastric bypass surgery and lost a great deal of the weight, I felt pretty good about myself for a while. I seemed to quit obsessing over food and using it in unhealthy ways. Then as problems began to pile up in my life again, I started to drink to cope since I could not use food. During this time, I went into full blown

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# Hope for Myself

By Heather McNeeley, CRSS

The definition of hope is a feeling of expectation and desire for a particular thing to happen. In my life, I've hoped for many things but I never had any real hope for myself or my recovery until two years ago. I was in Pima County Jail for the second time due to my heroin addiction. My parents had had enough and told me they didn't want anything to do with me. Naturally I expected the same from my boyfriend, Cisco.

When he came to visit me I expected him to break up with me for all the lies I told and things that I hid, but he did the complete opposite. He told me that he loved me and wouldn't give up on me. Somehow seeing him have hope in me made it easier for me to have hope for myself and for my recovery. Something clicked inside of me that day and I was able to make my hopes and dreams for myself a reality. I have been sober since that day and am now proud to say that I earned the hope and faith that Cisco had in me.



## Connecting to the Source of Hope, by Lesa Gambill *continued from previous page*

addictive behavior in several different areas of my life. My home life began to spiral quickly downward and my family began suffering as well. My son attempted to commit suicide, and life changed forever. I spent every moment with him at the hospital for the first 2 months. During this time; I lived in a "bubble", as I could only cope by living in this bubble; just him and myself. When I did finally begin staying with a friend who lived close to hospital; the drinking kicked in and a new type of self-harm... Cutting.

During the nine months my son was in the hospital, I tried to cope with emotions in many different ways; all of them destructive, and this was the thing that finally ended a 30 year marriage, as well as all but destroying my relationship with my other two children.

My time of Hope finally showed itself, after a night of

drinking, anger and self-harm. Someone called the police, and I wound up sitting on a curb, an emotional wreck and spiritually broken. I admitted that night to a crisis worker at Palo Verde, that I was an alcoholic and a mess, and needed help. I reached out to God and confessed that if He did not help me, I would just simply cease to exist. This is where I met hope.

It took a few years of counseling with an awesome Christian counselor and growing in my relationship with Jesus, but eventually God brought me to a place of seeing that I could help others who are going through the darkest days of their lives, to find the same hope that had helped me out of the darkness. I live everyday now, with gratitude and hope in Christ Jesus, that my life and recovery will enable me to bring hope to others.

## Hopelessness into Hope By Paige Johnsen, CRSS

My name is Paige and I have not always been filled with hope. When I think back on my 22 years I am forced to remember that there was a time in my life when hopelessness was a more familiar friend.

My early exposure to drugs began with marijuana at the age of 13; simply because it was available and I chose to follow the crowd. That exposure turned into regular usage and risky behavior. It was during this period that I was sexually assaulted by a "friend of a friend". I was hurt, ashamed and did not seek professional help; instead turned to cocaine to numb and suppress my depression. I became a regular abuser of marijuana and cocaine for years until I began self-medicating with illegally obtained prescription drugs. I felt hopeless and believed that I could not change what I had become. I did not see a light at the end of the tunnel.

When I finally began to take control of my life and make a change, I slowly began to realize that I must turn hopelessness into hope. I began to believe that what I wanted out of life could actually happen. And when I began to reach a goal, no matter how small, I believe I became more hopeful about the next challenge.

I believe hope is that "light" at the end of the tunnel and your belief that you can leave the darkness behind and walk in light.



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## "Thank God for Hope" By Stefanie Smith, CRSS



I remember the very day!! June 26, 2004. I was sitting in the federal Prison on Wilmot road, after having spent 1 year in Pima County Jail waiting for sentencing. It had been a total of 2 years being in jail with no contact from family due to my own actions.

I get called for a visit. Me a visit? I dressed and was taken to visitation and there was my mom, my 2 daughters and a very small 4-day-old baby (my first grandchild). I was in prison when my first grandchild was born! That was not where I should have been, but there I sat.

I held that baby girl the whole visit. I apologized for my actions. That was not enough, that baby was so precious it brought to mind when my girls were babies. I would do what is right. I will finish my sentence and when I am free I will be the person I was before drugs and bad choices. I told them

not to visit me again, that I would keep in-touch with them until I was released.

To this day my children and grandchildren (now 3 of them) are my HOPE and the loves of my life. Thank God for HOPE!!!!

# Hope: The Life Within

By Christopher Koval, CRSS

If you asked me years ago, I would have said experiences of hope, or joy for that matter, had been few and far between. But I suspect I must have had some, since I'm writing this today. Although I knew my "condition" related to my childhood experiences, I believed my unhealthy choices -- behavior, anxiety and depression -- were character flaws. I was the problem and needed to "get over it" and change. In my despair, living and suffering with mental illness, I wondered where God was in all of it. Looking back, I realize He was not only present but closer than I could have imagined.

Through my search for meaning and truth, I came to realize that I was powerless; that is, my life had become unmanageable. My recovery didn't rely on my own abilities, but in the trust and belief that God is more powerful than my despair and mental illness. The more I acknowledge and accept this, the more I surrender, stop wrestling with myself, and let God heal me. To put it simply, "I can't," "God can," and "I will let Him do it." We do not have hope; it is hope that possesses us.

My personal experience with hope has been a journey, one that will continue for the remainder of my life. I can't really say there was any single moment when I experienced hope for the first time, at least consciously. I suppose I had it since the day I was born. It must have been part of my design, something required for such a helpless creature, so dependent on the Other. I suppose the miracle of life, by definition, is hope. However, there have been a few pinnacle moments along the way. Many people have contributed as instruments of this hope: family, friends, acquaintances, teachers, priests, coworkers, and strangers. The kindness and compassion they have shown me, as well as their own suffering, has given me the courage and strength to continue my search for freedom and happiness. Hope within me recognized hope within them.



One of the greatest experiences on my road to recovery was my training at The Bennett Theatre Lab in San Francisco, where I studied the classical acting technique of Constantine Stanislavsky, a Russian director and actor in Moscow during the early to mid 1900s. His ultimate aim was to inspire actors to have real experiences on the stage and to behave as they would in life. Instead of "representational" theater, he wanted to create "Theater of Living Experience" by using the science behind the natural laws of human behavior. He spent forty years trying to get actors to fulfill truthful (psycho-physical) "actions" (purposeful acts of human behavior towards an objective) and feel real emotions.

Rather than trying to "be someone else," in our training, we were to come from ourselves and learn how to condition our behavior according to the "given circumstances" of our characters and the world in which they lived (the play) by using improvisation in rehearsals. The actors' goal was to achieve transformation -- an amalgamation of oneself and the character -- as well as spiritual communion with one's fellow actors.

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# My Own Journey of Hope

By Kim McKay, CRSS

My personal experience of hope began when I was 18. On a desperate day when my Mother and I were at our wits end about what to do about my brother's drinking and drug use and resulting violent behavior, my Mother called a recovery center for help. I was at my lowest. I was scared of everything and exhibiting all the signs of PTSD. The people at the recovery center pointed out that not only did my brother need help, but that I too was important enough to merit attention and support in my recovery. This was the first time that I was able to focus on myself and with their support begin my own journey. Since then I have found healthy pieces of self in Al Anon and therapy and by using the services of COPE. I was inspired by a woman named Sharon, an RSS, who shared her experience with me and provided a model of what can be done in spite of mental illness. By working on our own recovery we can be an example to others and a source of inspiration.



## Hope: The Life Within, by Christopher Koval *continued from previous page*

It didn't take long for me to begin contemplating the value of my training beyond the stage. If I could change my behavior, stir real emotions, and transform myself in an artificial environment by fulfilling simple actions, why couldn't I do the same in life? I began to see great possibilities within myself and in others.

Recently, my previous intuitions about the acting exercises have become much clearer. The exercises, especially in sense memory (including affective, associative, and emotional memory), all relate to the concept of "mindfulness." We were working on mindfulness in our acting class! Perhaps many people involved with acting and the arts, without knowing it, are there for healing.

In 2004, the year I graduated from "The Lab," I applied for a program in marriage and family therapy, with a concentration in drama therapy,

at the California Institute of Integral Studies. After filling out the application, writing an eight-page autobiography, updating my resume, attaining letters of recommendation, and attending orientation, I received a rejection letter. My natural response was to forget the whole thing.

In the grand scheme of things, I have to say my faith has brought me to where I am today. I spent my formative years and young adulthood going to mass on Sundays and fulfilling the "minimum requirement," something I've done in most of the other arenas of my life. In 2008, I was introduced to the spiritual movement School of Community and Liberation (SCL), originally formed by Father Luigi Giussani in Italy. His purpose was to address the reasonableness of faith and to deepen its meaning and significance for the Italian people and the world.

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## Hope: The Life Within, by Christopher Koval *continued from previous page*

In the weekly meetings, we read and discussed some of his writings: *Is it Possible to Live This Way?* (Volumes 1 - 3), *The Religious Sense*, and *The Origin of the Christian Claim*. I slowly began to have a deeper and more mature understanding of faith.

Since my involvement in San Francisco, I have been part of the SCL community here in Tucson. The focus of our discussions has gone beyond analyses and interpretations. Personal experiences are what connect us to one another and our faith. Within this friendship, I have moved from despair to a greater sense of hope for my recovery. I have begun to realize that it is within the circumstances of one's life where we find meaning and transform into full human beings.

My life-long goal is to strive to make God my center. When this happens, I will no longer be disturbed by the things going on around me. I can have troubles without being troubled, and my continued search for knowledge and to love God, in the world, within myself and others, gives me hope.

In 2013, another piece of the puzzle gave me a clearer picture of my path when I decided to seek help and enroll with CODAC. This was a significant breakthrough, and I found much more than I had asked for. Not only did I have someone who understood, empathized and had compassion, but through my search to become the best version of myself, I found my vocation. In my inquiries, my Recovery Support Specialist (RSS) informed me that I could do what she did and use my experience to walk beside others who live with mental illness. I was directed to the Recovery Support Specialist

Institute and was encouraged to apply. The RSS also recommended I try to "get a foot in the door" and apply for a position in the behavioral health field immediately. Since then, I have been working as a Behavioral Health Specialist for Cope Community Services. During my training, going back and forth from the human resources department and Community Partnership of Southern Arizona, I have learned about various types of therapy, such as Dialectical Behavior Therapy and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy. Not only have I gained more in-depth knowledge about mental illness, I have also gleaned a deeper understanding of my own struggles and conflicts in my relationships.

Hope certainly is more apparent in my life now than it was years ago. I have gone from seeking help at CODAC to working in the behavioral health field. Most recently, I received a call from the RSSI informing me of my acceptance. One of the things I heard in the first phase of the training, which I will never forget, is "We are all recovering from something."

The possibility of using my talents to help others in a professional capacity has made its way back into my life. My original dream to integrate theater and healing is coming to fruition. I am currently conducting a group called Mindfulness Through Theater Games at COPE Lifestyle Improvement Center (CLIC, a COPE facility). My search for wellness and my search for purpose have become one. All of the my life experiences -- in actor training, teaching, and most especially my relationships -- have been part of the journey to who I am today and who I will become.



## What I've Learned

By Daniel Kausch

*We all have come a long way; are smart and have learned tools  
To listen and provide resources is to empower. These are jewels  
In here(The institute), I can connect with the divine and feel chills through my body  
Every time that I feel it, I always think that it's Godly  
We help others recover-we may share our own story  
If I kept it locked up, it wouldn't do anything for me  
My mission is to give the chills like the ones I've felt here  
The inspiring CPSA instructors are why it is felt here  
I do not know what will become my life or how I will die  
I need to affirm in my head that I will reach my goals before the event of my demise  
We are all roses budding from concrete waiting to share our story  
I urge you all to listen on this day of honor and glory*

# Recovery Support Specialist Institute 37



*Back Row (L to R)*

Daniel A. Lewis II, Dyanna "Myshell" Saenz, Daniel Kausch, Donald Smith, Nancy Pohanic, Leonard Romero, Armando Sanchez

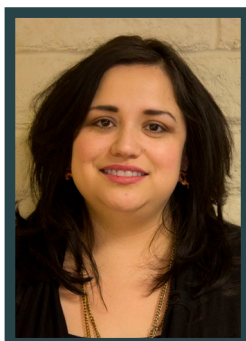
*Middle Row (L to R)*

Heather Morrison, C. Dawn Harward, Joyce Trejo, Gwendolyn Valentine, Yolanda Velardez, Paige Johnsen, Christopher Koval, Christina Saxton, Denise Dunn, Angelica Aguilar

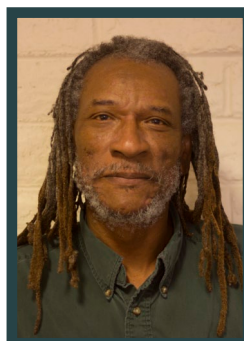
*Front Row (L to R)*

Sandie Boscia, Heather McNeeley, Elizabeth Arrington, Kim McKay, Stefanie Smith, Lesa Gambill, Taylor Wardwell, INTERN

## RSSI Panel of CRSSs



Norma Castaneda



Gordon Brooks



Shanna Moore



Kyle Long

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*UA Workforce Development Program promotes recovery and expanded opportunities for people with mental illness, substance use, and dual diagnosis by employing a collaborative approach to advocacy, service, education, and research.*

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