

Voices that Must be Heard: A Peer Response to Systemic
Inequality in Upstate New York

Beyond the Bars, 2020

Organizing Workshop, Sunday, March 8th

Contents:

Abstract and Biographies, Page 2

Welcome and Introduction from the CIU Director, Page 3
Benay Rubenstein

Remarks from the Peer Facilitator, Page 5
Sara Jenab

Welcome to the Jungle, Page 7
Richard Rivera

From Homelessness to Home Ownership, Page 11
Latoya Peterson

A Peer Response to Bail Reform, Page 15
Clay Hapstak

Closing Remarks from the Peer Facilitator, Page 19
Sara Jenab

Abstract

This document is a record of a workshop given at Columbia University that introduced three community grassroots leaders directly impacted by the criminal legal system. These leaders share their personal stories and speak about the innovative projects they have taken on in the pursuit of progressive change in Tompkins County, New York. By participating in the newly created, peer leadership group “Voices that Must be Heard”, each member agreed to design a unique, personal project to pursue around issues that have impacted them personally, and directly relate them to progressive change needed in our local community. “Voices” is part of the national movement around moving formerly incarcerated persons into positions of influence and power, and it is a program of College Initiative Upstate. This workshop was presented at the national conference, *Beyond the Bars: Strategies for Challenging a Carceral Society*, in March of 2019. This conference united activists and leaders across the country who are pursuing innovative ways to challenge the American criminal justice system.

Biographies

Benay Rubenstein is the Director of College Initiative Upstate, a non-profit creating pathways to and through college for people directly impacted by the legal system.

Sara Jenab is the Peer Facilitator for College Initiative Upstate and will begin law school in the fall to fight mass incarceration and defend human rights.

Richard Rivera, presenting *Welcome to the Jungle*, is recently released from prison after 39 years and is researching and documenting ‘The Jungle’, a longstanding homeless encampment in Ithaca, NY.

Latoya Peterson, presenting *From Homelessness to Home Ownership*, will speak about how she navigated local housing programs during her continuing journey from homelessness to homeownership.

Clay Hapstak, presenting *A Peer Response to Bail Reform*, will share his dynamic peer response to NY’s recent Bail Reform, inspired through his own struggles with addiction and the criminal justice system.

Welcome and Introduction from the CIU Director

By: Benay Rubenstein

Good Morning, my name is Benay Rubenstein. It's an honor and pleasure to be here to present our new peer-leadership group, Voices That Must Be Heard, and speak about how this group is responding to systemic inequalities in Tompkins County NY. "Voices" grows out of College Initiative's longstanding work creating pathways to and through college for men and women impacted by the criminal legal system. Voices That Must be Heard contains the word "must" because our work reflects the imperative to do everything in our power to encourage and support our students and allies to use their past struggle as fuel for progressive change. Now!

Here's a little about myself and the story that led to the Voices project. Columbia University is my Alma Mater, however, I received my deepest schooling about human resiliency, resourcefulness, and brilliance while coordinating college degree programs inside Federal and NYS prisons in the 1980's and 1990's. I worked with Marist College at FCI Danbury, FCI Otisville, Otisville State, and with Marymount Manhattan at Bedford Hills CF—where the women called the Marymount program the most residential women's college in the country! As a result of this experience, and also growing-up in the aftermath of WWII, with ghosts of the holocaust always in the background, I determined to spend my life finding a way to challenge incarceration. As fate would have it, my years working inside put me smack in the middle of the unprecedented growth of the prison industrial complex and I experienced firsthand the deep damage incarceration imposes on individuals and the core-values of our democracy.

Without a doubt, higher education is the elixir that changes lives and society, inspiring people with justice experience to earn degrees and move into positions of leadership. In many ways, Bedford Hills paved the way for starting College Initiative in NYC in 2002. CI is now a program of the Prisoner Reentry Institute at CUNY's John Jay College of Criminal Justice. Twenty years later, we can see how many CIU alumni now hold positions of influence and power throughout NYC and beyond—leading non-profits, teaching in universities, and practicing law. I'd like to give a shout-out to some of my heroes! Cheryl Wilkins, M (Columbia U), Ronald Day, PhD (Fortune) , Mika'il Deveaux, PhD (Citizens Against Recidivism), Khalil Cumberbatch (New

Yorkers United for Justice), Marc Ramirez (Lawyer with Bronx Defenders), Robin McGinty PhD (Professor, Queens College), Sharon White, MSW (Women's Prison Association), Iris Bowen, MSW (Institute for Advanced Medicine), Christina Voight (Soros Foundation), and dozens of others. I mention these amazing people to honor them and to inspire the same kind of brilliance and activism in the Southern Tier of NYS and beyond.

More recently, in 2016, after moving to Ithaca NY, I adapted College Initiative's urban model to a rural model and College Initiative Upstate was born. College Initiative Upstate works in three Areas: College Prep, College Access, and Leadership.

1. College Prep: Involves ongoing intensive College Prep sessions in collaboration with our local SUNY Community College, the Tompkins County Court System, Probation, Parole, and a broad range of non- profits. In 2017, our College Prep Program became an Alternative to Incarceration. This revolutionary model opens the door for some students to have the choice of going to college instead of going to jail!

2. College Access: As a bridge to college we offer many services and also material support leading to enrollment in college degree programs. The majority of our students are first generation, most are in recovery, more than half are parents, many work and attend classes, the average age is 35, and 99.9% of CIU students receive full financial aid based on low incomes.

3. Leadership: Our new Voices That Must Be Heard Peer Leadership Group is what brings us here today. Voices is our launching pad for emerging grassroots leaders in Tompkins County.

The importance of College Initiative Upstate and our Voices That Must Be Heard Peer Leadership Group is not only tied to the important work we do, but also to the fact that we are doing the work in an area of the state that is primarily conservative and tough on crime. Yet, within this conservative area, there is an oasis—Ithaca NY. We are in Tompkins County, home to Cornell University, which is in many ways a progressive enclave in Upstate's Southern Tier. Here we are able to enjoy support, and also influence surrounding counties that have little programming for justice involved people. The work we are doing runs deep and it cannot be done alone. Connecting with the network of activists and visionaries attending his conference has been a powerful way to recharge and move forward with new friends.

Remarks from the Peer Facilitator

By: Sara Jenab

Hello, my name is Sara Jenab, and I would like to share a bit about the reason why I began to work in this field. I grew up as the daughter of three attorneys, two mothers, one father—one of whom was a public defender. I became accustomed to living on the periphery of the carceral state, dimly aware of its existence and the people locked inside, but not fully aware of its reach or its brutality. It was not until I began to volunteer with the Cornell Prison Education Program, which provides college courses to four prisons in upstate New York, that I was forced to confront the dark reality of incarceration. As I helped teach courses inside, a few lessons became clear. First, there is a huge difference between a bad act and a bad actor. If all of us were defined by the worst day of our lives, as my students were, the world would be a much darker place. Second, I learned that the lines that divided my life from my students' lives were not as concrete as I imagined at the beginning of the semester. The main areas we differed were in our upbringing, our social class, and our race. This led me to my third and most important lesson, which is that I refuse to believe that our criminal justice system is working when it incarcerates mostly the poor and the black or brown. Something is broken.

When I began to volunteer, I was not thinking about systemic change. But, as I finished the semester, I could feel that I was forever changed. I could not forget the men that had been in my class, who remain incarcerated even as I plan my future and attend this inspiring conference. All of this has impacted my decision to spend this past year, post-graduation, working with College Initiative Upstate to gain an understanding of the reentry side of incarceration. Now, I want to continue my work with incarcerated persons by pursuing a legal career fighting mass incarceration and defending human rights. I will be beginning law school this fall and I will take these lessons with me.

Now I would like to speak with you all about the work I am doing with CIU, where I am the Peer Facilitator of the newly created Voices Peer Group. As Benay mentioned, since its inception four years ago, CIU grew quickly, and by the fourth year the work was well established and

integrated into Tompkins County. This was when the staff realized that something was missing from our program model—direct contribution and community leadership from our students. This is a critical gap in many programs around the country, and one that has dire consequences, because it is only through direct leadership from formerly incarcerated or court involved persons that we can enact imaginative and effective criminal justice reform. In response to this gap in our own program, we applied to a local funder for seed money to begin a peer leadership group for CIU emerging leaders, called Voices that Must be Heard. We gave it this name in the hope that we would be able to provide a platform to raise up the voices of our students and colleagues, all of whom have quite a lot to say. Our group is composed of emerging leaders in the community who have lived experience with incarceration, court involvement, homelessness, or other critical issues that face our county. We have one of the few peer groups in our area and we believe that this movement has unlimited potential to grow and positively impact our community. Because we are so excited about the potential of programs like this, which put those with lived experience at the vanguard to fight social issues, we are paying close attention to the measurable impact of the group.

Each member of the group works to develop projects that address one or more of the critical issues that face our community, ranging from voter registration for the formerly incarcerated, to the problem of homelessness in Ithaca. Many of the Voices peers were already involved in the community in myriad ways, but the peer group allows them to connect with each other and receive institutional support from College Initiative Upstate, should they need it. Some projects are largely self-driven, but everyone has the option to meet with staff members for support whenever they would like. Our goal is to raise the voices of those with the lived experience to respond to these issues and to begin solving problems at the ground floor. Some of the projects that our peers have pursued, like the voter registration drive for formerly incarcerated persons, have already yielded positive impacts on the community. I now have the great honor and pleasure to introduce three of our peers, who are here with us today to share their stories and their projects.

Welcome to the Jungle

By: Richard Rivera

My name is Richard Rivera and I am a formerly incarcerated person. At the age of sixteen, I was involved in a botched robbery that led to the tragic and senseless death of a New York City police officer. I was arrested, convicted, and sentenced to 30 years to life. I served 39 years and was released in July 2019 - a little over 7 months ago. During my imprisonment, I earned a GED, a Bachelor's, and a Master's, and I am currently a candidate for another bachelor's degree from Bard College. One could reasonably argue that I wasn't arrested but *rescued*.

When I entered prison, I could neither read nor write--I was an illiterate, drug-addicted 16-year-old. Not only was I illiterate, but I didn't know who I was in the sense that I lacked a fully formed identity or had any conception of my place in the world and my responsibility to others. Fortunately, when I entered the system, we were a decade removed from the Attica riot, prisoners had a different vibe and attitude--they were older, militant, educated, and, most importantly, they cared about each other. "Each one, teach one" was not just a bumper sticker but rather a way of life. As a result, my political and moral education came early in my bid. It wasn't long before I was holding up a newly minted GED. That was 1983.

I entered prison in 1981 and AIDS entered with me. AIDS devastated our communities but terrified our prisons. *We didn't know what the hell was going on*. It was shrouded in fear and superstition and we responded like the ignorant and afraid--we, prisoners and staff alike, tried to destroy it. As a result, prisoners suspected of having "The Monster" were driven out of the general population either by being set-up, assaulted, or having their cell set on fire. Alternatively, if you had a chronic cough or other unexplained illness, medical staff would order you moved into the infirmary. Either way, those suspected of being infected with AIDS would be removed from the general population and quarantined in the prison infirmary. I went up there in the early years. I volunteered to clean and care for the guys. I sat with them as they forgot my name and died, because no one deserves to die scared and alone in a filthy prison infirmary.

All these experiences produced the man I am today - a patchwork human being made up of all those individuals who have touched my life:

- The brothers who took me under their wings when I first entered prison, who sat with me for hours as I tried to pronounce words or write a letter to my lawyer, taught me the value of education.
- The brothers who stood by me when I was terrified and uncertain and taught me the importance of having something to believe in, an unshakable moral core.
- My experiences with the AIDS crisis, which taught me what it means to be strong, courageous, and compassionate—and that every one of us, regardless of race, gender, or social status, is worthy of being treated with dignity and respect.

In July 2019, after being denied parole 6 times, I was released from prison. I walked out of Eastern Correctional Facility and into Cornell University. At Cornell, I took two courses to satisfy a major track seminar for Bard College—an impossible task for someone returning to the world after thirty-nine years. Luckily for me, I walked into the offices of College Initiative Upstate and into the office of Benay Rubenstein, who immediately provided me with the assistance I needed to navigate the obstacle course of student enrollment at Cornell, provided me with a small grant for books, a chrome computer (my *first* computer!), and introduced me to an entire community of similarly minded and similarly situated individuals.

I arrived in Ithaca full of fire and passion, wanting desperately to fight for social justice and to fight the carceral system. But Ithaca, as it turns out, is not the place to go if you want to strike a blow against the carceral state. Ithaca does not have a social justice problem. They have a small jail population and a small number of men returning to Ithaca from prison or jail. However, what the city of Ithaca does have is a large population suffering from mental health, drug abuse, and poverty—issues that operate on a continuum and are responsible for Ithaca’s homeless population. This homeless population is at odds with Ithaca’s image as a progressive, forward-thinking community. Consequently, for the past six months I started looking into this subject and I have been doing an ethnography in the city of Ithaca—a project that has required me to immerse myself in the homeless population of Ithaca, especially in the homeless encampments of

The Jungle. This work has allowed me to discover amazing things about this most vulnerable population and it has already taught me a great deal.

When Voices that Must be Heard was started, I saw it as an opportunity to further my work and give voices to the individuals who are homeless in Ithaca. Because homelessness, like being designated a violent felony offender, carries a certain stigma. It identifies a person as someone that should be excluded from the civic, social, and political life of the community. In response to this forced invisibility, I have narrowed the scope of my study to four subjects for the purpose of my project with the College Initiative. I chose these subjects because they represent a cross section of the population living in The Jungle. They speak to how The Jungle, as an occupied space, functions as a social/cultural economic community. My Peer Project is to follow these individuals and see how their lives change over the course of the next sixteen weeks or academic semester and share their stories.

I want to tell you briefly about this space known as *The Jungle*. The Jungle is not one monolithic space but several spaces operating in one geographical location. It is actually three spaces occupied by three different kinds of homeless or houseless people, which I designate as fluid, temporary, and permanent. The fluid population, which tends to be the most mobile, moving in and out and through the jungle, generally occupies the outer spaces of the jungle—utilizing the roads and highways which border the jungle, accessing the big box stores which ‘hide’ the jungle spaces from public view. Walking through it, we would walk into a space littered with debris—abandoned shopping carts, clothes, tents, etc. The ground is covered in hypodermic needles (or sharps). The camps are fortified, ringed with shopping carts, bike frames, spikes, bits and pieces of fencing. Many of the abandoned structures reek of chemicals from functional meth labs or shooting galleries. Though this is the most densely populated area of the jungle, these populations tend to be more fluid and less permanent. The subjects who live in this space tend to be addicts. Meth and other drugs are made, sold, or used in this space. Here reside the outcasts of The Jungle community.

A little further in reside those who I call truly homeless, people who for various reasons have lost the ability to pay for housing and find themselves in the streets. They are temporary residents,

waiting to save enough money (many holding down full-time jobs) or get approved for housing vouchers in order to move into more stable housing. Their camps are generally clean of debris and in proximity to the more seasoned and permanent residents of the jungle. At the heart of the jungle reside the more permanent residents, some occupying these spaces for ten or twenty years. They tend to be the seniors and the ones that others generally defer to. They are the survivors, historians, and the ones others go to for tips on how to fortify their tents, secure their camps, and obtain needed supplies like propane.

In this way these spaces can be reconceived not as dark and lawless spaces but as functional social and cultural spaces where life is lived and experienced in much the same way that you and I do here in NYC. As I follow the lives of these four individuals for the next sixteen weeks, I hope to flesh out how these folks manage to form the social and cultural relationships that make the jungle possible as a functional and operational space. Most importantly, I hope to discover the myriads ways these individuals access resources and insert themselves into the political and social life of the Ithaca. The project is itself a work in progress. A project driven by the belief that there are no such things as throwaway human beings.

It is in this sense that the CIU initiative, Voices that Must be Heard, is so important. This group gives voice to me, a formerly incarcerated person 7 months removed from walking a prison yard. College Initiative Upstate has been there to support and encourage me in my scholastic pursuits post-release, which provides a platform for my voice. Likewise, my peer project through the Voices initiative allows me to pay-it-forward, in the sense that it provides me with a platform to give voice to the homeless of Ithaca and to tell you about The Jungle and the people who live in those spaces. All of these voices must be heard. That is the purpose of this project—to produce leaders, to produce voices, and to allow us to get actively involved in our communities.

From Homelessness to Home Ownership

By: Latoya Peterson

My name is Latoya Peterson and I was born and raised in Ithaca, NY. I would call myself an Ithacan, a label which brings to mind ivy league universities and liberal practices, because Ithaca is well known for containing Cornell University, which more than 24,000 students attend each year. Since this is a college town, housing is often catered to college students who only live here ten months out of the year. This means that rent rates are often high above the average standards of living that many housing programs in Ithaca are based on. From my experience, I have come to believe that college students are offered the best selection of housing and are catered to by landlords. Because of the high number of college student tenants, landlords are often biased and judgmental when it comes to tenants who use various housing assistance programs. At times, it is clear that landlords make the assumption that an individual who receives housing vouchers might be a drug addict or a person abusing government funded programs. At first glance, you wouldn't think that in a progressive town like Ithaca, housing would be an issue. However, there are deep, systemic inequalities in our town, and unfortunately, sustainable affordable housing is one of the many issues that gets swept under the rug. I have personally been faced with many obstacles throughout my life in Ithaca, the most serious being my struggle with housing.

My story starts in the year of 1988 in Sarasota, Florida when my fourteen old mother and sixteen-year-old father met. During this time crack cocaine had swept the county and had taken many families by storm. Once word spread that my mother was pregnant my grandfather traveled to Sarasota, Florida and my mother moved to Ithaca, NY, at five months pregnant. I guess you could say I was a survivor before I was even born, because at eight months pregnant my mother was struck by a teenage driver while she was walking to get Purity Ice Cream. I had the typical childhood of a kid growing up in the nineties, but since I was the oldest child, I was expected to excel when it came to academics as well as sports. Coming from that background, I wouldn't have expected to experience homelessness 23 years later. My name is Latoya Peterson and eight years ago I was homeless.

I was almost due to give birth to my oldest son when my mom and younger sister moved to Florida. Since I was so close to giving birth, I decided to stay in Ithaca with my sister, other family members, and friends. Knowing that I needed help, I attempted to apply for assistance at the Department of Social Services, but since I was pregnant, I was told from case workers that it was not safe for me to stay at the Red Cross Shelter. At the time I was crashing on the couch of various family members and friends, and I became familiar with the saying that couch surfing is not considered homeless, but anyone sleeping in their car or on the streets is considered homeless. However, after giving birth, things changed. I wanted my own space and a place to call my own.

After my son was born, we had no option but to continue couch surfing with family members and friends. It wasn't until I applied for a housing scholarship through a program called Learning Web Outreach that things began to start looking up in my housing situation. The qualifications for the program were to be homeless, 16-25 years old, and either working or going to school. My son was only one month old when I decided to return to work, because I didn't want to depend on public assistance, and I wanted to have a higher income to make ends meet. At the time I worked at a local personal care agency twenty hours a week, volunteered at Cayuga Medical Center through a paid internship at Learning Web, and had recently begun working as a resident care associate at Brookdale Senior Living, where I have been for the last seven and half years. Things were starting to fall into place when, in May 2012, I was able to sign a lease for my first apartment through the Learning Web Housing Program. I was excited about the opportunity to not only provide for my newborn son, but also to have some independence.

I was in the Learning Web Housing Program from the ages of 23-25, during which time I was able to save money for my next apartment. I was also able to complete a medical office certification as well as return to Tompkins Cortland Community College to pursue an Associate's degree of Science in Human Services. In the fall of 2014, I completed the Learning Web Housing program and transitioned to the Solutions to End Homelessness Program, which offers intensive case management to help homeless individuals reach financial stability. In this program I received assistance for six months, which ran out at the end of 2014, just as I received my first Section 8 voucher. At that moment my life changed once again, because my previous

landlord informed me that she was not willing to accept the voucher. Once again, I had no choice but to move to an apartment that was willing to accept it.

During my third semester of college, on Mother's Day of 2015, I found out that I was pregnant with my second son. At this point in my life I had become more financially stable and I was determined, against all odds, to complete the next semester in pursuit of my degree. I was more focused and driven this time around, because I wanted to make a better life for myself as well as my sons. To finish the degree, I needed to attend a combination of day classes on campus, on-line classes, and various night classes. On May 25, 2017, I was overjoyed to finally complete the credits needed for my associate degree. After graduation, I continued to work at Brookdale Senior Living as I thought about which type of career would allow me to help others make a difference in their lives and make changes for the better. I eventually found those qualities in my current job, where I work full-time as a peer support specialist. I am also in the process of completing a real estate training course to become a real estate agent, as well as saving money to become a homeowner in the near future.

I first met Benay and Sara in December of 2019, who mentioned that they would be starting a peer group called Voices That Must Be Heard. I was asked to join the group in January after I shared my personal experience of being homeless and my journey towards where I am today. As a member of the Voices group, I decided to create a project that can be used as a guide for other individuals who are facing the same situation of homelessness that I lived through. Broadly, my project will be about how to find sustainable affordable housing in Tompkins County by explaining all of the programs that can help make housing more accessible, and by serving as a guide for those who are going through obstacles that I overcame in the past. In the future, I would like to make and publish a presentation with my own personal experience as well as individual stories of others within the community, because I want to bring visibility to this issue and inspire others to help change the system.

I believe that the project I am pursuing with CIU will allow me to share my personal perspective with others so that I can make it easier for those who come after me. Working as a peer is the best way that I have found to help others, because I can relate to participants' situations as well

as offer suggestions to advocate and guide others to positive solutions on a day to day basis. Currently, my project with Voices on affordable sustainable housing is a work in progress. Over time I plan to get more in depth about homelessness in Tompkins County, as well as add statistics and real-life stories about the people who are in various programs in the community. I am thankful for overcoming many challenges that I have faced in my life that have led me to where I am today. We are breaking ground as the first Voices Peer Group in Ithaca, and I look forward to seeing what accomplishments can be achieved in the future.

A Peer Response to Bail Reform

By: Clay Hapstak

My name is Clay Hapstak. I'm here to share my story and how it relates to my project as a peer of Voices that Must be Heard. Up until I was 30, I had a pretty typical life by American standards. I married my high school sweetheart, and we had a house and a child by the time I was thirty. In fact, my son has taken this trip with me, and sits in the audience for two reasons: one, he's never been to Manhattan before, and two, after you hear my story, you'll realize why we're a package deal.

In the summer of 2013, I broke my wrist while playing softball. After surgery I was prescribed pain pills, which after a couple months led to a heroin addiction. I quickly became something which I never thought I would be, an addict. Uneducated about how to battle this disease, I felt hopeless, guilty, and shameful. I was arrested on a petit larceny charge which was directly related to having to feed my addiction. I was placed on probation. If I had not had the \$1,000.00 for bail, then I would have had to spend time in jail, which at that point would have been the worst-case scenario for me. But, while out on bail, I continued down a dark path. I felt alone and because I didn't have any friends with serious drug problems, I isolated and disconnected from society.

In December of 2016, I incurred felony charges for attempting to possess drugs. Because it was my first felony charge, I was released on my own recognizance. Soon after, I went to my first 28-day inpatient facility. I completed it and felt hope for the first time. But, upon returning home, my wife passed away from an overdose. The following day my son was taken away from me. That was enough cause for me to relapse. I overdosed for the first time and was remanded to jail on suicide watch. Being in jail violated my probation and I was placed on what is called door to door, which means that I was to remain in jail while waiting for a bed to become available at what would be my second rehab in 2 months.

I was transferred to Cayuga Addiction Recovery Services Residential after spending 3 weeks in jail. I spent a total of almost a year in treatment, between Cayuga Addiction Residential Inpatient

and the 6 ½ months at Syracuse Behavioral Health's Halfway House for men. In December of 2017, after finishing my time in Syracuse, I moved to Trumansburg New York to begin my journey post-treatment in Tompkins County. My life was very chaotic upon arriving back to Tompkins County. I found myself a client of 3 different courts, all with different expectations. Not familiar with how any of it worked, I was overwhelmed, confused, and desperate to attain some positive relationships in my life. I could have used advice from someone who had been through what I was experiencing. I could have used a Peer.

Although I was clean and sober for almost a year, and I was attending Cayuga Addiction Recovery Services Outpatient, the only people I knew were the other clients in my groups. I felt that I needed to interact with people who were further removed from the last time they used and were dealing with similar circumstances other than just outpatient groups. Judges from some of the courts I was in and my probation officer had some suggestions, but I needed advice from another person in recovery on how to navigate my life. I felt lost and wasn't sure what I could do other than remain abstinent and make all my appointments.

In March of 2018 I finished City Misdemeanor Court and was transferred to City Felony court, which was the consequence of the federal felony charges that I had picked up in 2016. Felony Treatment Court would give me the opportunity to have my felony reduced to a misdemeanor upon satisfactory completion. Later in March, after graduating Family Treatment Court, my son was returned to me, now fully in my custody. I transferred his school and got him settled but it hit me that I was now a full-time single parent in recovery and needed even more help. The only thing I knew was that I couldn't lose him again, so I was willing to do whatever it took and whatever was asked of me, but I felt lost and needed even more guidance on how to manage my life.

It was around that time that I met a gentleman at the Community Justice Center who said he was a Peer for the Center of Treatment Innovations, or C.O.T.I. for short. He was employed by the Addiction Center of Broome County and worked under a federal grant that was designed to battle the opioid crisis. I had never heard of this organization before but could use all the positive supports I could get. At that time, I was almost a year clean and sober so when we first started

meeting up, we mostly talked about various subjects, ranging from recovery to sports. He listened and shared his experiences and always told me to call him if I ever needed anything. He had a profound impact on my life, and I am grateful to have met him. It was in June of 2018 that I woke up to a text message on my phone from my Peer, asking if I'd like to come work for the Addiction Center of Broome County for the Center of Treatment Innovations team as a Peer in Tompkins County. I had never done anything close to peer work before, having worked mostly in business sales, but I was strong in my recovery and had good relationships with the different people, agencies, and courts that I had been involved with in the past year and a half. I accepted the job and started working in July of 2018.

I quickly developed working relationships with those agencies and courts, the ones I had been a client of previously. This helped me expedite services in support of my clients because I had firsthand working knowledge of how to navigate a lot of the struggles my clients were going through. After about 6 months, upon completing my Certified Peer Recovery Advocate training and feeling more comfortable with my role, I started doing a lot of outreach and networking on top of seeing my clients one-on-one. Being a peer and having clients who found themselves involved with the same agencies and courts I was once a participant in really opened my eyes to how important positive, structured supports are for people in recovery.

As a COTI Peer, I had been working closely with College Initiative Upstate over several years, supporting the clients and helping their staff. So when the grassroots leadership group, Voices That Must Be Heard, was launched as a program of CIU, I was excited and hopped on board because I saw it as a great opportunity to get creative with others in the community and get directly involved in an issue I care about—the newly enacted New York State bail reform. For those who are not familiar, the new bail reform eliminates cash bail and pretrial detention in cases involving most misdemeanors and non-violent felony charges. If this were in effect in New York City last year, 43% of the people detained pretrial on April 1st would have been released. That's 2,150 people who would have been out under the new law. Think about what services are available for those people currently. What options do they have? Because in most cases, the only real option is to sit idle. That doesn't sound very beneficial to someone who might be willing to change their life around. One of the things I learned from being a peer is that

when someone is willing to change their life, there is a very small window. They need to hop on opportunities quickly and take advantage of them.

My project for Voices That Must Be Heard is addressing this gap in services in New York State's new Bail Reform Law. My plan is to bring together a group of social activists in recovery who are now successful contributing members of our community. This group will engage with people with addiction issues who might have gone to jail in the past, but now have an idle period between arrest and sentencing. From experience, I know that this gap time could be better spent if they were directly working with a person who has experienced a similar situation. This Bail Reform project will link people between sentencing and arraignment with different agencies who can provide the services they will require before their arraignment. This might mean helping connect someone up with inpatient/outpatient services, housing, or simply being there to listen and lend an ear. My vision is to eventually create an ongoing program, possibly under the umbrella of a non-profit, to sustain this work for the future, helping men and women (particularly with substance abuse issues) to utilize this "in-between" time to their advantage so they can improve their sentencing outcomes. It is very powerful, when a person must stand before a judge, to be able to say that they have already completed the treatment that the judge suggests.

I'm an addict in recovery. I'm a single parent and a Peer in my community. I've survived my wife's passing, losing my child, and facing homelessness. I've completed 5 different courts and multiple inpatient and outpatient programs. I've had 6 different probation officers and five different lawyers. I'm currently in a 12-step program, have several therapists and multiple trusted advisors in my life who support me. I don't tell you this for recognition, I tell you this because out my own personal struggle with addiction I have realized that the best way to fight this disease is through developing personal connections with others in need. I have learned that no one can beat this alone. Without the support structure I've built and will continue to build, I would have little confidence in my being able to live life on life's terms. If not for the lessons from others who now live life substance free, I would not have celebrated being clean and sober for 3 years last week. Thank you for letting me share my story.

Closing Remarks from the Peer Facilitator

By: Sara Jenab

As you all have heard, we have a lot going for us at this moment: College Initiative Upstate now has a large enough student community to begin identifying emerging leaders; we have easy access to people in power and leadership positions; Ithaca's court system has recognized College Initiative Upstate as an official ATI; the jail population has decreased by 50% over the past two years; and many of our local funders support grassroots initiatives. However, coming to this conference has changed our perspective and helped us appreciate how we are part of a larger movement, but we are not yet connected. Ithaca self-identifies as an extremely unique place, but we now see that the issues we face are largely universal. Now, in our beginning, is the best time to take concrete steps to develop open lines of communication and collaboration across the country. There is no need for us to reinvent the wheel. Rather, we would like to ask all of you for your perspective and advice on how to create a sustainable, successful grassroots campaign. Thank you.