Due to strong community alliances and support from university leadership, WVU's collegiate recovery program has blossomed since it launched in 2016.

Mountaineers Are Always Free

Taking to heart West Virginia's state motto, officials at West Virginia University join forces with town and community leaders to free students and residents from addiction and help them forge a rewarding new life in recovery.

By **PATTI ZIELINSKI**

West Virginia is in the midst of an addiction crisis, with the highest rate of overdose death in the country. But Morgantown, home to West Virginia University (WVU), is experiencing a dramatic shift in how people with substance use disorders reclaim their lives. Through public and private partnerships, the town and campus community is banding together to change the lives of its citizens and students.

In doing so, they are creating a model for the rest of the nation.

CREATING SUPPORTIVE HOUSING

Due to strong community alliances and support from university leadership, WVU's collegiate recovery program (CRP) has blossomed since it launched in 2016. A year after its founding, it opened Serenity Place, a dedicated house that is open six days a week and provides programming and events to support students in recovery. Membership in the CRP has swelled to about 100 students, who enjoy programs geared to maintaining a healthy life — cooking classes, yoga, meditation, support groups, 12-step fellowships, Refuge Recovery — as well as engage in fun activities such as the drum circle "Rhythm of Life" and Sober Jams on Friday nights.

In fall 2019, the CRP will move to the next level with a pilot program creating an intentional living environment near Serenity Place. Eight students will live in the house, surrounded by the CRP community,

Graduation day at Serenity Place

which will provide them with support. "One of the challenges that incoming students face is finding housing through the university that is also supportive of their recovery," says Nathan Harlan, executive director of the Student Wellness Office, which manages the CRP. "The goal is to provide houses with these students in mind."

HEALING IN NATURE

Outdoor activities and healthy lifestyles are at the program's core. Each Sunday morning during the semester, members embark on hikes, bike rides or excursions. The CRP recently kicked it up a notch by partnering with Adventure WV, an organization also managed by the Student Wellness Office that fosters personal growth, leadership development, social responsibility and student success through adventure-based and experiential education programming. "Nature is its own healing force," explains CRP Director Cathy Yura. "It doesn't take long to get to the woods from campus and find a hiking or biking trail or other avenues of exploration."

Merwis Haidar, a student in long-term recovery who has been an employee for the past two years, says such activities help with many challenges faced by students in recovery. "I can empathize with what people face," he says. "On a college campus, socialization typically involves some kind of partying or going to a bar. Coupling a recovery environment with adventuring outdoors is constructive and rewarding."

GETTING INTO THE COMMUNITY

Within the CRP, the Mountaineers for Recovery student organization provides another outlet for social interaction while supporting those in or seeking recovery. Students who would like to serve as allies of those who are in recovery are encouraged to participate as well.

Yura and her team promote the CRP through tabling events, speaking engagements in class, on social media and by getting out into the community. They are seeking to attract both individuals who are in recovery and those who support recovery. "Stigma is one thing that we try to overcome," Yura says. "West Virginia is known for its opiate crisis, and many people have family members or know someone who has been impacted. They come to us to get away from that scene."

PRACTICING MINDFULNESS

Last year, the CRP had its first 21-Day Mindfulness Challenge in which members learned a different way to be mindful — eating, walking, meditating — for 20 minutes each day and had trainings on the weekends. It was so popular that a second installment is planned.

Every morning at 9, you'll find CRP staff and members gathering together before the start of their day. They list three things they are grateful for the day before, what their aim and mantra will be for the day, what they're grateful for today, and one fun activity that day they will do.

The CRP communal garden is another way members can put their mindfulness practice into action, tending to and harvesting fresh produce such as herbs, tomatoes and beans. This year, the school's summer landscape program will be assisting, helping CRP members turn part of the courtyard into a garden.

Student workers, such as Haidar, are essential to the program's success, Yura says. Every student worker attends programs and designs them based on their interests and talents. "This helps them mentally, too," she notes. "One student who is artistic proposed an art therapy program, and our student musicians participate in the Sober Jams on Friday nights. When we allow people to share their craft, it grows the community."

FOCUSING ON THE LONG TERM

Introducing a collegiate recovery community on the WVU campus has created benefits and shifts that probably could not have been predicted, observes Margaret Glenn, professor and coordinator of the Clinical Rehabilitation and Mental Health Counseling program. "Under inspired leadership, the students have created supports for each other in health, home, purpose and community," she says. "It has resulted in collaboration between the collegiate recovery community, our graduate program and our Regents Bachelor of Arts program. These students can address

the residue left from their pre-recovery days in school and engage in the study of human services, addiction and disability studies. They reveal themselves to be strong academically, as well as compassionate and committed to pursuing counseling as a career. So, we have a pathway into our online counseling program designed for the nontraditional student with recovery-friendly faculty."

Glenn says focusing on the long-term efforts in addressing addiction is a shift that needs to be made on college campuses. "My students have started out in a treatment program, engaged in sober living and self-help groups, found the collegiate recovery community, and are now pursuing higher education that has helped them smooth out past academic problems and create a path to bright, resilient careers aligned with their talents and commitment to others," she says. "The gold standard is not just about a type of treatment. It must be about long-term private-public partnerships that allow people in recovery to heal and grow over years."

Community members such as Doug Leech, founder of West Virginia Sober Living and Ascension Recovery Services (see Page 30), and Ascension employee and WVU graduate student Joey Ferguson have been strong private-sector partners in making the CRP's dreams a reality. "Doug helped us promote the concept of the CRP to the administration and has continued to help by providing peer recovery coaches, doing interventions with families, helping people get back into treatment and more," Yura says. "Together, we can provide a broad-based approach to recovery."

ENTERING THE BLUE ZONE

In 2018, WVU and Morgantown city leaders joined forces to bring a community-based wellness initiative to WVU and the city. Called the Blue Zones Project, the initiative is designed to enable residents to live longer, happier lives with lower rates of chronic disease and a higher quality of life. If the initial assessment phase proves successful, WVU will become the first Blue Zones-certified university in the world.

Based on principles developed by Dan Buettner, author of *The Blue Zones* and *The Blue Zones Solution*, the Blue Zones Project provides evidence-based best practices designed to improve health and wellness in the areas where people live, work and play. The premise came from demographic research that pinpointed the places in the world where people lived the longest, happiest and healthiest and sought to discover the commonalities.

Last year, the CRP had its first 21-Day Mindfulness Challenge in which members learned a different way to be mindful, such as walking meditation.

"Unfortunately, West Virginia is not known for its health or substance use assistance. A way to turn the community around is through healthy eating, meditation, exercise, finding your tribe and a way of life," Yura says. "That was our CRP model even before the Blue Zones Project initiative."

EDUCATING THE NEXT GENERATION OF PROFESSIONALS

Nationwide, addiction directly affects more than 21 million Americans annually with countless others indirectly impacted. Despite these large numbers, research indicates that only 11 percent of those needing treatment receive it. The reasons are many: lack of treatment capacity, trained addiction professionals and trained allied professionals.

Outdoor activities, such as hiking at Coopers Rock, and healthy lifestyles are at the program's core.

Momentum

By continuing the work that began in primary treatment, we maintain traction and forward progress, propelling us toward sustained recovery.

Gratitude

With continued personal growth we develop a change in our mindset, allowing us the capacity for gratitude. This gratitude compels us to give more than we take.

Community

It is through healthy connection with others that we recover. With a new sense of community we decrease our dependence on outside sources that have proven to be detrimental in the past.

Our Approach

Momentum Recovery is a transitional living program for young men located in the vibrant coastal city of Wilmington, North Carolina.

We specialize in providing individualized, comprehensive sober living, clinical services, and life skills to young men who have completed a primary treatment program. At Momentum Recovery, we are committed to empowering and providing opportunities to individuals affected by addiction to move toward health, wellness, and a life defined by purpose.

888-815-5502

info@momentumrecovery.com

www.momentumrecovery.com

2301 Delaney Ave • Wilmington, NC 28403

To address these issues, the school's Department of Counseling, Rehabilitation Counseling and Counseling Psychology began offering an undergraduate minor in addiction studies to prepare addiction professionals for employment in substance use disorder treatment and related settings and to prepare students in a variety of fields with basic knowledge in addictions.

"Our primary goal is to develop a foundational set of skills for our students who eventually want to work in this field," says Frankie Tack, the addiction studies minor coordinator. "We wanted WVU to be part of the solution to the opioid epidemic by training addiction professionals. Addiction is a relapsing disease like other diseases, but people do get well. When you see recovery happen in front of your face, there's nothing like it. You get to witness miracles."

Voices of Mountaineers in Recovery

"The WVU collegiate recovery community has provided me with the support and resources necessary to become the kind of person that I want to be. Through healthy social connections, recovery meetings, academic support, wellness activities and endless opportunities to have sober fun, this community has allowed me to thrive as a student in recovery. I have a home at Serenity Place, where I have formed numerous relationships with people who believe in and support me. Today, thanks to this program, I am in a position to give something back to other students in recovery and to contribute something positive to my community." — *Andrew*

"I found the collegiate recovery community in February 2017. It has been a rewarding and eye-opening experience to work for this program since finishing my graduate degree. I have learned professionally and grown personally and spiritually with our students in recovery. Mindfulness has been an effective tool for us to be aware of our cravings, emotions and thoughts. I am very grateful to be a part of this supportive community." — *Phat*

"West Virginia University's collegiate recovery community has become my family. Our facility, Serenity Place, is my home away from home. The opportunities that I have been given to enjoy the collegiate experience with other happy, joyous and free peers is unparalleled. We get to embark on all that this amazing university has to offer, and we get to do it together in safe environments. Surrounded by others who are like-minded, recovery-oriented and ambitious to follow and fulfill our goals and lifelong aspirations, I feel empowered and limitless. I am filled with gratitude and so proud to be able to share this blessed experience and journey through life with my friends in recovery at WVU! Semper liberi montani: Mountaineers are always free!" — *Dustin*