Photo by Melanie Van Leeuwen

Celebrations of Music and Recovery

A music-industry father of a student in recovery forges a harmonious path to promoting collegiate recovery communities

By **PATTI ZIELINSKI**

When Jill and Jeff McClusky's daughter Rachel was researching colleges in 2011, they knew she wanted to go somewhere in Southern California. That was the easy part. What was more elusive was finding a school that would allow Rachel to continue her life in recovery.

The Chicago couple understood on a personal level how difficult maintaining sobriety could be — both had been in recovery for over three decades — and knew that a college campus would present greater challenges than Rachel had faced before.

Rachel had struggled with a substance use disorder throughout her teenage years. When she was a sophomore, her parents made the difficult decision to send her across the country to the Academy at Swift River in Massachusetts to finish high school. Although it was difficult to send their 16-year-old away for two years, the couple says it was the best thing they could have done.

PARENT ADVOCATES

The family, which also includes Rachel's sister, Lauren, who is three years older and was in college at the time, shared a common goal of supporting one another. Jeff and Jill strengthened their support in 12-step programs, including their anchor, Alcoholics Anonymous. They also joined Families Anonymous and a parent group in their community where they used their experience being in recovery and parenting a child in recovery to advise other parents with children grappling with substance use disorders. "While we were in the struggle, we also had enough background of our own to understand how to cope with it," Jeff says. "And we wanted to share that knowledge."

As the McCluskys evaluated college options with Rachel, Jeff found an article in *The Wall Street Journal* about Texas Tech in Lubbock in the early days of the collegiate recovery community (CRC). The article talked about Kitty Harris and the fledgling days of the Association of Recovery in Higher Education (ARHE), which immediately got his attention. We need to find out more about these programs. It could be a good option for Rachel, he thought.

As he and Jill began educating themselves on what collegiate recovery programs had to offer, Rachel was offered a scholarship to Whittier College, outside of Los Angeles. Although the school did not have a collegiate

Jill, Rachel, Lauren and Jeff McClusky

recovery program, Rachel felt that she could make a home there if the college allowed her to live off campus. She knew she could build her sober community outside of a campus setting and wanted to live in the Long Beach area. Typically, scholarship first-year students were required to live in the dorm.

They traveled to Whittier, and Rachel had her own personal meeting with the admissions department. She was determined to ask them to make an exception to the rule to allow her to live off campus. She told them she would not be able to attend otherwise. The school understood and agreed to accommodate Rachel's request. "I became an immediate and supporter and enthusiast for Whittier College when that happened," Jeff says.

Rachel spent her college career living off campus in Long Beach, meeting her needs as an individual in recovery as well as a student. She graduated with honors in May 2017 with a 3.8 GPA. "It was one of the highlights of our life to see Rachel achieve that in a community and collegiate environment that supported her," Jeff says.

This experience spurred the McCluskys into action. They wanted to become "parent advocates" of collegiate recovery programs. They decided to attend ARHE conferences and got to know different faculty and administrators around the country as they became self-proclaimed "resource parents."

At the conferences, Jeff met many professionals from collegiate recovery programs, who were pleasantly surprised to see a parent there. "They told me they needed more active parents like Jill and I," he says. "So we got more involved."

The McCluskys started volunteering where possible. Jill assisted Tom Bennett, who is currently the higher education recovery coordinator at Acadia Healthcare, with setting up different meetings at colleges in the Chicago area with the hopes of starting a CRC at Loyola, DePaul or Northwestern and to help plant those seeds. Jeff pursued a different method by using his background and career in the music industry and developed evenings of music for recovering students at a few different universities.

"Although there were several colleges in Chicago, none had a CRC," Jeff says. "Because Jill was not working at the time, she took on the role of a CRC ambassador, visiting schools to see which would be interested in starting a program." They received a range of responses: Some schools liked the idea and would investigate further, some did not have the resources to start a program and others denied having a need for such a program.

There was clearly a lot of work to be done.

A MUSICAL CONNECTION

In his role as the owner of a music promotion and artist management company, Jeff travels frequently to meet with artists, managers and radio stations around the country. He started using the growing directory of CRCs to pinpoint schools in locations that he was going to visit anyway, asking to meet with CRC directors. Those included Katherine Drotos Cuthbert at Vanderbilt University, Susan Nicholas at Ole Miss, Mark Frillman at University of Nebraska Omaha, Jeri Cabot at the College of Charleston, Ahmed Hosni at The Ohio State University, Ivana Grahovac at the University of Texas at Austin and the team at Augsburg University in Minneapolis, among others. "I was blessed to have the flexibility in my work life to include this in part of my schedule," Jeff says.

And he was about to put it to good use. While returning home on a plane from an ARHE conference, Jill sat next to Drotos Cuthbert, a coordinator for the Center for Student Wellbeing and the administrative facilitator for Vanderbilt University's growing collegiate recovery support program, Vanderbilt Recovery Support. Their engaging conversation made an impact on each woman, and they stayed in touch.

Because Jeff found himself frequently in Nashville, he visited Drotos Cuthbert often and started thinking about how he could use his professional expertise to help the Vanderbilt program. In 2014, they together came up with the idea of a musical event for students and friends of students in recovery: "What if we held a music event to celebrate recovery?"

Drotos Cuthbert readily agreed. "I thought a concert would be a wonderful way to highlight the collegiate recovery program," she says.

With the school's approval, Jeff and Jill sprang into action, working with Drotos Cuthbert to create the Vanderbilt Recovery Support (VRS) Celebration of Music & Recovery. Through his connections, Jeff found performers. Rachel was a featured musician at the inaugural event. "We supplied some of the talent — and also featured at least on two occasions artists and students in recovery — bought pizza and salad and helped with promotion," Jeff says. "I love doing it. It allows me to integrate the most important aspects of my life using the business to assist

Vanderbilt Recovery Support and Jeff McClusky and Associates are pictured with 2019 Celebration of Music and Recovery musicians Gabriella Badmus, a Vanderbilt student; Ava Suppelsa; and The Brook and The Bluff.

Celebration of Music and Recovery performers with Jeff McClusky; Maggie Drummond, a Vanderbilt Recovery Support graduate assistant; and Katherine Drotos Cuthbert

it." The first event focused exclusively on VRS members and their closest friends. Understanding the need to be more inclusive and to further reduce the stigma attached to addiction, the concert has expanded to over 150 attendees.

"We made the evening open to everyone: undergraduates, graduates, faculty, staff and community members who are in recovery or not," says Drotos Cuthbert, who promoted it on the school's student involvement platform, posters and through social media. "It created this beautiful sober space that connected the recovery community with allies in celebration."

Since then, Vanderbilt has hosted four concerts, growing to about 100 people in attendance at the spring 2019 event, and other schools have done similar types of events. "We worked with College of Charleston and Ohio State this past year, and on a separate occasion, there was a performance at an Ole Miss event that Susan Nicholas invited Rachel to play for," Jeff says. Ohio State hired a band to play at a sober tailgate before a football game. In each case, admission was free, and Jeff paid for the bands, food and expenses.

Talent at the Celebration of Music and Recovery events range from national and regional acts — such as Maybe April, Shel, Cage the Elephant side project Dan Luke & the Raid, Grace Guggenheim and country singer-songwriter Ava Suppelsa — to students in recovery, such as Rachel. "Many of the national and local acts have connections to recovery and have been very supportive. It's a truly inclusive experience that celebrates recovery in a positive way," says Jeff, who is targeting about 10 events for the 2019–2020 school year.

Storytelling and speeches are woven throughout the event, which Vanderbilt opens to area colleges, including Belmont University. "Because we have the only collegiate recovery program in the state, we open our meetings to any college student who wants to attend," Drotos Cuthbert says. "It was only natural to invite other colleges to the concerts."

In addition to Rachel, a Vanderbilt student ally, Gabriella Badmus, and a Belmont student in recovery have opened the shows. "Having events where the focus is on celebrating recovery helps to shift the focus to the positive aspects of sobriety," says Drotos Cuthbert. "With musical events, that is not always the case as alcohol and substances are part of the mix. Here, we say you don't need substances to have fun at a concert."

One of the more poignant moments for Drotos Cuthbert occurred at last year's concert. "We have people tell their story or discuss recovery in between acts. That year, a local therapist, Megan Moir, talked about how sobriety sucks and recovery rocks, which really resonated with the students," she says. "The words are true: With sobriety, you're trying to get through every day sober, but the recovery aspect is when you start feeling that sense of belonging and are not so alone. This is the whole idea of being part of a community. This is why we do this celebration. You can feel alone on campus with the outside culture doing things that you cannot participate in. Here, people feel like they are a part of the action."

She says that parents like Jeff and Jill are important in helping students feel supported. "Every person I speak to at collegiate recovery programs say they can use additional support. That's where parents can get involved," she says. "It's also important to get students involved: Have them help with the food, logistics and promotion of events. They should feel a part of this community and not that it is just run by the administration."

And to everyone in collegiate recovery, parents, administrators and students alike, she says: Be open. "This incredible journey all started when I sat next to Jill on a plane after an ARHE conference and had a wonderful conversation," she says. "Engage with those around you. You never know where it might lead."

For more information on the Celebration of Music and Recovery events, email Jeff McClusky at jmcclusky@jmapromo.com or Katherine Drotos Cuthbert at recovery@vanderbilt.edu.