

Chili woman's idea would connect addiction to a solution

[Patti Singer](#), Rochester Democrat and Chronicle Published 7:00 a.m. ET Oct. 8, 2018 | Updated 9:19 a.m. ET Oct. 8, 2018

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Carlee Hulsizer has an idea that could change the way people search online for help with their addiction Rochester Democrat and Chronicle



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(Photo: Patti Singer Rochester Democrat and Chronicle)

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Carlee Hulsizer went to an opioid summit to tell her story of teenage addiction and ended up pitching an idea that could change how people search online for recovery help.

The 22-year-old Chili woman proposed incorporating real-time peer support into search results. She recruited others who supported the idea, and Team Recover-We took second place among 12 teams at the Empire State Opioid Epidemic Innovation Challenge, Sept. 28-30 at Columbia University in New York City.

"Second place was awesome," she said. "I have to give credit to the team."

The group refined her idea of connecting people with each other, and not just to the resources.

"What we've noticed in the recovery realm is that the peer to peer model works really well," said Hulsizer, who works for Youth Voices Matter, which is part of [Friends of Recovery New York](#). "It helps to talk to somebody. This would be as soon as you have a question or think your child might be using or as soon as you want help, you are immediately connected with somebody."

Team Recover-We won \$1,500. The group, which is made up of people from Yale and Harvard universities as well as a resident of Washington, D.C., will meet via video chat over the next several weeks to prepare for a return to Columbia on Jan. 31 to compete against three other teams for \$10,000 and six months support to further develop the concept.

"Nothing is set in stone," Hulsizer said. "Apparently it's a really good idea that hasn't gone anywhere yet."

Addicted as a 'tween

Hulsizer was invited by the [Consortium for Affordable Medical Technologies](#) (CAMTech), part of Massachusetts General Hospital, one of the partners in the event. Her job is funded by the [New York Office of Alcohol and Substance Abuse Services](#), they recommended her as a speaker. She was one of four people sharing their stories of addiction on panels that included medical professionals, law enforcement and treatment providers.

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Hulsizer said both her parents have substance use disorder, and that she started using substances when she was 11 or 12.

“High school was tough because I was bullied and there were problems at home,” she said. “Alcohol and drugs were my escape. They got me outside of myself. I can’t remember exactly what it was like getting high or getting drunk for the first time, but I remember it took me outside of me and that’s what I wanted, an escape from the pain. Ever since I felt that I chased it.”

Hulsizer said she became sober her senior year at Spencerport High School.

Hulsizer said she wasn’t taking care of herself and she felt lost and hopeless. “I felt like I had no purpose in life, that this was going to my life forever, it was just going to be using, by myself. ... Having fun and being with friends that was in the beginning. Then I started using outside of the weekends and outside of parties and I couldn’t stop. It wasn’t fun anymore. I lost myself and really did want to die. I feel very lucky to be alive.”

Shopping her idea

Hulsizer then heard an attorney from Google talk about how internet searches can turn up so much information that leads to confusion rather than direction.

“I thought, ‘Huh,’” she said.

The conference was about more than rehashing the problem of opioids — it also was about finding local and national solutions. Idea pitches were scheduled for Saturday, but Hulsizer was thinking of taking advantage of the rest of the weekend in the city with her mother, Carol.

“To be honest, I wanted to stay for the whole thing, but shopping sounded really nice. We were in New York City.”

Nicholas Diamond of CAMTech said the conference included a range of people touched by and coping with the epidemic and it was set up so that everyone in attendance could play the role of innovator.

“The stereotype of solution sprints or hackathons is a bunch of tech engineering people in sweatpants with coffee over 48 hours,” he said. “We tried to bring in people in public health, clinical medicine, engineering, design, business, community organizing, so there’s really diverse people in the room. Carlee and her mom were one of those as well.”



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Photos of Carlee Hulsizer at various ages as she poses with her mother, Carol Michelle Hulsizer. Carlee, 22, has been sober since she was 18. (Photo: Patti Singer Rochester Democrat and Chronicle)

Carol Hulsizer founded and directs the nonprofit [Mission Recovery and Hope](#). She urged her daughter to stay and share her idea, and then joined her team.

"I think it's genius," Carol Hulsizer said. "The best people to come up with solutions are people living it. Her voice needed to be heard."



Carlee Hulsizer poses with the cardboard version of the check her team won for second place in the Empire State Opioid Epidemic Innovation Challenge, Sept. 28-30 at Columbia University. (Photo: Patti Singer Rochester Democrat and Chronicle)

From keywords to key people

Hulsizer's idea is that when you type key words related to addiction or rehab, a box pops up asking if you want help. You could click an option to talk with somebody in recovery, to talk with a family member of someone in recovery, or continue on your own. If you clicked on either of the first two questions, you'd then get a place to type in your ZIP code and be connected with somebody in your area. This would happen in any search engine.

The judges wanted details about staffing the chat function. The team has until January to figure that out and address other questions that crop up in the meantime.

“We need to get all our ducks in a row and just keep doing research and keep figuring this thing out,” she said. “We’re really looking at January with our eyes on the prize.”

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