



# MENTAL HEALTH ASSOCIATION

Updates and Information from the Atlantic County Office

BIPOC Mental Health Awareness Month (Black, Indigenous, People of Color)

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*Special guest writer from the BIPOC community*

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## Common Family Thread

### Forging frayed pieces into a fortified steel rod

BY BETH WADE  
Public Relations Specialist

Among the faces who look upon Kristen Reid-Ortiz with admiration and pride for her recovery from substance use, one person is missing, her mother. She didn't live long enough to congratulate her -- she passed away from alcohol abuse about 15 years ago.

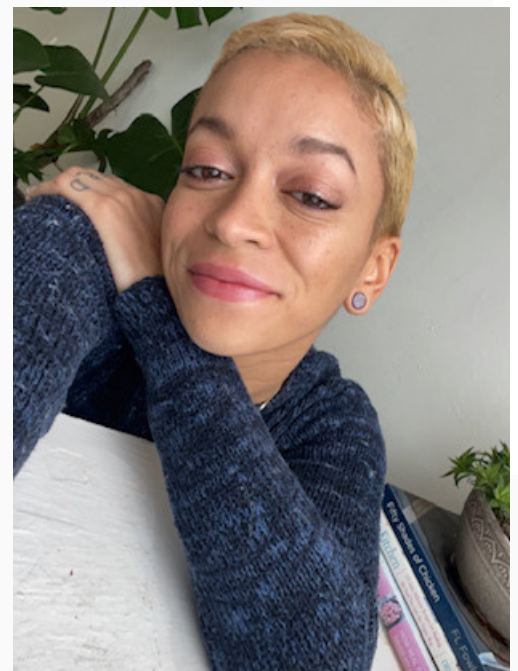
Kristen and her mother didn't live under the same roof for long, but their paths turned out to be painfully parallel.

Though that is a sad truth, Kristen is the first to break the pattern and spark hope. That accomplishment and her story are inspiring.

Looking at the women across multiple generations on her mother's Puerto Rican side, she sees the thread, the illness called anxiety.

"Some had financial hardships, some were single parents raising children. Others had it easier, but I would say they all have a degree of anxiety," she said.

To cope, Kristen says her mother used alcohol. Because of her mother's illness, Kristen's extended family raised her in their home, just outside Atlantic City.



Kristen Reid-Ortiz worked against her maternal family history of anxiety and substance use to reach personal and professional success.

Her mother lived across the county, though, and as far as anyone in the high school was concerned, Kristen lived there, too. Each weekday, a family member faithfully drove her to a school 30 minutes away. That's the kind of love she grew up knowing.

She also was raised with a lot of family on her father's side – 8 aunts and uncles to be exact. Her father is Black. Many *continued on page 2*



Treasured family photos of Kristen and her late mother, Elizabeth Acevedo. Kristen says her mother and many women in her Puerto Rican family struggle with anxiety. One of the ways her mother coped was by drinking. From age 15 to her late 20s, Kristen struggled with the same issues.



family functions, whether showers, Christmases, or birthdays are commonly celebrated with social drinking, she said.

What she saw and how she grew up wasn't what started her addiction and downward trajectory, though. It was anxiety. And she very clearly remembers the moment she became aware.

One particular day during her sophomore year a teacher's expectation should have been easy to meet – stand up and talk about yourself using words that begin with the letters of your name. Kristen has always been a confident student, often the first to raise her hand, but she couldn't bring herself to do it for reasons she could not explain.

The discomfort, hesitation, and racing heartbeat didn't make sense to her.

And, so this bright student went home that day and searched online for her symptoms, which pointed to panic attack. Also, in that search – medications. One of the names matched a medication that was in her grandmother's medicine cabinet.

“At first I would take one, just to get through something at school,” she explains.

And, at first, that “worked.”

She continued to succeed academically as well as participate in track.

The leap to trying and using other pills came from the common knowledge at high school about the kids who sold and used them. And, over time, she started to take them recreationally. Occasionally, she drank.

This combination continued and ramped up for the next 10 years. During that decade, she married a young military man at age 19. She became a widow before her second anniversary following his discharge and tragic death during a drug deal gone bad.

Remarkably Kristen found the strength, focus and ambition to attend college where she earned good grades. She fit in among the partying crowd and enjoyed Greek life in a sorority.

She succeeded at school despite her habits, though they did cost her socially. At times, her behavior was so atrocious that her friends sent her home early. She'd arrive at a party high while others were just starting, which meant she wouldn't follow the rules of drinking games or feel so sick she'd have to leave early to avoid embarrassment.

By this time, she's learned to use the pills in a way that didn't interfere with homework and, for the most part, her job.

“I knew if I wanted to keep doing this, I needed to make money. I knew not to do too much of it to get in the way of work,” she explained.

She held a job in Atlantic City at a bar and made great tips. Kristen is exceptionally pretty, just like her mother, and that, combined with her winning personality helped her on the job.

During her senior year, she said partying became less fun because she felt ill, experienced bad hangovers, and suffered withdrawal.

*Anxiety is a common mental health condition in the Latine Community, according to the National Library of Medicine. Some research suggests anxiety is more prevalent in people of Puerto Rican background.*

Following graduation, she landed a great job in social work, but needed shots to start her day and avoid feeling sick. She said she didn't think clearly anymore and shopped excessively while drinking. That led to financial problems. One day she left her house for work to find her car missing. Though she believed it was stolen, it was repossessed.

“I am thinking I am turning into my mother and that was horrifying to me,” she remembers. “I saw my mom die from her alcohol addiction. If I don't taper correctly, I could have a seizure that stops my heart.”

Her father stepped in to help, but his approach included religion, which was uncomfortable for her. She used meetings and turned to both to a boyfriend and even the National Guard for support and structure, but none of these worked. She occasionally

*Continued on p. 3*



meetings.

What finally pushed her into recovery was an emotional break up.

“I went on a two-day bender at my grandparents,” she remembers. “I didn’t leave my room for two days. I peed on plants. I was so sick.”

A timely call from a peer made the difference -- Kristen agreed to treatment.

Today, she has the distinguished designation in her family as the first person to become sober using the traditional health system. She knows of family members who made the choice to moderate on their own instead of abstaining.

She’s now a sort of “go-to” person for advice. Several people have been connected to help because of her. Kristen's family members know about her decision and support her.

“I don’t miss out on family functions,” she says. “When shots are poured, I take one with cranberry juice or water.”

She also enjoys attending organized sober events. Since she stopped drinking and taking pills, the symptoms of her rheumatoid arthritis have improved. She’s returned to a healthier weight and feeling well again, including managing her mental health, the anxiety that started it all.

Kristen finished her graduate degree after becoming sober. That’s been nearly 3 years now.

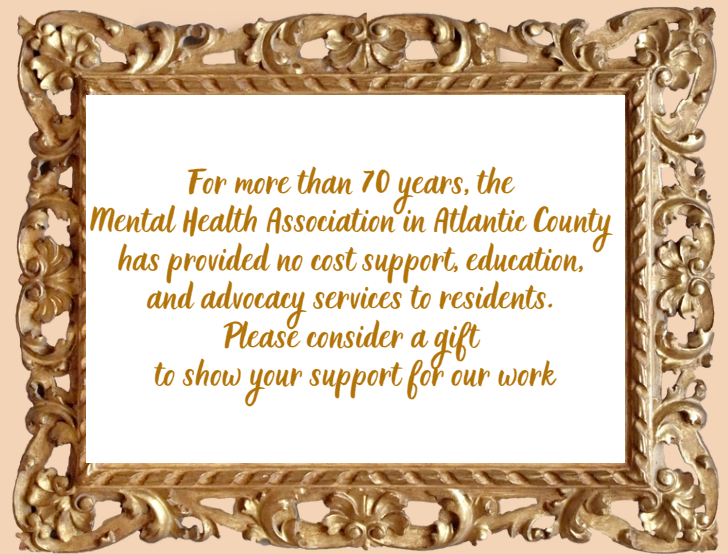
Kristen reflected on her accomplishment – and it’s clear she’s humble and not showy. A bit of her hesitates despite how monumental and commendable her dedication has been, but she does offer this.

“I’m not sure exactly what my mother would say seeing me choose sobriety, but I know she would be proud.”

*Kristen has been an intern at MHA Atlantic since September 2022. She currently facilitates a United By Wellness online group called An Hour in Nature.*

*In addition to her work with MHA Atlantic, she is the sole Social Worker at The Atlantic City Free Public Library.*

*She's earned an Associate Degree in Human Services and a Bachelors Degree in Social Work. Kristen is currently pursuing her Master's Degree in Social Work.*



***Including a gift to the Mental Health Association in Atlantic County in your will or trust allows you to create a legacy which provides families like you with the education, support, empathy and options. The process takes 20 minutes or less.***

## HOW YOU BENEFIT FROM PLANNED GIVING

### Leave a Legacy

**Making a bequest in your will is a powerful way to leave a lasting impact. Another way to leave a large gift is through establishing your legacy by making a bequest, showing your support for years to come.**

### Tax Break

**Did you know that bequests can reduce federal estate taxes for heirs? And these deductions are not limited to cash — they can include assets like real estate, IRAs, and stock as well.**

### Decide How Your Gift is Used

**When you leave a bequest in your will to the Mental Health Association in Atlantic County, you can allocate a program where you would like to make an impact.**



# A heated discussion in the kitchen leads to a generous serving of understanding

BY Bianca A., staff member  
SPECIAL GUEST WRITER

*My sister and I grew up in a home with my mother, who is Black, and my father, who is White. Our mother raised us to have deeply religious beliefs -- in fact, she relied very heavily on herself and her faith for inner strength and resilience.*

*Growing up, my mother always encouraged me to turn to God to be strong whenever I was having problems, in particular my struggles with mental health. Over time, I drifted away from religion and felt connected more with what I'd call "neutral spirituality." In retrospect, I believe my mother's views on mental health and seeking mental health care adversely affected my well-being and personal growth -- not intentionally or with malice, but it happened.*

*Conversations about mental health that occurred around myself and one of my sisters were dismissed. And so, I surprised myself one day when I spoke about a friend. Through that interaction with my mother, I gained new insight that changed the way I saw her.*

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"I'm going with Lucy to a doctor's appointment tomorrow," I told my mom one day while we cooked together in the kitchen.

Lucy has been my best friend for 13 years and has been a part of my inner circle for most of my life.

My mother turned to me, confused, and asked, "What's the appointment for?"

"Oh, she just wants to get referred to a specialist so she can get evaluated for autism," I said.

My mother responded with some combination of confusion, disbelief, and denial.

"Autism?" she questions. "No, she's fine. There's nothing wrong with her. Why is she doing that?"

I immediately felt the familiar feeling of regret for bringing up the subject.

In the next moment, I quickly defended Lucy's choice. I explained to my mom that Lucy has gone through a lot in her life, which is met with this response.

"Like what?"

I took my time to gather my thoughts to best respond to a question that was personal and about my closest friend, so I started with one answer that doesn't feel inappropriate to share.

"Her mom has been tough on her about getting a job," I said. "She doesn't understand what Lucy's going through."

"Listen, I know what she's going through," she said assertively. "It's just a lot of pressure."

This time, my response was quicker than the last.

"No, you don't understand what she's going through. Clearly, it's a lot more than that if she's seeking medical help."

My mom shot back, "I've seen her, and I know that there is nothing wrong with her."

At this point, I became upset -- and I felt angry tears well up in my eyes when her words landed. I blurt out, "You've only talked to her how many times in the past few years? Once? Twice? How can you know from two conversations with her? You don't know if

anything is wrong with me, do you?"

"I know there isn't anything wrong with my daughters," she told me firmly.

That was the proverbial punch in the gut.

Although the times I confided in her about my mental health were very few, this conversation was a painful reminder of how often my feelings were dismissed.

I wasn't the only one. My sister, who experienced multiple traumas, was also dismissed throughout her life. She reached a point where the need for mental health intervention was necessary. Finally, as an adult she sought help.

For a few moments, I stood there in the kitchen in disbelief. Eventually, I responded. I told her that it's impossible to know what's going on in other people's heads, including Lucy's.

"You can't just assume that everyone is fine just because they look fine," I said.

In that instant, she relented. It seemed like she wanted our conversation to be over (I did, too). With a few words that felt a lot like agreement for the sake of satisfying me, my mom then paused.

The kitchen fell silent until she spoke again.

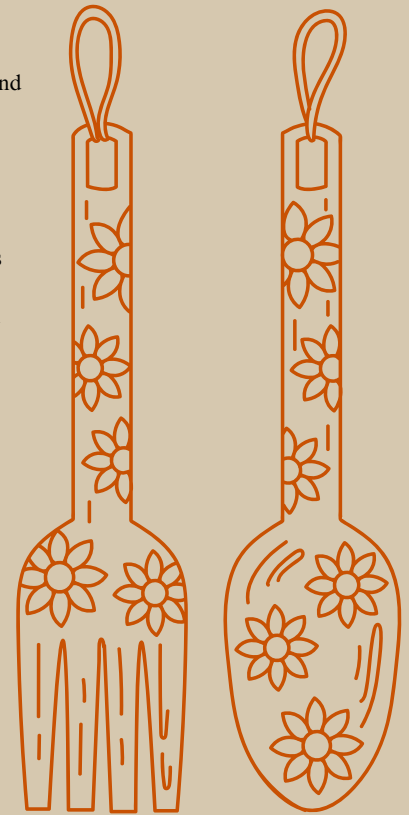
Unexpectedly, my mother revealed her experiences when she was younger involving her own mental health. I listened to her, and I felt empathetic about what she had gone through. She told me she was strong enough to deal with her struggles by herself.

Despite the fact I've heard this speech from her many times before, this time felt different. I had a revelation. This was how she grew up. This is what she heard and learned from her family and her community.

In that moment, I realized, without a doubt, that she had once stood in the spot my sister and I are currently standing in. My heart also broke because then I realized that, growing up and, until now, her mental health wasn't likely discussed -- or worse -- it was dismissed.

She must have learned that seeking help for mental health outside herself or her faith wasn't an option. My mom was taught by example from generations before her. She was conditioned to her beliefs.

And none of that, absolutely none, is her fault.

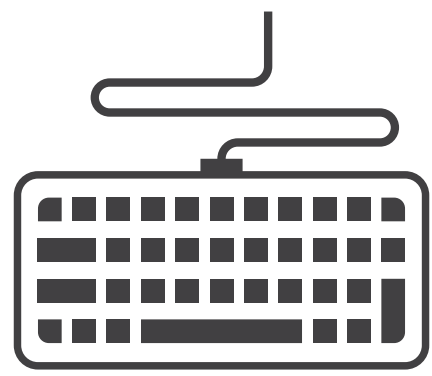


**BIPOC  
Mental Health Awareness Month**



# NEWS

## briefs



## 911 Dispatchers Training

MHA Atlantic staff coordinated a Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) training for Dispatchers. This one-day training was attended by 38 First Responders, all of whom are 911 Operators.

The Thursday, June 13 training was held at Stockton University and included dispatchers from the towns of Galloway, Ventnor, Margate, Brigantine, Hamilton Township Pleasantville and Atlantic City.

"Dispatchers are the first to answer a call and they need to be able to identify a mental health crisis to ensure a CIT officer is dispatched to the scene," said Vicki Phillips, Co Chair CIT Atlantic.

Another training will be offered in August 23rd. For information, contact [edobleman@legacytreatment.org](mailto:edobleman@legacytreatment.org)



CIT Director Ed Dobleman demonstrates the importance of accurately communicating instructions. He followed their step by step instructions on making a PB&J sandwich while the dispatcher, whose back was turned, could not see the critical steps being missed.

## CIT Trainer Honored

An important community partner in the Atlantic County effort to train and educate local law enforcement and other professionals in the areas of mental health and substance use disorders was honored recently for his contributions and wished well as he begins a new chapter of his professional career outside South Jersey.

Ken Litwak, Director of Gambling, Education, and Community Relations for John Brooks Recovery Center, has been an integral part of local Crisis Intervention Training (CIT). In addition to serving on the Steering Committee, Ken has taught several blocks of curriculum. He began teaching the substance use instruction block and within a few months added a section on gambling addiction. This year he developed a block of instruction on trauma and its effects on individuals. In addition to teaching, he often participated in role play scenarios during training. *Continued on page 6*



Ken Litwak

## Celebrating the contributions of retiring, longtime PEWS Director

An influential, trailblazing staff member at the Union County office who devoted 38 years to MHANJ and statewide programming, Laverne Williams has retired. MHANJ honored her at a June 23 dinner held at Appian Way, Orange.



Laverne Williams retired, but her long legacy lives on.

During much of her career, Laverne crisscrossed the state to church halls, libraries, school auditoriums, and provided countless presentations and workshops for a range of audiences about

mental health with a goal in mind -- to bridge the gap between theology and the behavioral sciences.

A certified social worker and Deacon at her church, "Ms. Laverne," as she is affectionately known, has been a great fit as the Director of the MHANJ's Promoting Emotional Wellness and Spirituality Program, known as PEWS.

MHANJ initially launched PEWS as an outreach to communities of color, but the program expanded to the faith-based community at large. Today's PEWS provides spiritual leaders and health ministries with direction, education and support so that they can respond to congregants with mental health challenges.

Since PEWS was established, she's spoken to more than 60,000 individuals across New Jersey and has provided programming in every county via her educational seminars, presentations, conferences, and individually tailored workshops.

During COVID, Laverne developed Thankful Tuesdays, which was an online meeting that encouraged and fostered a connection to spiritual wellness. A variety of invited guest speakers inspired and guided participants.

She is a certified instructor of Mental Health First Aid and Wellness and Recovery Action Plan, or WRAP, facilitator. She also is a Certified Grief Recovery Specialist.

"She has been a true inspiration and her legacy will continue to make a difference in the years to come," said Carolyn Beauchamp, MHANJ's President and CEO.

A respected coworker, Clarissa Wheat, is stepping into the role as PEWS Director. For more information, [cwheat@mhanj.org](mailto:cwheat@mhanj.org).

Because of Ken's military background – he served in the Navy – he participated in the launch of the two-day training of CIT training of law enforcement who also had military experience. This was part of the Veterans Response Team (VRT) initiative which was achieved in partnership with CIT Delaware.

"Very few individuals can come on board and quickly become such an effective instructor in several areas and be so compelling with our law enforcement partners," said Sgt. Brian Shapiro of the Atlantic City Police Department and member of the CIT Steering Committee. "Ken did this with great ease. "

At a recent CIT workgroup, Sgt Shapiro, and Lead Instructor Carolyn Quinn, MHA Director of Community Engagement and Wellness Programs, honored Ken for his work and presented him with gifts to remember his friends and accomplishments.

Ken has accepted a new position as Executive Director of Algamus Recovery Services in Phoenix, Arizona. Algamus is one of the only residential gambling treatment programs in the United States that has been treating gambling and the unique issues related to this addiction.

"We will certainly miss all the contributions that Ken made to our CIT Atlantic Program, " said Vicki Phillips Co-Chair CIT. "Our county's loss will be Arizona's gain."

Carolyn said his dedication to the program is remarkable, noting he's worked on site for each weeklong training.



Pictured at left: Sgt. Brian Shapiro, Ken Litwak, and Carolyn Quinn.

*Thank you, Ken, for supporting our guiding principal of working for better outcomes. Atlantic County is indebted to you for your positive impact and influence.*

## A Successful June Fundraiser

As part of the Mental Health Association in New Jersey's annual walk and fundraiser in the northern part of the state, the staff in the Atlantic office set a goal to raise \$1K this year -- and that number was not only met but exceeded.

"Thanks to all those who supported us," said Vicki Phillips, Executive Director. "Most of the services we offer services are at no cost. Fundraising like this helps us continue our efforts."

This year's MHANJ Walk for Wellness & Recovery was held at Nomahegan Park in Cranford, Union County, on Saturday, June 10. Along with a fun boardwalk theme that featured games and prizes, the event included information and resources.



## MHA - Acute Care Family Program

Support and assistance for families with a loved one in crisis and in need of linkage to treatment and other services.

**7 days per week**  
**Available 8 am to 8 pm**  
**609-517-8614**

Our team engages families who are often navigating the mental health system for the first time. Staff educate families about mental illness and offer resources and referrals that can help their loved one



**When your family needs help**  
**we are a phone call away**  
**609-517-8614**



# Wellness Bulletin Board



## At the Library

YOGA (all levels) at EHT Branch. Registration required

ADULT BOARD GAMES at Brigantine, EHT, Pleasantville, Ventnor. Call for details



FLOWER POWER at Brigantine Branch July 19@ 10 am  
Master gardener presents on how plants benefit local wildlife and the environment

View the complete calendar at [atlanticlibrary.org](http://atlanticlibrary.org)  
Click on "Calendar of Events"



## Free Summer Concerts



SOMERS POINT Fridays 7-10 pm William Morrow Beach

VENTNOR Saturdays at 6 pm Newport Beach  
\*Wednesday nights 6 pm at Ski Beach

ABSECON Sundays at 7 pm - Heritage Park

EHT Fridays 7-9pm at Tony Canale Park

ATLANTIC CITY Kennedy Plaza  
Wednesdays at 7 pm  
Thursdays at 7 pm JAZZ

BRIGANTINE Community Center  
Wednesdays at 7 pm

## Farm Markets

Ventnor  
St. James Church, Newport & Atlantic  
Fridays 8:30 to noon

Brigantine  
North School Parking Lot on Sheridan  
Saturdays 8 am to noon

Somers Point  
Somers Mansion, 1000 Shore Road  
Saturdays 8 am to noon

Galloway  
Smithville Village Greene  
Thursdays 4 pm to 7 pm



## ART & exhibitions



Noyes Galleries at Kramer Hall, Hammonton  
Fred Staloff: Origins of a Modernist  
(similar style to Cezanne)

Noyes Arts Garage of Stockton University, AC

- The Souls Shot Portrait Project
- "Children of Glass"
- "AC Grit" Group Exhibition

## Qigong classes - gentle, mindful movements

Adult virtual class Fridays 11 am  
register at [acfpl.org](http://acfpl.org)

Summer class at O'Donnell Park, AC  
Wednesdays 5 pm

Senior Class age 60+

Absecon Senior Center Tuesdays 10 am



## Are there missing pieces in 12-step for people of color? For some, yes.

BY BETH WADE

Public Relations Specialist

*BIPOC Mental Health Month highlights the unique mental health challenges and needs of historically disenfranchised or oppressed racial and ethnic groups in the United States.*

*This article is not intended to criticize AA 12-step recovery, but to raise awareness about the experience of a person of color. The public relations policy of AA encourages membership by attraction and example-setting rather than promotion. It frowns upon sharing in the press, radio, or film. For that reason, the source in this article is unnamed.*

When she walked into her first 12-step program, she expected to see a room full of fathers – middle-aged Dads – and she was partially right. She was also surprised to see so many young women her age, “twenty something.”

But the most noticeable observation about the group were the faces of those who was not there -- people from her own community, people of color.

To her benefit, she is comfortable moving about in predominantly white spaces because she’d attended schools where the majority of the population was White. In college her social group was White and mixed crowds.

Though she felt like a chameleon in White spaces – fitting in rather seamlessly – she said she was uncomfortable at times sharing with her family that she participated in a system that historically betrayed and abused people of color.

Over time, she says, she was able to share her experience and was received without contempt, judgement, or criticism from her family.

Part of 12-step program is to “wear” the sobriety in a way that sets an example for others. You live it, people see it, and that attracts others who are suffering, she explained.

“Today I’m proud that people in her family ask me about it. Mostly they are helping someone they know. I feel like I’ve been able to reach others and that means a lot.”

One male family member confided in her that he tried the 12-step program but it didn’t work for him. In his case, the missing piece was one necessary, integral part of the program related to peers with lived experience. In the program it’s known as “unity,” which she explains as having connections.

“If you don’t see anyone who looks like you, understands you, or understands your story, that unity piece isn’t there,” she explained, adding that the success of the AA model is members seeking help from the experience, strength, and hope of other members.

For example, issues related to discrimination, incarceration, generational trauma that may be tied to substance use would be understood among people of color, not Whites.

She believes a stronger representation of people of color will occur and grow at the at 12-step meetings over time. As with other social change, historically people of color and women are always behind the curve, she notes, but these groups eventually catch up. Based on the young faces of female peers she saw in meetings; the numbers indicate she’s right.

She noted that a lack of resources, lack of insurance, lack of knowledge about options continues to be barriers for people of color.

Some of the prevailing beliefs about resilience and self-reliance also are preventing people of color from seeking help, especially in the Black community, she says.

“We’re told we’ve overcome so much. [In the Black community] People think Black people should be tough. We seem weak if you reach out outside the family,” she said.

Despite the challenges in bringing people of color to meetings, some high profile celebrities and famous athletes have shared their successes through AA, including actress Jada Pinkett-Smith and boxer/mental health advocate Mia St. John. Men who have credited the method with their sobriety have included Samuel L. Jackson, Bobby Brown, and Darryl Strawberry.

The founders of the 12-step program are largely White, Christian middle class men. Reportedly, they still comprise the largest demographic in AA.

“

If you don't see anyone who looks like you, understands you, or understands your story, that unity piece is not there.

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