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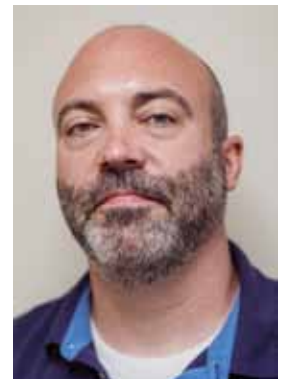
NEW RIVER VALLEY COMMUNITY SERVICES

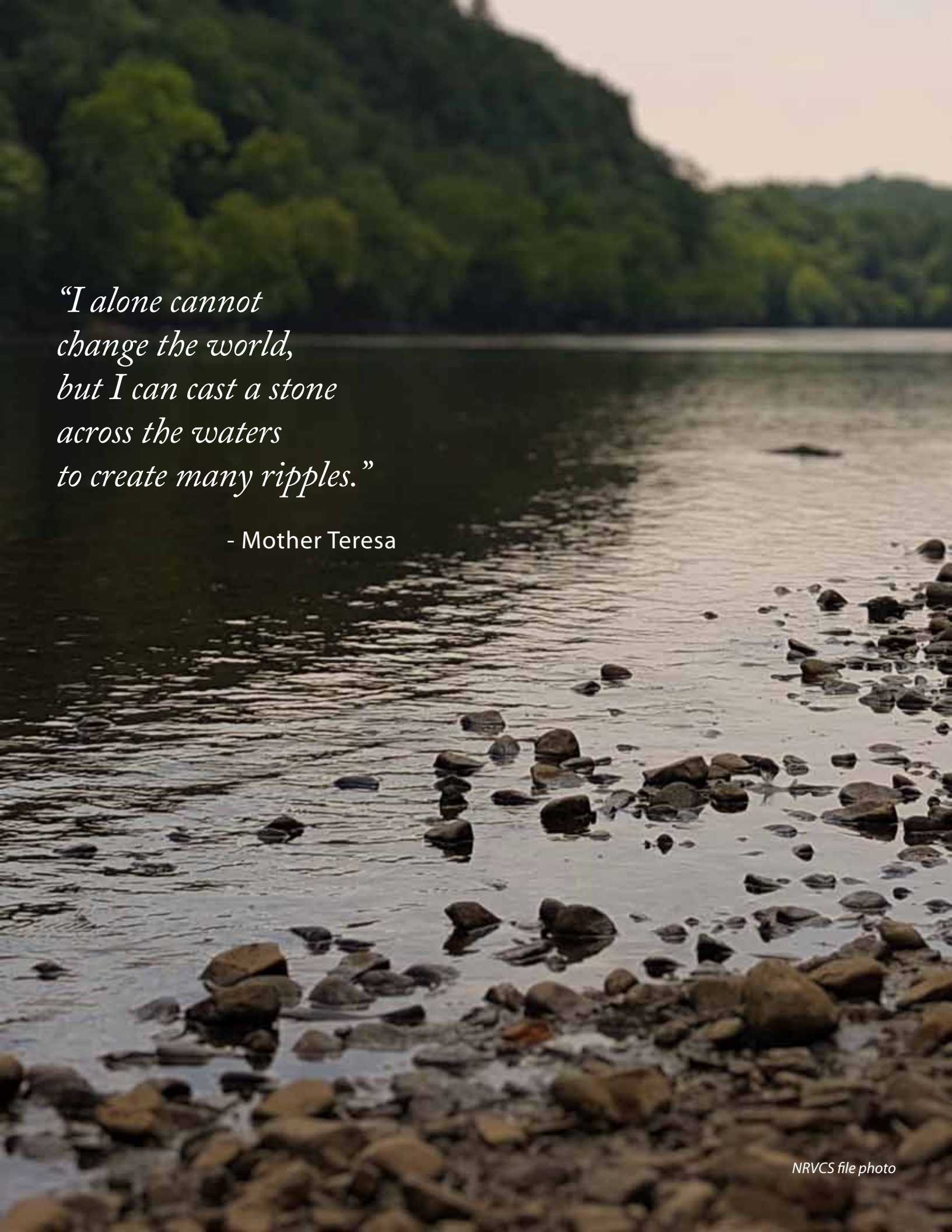
SUMMER 2022



agents of **HOPE**

Twelve of our community partners offer their perspective on current challenges facing the New River Valley - and their shared belief in a brighter tomorrow





*“I alone cannot
change the world,
but I can cast a stone
across the waters
to create many ripples.”*

- Mother Teresa

United by hope

It doesn't take much to get discouraged these days.

War and senseless acts of violence are mainstays in the news. Many of us are faced with economic concerns and the ability to find common ground on political and social issues seemingly continues to elude us as a nation. Not to mention the fact that we find ourselves still coming to grips with the aftermath of a global pandemic - including a rising number of people who are struggling with mental health and/or substance use disorders.

This conglomeration of issues paints a very bleak picture and can feel rather overwhelming. While it is necessary to recognize the gravity of this particular time in our history, we must believe in a better tomorrow. We must have hope.

Hope is essential to our functioning as human beings. We hope our children will grow up healthy and happy. We hope our friends and our community will support us in our time of need. Hope challenges us. It moves us. Hope is wellness. Wellness is hope.

Admittedly, there are times and circumstances when hope seems difficult to attain - if not lost - for some. That is why the work of public agencies, providers and non-profit agencies is so incredibly important. On their own, each of these entities and institutions provide invaluable support to our communities but as is often the case, these efforts rely heavily on collaboration with partner agencies to solve problems and serve those in need.

This newsletter features insight and observation from just some of the many caring and dedicated professionals who constantly give of themselves to make the New River Valley a better place to live. They are truly agents of hope.



Joe Young
NRVCS Board Chair



James Pritchett
NRVCS Executive Director



New River Valley Community Services is the public provider of behavioral health services for the counties of Floyd, Giles, Montgomery and Pulaski, as well as the City of Radford.

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4X:
A quarterly report from NRVCS

CONTRIBUTORS

Mike Wade
Writing/Layout & Design

Ross Wilsie
Photography
(unless otherwise noted)

ON THE COVER

(Clockwise from top left) Andi Golusky, Judge Brad Finch, Dr. Pat Huber, Jon Dance, Rob Graham, Gabby Castillo, Dr. Joshua Bradley, Megan Dean, Rev. Morris Fleischer, Chief Mark Sisson, Dr. Pam Ray, Patrick Ford

Partner Perspectives | The Honorable Bradley W. Finch

PULASKI - The Honorable Bradley W. Finch serves as a circuit court judge for Virginia's 27th Judicial Circuit (which includes the five localities served by NRVCS). As part of this role, he presides over the Pulaski County Adult Drug Court Treatment Program.

Can you specifically talk about how you, or your organization, collaborates with NRVCS?

Primarily through the Drug Court program - which is an excellent program that has helped many people. It's rigorous and challenging, but for those participants who are able to give it one-hundred percent of their commitment, it can be a life-changing experience."

From your perspective, what are the biggest challenges facing the community you serve, or the New River Valley in general?

From the court perspective, substance abuse has been - and continues to be - a very serious issue for our communities. It's something that we have to stay focused on and remain diligent in our efforts to address it. Drug Court is certainly a great example of what we can do to improve things.

What is your take on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the local community over the past 2+ years?

What we saw seemed to exacerbate substance use problems among our participants, as well as the broader population, and it made matters much worse for individuals living with substance use disorders. I think there were a number of contributing factors - the isolation, challenges caused by not having access to treatment and in-person supports...It's much harder for some people to work on their recovery online."

What are the solutions/resources needed to address the challenges you've mentioned?

Well, it requires a multi-pronged approach - Drug Court, community education, enforcement, innovative treatment options - it's a very difficult problem and it requires not only commitment but also some degree of creativity.

Drug Court, for example, takes a very individualized approach with every participant. These are distinct individuals with distinct needs. So, you can't expect them to all respond to the same type of treatment or consequence, or the same type of positive reinforcement in the same manner.

Are you optimistic about the future? Can things get better?

You have to remain optimistic about the future. There is a great deal of ongoing research about substance use disorders and that is bound to result in better treatment and strategies. I certainly don't expect it to be easy - or have any sense of panacea - but I do think we'll see advances that ultimately help improve our ability to successfully treat those who struggle with this issue.

When you hear the word "hope," what comes to mind? What does that mean to you?

So many of the participants we have in Drug Court are good people - they're kind, smart and hard-working - but they have a



"Don't be too quick to give up on people."

- Judge Bradley W. Finch

substance use disorder. Our job is to help them with getting parts of their lives back they have lost as a result of their substance use disorder. Quite often, one of the hopes they express is that they want to rebuild their relationships with their families. They want to regain the trust and respect of their children, their parents or other family members.

Hope means different things to different people, but there are some basic fundamental values that most people hold dear, including family.

For all of those hopes, goals and dreams you have - whatever that may be - I always tell participants that their recovery has to be the foundation of that. Without recovery, they can't achieve those.

Do you have any words of wisdom for our readers?

Don't be too quick to give up on people. Some of our participants have struggled for so long and experienced so many tragedies as a result of their substance use disorder, they get to a point where the people who are most important in their lives give up on them, so they eventually give up on themselves.

It's important to remember that someone can be saved from substance abuse and they can turn their lives around. It takes accountability, but it also requires proper treatment and support.

Partner Perspectives | Joshua Bradley, Psy.D.

FLOYD - Dr. Joshua Bradley is a Licensed Clinical Psychologist. He currently serves as Behavioral Health Director for Tri-Area Community Health, which operates several health clinics throughout southwest Virginia - including a site in the Town of Floyd, where patients can receive both primary and behavioral health services.

Can you specifically talk about how you, or your organization, collaborates with NRVCS?

Because we [Tri-Area] focus on primary care, we often get referrals from NRVCS. We also refer to NRVCS when the level of care an individual needs rises above what we are able to provide - which, of course includes crisis situations. Our agencies have also partnered on community health education, with past events like the one that was focused on suicide prevention awareness - and the upcoming event that we have planned for Hispanic families.

From your perspective, what are the biggest challenges facing the community you serve, or the New River Valley in general?

The one that instantly comes to mind for me is the behavioral health workforce shortage. Telehealth and video appointments have helped to some degree, but it's a situation that is only getting worse because more and more people are seeking services. We just don't have enough people to work in this field.

What is your take on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the local community over the past 2+ years?

The isolation piece was really the biggest thing. It was something we were already used to on some level in rural communities, but COVID made that much worse.

COVID also highlighted a lack of control that led to existential angst that was covered up by day-to-day activities, but once that was disrupted it really put a strain on whole systems. People's stress tolerance was tested and they were pushed beyond the coping measures that many of us had in place. Unfortunately, I think what we're seeing now is only at the tip of that.

What are the solutions/resources needed to address the challenges you've mentioned?

We need to get more people trained. LPC (Licensed Professional Counselor) reimbursement by Medicare would also make a big difference.

That said, we are excited about implementing therapeutic gaming for our patients who are on the Autism spectrum or want to enhance their social/interpersonal skills. We are also going to be adding Virtual Reality (VR) as a supplement to the tools we have when working with patients.

Are you optimistic about the future? Can things get better?

I'm optimistic for this reason - it sometimes takes events like this [COVID] for people to step back and consider what's really important to them and to clarify their values. And, despite all of the hardships we've encountered, that can be a good thing because it causes us to shift our lives in a way to match those values. This has also helped us realize the impact of mental health



"... it sometimes takes events like this for people to step back and consider what's really important to them and to clarify their values."

- Joshua Bradley, Psy.D.

on our functioning and well-being. So, it's important for us to think ahead instead of being so reactive - focus on prevention more than reaction.

When you hear the word "hope," what comes to mind? What does that mean to you?

I think of hope as a deep sense of gratitude and fondness to what could be. In the darkest of times, gratitude and connection act as buoys to help hold us up to the light.

Do you have any words of wisdom for our readers?

Try to say 'yes' as often as you can to things that are meaningful and important to you and try to live your life in congruence with those values.

Suicide is the 12th leading cause of death in the United States.

It doesn't have to be this way.



Question



Persuade

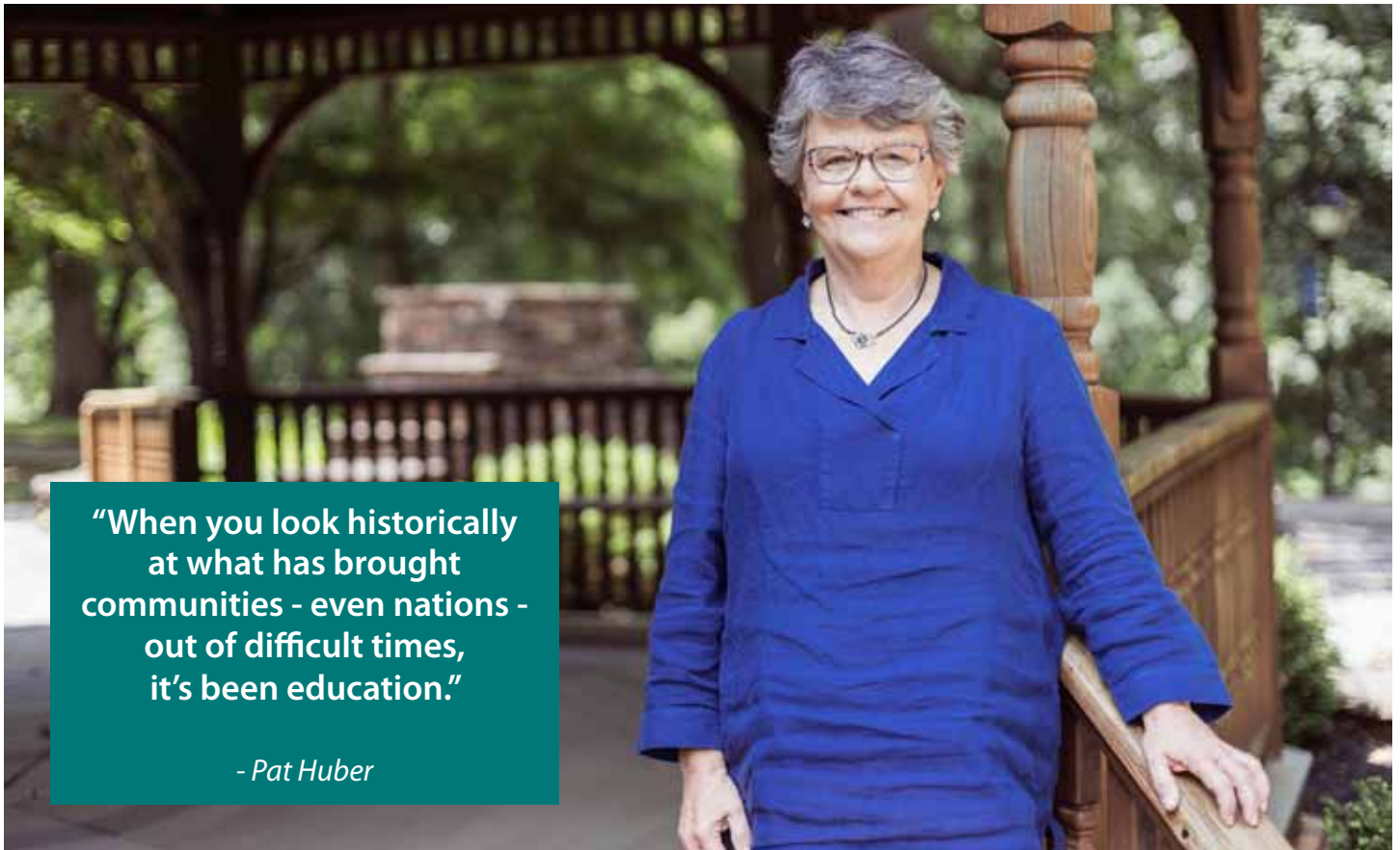


Refer

Get trained. Save lives.

*Free training provided locally by NRVCS
in cooperation with QPR Institute*

To schedule a training for your group, email info@nrvc.org



“When you look historically at what has brought communities - even nations - out of difficult times, it’s been education.”

- Pat Huber

DUBLIN - Pat Huber serves as President of New River Community College, a position she has held for the past six years. She has been with the college full-time for more than 30 years.

Can you specifically talk about how you, or your organization, collaborates with NRVCs?

One very important aspect of this collaboration is that we are able to call on NRVCs - whether it be a routine question or to handle an emergency placement or crisis situation. This long-standing relationship has been to the benefit of not only our students, but the entire community. It goes beyond just a professional connection because we all want the same thing.

From your perspective, what are the biggest challenges facing the community you serve, or the New River Valley in general?

I think we’re seeing more and more people of all ages who are struggling with mental health issues - anxiety, depression, the pressures on our students trying to re-engage after the pandemic - I suppose there’s just a greater sense of unrest.

I also think substance use is an ongoing concern, especially with the prevalence of more potentially deadly drugs like fentanyl.

What is your take on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the local community over the past 2+ years?

We’ve seen the devastating impact it has had on public health

and we’ve seen both economic and emotional fallout. However, we have also seen communities step up - the regional public health task force, the tremendous efforts around vaccinations and dissemination of information - that’s been remarkable. I can’t say enough good things about our medical community, our public schools...and our faculty and staff here at the college. I am so impressed by what they have done to help us keep moving forward.

What are the solutions/resources needed to address the challenges you’ve mentioned?

Education. When you look historically at what has brought communities - even nations - out of difficult times, it’s been education. At the core of it is taking a student or a community member and giving them opportunities to elevate and challenge themselves to where they can achieve their goals.

Are you optimistic about the future? Can things get better?

Absolutely! Every time I walk by a classroom or go down the sidewalk and interact with a student, I feel a strong sense of optimism.

When you hear the word “hope,” what comes to mind? What does that mean to you?

I think of our students and the future ahead of them. It’s about being positive and looking forward - taking the lessons from yesterday and moving on.

Partner Perspectives | Rob Graham



“We’re all in this together. It’s not always easy, but we have to treat each other the way we would want to be treated.”

- Rob Graham

RADFORD - Rob Graham has worked in public school administration for more than 20 years. He currently serves as superintendent for Radford City Public Schools.

Can you specifically talk about how you, or your organization, collaborates with NRVCS?

We work with NRVCS in a few different ways, but the one we probably appreciate most is having counselors and school-based clinicians on site working in conjunction with our guidance counselors. We also utilize the YRC (Youth Resiliency Center) and psychiatric services.

We’re also honored to be part of the Radford Youth-Adult Partnership and to support the important prevention education provided by NRVCS.

From your perspective, what are the biggest challenges facing the community you serve, or the New River Valley in general?

The pandemic has really taken a toll on our mental health - our students and adults. As a result, we’re seeing more issues with substance use and other challenging behaviors.

What is your take on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the local community over the past 2+ years?

Issues with mental health have increased exponentially since COVID. The isolation took away supports and structure made it difficult for our students to participate in extra-curricular activities at school. It impacted communication and presented financial challenges for some families. It’s been an incredibly

challenging time for all of us in one way or another.

What are the solutions/resources needed to address the challenges you’ve mentioned?

Schools are asked to wear many hats these days. Teachers are counselors, nutritionists, they have to navigate clothing needs and food insecurity...it’s a lot. So, we have to get past this and ask ourselves, ‘How do we become a true community again?’

Education is critical to not only the success of our young people, but our entire community. We’re constantly looking for ways to engage with more community partners and agencies to meet the needs of our students, while also taking a more proactive than punitive approach so that we can keep kids in school, where they need to be.

Are you optimistic about the future? Can things get better?

Despite how difficult this past year was, we have also enjoyed some fantastic achievements. We were recognized as a Division of Innovation by the state Board of Education. Our students won several state championships - both academic and athletic - and we had a 98 - 99% graduation rate this year.

Do you have in words of wisdom for our readers?

Well, the word ‘hope’ would definitely be in there...I think it’s really about having more love, more care and compassion for one another. We’re all in this together. It’s not always easy, but we have to treat each other the way we would want to be treated.

Partner Perspectives | Jon Dance



"I really didn't see - until I got into recovery - how hard it was to get help."

- Jon Dance

BLACKSBURG - Jon Dance is the Recovery Community Coordinator at Virginia Tech. A person with lived experience, Jon has been in recovery since 2019 and substance-free for more than 22 months.

Can you specifically talk about how you, or your organization, collaborates with NRVCs?

Mainly through the local community prevention coalitions, but also through our outreach efforts at Virginia Tech, the general community, and the local community college.

From your perspective, what are the biggest challenges facing the community you serve, or the New River Valley in general?

From a recovery perspective, I see people with substance use and mental health disorders who are struggling and even though they may be asking for help, they don't always have access to services - especially those who live in the more rural parts of our community. That's caused by a lack of facilities for treatment, lack of insurance, and a shortage of providers.

I really didn't see - until I got into recovery - how hard it was to get help. So, the biggest thing I'm trying to do is normalize substance use as a disease and not a moral failing...Our society has gotten to the point that we glamorize drinking and smoking weed - you know, 'work hard, play hard' - but that's not a sustainable lifestyle.

What is your take on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the local community over the past 2+ years?

We saw the number of overdose deaths go up. I think that came from the isolation and some people found themselves stuck in a toxic environment. Personally, I was in treatment twice during the

pandemic. It affected me because I saw how miserable everyone else was and I wanted to be right there with them, so I went back to drinking.

What are the solutions/resources needed to address the challenges you've mentioned?

If there's one good thing to come out of the pandemic, I think we've figured out how to use virtual technology. With things like Zoom, you can attend an AA/NA or Recovery Dharma meeting any time of day, any day of the week.

That same technology has helped me be more involved in our local coalition meetings. Seeing and hearing the work that all of the people in these meetings are doing across the New River Valley is impressive.

Are you optimistic about the future? Can things get better?

I'm definitely optimistic. I've seen in my 45 years that if you are able to look at things optimistically, they will get better. I'm only one person but I'm going to do everything in my power to make things better.

When you hear the word "hope," what comes to mind? What does that mean to you?

Recovery. When sobriety changes to recovery, we are able to work on the betterment of ourselves and through that we are helping others. By spreading hope and embodying recovery, you can help lead them down that same path.

Do you have any words of wisdom for our readers?

"Let's normalize sobriety. Let's accept that some people don't wish to drink anymore. Let's support friends who are trying to find a more healthy path. Let's inspire those around us who are afraid to step into the light. Let's show the world there is another way to have fun. Let's be proud of stepping off the ferris wheel of beer o'clock." - Unknown

Partner Perspectives | Andi Golusky

CHRISTIANSBURG - Andi Golusky has been Executive Director of NRV CARES ((New River Valley Child Advocacy, Resources, Education, and Services) for three years. NRV CARES is a private, non-profit organization dedicated to protecting children and strengthening families.

Can you specifically talk about how you, or your organization, collaborates with NRVCS?

Probably most importantly through our work with the NRV Resiliency Network. - the creation of our region's Trauma-Informed Network. [Golusky serves as Chair.] We are also a source of referrals for one another and our agencies routinely collaborate on workshops, education to communities and families, and through the local community prevention coalitions.

From your perspective, what are the biggest challenges facing the community you serve, or the New River Valley in general?

Transportation always comes to mind. From a logistics standpoint, our service area is just so spread out. We also have a great need for increased mental health resources and things like dental care...the need just far exceeds the available resources.

Housing is also a major concern. It's such a huge problem - and not just the availability of safe, affordable lower-income housing - it's a problem for middle-class families as well.

What is your take on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the local community over the past 2+ years?

As much as this has been a challenging time for us all, I think the Task Force that was created to address COVID in our region really strengthened relationships among our partners and streamlined efforts that enabled us to have a more effective community response. There's a lot to be learned from that.

At NRV CARES specifically, we learned how to do things differently. We offered our parenting classes virtually and that was fairly successful - especially for people who don't have access to transportation or who needed the class and couldn't wait until it was provided in their specific community.

What are the solutions/resources needed to address the challenges you've mentioned?

A lot of what we need is already in place, but there may be a bit of a disconnect between decision makers and what's needed on the front lines. On the sunny side, many of our local agencies work very well together and we've demonstrated that we can be creative to meet challenges, but sometimes the capacity just isn't there.

Are you optimistic about the future? Can things get better?

Of course! What are we doing if we don't have hope? There are things that happen - or circumstances we might find ourselves in - that can be very difficult, but I also believe we are continuing to move in the right direction.

When you hear the word "hope," what comes to mind? What does that mean to you?

That things can - and will - get better. Hope is all around us but



"What are we doing if we don't have hope?"

- Andi Golusky

sometimes, it can be difficult for us to believe in. Having hope helps us strive for a better quality of life and motivates us to reach out for help and access resources when we need them. We've got to have hope!

Do you have any words of wisdom for our readers?

It's something that has come up quite a bit in conversations about Adverse Childhood Experiences and trauma, but I think it's important to look at things through that lens.

Instead of asking, 'What's wrong with you?' We need to be asking, 'What happened to you?' And that's really just about taking time to learn and understand what others have been through. It's about being able to have compassion for everyone.

Partner Perspectives | Dr. Pam Ray

CHRISTIANSBURG - Dr. Pam Ray has worked with the New River Health District for eight years. She currently serves as Population Health Community Coordinator.

Can you specifically talk about how you, or your organization, collaborates with NRVCs?

I'm an active member of all of the NRV's community coalitions and we've worked together on multiple community outreach events and presentations about nicotine addiction and vaping.

From your perspective, what are the biggest challenges facing the community you serve, or the New River Valley in general?

Probably inadequate communication about the resources that are available in the community and a lack of equal access to healthcare and providers. Generational poverty and substance misuse are also very big challenges for our area.

What is your take on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the local community over the past 2+ years?

The biggest impact - besides people being sick and dying - was our failure to reach certain people. It highlights where we have gaps to address but I think with whatever might come next, we'll be better prepared.

The isolation that came with COVID was very difficult for our youth and the elderly. Unfortunately, within those populations, resiliency isn't what it needs to be. So, we've seen a significant uptick in substance use and I would imagine there has also been an increase in domestic violence and abuse that has gone unreported.

What are the solutions/resources needed to address the challenges you've mentioned?

We have to get back to business and understand where we need to change things. We need to double down on communication and education. Let's find out who we left behind and regroup to help those people.

As providers, we need to get out of our silos and work more closely together. Ultimately, that decreases the burden placed on individual agencies.

Are you optimistic about the future? Can things get better?

Absolutely. It's the attitude we have to have. We've got to stop wringing our hands and start taking what we have learned - good and bad - to improve how we do things.

We have a lot to overcome - there's no doubt about it. We've been beaten up and damaged by this pandemic. But if there's one thing I know about this community, it's that we know how to overcome.

When you hear the word "hope," what comes to mind? What does that mean to you?

I think of a collective action by people who are passionate about helping others - working together to not only be optimistic, but also realistic. It's about picking each other up moving forward



"We have to get back to business and understand where we need to change things. We need to double down on communication and education."

- Pam Ray

together. We shouldn't be doing it alone.

Do you have any words of wisdom for our readers?

Look at the person to your left. Look at the person to your right. Be sure to look back at the person behind you - or that person you left behind - and pick them up. Make connections. Work to find common ground with others.

As someone who has earned degrees from Virginia Tech and spent a lot of time there, I also take the school motto, *Ut Prosim*, very seriously. I really try to live by that.

Partner Perspectives | Patrick Ford

PULASKI - Patrick Ford is Managing Editor for *The Southwest Times*, a community newspaper in Pulaski County. A native of Marion, Virginia, Ford joined the paper in November of 2021.

Can you specifically talk about how you, or your organization, collaborates with NRVCs?

I intentionally focus my stories on the good that's happening in Pulaski County. Being involved with PCPC (the Pulaski Community Partners Coalition) has helped me realize just how much work is being done to support the community.

From your perspective, what are the biggest challenges facing the community you serve, or the New River Valley in general?

The way I see it, there are two worlds that aren't quite meshing. You have leaders who care deeply for the community and are doing a lot of really good things - but the general public is not quite convinced yet. There's a lot that factors into that. People have been socially and economically beaten down for years. While that's no one's fault in particular, there is a significant portion of the community that won't believe it until they see it.

We've got working together nailed down really well, I think. Now, we have to focus on engaging the members of our community who seem unreachable.

Bad news lasts and travels further than good news. That isn't unique to our area, but it certainly affects the Pulaski County community. It's important for people to realize, however, that if there's something they don't like, there is a way to change it. A group of 20 people with a shared and legitimate concern at a town council meeting can have a tremendous impact on how that issue is addressed.

What is your take on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the local community over the past 2+ years?

It hurt us but I think there's two good things that came out of it: telework and the access to that technology; and the cultural/mental reset we were all forced to take. We had to stay home for a while and I think we've come out recognizing that the time is now to make change.

What are the solutions/resources needed to address the challenges you've mentioned?

The number one resource is obviously money, but number two is the mentality that allows us to see a need for change. And without people who are willing to make changes, there can be no progress.

I do think that's something special about southwest Virginia and rural towns. People are willing to volunteer because they everyone knows each other and they genuinely care about one another.

Are you optimistic about the future? Can things get better?

I don't think there's ever a reason to be pessimistic. There's nothing to gain from that. If something is not good, do something to change it. If it is good, do something to protect it.



"I don't think there's ever a reason to be pessimistic. There's nothing to gain from that. If something is not good, do something to change it. If it is good, do something to protect it."

- Patrick Ford

When you hear the word "hope," what comes to mind? What does that mean to you?

Hope is the belief that you'll be able to act and remind yourself that there's good you can do and there's good that exists. It means that I believe I can either create or find that good.

Do you have any words of wisdom for our readers?

Your community will only have the feeling and energy that you are willing to put into it. If you want to see something grow, you have to work at it.

Partner Perspectives | Rev. Morris Fleischer

NEWPORT - Rev. Morris Fleischer is pastor of Newport-Mt. Olivet United Methodist Church in Giles County, where he has served for the past 15 years. He also serves on the NRV Resiliency Network and is a board member for the Giles County Christian Service Mission, Hope House and is an active member of the county's Ministerial Association.

Can you specifically talk about how you, or your organization, collaborates with NRVCS?

I'm proud to be involved with the NRV Resiliency Network, representing the faith-based community, as we work to address trauma and its affects on issues like mental health and substance use disorders.

From your perspective, what are the biggest challenges facing the community you serve, or the New River Valley in general?

I don't think there's any question that folks are struggling with their mental and emotional health. There seems to be a high level of stress, combined with a lack of hope. From a practical standpoint, you would have to point to transportation, lack of access to care and the limited availability of providers.

What is your take on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the local community over the past 2+ years?

It's put a spotlight on the undercurrent of distrust of institutions that many feel. On top of that, people of the Appalachian culture are reluctant to trust people they consider to be 'outsiders' because they carry resentment of everything that has been extracted from their lives and their families for generations.

What are the solutions/resources needed to address the challenges you've mentioned?

We need more providers. Not that there's anything wrong with the ones we have - there just simply are not enough to meet the demand in a region that is underserved medically.

Are you optimistic about the future? Can things get better?

Yes. Things can always get better. I suppose I'm an eternal optimist. We've got to rise to our better angels and see the best in people. Even if I encounter someone that I don't necessarily agree with, my job is to find a way to be in community with that person and be willing to listen to them.

If we don't translate words into action, we're losing half the battle. So, it's imperative that we communicate. When we don't, that leads to fear and fear takes us down some bad paths. Empathy and understanding can cross boundaries and help us look past our differences.

When you hear the word "hope," what comes to mind? What does that mean to you?

It's one of my favorite words in the English language. It truly uplifts me just to see it written out somewhere and that's been the case for as long as I can remember. When I think of hope, it's not about having a false sense of optimism. It's really about maintaining an attitude of gratitude. We have so much to be



"When I think of hope, it's not about having a false sense of optimism. It's really about maintaining an attitude of gratitude."

- Rev. Morris Fleischer

thankful for - despite whatever hardships or stressors we are faced with.

Do you have any words of wisdom for our readers?

People need hope in order to survive. There are the basics that fall under Maslow's hierarchy of needs - things like food, water and shelter - that we all must have, but hope is about being able to see beyond the next 24 - 48 hours when we are struggling.

Hope has to have feet. It's not just an ideal or something that's up in the air. It needs to be real. It needs to be tangible and I think that's the challenge for those of us who serve our community.

Partner Perspectives | Megan Dean

DRAPER - A native of Pulaski County, Megan Dean is Retail Sales Manager for Thee Draper Village. Earlier this year, she organized an event to raise awareness of mental health. More than 100 runners and walkers participated in the first-ever Stopping the Stigma 5K and proceeds were donated to NRVCS.

Can you specifically talk about how you, or your organization, collaborates with NRVCS?

I guess most importantly, I personally have received services through NRVCS. And most recently, of course, we worked together on the 5K event - which was great. I'm already planning for next year and am excited to do more!

From your perspective, what are the biggest challenges facing the community you serve, or the New River Valley in general?

I love this area. I was born and raised here, but I do think we struggle with closed-minded thinking and a lack of knowledge - not only about mental health but progress in general. If we can be more open to change and growth, we can develop resources to meet the needs of our residents - and we need that now more than ever.

What is your take on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the local community over the past 2+ years?

In a small community, it's hard enough to thrive as a small business, but COVID shook up employment, the workforce in general, and unfortunately caused a bit of a divide. We wasted too much time and energy trying to place blame and argue about who's fault it was.

Personally, I think COVID will linger and be with us for a long time. I know I am not the same since the pandemic started. Being inside all the time was hard on me and I still feel anxious in large crowds. I still haven't gone to a movie or a concert at this point.

What are the solutions/resources needed to address the challenges you've mentioned?

It starts with more public access to help in any capacity - not just help for mental health. And, again, we have to be willing to learn to open up to new ideas and not continue to do things the same way we were 20 years ago.

I believe there's a huge generational gap between the people who are trying to seek knowledge and those who feel it's not important to grow and learn.

Are you optimistic about the future? Can things get better?

I truly do think things can get better. There are people who get up every day to spread kindness, spread love and spread knowledge. We are fortunate to live in an age when there are way too many resources to be left behind.

When you hear the word "hope," what comes to mind? What does that mean to you?

I think of the future, where we are all understanding of the importance of access to mental health services and we are able to



"The little things are sometimes the huge wins. Every day we push forward is a victory."

- Megan Dean

talk openly about our struggles, take care of ourselves and take care of each other. I want that for my daughters. I want them to grow up in a place where it's safe to talk.

Do you have any words of wisdom for our readers?

You are not your mental illness. You are so much more than that. You're doing amazing - even if it's just getting out of bed and taking a shower or doing the dishes. The little things are sometimes the huge wins. Every day we push forward is a victory.

Partner Perspectives | Chief Mark Sisson

CHRISTIANSBURG - Mark Sisson has served with the Christiansburg Police Department for 28 years, including the last 15 as Chief.

Can you specifically talk about how you, or your organization, collaborates with NRVCS?

We're heavily vested in the local CIT (Crisis Intervention Team) program. Every member of our department is CIT certified because we're all working toward the same goal - to appropriately serve and respond to citizens who are facing mental health challenges.

From your perspective, what are the biggest challenges facing the community you serve, or the New River Valley in general?

The current issues in the mental health system around the ECO/TDO (Emergency Custody Order/Temporary Detention Order) process is our number one challenge. We have officers literally sitting at a hospital for days because we can't get someone into a hospital bed. We're doing some things in our region that are outside the box - like the new crisis drop-off center in Radford - but it's still a huge drain of resources for our departments.

What is your take on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the local community over the past 2+ years?

It impacted so many elements of our standard workday and a lot of people have really struggled. Obviously, it wasn't just the mental health system that was affected but the ECO/TDO system was backlogged, the hospitals had no capacity and they were struggling with staffing issues like everyone else.

It was a very tough period of time. It has put a strain on every part of our society and when mental health issues are on the rise, that's going to fall on someone.

The issues with substance use are equally terrible. We continue to have overdoses in the community and we're dealing with drugs being trafficked from other areas that are laced with fentanyl and even carfentanil. It's scary.

What are the solutions/resources needed to address the challenges you've mentioned?

We need leaders in Richmond who have the vision and the will to dig into the problem and at the end of the day, create more bed space and create more regional de-escalation centers. It's not something that can be accomplished overnight but we have to start coming up with some real answers.

Are you optimistic about the future? Can things get better?

Coming out of this pandemic, you have to believe if we can get through that, we can get through anything.

When you hear the word "hope," what comes to mind? What does that mean to you?

In the New River Valley, I personally have tremendous hope because of the great relationships we have among all of our local law enforcement agencies, as well as NRVCS and the mental



"Coming out of this pandemic, you have to believe if we can get through that, we can get through anything."

- Chief Mark Sisson

health system. Working together as we are, we are leading the state in being proactive and collaborating on the issues at hand. No one else in the state even comes close.

We may not agree with each other on everything, but we have built a culture in the community that allows us to address things head-on when problems do arise.

Do you have any words of wisdom for our readers?

Life's hard. It's not easy and we don't really know what others are going through.

My message to our officers each day is to treat people fairly and to treat them with kindness. You never know, the one positive thing you do for someone may turn their entire day around. You have a choice to make a positive impact on others.

When you get up in the morning, you have the power to decide what kind of day you're going to have.

Partner Perspectives | Gabby Castillo



RADFORD - Gabby Castillo is a rising 11th grade student at Radford High School. She also serves as Student Ambassador for the Radford Youth-Adult Partnership, the community prevention coalition that is facilitated by NRVCS.

From your perspective, what are the biggest challenges facing the community you serve, or the New River Valley in general?

It's definitely drugs - mostly vaping but also some heavier drugs. Underage drinking is also a problem. People my age are just doing it casually and they really don't seem to worry about getting caught.

It's different mentalities for different people, I guess, but a lot of people do this stuff because the 'cool kids' are doing it. It's not that difficult to turn those things down when someone offers it to you, but a lot of teenagers just go with the flow and do it anyway.

I see how it affects people - especially drunk driving - and I just have so many plans for my future that I don't want those to get ruined or cut short because I did something foolish.

What is your take on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the local community over the past 2+ years?

I think isolation was the big thing. That's probably why so many people my age started to vape. They were stuck at home and bored and wanted something to do.

What are the solutions/resources needed to address the challenges you've mentioned?

That's a hard one to answer. People are a result of their

environment for the most part and if a kid or teenager experiences a lot of turmoil at home, they might be more likely to turn to vaping or drinking to get away from that.

I don't know how to make people good parents, but if you can't make it a priority to provide your child with a good life, maybe you shouldn't have kids.

I also think stores need to check ID's more than they are. It's way too easy for people my age to go in and buy vapes or alcohol.

Are you optimistic about the future? Can things get better?

I definitely think there's opportunity for things to get better - if they're handled the right way. A couple of bad decisions and things could go south and that's not just at a local level, but nationally. Sometimes, it feels like we're in the 1800's. People my age want things to get better, we're just not sure how to make that happen.

When you hear the word "hope," what comes to mind? What does that mean to you?

I think there's hope when you have unity within a community... unity in collective understanding and response to challenges.

Do you have any words of wisdom for our readers?

There's no need to be so hateful to other people. Let people live their lives, live your own life and mind your own business.

It's a free country but don't offer your opinion when no one asks for it. Just don't do that!

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