

# N R V C S

NEW RIVER VALLEY COMMUNITY SERVICES



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*Cover photo by Ross Wilsie*



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# NRVCS earns top ranking in latest “Best of Virginia” publication

By Mike Wade / NRVCS  
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New River Valley Community Services (NRVCS) was recently named the number one counseling or therapy practice in the Southwest Virginia region, based on voting in Virginia Living’s 12th Annual “Best of Virginia” Readers’ Survey.

According to publishers, more than 50,000 readers across the Commonwealth submitted votes via the survey. Southwest Virginia is among five different regions included in the voting, along with the Shenandoah Valley, Central Virginia, Eastern Virginia, and Northern Virginia. “Counseling or Therapy Practice” was one of the categories included in health services. The survey also provided readers an opportunity to select favorite restaurants, shopping, and recreational opportunities. The publication lists first, second, and third place winners for similar categories in each of the five regions.

This marks the first time NRVCS has been included in the publication.

“We are obviously delighted to be recognized in this manner – particularly since the votes were submitted by readers and members of our own community,” says James Pritchett, NRVCS Executive Director. “Earning the top ranking for our region is validation of the incredible work that our team does on a daily basis to enhance the lives of residents of the New River Valley. I could not be prouder of our dedicated staff.”

NRVCS, first established in 1969, is the public provider of



behavioral health services for the counties of Floyd, Giles, Montgomery, and Pulaski, as well as the City of Radford. During Fiscal Year 2023, the agency provided direct services to more than 12,000 residents.

“Our goal is to be the provider of choice for the communities we serve,” Pritchett adds. “At the same time, we recognize that our success is made possible by the strong working relationships we share with many other providers and service agencies. That shared commitment to collaboration ultimately benefits those of us who call the New River Valley home.”

Virginia Living’s “Best of Virginia” 2023 issue is expected to be published in May 2023.

# Singh named NRVCS Medical Director

By Mike Wade / NRVCS  
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Dr. Gagandeep Singh, a psychiatrist with NRVCS since 2012, has been named the agency’s Medical Director, effective May 14.

Singh replaces Dr. Circe Cooke, who recently retired from NRVCS to relocate to New Mexico.

Dr. Singh brings over 20 years of psychiatric experience to this role. He completed his residency in Adult Psychiatry from Virginia Tech Carilion School of Medicine and has board certifications in Adult Psychiatry, Brain Injury, Addiction Medicine, and Obesity Medicine.

During his tenure at NRVCS, Dr. Singh has worked directly with various service lines, including: crisis care, outpatient psychiatry at most of the agency’s clinics, and the Assertive Community Treatment programs.

“We are very excited to have Dr. Singh in the position,” notes

NRVCS Executive Director James Pritchett. “He has a great deal of knowledge and expertise to share with us.”

In a statement, Dr. Singh notes that he is committed to coordination of high quality medical care to consumers across the different programs provided by NRVCS. He goes on to say that his core values include treating staff and clients with dignity, respect, and humility.

“I hope to challenge the stigma around mental illness and provide a safe and welcoming environment to all our consumers,” he adds.



**SINGH**  
(File photo)

# AGENTS OF HOPE: YRC TEAM



## **YRC Staff**

*NRVCS staff at the Youth Resiliency Center (YRC) include (from left): Jenna Kirtner, Program Supervisor Amanda Lanoue, Daniel Parker and Gary Whitehead. (Photograph by Ross Wilsie)*

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For children and teens with significant emotional challenges, it can be difficult to function in the classroom. Students in the New River Valley with this level of need are sometimes referred to the Youth Resiliency Center (YRC) Therapeutic Day Treatment program, located in Christiansburg.

Operated by NRVCS, the YRC provides intensive supports for students to help them develop practical living skills that can address behavioral issues and also improve academic performance.

“They’re [students] here because the schools, the families, and the providers they are receiving services from all recognize that their behavioral and emotional needs are higher than what can be met in the typical school environment,” explains Amanda Lanoue, Program Supervisor at the YRC. “These are kids who can benefit from the therapeutic work here and the goal is to stabilize them, give them the skills and the practice that they need to go back to the school and be successful when they’re ready.”

YRC serves students in grades K-5, as well as those in

grades 6 - 12.

While the goal is for the program to be a temporary placement, Lanoue is quick to point out that the time frame for enrollment at the YRC is unique for every participant.

“We work closely with the school systems on the progress being made by each student, and come up with a very specific plan for each kid to determine how they’re going to transition back,” she adds. “It’s a very phased-in approach.”

Due to the high level of need among the students attending YRC, numbers are intentionally kept low. In addition to Lanoue, the program currently has three full-time staff: Jenna Kirtner, Daniel Parker and Gary Whitehead. The YRC team also receives some support from local college interns.

“They (staff) do a phenomenal job,” says Lanoue. “They are wonderful...They have great individual skills but they are also extremely supportive of each other.”

“When we don’t have interns here, we do a lot of classroom hopping to give each other bathroom breaks or a chance to run to the copier because we aren’t able to leave these kids unattended.”

“Every single day that we are here, my staff has a plan for

# AGENTS OF HOPE: JEREMY NELSON

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Jeremy Nelson might look like your typical “twenty-something,” but when he speaks about the importance of his work and his passion to help children enjoy a better quality of life, he clearly possesses the insight of someone far beyond his years.

Nelson, an Intensive Services Clinician, works primarily as a clinician with the NRVCS KPACT (Kids’ Program for Assertive Community Treatment) team, but he also supports the agency’s intensive in-home and outpatient programs, as well as the functional family therapy (“FFT”) program.

Originally from the New River Valley, Nelson attended Concord University on a football scholarship. A major injury prematurely ended his playing career, but Nelson was able to earn his undergrad degree in just three years.

Nelson first began his tenure at NRVCS back in March of 2020, just as the COVID-19 pandemic was beginning to take its grip on the world. At that time, he was working at one of the agency’s residential programs for adults with developmental disabilities. He did that for just over a year while also working toward his master’s degree and eventually transitioning to an internship with KPACT.

Like many who work in the field, Nelson’s decision to be a behavioral health professional was inspired by family members who live with disorders and/or disabilities.

“As I was growing up, my dad was in the military and I didn’t really understand some of the things he was dealing with - PTSD and some other diagnoses,” recalls Nelson. “I also have an older cousin with intellectual disabilities. So that, in conjunction with my dad’s challenges, made me want to use my career to help people.”

Although he first thought his work would be focused on adults, Nelson says he quickly found that he enjoys working with young people as he settled into his work with KPCAT.

These days, he works with children, adolescents and teens ranging in age from 4 to 17. Although they each have unique challenges, he has seen some commonalities.

“A lot of them definitely have traumatic backgrounds,” says Nelson. “It can be pretty alarming to hear some of the things that we do in sessions...I think a lot of people have no idea what some kids have to overcome.”

Still in the early stages of his career, Nelson admits he’s perhaps been most surprised by the prevalence of substance use among young people he works with - and their ability to access “more extreme” drugs like meth.

“Being in a more intensive service, I feel like you’re able to see the progress that you’re making with someone - especially with the more intensive clients,” he notes. “So, that’s always my favorite part of the job.”



*Submitted photo*

He acknowledges that being so invested in the well-being of his clients makes it sometimes difficult to leave work behind when he goes home.

“That’s something I’m learning - trying to separate my work time from my personal time - but it can be hard some days,” he says.

As for the future, Nelson plans to continue working with the KPACT team while pursuing his goal to become a licensed clinician. He was married last February and says he and his wife hope to eventually find a home when interest rates and housing market both cool off.

“I kind of take the approach of going after one goal at a time,” he says. “That way, I don’t get overwhelmed.”

# PHOTO GALLERY: Spring Family Fun Festival

NRVCS was pleased to partner with NRV CARES and the Radford City Department of Social Services in hosting a “Spring Family Fun Festival” on April 6 to help kick off Child Abuse Prevention Month.

There was a great turnout for the event, as families took advantage of the resources made available by many of our community partner agencies, as well as activities and free food.

Similar events were conducted throughout the month of April in Pearisburg, Pulaski and Christiansburg.

*Photos by Ross Wilsie/NRVCS*





# AGENTS OF HOPE: CAROLINE MULLINS

By Mike Wade / NRVCS  
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Spending most of her work time these days promoting mental wellness and suicide prevention might not have been what Caroline Mullins envisioned for herself when she first began her career. Still, she can't help but think she's now in the right place at the right time.

Mullins, a native of Blacksburg, is a Behavioral Wellness Specialist with NRVCS' Community Wellness & Outreach team. She's primarily responsible for coordination of the agency's Mental Health First Aid trainings and is also the lead for the regional suicide prevention collaborative.

"When I first went to college, I really had no idea what I wanted to do," admits Mullins. "...I just knew I wanted to work with people and I wanted to help people."

That goal led her to pursue a degree in human services, followed by a stint in early childhood education. She and her now husband both accepted positions in Richmond and eventually were drawn back to the New River Valley, where they first met. They now have two teenagers that both attend Blacksburg High School.

Following her father's passing, Mullins joined a mentoring program through the Virginia Star Quality Initiative, consulting with various child development centers in the region, including Head Start facilities and private programs.

She then took a pause from the human services/non-profit world to become an entrepreneur, opening an art studio and providing a program of step-by-step art instruction - even though she has no formal training as an artist.

"After losing my dad, it helped me realize that life is short and that [art studio] was something I had always wanted to do," explains Mullins. "Looking back on it, I'm like, *'What was I thinking?'* - it was such a ridiculous whim - but I got my studio up and running with tons of support from friends and family."

"It was a good experience," recalls Caroline. "I learned about running a business. I learned how to teach and I grew my own art abilities."

"It was also a great challenge - but through that teaching, I was also discovering that there is a real therapy in art," she continues. "It can help people overcome fears, learn something new, and help them accomplish something they can be proud of."

Two major flooding incidents at the studio (within a year of each other), combined with the typical challenges of being a business owner, caused Mullins to re-consider her professional goals. After providing some paint classes for groups at NRVCS, Mullins applied for a position with the agency and was hired as a prevention specialist in 2018.



Photo - Ross Wilsie/NRVCS

"I was scraping the barrel," she says. "The realization of owning a business is that it's hard...Constantly being in that emergency mode of trying to make ends meet was really tough and really stressful."

She says her work at NRVCS has helped provide some level of insight about what initially sparked her urge to work in a helping profession. She grew up with a member of her immediate family who struggled with mental health challenges.

"I realize now - years later - that desire to help people really comes from events in my own life and my own struggles," Mullins notes.

"This job has been such an eye opener," notes Mullins. "I've learned so much about what the agency does - and I'm still learning about it - and all of the incredible people who work at NRVCS that do so much to help others."

"I've also learned a lot about my community and my New River Valley," she adds. "When I was growing up, my world was pretty much limited to Blacksburg...but now, I feel more connected to my community than I ever have before."



# AGENTS OF HOPE: CARRIE YOUNG-GUARD

By Mike Wade / NRVCS  
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Carrie Young-Guard's career has been dedicated to helping children and families, but she says it took becoming a mother herself to fully appreciate the challenges they often face.

"I have so much more compassion and understanding now for parents after having had children of my own," says Young-Guard. "Both of my sons have ADHD and so they were challenging - and before we had a real diagnosis or medication, I felt a lot of judgement from other people around us in the way we were parenting."

"But I knew I was a good parent, I was consistent and was doing all the right things - but I was broken," she adds. "... So, it really made me better understand what other parents are going through and how hard it can be at times."

Young-Guard grew up in western North Carolina and obtained her undergraduate and master's degrees from a private Christian university in that same area before relocating to Blacksburg in 2008. She began working at NRVCS shortly thereafter, as part of the agency's school-based program. She eventually transitioned into outpatient clinical services.

"I always knew I wanted to work with children and help children," says Young-Guard, who is also a registered play therapist supervisor. She adds that Virginia Axline's book on play therapy, which she first read in high school (and again in college) helped cement her plans to work in the behavioral health field.

Much of what she had learned or experienced as a therapist was put to the test in early 2020. Young-Guard learned quickly that a virtual play therapy session was not an ideal way to connect with the children on her caseload. After about a couple weeks of trying, she went to her then supervisor and asked that she be able to resume in-person sessions - well before most even entertained the idea of being in a space with someone else face-to-face.

"The majority of my caseload at the time were kids under the age of ten and it didn't take long to realize that we needed to get back to in-person," she recalls. "So, I saw kids in-person throughout the pandemic."

She says she spent significant time between sessions cleaning her office and the multiple toys used by her clients. She also purchased clear masks so children could see her face.

"It was not easy," she adds, "but telehealth just isn't very effective with four-year-olds."

While Young-Guard was able to adapt her physical space to accommodate in-person sessions through the pandemic, she's not so sure that children overall have adjusted to what



*Submitted photo*

they lived through during COVID-19.

"In the beginning, it didn't seem like there was too much of an impact," she says. "A lot of kids were thrown off by it early on, but then I think enjoying the novelty of getting to stay home...but then I think it was a year or two into it that really seemed we were seeing a lot more kids referred by schools and by pediatricians because we saw heard a lot more about behaviors in schools and that things were getting worse."

"While it is nice that it's brought a spotlight on to the importance of children's mental health, it's also very frustrating that it's taken something this big [COVID] to get it there," she continues.

Given the fact that she has spent a significant amount of her work using children's toys, it seems only fitting to ask Young-Guard to pretend she has a magic wand and that she can do one thing to help the children who come to NRVCS for help.

"I would really love to provide kids - especially through those first years of life - a safe and stable home with attuned and loving caregivers," she says. "It's just so important to protect that early brain development."

# AGENTS OF HOPE: JULIE MERRIAM

By Mike Wade / NRVCS  
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As a Mental Health Case Manager with the NRVCS Child and Adolescent Specialty Services Team, Julie Merriam's primary caseload includes individuals with autism or some other developmental disability. She works directly with children, adolescents, and even a few adult clients.

Merriam is originally from the Bay Area of California. She relocated when her family moved to West Virginia in 1995. Although she moved around for a few years after that - she eventually returned to the Mountain State, where she would eventually meet her husband.

Before joining NRVCS in 2017, Merriam had a 25-year career in early childhood education - the last 11 years of that time with Head Start. Over the years, she served as both a preschool teacher and director and also owned a home day care. Merriam was in her 30's when she decided to pursue her bachelor's degree in early childhood with a focus in special needs.

"I was getting very tired being in the classroom as I got older," she says with a chuckle, "but I knew I still wanted to be in the field of working with others."

Things had changed in her personal life as well. She and her husband eventually decided to adopt three children (now all adults and all biological siblings), including their son, Marcus, who has autism.

"The opportunity to join NRVCS kept presenting itself in my life," she recalls. "...when we adopted our children and as I had more experience with Marcus...I thought, maybe this is the direction I'm supposed to go in."

As he was growing up, Marcus actually received case management services from NRVCS. She says her role at the agency now allows her the opportunity to help families with similar needs.

"I love that I get to connect with the individuals and the families and I feel that I get to connect with them in a different way because I'm older and I'm a mom who lives this same life," adds Merriam. "So, I relate with them in that way as well."

"I tell parents that my son may not have the same behaviors as their child, but we all still have to find supports for what this life is going to look like and that we all have to think about those future things as well," she adds.

"I am not shy to share my story," Merriam notes. "...I guess the benefit of that is I can tell my clients that I'm a mom, I can tell you about all of these great resources, talk about the importance of self-care...but we're all human, too."



*Submitted photo*

"I can let them [parents] know that there are times when I go home and I lose it, too, because I have to take a deep breath and re-center because that's how we get through it," she adds. "I don't sugarcoat my experiences. I'm not perfect and they don't have to be either."

The majority of Merriam's caseload is in Giles County. She says families in rural communities are also challenged by lack of resources like family support groups and activities for children with autism or other disabilities - particularly during the summer months.

"There isn't much available and anything that is happening is usually more toward Roanoke, so that really makes it challenging for families in Giles," she says. "...but on a positive side, it's a very strong community."

Like many other providers who work with families, Merriam is seeing a noticeable number of grandparents or other relatives stepping in as primary caregivers due to parents struggling with substance use.

"I'm a people pleaser and I want to help fix things, but I also I've learned with time that you don't always have to have the answers," she says. "Sometimes, parents and families just need to be heard. So, you just have to listen."

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exactly what activities are going to be provided - therapeutic activities and topics, creative activities, social skills activities - every day that the kids are here,” adds Lanoue.

“They also stay engaged with the kids from 9 - 2 every day - so there’s no gaps or breaks in between like you see in the schools,” Lanoue continues. “So, they have to be ‘on’ every day - which can be exhausting - but they each bring their own unique energy and are very consistent and we know how important that can be to the population of kids we are working with.”

A wall tapestry in Lanoue’s office reads, “*Everyday is a fresh start.*” She says it helps to remind her of the important work happening at the YRC.

“I love this program,” says Lanoue, who first started with the program as an intern herself back in 2014. “The staff does amazing work everyday and we serve a group of kids who otherwise would have trouble getting their needs met.”

“My goal is to not just sustain the program, but hopefully help it grow,” she continues. “The kids who need this kind of help deserve to have it.”



### Self-care “paint party”

As a follow-up to their Mental Health First Aid USA (MHFA) training in April, we revisited our friends with the Giles County Department of Social Services in Narrows a week later to conduct a self-care activity, led by Caroline Mullins. The “paint party” provided a great opportunity to discuss some of what was learned in MHFA, to connect as a team, and of course, to create beautiful works of art! (Photo - C. Mullins/NRVCS)

## Mullins

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“I’ve also learned a lot about humility,” Mullins continues. “No matter where you come from, no matter what your background is, no matter how much money your family has or doesn’t have, we are all part of this community and we all have a part in making it what it is.”



### Agents of Hope

Members of our medical services team proudly show off their new “Agent of Hope” t-shirts, helping promote our agency’s ongoing wellness campaign. Pictured are (from left) Tameca Crouse, Sarah Maxwell and Shakira Hendricks. (Submitted photo)

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