

[MUSIC - STEVE WAH, "HOME"]

MAUREEN FITZGERALD: Hello, everyone. This is Maureen Fitzgerald of the Great Lakes Addiction Technology Transfer Center, your host for today's Great Lakes ATTC podcast. The Great Lakes ATTC podcast bring interviews and insights to the addiction treatment and recovery services field in the Great Lakes region and beyond. Today's podcast is part of our premier series focused on recovery from substance use disorders.

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration holds National Recovery Month every September to celebrate the message that behavioral health is essential to overall health, prevention works, treatment is effective, and people can and do recover. With the theme "join the voices for recovery-- invest in health, home, purpose, and community," Recovery Month 2018 highlights inspiring stories to help people from all walks of life find the path to hope, health, and wellness. We're excited to launch our podcast series today with an interview with our guest Julia Alexander.

Julia is a technology transfer specialist with the STR-TA consortium, a recent SAMHSA grant-funded project that was created to support efforts in addressing opioid use disorder prevention, treatment, and recovery. Julia works specifically with the states of Michigan and Indiana to support their efforts addressing the opioid crisis. Before her current position, Julia assisted in the forming of Minnesota's leading Recovery Community Organization, Minnesota Recovery Connection, and was on staff at that RCO for nearly eight years, including her time as co-executive director of MRC for the latter part of her tenure there. A woman in long-term recovery, Julia has advocated for recovery professionally and personally for many years, would like us all to know that recovery works.

Thanks for joining us today, Julia. Before we begin, tell us a little bit about yourself and your background in recovery.

JULIA ALEXANDER: Well, my name, as you said, is Julia Alexander. I'm a woman in long-term recovery, and what that means for me is I have a sobriety date of August 28, 1992. I'll do the math for you, so this August, I'll be celebrating 26 years in long-term recovery. And what that means for me is that I'm much more present in my life today with my family, my friends, hopefully, my co-workers, and I am able to be a participant, an active participant in my community. I vote, I pay taxes,

and I'm an active member of society today.

MAUREEN FITZGERALD: Congratulations on your long-term recovery, and thank you for sharing your story.

JULIA ALEXANDER: Thank you.

MAUREEN FITZGERALD: What inspired you to become a professional in this field, Julia?

JULIA ALEXANDER: Well, I fell into it a little bit. So I found recovery at the same time that I started my undergraduate studies, the same month, actually, and so I did a lot of just work in my community in recovery during that time. And when I graduated, I was looking for, you know, full-time work and what to do next, and I had been doing a lot of volunteer work with the Hazelden Foundation, now Hazelden Betty Ford, but then it was Hazelden Foundation, and I applied for a position in their development office, and so I did that for about five or six years before I went on to do grad school. So I initially entered the field in the development department and fundraising, so that was my initial, kind of, entrance into this type of work, and I ended up going to grad school in California for a number of years.

And when I came back, I was studying for my qualifying exams as a doctoral student, and a friend of mine had called and asked if I wanted to do some, kind of, assistant work with this new project that they were starting, what was called a recovery community organization. It's a very small staff with a large number of volunteers, and did I want to be part of it? And I thought, oh, this is great, I can supplement my student loans, I can work on my dissertation, and I can do some work in the field that I enjoy.

And if anybody has set up an RCO, you know it takes a lot, so little did I know, about two weeks later, it became a very full-time position. And there were three of us and our board of directors that were really starting this RCO from scratch.

So it was an initiative that was brought about by Minnesota Department of Human Services Alcohol and Drug Abuse Division, they wanted to create RCOs in the state of Minnesota. And so Nell Hurley, who was the founding executive director, she and I sat down with a pen, a pad of paper, and a bucket of money from the state to create this RCO, and then we spent the next eight years making it really effective and working to support the community. We brought

the community in as part of developing it, so that's how I got involved with recovery work.

**MAUREEN
FITZGERALD:**

Julia, can you tell us what are some of the benefits of recovery that you have experienced?

**JULIA
ALEXANDER:**

Sure, well, one of that things I want people to know is that, obviously, I want people to know that recovery is possible, recovery works, but also that young people can find recovery. So I found recovery before I turned 21, and like I said when I was starting my education, so I've been really lucky to have my recovery as my background for most of my whole and adult life.

So the benefits are some of which I mentioned earlier, but mostly like I'm really able to be present in my life. I'm able to be a professional in this field. I'm able to have relationships with my family, friends. I'm just, I'm no longer in the throes of addiction and all of the negative consequences that come along with that.

So I think that it's hard to quantify sometimes the benefits of recovery because it's just, it's like the air you breathe. It's part of every aspect of your life, and so when you're really active in your recovery, and you're supporting the others in recovery in the community, you're really part of establishing community, not just for yourself and your family, but for the community as a whole.

**MAUREEN
FITZGERALD:**

So Julia, what advice do you have for anyone who might want to start a recovery community organization in their region?

**JULIA
ALEXANDER:**

Well, I think that is incredible. We need as many RCOs, Recovery Community Organizations, as there are libraries, as there are community centers, as there are places for people to gather because recovery is not done in isolation. It's done in community, and starting an RCO is absolutely something anybody can do, whether you have a brick-and-mortar place for people to gather, or you start a recovery community organization online. The main thing is to gather your community together and get support, and decide as a community, what do you want your recovery community organization to look like.

Traditionally, RCOs do three things, they do peer-to-peer support, public education, and advocacy. Not all RCOs do all three things. Some RCOs are advocacy organizations, some just do peer support, and some do all three. So really, it's deciding as a community, how do you want to express your recovery in the community with your recovery community organization?

And then oftentimes, there's support financially that you can get from your state or your county or other community organizations or, you know, family foundations. Or looking at how you can build from initial idea to something that's structured and funded and sustainable, there's lots of help out there. In Minnesota, for example, there's the Minnesota Council of Nonprofits, and they're a great resource for starting any type of nonprofit, but would also have a lot of wonderful resources for a recovery community organization.

MAUREEN

Julia, is there a national center or clearinghouse for recovery community organizations?

FITZGERALD:

JULIA

Well, there's an organization called the Association of Recovery Community Organizations, which is a part of Faces and Voices of Recovery, and to be a member of that ARCO, it's a peer-reviewed application. So there's a few requirements that you need to meet to be a recovery community organization in the eyes of ARCO, but they're also there to help you begin your RCO and go through the steps that would need to be taken to be part of that organization, and I highly recommend that as well. There's a toolkit, recovery community organization toolkit, on the Faces and Voices of Recovery website, and that's another really helpful tool in establishing an RCO in your community.

MAUREEN

Thanks, Julia, and going back to your experience with the Minnesota RCO, what do you think the impact has been of your RCO in the state?

FITZGERALD:

JULIA

Oh, it's been tremendous and, I think, on a number of different levels. I'll give you two examples real quickly. The first one is Minnesota Recovery Connection staff worked with the staff of another organization in Minnesota called the Steve Rummmler Hope Foundation, and together, we wrote the legislation for the Good Samaritan bill in Minnesota, which allows for individuals, family, community members, law enforcement, EMTs to carry naloxone, which is an opioid antagonist. So if somebody is in an episode of overdosing, and someone has a naloxone, they can give them that medication to arrest an overdose.

Prior to this legislation, EMTs and police officers and individuals weren't allowed to carry naloxone without a prescription. The other thing that it did is it allowed for limited immunity if someone calls 911 when someone is overdosing, so if there's small quantities of drugs or paraphernalia, then they're not charged for those issues. So it really is, allows for a direct response to an overdose that didn't exist before that legislation, so we're very proud, I'm very proud of the work that we did to change that in our community. So that's had a huge impact.

The second example I would give is National Recovery Month in the state of Minnesota. We have, historically, through Minnesota Recovery Connection, had three primary events. There are a number of events all across the state.

As a recovery community organization, Minnesota Recovery Connection did a Walk for Recovery, which has upwards of 5,000 people attend every year, a spirituality breakfast, and also Rally Caps for Recovery Twins game, which is recovery night at Target Field. So there were over 2,000 people, all coming together to have fun in recovery, go to a baseball game, and show everybody in the stadium that recovery works. So it's a great way to bring together everyone in the community to support recovery, whether you're an individual in personal recovery, friend or family member, a professional in the field, or other allies, it's a wonderful way to recognize the power of recovery in the community.

**MAUREEN
FITZGERALD:**

Thanks, Julia. You win our thanks again for joining us today. And thanks to everyone for tuning into our podcast. Our next podcast in the Recovery Month series will air September 22. Our guest speaker, Haner Hernandez, will share his insight on what recovery means in Hispanic and Latino communities.

All Great Lakes ATTC podcasts will be available for download from our website. Thank you.

[MUSIC - STEVE WAH, "HOME"]

The music for today's podcast is titled "Home," an original piece composed and performed by Steve Wah.