

I first discovered Hillsgrove Clubhouse in April of 2023, through the exuberant endorsement of another member – a time in my life of both positive changes, but also turbulent upheaval. Most notably, I had recently experienced the death of both parents. In the months that ensued, due to modest financial means, I was no longer able to keep myself in possession of a motor vehicle. This now, not only made it difficult for me to accomplish basic tasks of daily living – residing in a more rural area of Rhode Island – but left me as well unable to engage in many of my routine pursuits. One of which included my decades long hobby of photography – an outlet that most often brought me deep into the woods or alone by the ocean for hours. It was my stress management, my meditation, and my primary way of interacting with the world around me. It brought me both satisfaction and a sense of accomplishment, though it also largely isolated me throughout many of my days. Sometimes for the better, but oftentimes for the worse. Even if I didn't yet know it fully at the time.

Having lifelong depression, as well as Autism Spectrum Disorder, I tend to be more of an introvert by nature. At best, I consider myself selectively extroverted. Associating with larger groups of people doesn't come readily to me. Although I feel I have an ability to relate to near anyone on some level, it is a far more scattered and select group that I typically find deep trust and ease with. Opening up to people hasn't always come effortlessly to me.

But a curious thing happened when I joined Hillsgrove. From the moment I entered for my tour, I felt very welcomed and accepted. It didn't matter to people that my social skills were probably about as rusty as my state of being at that point. Having spent most of my life in Massachusetts but lived in Connecticut prior to the Ocean State – I knew what it felt like to be a fish out of water. Though self-admittedly a bit of an offbeat sort, I nevertheless wondered whether I would be accepted by Rhode Islanders. I hadn't much ventured an attempt in the decade fore. They nonetheless took my wry humor in stride. I never once felt like an outsider.

It didn't take me long to find my place. Being a proud product of the '80s, I grew up cooking for myself and others from a fairly young age. Much of my misspent time in high school was occupied by shadowing and assisting the resident chef of the establishment. He served not only as a mentor, but often as my de facto counselor, gruff and straightforward as he often was. Though I know, few people cared for me more. Many great memories were created there. So, it came as no surprise that the kitchen instantly felt like home to me.

In my three-year tenure thus far, I have rarely strayed from the food prep area for long. I make my morning rounds to greet everyone and will fill in as help where I can when able,

but know that at this point, I am considered a somewhat integral part of my chosen unit. My greatest joy has always come from caring for others, and there are few greater ways to do that than to help feed people.

This past summer though, with the support of Hillsgrove Clubhouse, I returned to the outside workforce, completing a successful duration of temporary employment at Old Navy in Warwick. Growing up, I had always wanted to work in retail at an indoor mall, and at the age of fifty-five I finally got my chance. My first formal job at the age of seventeen was working in a Toys 'R' Us, but somehow, in the age of online consumerism, this assignment felt special. I not only felt important, but I also rollicked in the nostalgia.

Though what made this whole experience particularly dear to me, was the freedom that both organizations gave me to transition socially in the process of being gainfully employed. And sadly, that is a truly rare thing for many people.

For I am a transgender woman. I have known such since the age of seven but rarely had much support in any sort of manner. Often quite the contrary. Without a doubt the greatest gift that both Hillsgrove and Gap, Inc gave me was the breadth and berth to be my true self. Though I had at last been medically transitioning for a few years, I had never felt safe enough to be myself in most social situations, and certainly never the workplace. There was one brave day in college, but that was it outside of exclusively LGBT circles. Though some had known from the near beginning, the day I came out to everyone at the clubhouse, I've rarely felt so supported and valued in my life. I never thought I would ever hear anyone tell me they were proud of me for being my truest self.

Hillsgrove isn't a place for me to pass time meaningfully or get a nutritious meal; it's the place I feel I've always meant to be. As if my whole life has been working up to this point. And for once, that's a truly great thing. The people at Hillsgrove aren't just my friends and family; they are far more than that. Everyone, members and staff are uniquely special, and I wouldn't be anywhere else for anything. A better lot of humanity you will not find. I urge you to please help us fund our future. I know there are many more lives yet to be transformed. Thank you. My deepest gratitude.

- Lianah R. Irwin

Clubhouses save lives. Statistically people with mental health issues are 30% less likely to be re-hospitalized when they belong to a clubhouse. There are 370 clubhouses world wide that offer hope to people living with mental illness.

My name is Karen Morra and I have been a member of Hillsgrove Clubhouse in Warwick, Rhode Island for nine years.

While Hillsgrove House acknowledges that I have mental illness, that is not the focus of the club.

Hillsgrove has made a huge impact on my life. Before coming to Hillsgrove I was isolating and drowning in my anxiety.

With the help of the clubhouse I have become a much more positive person. Knowing that there are people who believe in me even when I do not believe in myself is empowering.

I have gained many friendships during my time at the club and those friendships remain strong; whether we are going on a social or spontaneously meeting up.

During covid, a very isolating time, being part of a clubhouse became essential to my well being. Through zoom meetings, I was able to stay connected and it made the world feel a little less scary, like I still had control over something.

Members and staff at the clubhouse are also a huge support when someone is looking to go back to school. I am proud to say that with the help Hillsgrove House, I am recently celebrated five years at my current job(not bad for someone who thought she would never hold a job)This is all part of how the club helps us to become productive members of society.

With the help of the club I have learned that mental health does not define me. I have gone from believing that my life will just be a revolving door of hospital visits to realizing that my life can be more than that.

I am beginning to be proud of the life that I am living. While I might not be one hundred percent all of the time, that is ok because I know that I will always have the support of Hillsgrove House on this life long journey! "Once a member!"

I ask you to please pass bill H8417 for clubhouse funding.

Clubhouses really do save lives!!

Thank you,

Karen Morra

*Karen Morra*

West Warwick, Rhode Island

Good Afternoon,

I have been a lifelong resident of RI & work in the mental health field for over 30yrs. My first experience with chronic mental illness was when I was 16yrs. Old. My friend's mother was suffering from mental illness. I watched my friend struggle through high school because she had the responsibility of caring for her 5 siblings. If Hillsgrove House had existed then, what a difference it would have made in my friend's life. I decided then I was going to dedicate my life to helping people that suffered from chronic mental illness.

Hillsgrove Clubhouse is the first & presently only clubhouse in RI that has been assisting people with chronic mental illness to achieve their goals in life for the past 35yrs..

Hillsgrove provides members with meaningful daily work, assistance with going back to school, & with obtaining employment in the community. We offer job coaching to members on the worksite. Members & staff work together side by side at the clubhouse as colleagues. Hillsgrove clubhouse is a community of presently 167 active members not counting members that have independently moved on with their lives. These members know that they can always return to Hillsgrove Clubhouse because membership is for life.

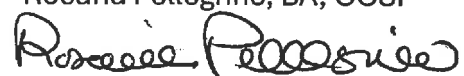
Hillsgrove Clubhouse also provides healthy adult lunches to our members. We have provided 12,000 lunches a year & we are open for the holidays. Members have a place to go for the holidays for those that don't have family and they know they are not alone.

Members are part of a community that supports them. Our annual Harvest Dinner is a traditional turkey dinner where all members, their friends, family, & people that support our community are invited to a holiday feast. This is a time of celebration for all the hard work members & staff do. Hillsgrove also provides social activities every month for members to socialize & build friendships instead of isolating at home. The clubhouse provides a strong community where members feel they belong & are needed. Hillsgrove has hundreds of success stories on how the clubhouse has changed the lives of people living with chronic mental illness. One that I would like to tell is of a member that had isolated in his home for 7yrs. His CM brought him to Hillsgrove Clubhouse. He began to attend Hillsgrove & engage in the work order day . He started to build friendships & no longer isolated at home. After a year, he completed temporary employment position at Old Navy. Recently his father passed away, instead of isolating at home, this member continued to attend Hillsgrove because he knows he is not alone, he is part of community that supports him.

Today, 1 out of 5 people will be diagnosed with chronic mental illness. Where will they go? How will they cope with feelings of loneliness? Will hospitalizations & homelessness increase? Please help Hillsgrove Clubhouse keep their doors open to help People that suffer from chronic mental illness find their road to recovery, be part of a community that

supports them & a future to succeed in life. Also did I mention that we have a great leader ( our director ) that ensures that all this is possible.

Rosaria Pellegrino, BA, CCSP

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Rosaria Pellegrino". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, prominent initial "R".

May 5, 2025

I am the mother of a young woman who has been dealing with mental illness for the majority of her life. She spent her high school years in either hospitals or group homes. While her peers spent those years learning life skills, social skills and making plans for their future; my daughter was trying to deal with maintaining personal safety every day.

When she left her last placement for the last time, my husband and I were "lost" in what to do for her now. Where and how do we help her get caught up with her peers. We "limped" along.

Seven years later we discovered Hills-grove House. What a game changer!! My daughter now has a purpose to her life. She has been able to maintain personal safety, her circle of friends has grown, she just celebrated 5 years of working at the same job part time and now has hope for the future.

A lot of this has been supported and encouraged through the staff and other members of the clubhouse. It has become an essential part of her support system.

which keeps her home and aides her in being a productive member of our society.

When she gets "down" I tell her she needs to spend a day at Hillsgrave. Coming home she's more upbeat and a happier person again.

Please find the money in the state budget to keep clubhouses going for the benefit of all connected to it.

Thank you for your time  
and consideration  
Sincerely,  
Jeanne Morra  
West Warwick