

POSITIVE PEER ~ Cathi Valdes

It was a lot to hold, in her body, in her mind, and in her spirit, those waves of depression that had a deep and pervasive grip on her for over 55 years. At age 13, Cathi experienced sexual assault and the resulting shame and confusion stayed with her all of those years and consistently effected her mental health. In the early sixties you didn't talk about things "like that" so her buried emotions led to struggles with depression, anxiety, self esteem, weight, and and worst of all, suicidal thoughts. She was tough enough to "just keep it together". You have to when you are raising a son and working a state job with the Human Services Department. But it was this state job that helped her eventually turn a corner. During a bout of deep depression and strong anxiety she decided she didn't want to go it alone anymore and she called the State Employee Assistance Program (EAP) and was referred to a therapist whom she started to see weekly. ***"It was so supportive and heartwarming to have that kind of support through my state agency and now it is my number one advice; don't be afraid to ask for help"***. It made a huge difference to her to be working with a therapist where she could explore all of the buried issues and emotions and work to set them free. She then started working for BHSD which was a very welcoming and understanding division that supported her mental health. She could take breaks as needed when she was struggling and maintaining good self care was understood.

She decided to retire just before she turned 70. This opened the door to her next adventure of service and she became a CPSW. Being involved in the Peer movement re-energized her as she clearly saw how much difference a peer worker made for others experiencing some of the same struggles she had gone through. She quickly became a CPSW Trainer and new pathways continued to open for her to apply her passions and sense of purpose. She was working for the Behavioral Health Planning Council when there was a threat of ending the Senior Jubilee program so she stepped in to keep it alive. She not only kept it alive, she made it thrive. She began to incorporate the SAMHSA's 8 Dimensions of Wellness in all of her programming and the seniors couldn't get enough. Cathi travels to rural areas throughout the state to uplift and support seniors with activities, simple tools, and special presentations that help them incorporate new ways to work wellness in to their lives. As a person in recovery she emphasizes the need to integrate all 8 dimensions of wellness for balanced mental health. Her work has been recognized by SAMHSA and she was invited to be a speaker on a SAMHSA webinar on Senior Care where she was able to present to over 670 people nationwide. One of the things she emphasized was the importance of identifying ourselves as community workers in public. She wears her branded OPRE t-shirt and vest regularly and she is always amazed how this makes her more approachable. Not only does this help people share their story with her, it also helps to break down the shame and stigma of substance use disorder and mental health issues.

Cathi has helped build the credibility of OPRE nationally with these efforts and is deeply grateful to Mark Garnand, Melisha Montañó and the team at BHSD for their support. With this ongoing backing and with funding from SAMHSA, Cathi is eager to offer the Certified Older Adult Peer Specialist Endorsement as soon as it is safe to gather again. In the meantime, during this pandemic crisis, she continues to apply the 8 Dimensions of Wellness in her own life to maintain her mental health and peace of mind. To learn more about the 8 Dimensions of Wellness go [HERE](#).

[Cathi Valdes Video Interview](#)