

You First Episode 29: Creating Community with Clubhouses

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Keith Casebonne: Welcome back to the You First Podcast. I'm Keith Casebonne, and thanks for joining us today. Let's start with a quick reminder to subscribe to the You First Podcast, which you can do anywhere you normally listen to podcasts, as well as our YouTube channel. More information available at disabilityrightsflorida.org/podcast.

When you hear the word "clubhouse," what do you think of? Many of us probably think about a building that's used by a club for whatever activities that club engages in, right? Whether that's a formal group or something you created for fun as a kid. If you're a member of a sports team, it's sometimes used as another name for the locker room.

A pro golfer probably thinks of the building at a golf course where they have the pro shop, the lockers, and more, but for somewhere between 500,000 and 1 million people with mental illness, they think of a clubhouse as a place to gather regularly to reduce isolation, gain important skills and resources, and is an integral part of recovery.

My three guests today will tell us more about these clubhouses. They are Debra Webb, executive director of the Key Clubhouse of South Florida, Amy McClellan, the president of the board of directors at the Key Clubhouse, and Alexander Lasa, a longtime member of the Key Clubhouse. Let's get started.

Thank you so much for being our guest today. Let's start with you, Debra. You're the executive director. Tell us a little bit about the Clubhouse you run, the Key Clubhouse of South Florida?

Debra Webb: The Key Clubhouse of South Florida is located in Miami-Dade County. We have served 657 people to date in the 11 years that we've been here. Basically, the model of the Clubhouse, which is an international model, is a social invention in psychosocial rehabilitation for people with mental illness. What does this mean?

The Clubhouse itself is an intentional community designed to create a restorative community for people that have been living with mental illness, and who have been socially and vocationally disabled because of their illness.

The Clubhouse as a goal is to help them achieve or regain the self-confidence that is needed and the skills necessary to lead vocationally productive and socially satisfying lives. That's it basically in a nutshell.

Keith: Interesting. Amy, you're the board chair. Tell us a little bit about the history and the progress the Clubhouse has made over the years?

Amy McClellan: The Clubhouse was started by a group of parents, including myself, who all have young adult children who have schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, major depressive disorder, schizoaffective disorder, those types of mental illnesses.

We decide together as a support group originally, and then we evolved into an action group because we've decided that there wasn't anything to help our kids whose lives had basically stopped. They've been disrupted. They have dropped out of school. They were isolated, depressed. They've lost their friends.

We were looking for something that would help restart their lives, and there wasn't anything like that out there, because taking medication doesn't reestablish social connections, help you go back to school, or back to work. Just by looking on the Internet, we found the clubhouse model.

Debra explained it's an international model. There is 300 clubhouses in over 30 countries around the world, and they all do the same thing. We visited a clubhouse in Pinellas Park called Vincent House. When we saw that, we realized that was what we needed in Miami.

Fortunately, the organization that helps all the clubhouses around the world called Clubhouse International has a training for laypeople to start a clubhouse in their community. We took that training, and we started a very small clubhouse in 2010. Long story short, 11 years later, our Key Clubhouse has grown.

In 2015, we hired Debra as our executive director, and she got us rocketed to a new level in terms of fundraising and employment opportunities for our members. Recently, we moved into this beautiful new 5,000 square foot facility, a new clubhouse, that's on the bottom floor of a supportive housing complex.

One of the most important needs for people with mental illness is to have stable affordable housing. This, we collaborated with a local supportive housing developer called Carrfour Supportive Housing. They were able to get financing to build this 80-unit apartment structure. 45 of our members are going to be living in supportive apartments above Clubhouse.

This is a project that we worked on for several years. Our new Clubhouse is beautiful. It's got a restaurant-quality kitchen, a video production room, tons of computers. We are going to have a small bank, all of which are going to be run by members and staff together.

We believe that this is the only type of clubhouse that's combined with supportive housing in the state in the same building and may actually be the only one in the nation. We don't know yet. We're very excited to have this opportunity that we're giving this service for free to the Miami-Dade community.

Keith: So much growth and only 11 years, that's very impressive. Alex, you're a longtime member. You've been a member for about five years. Correct?

Alexander Lasa: Sure, Keith. I'm going on six. It's been a long time. I've gained so much.

Keith: Definitely. What do you think of some of the new changes in these spaces? You live in one of the apartments, don't you?

Alexander: I sure do. First of all, I suffer from bipolar disorder. It's a mood disorder. It's a depressive state, up and down, manic episodes, and episodes where you're down. The Key Clubhouse has helped me in so many aspects, Keith. Not just a home, not just a new apartment, it's given me a sense of community. It's given me family. It's given me a job.

It's given me among those very important things, resources to bring myself back up to support myself. The new apartment is fantastic. It has all new appliances. It's brand new. I have to tell you, that has to be one of the key elements to making a person feel like a human being.

Keith: That's wonderful. That's great. Debra, tell us a little more in general about what a clubhouse is, and what the model is behind it? How it works?

Debra: The Key Clubhouse is a club. [laughs] As in all clubs, it belongs to those people in it who make it come alive. The participants, as you heard Alex and Amy saying are called members.

The model basically, and this is years and years of research around the world with people that are very experienced in mental illness and psychiatric rehabilitation, is the concept of being a member as opposed to a patient status is a more empowering designation if you will and gives folks a sense of belonging and being part of the significant community where they can make a difference.

It's one thing when you're getting medical treatment, which we think there is definitely a place for medical treatment. Obviously, your medications to keep you stabilized. To keep you significantly on the course and on the journey of recovery, you need to have more than just medication.

We are open like any other business, 8:30 to 5:00. We do weekends activities, and we're open during the holidays. What, basically, the Clubhouse does is it gives people an opportunity to come here and work.

Not just sit and do recreation, but to actually run the business of the Clubhouse like any business. We have a 9:30 morning meeting after coffee, and after speaking a little bit at the watercooler if you will like any other office.

Then we have our morning meeting of what we're going to do for the day. Then we have the lunch, and the members, to make the lunch, they do the shopping. They do the budgeting. Then we have an afternoon meeting to look at what's next, on what to do in the afternoon.

All of these little pieces together have been magically intertwined to create an environment of restoration and to create an environment of preparation for going out into the business world. Business world is not quite as loving and embracing as we are, but we prepare everybody to go out there and do the best they can and help them build their self-confidence to do that.

Keith: That's fabulous. This is an international model, right? This is all over the world?

Debra: Yes. It started in Manhattan in New York City in 1948, which is a very cool story, but it started in 1948 where there was no programs for people that were being released from the state

hospitals. It was developed with elements in mind to create a space where discrimination doesn't live.

We don't talk about the illness unless you want to. We don't have support groups. We're not therapy. We're here to create. We're here to work. We have an employment unit. We have a culinary unit. We have a video production center like Amy was saying. We have a communications unit. We now are going to have a thrift shop, a thrift closet.

This is all programmatic elements that are constructed in such a way to ensure that all members feel wanted and needed in the job at hand, so they feel the sense of responsibility, accomplishment, being needed, being valued. That goes a long way in one's recovery.

Keith: Yes, indeed, it does. Amy, what makes the clubhouse model so effective?

Amy: Debra described a lot of the elements that make it effective, but it's a community. She called it an intentional community.

In other words, people intentionally come together to support each other and to work together. That in itself is a powerful thing because it's not the patient-doctor relationship. We call each other -- even I do -- colleagues. People are colleagues, and members help train other members to do tasks in the clubhouse.

The staff trains members, the members train members. People work side by side on computers, preparing food in the culinary, working in the business unit, there's filing. There's a lot of tasks that have to be done, cleaning the clubhouse, everything is done as a community.

This is tremendously empowering for people who have been isolated and not accepted in their own social settings. We do an informal survey of our members every year, and we find out that 95 percent of people report that their self-confidence has improved.

Recently, even during the pandemic, we found out that 75 percent of members didn't have any hospital stays, or stays in a crisis unit. In non-pandemic years, it's much higher than that, like 85 percent, but the pandemic was very difficult for people with mental illness because we had to operate virtually for a while.

Our culture is different than other mental health organizations. We don't talk about mental illness in the clubhouse. It's talking about hopes and dreams, and it's a support system also because we also help people get access to other social services in terms of food stamps, bus passes.

Even if people are having trouble getting appointments, we have a relationship with the federally qualified healthcare center where people can go for medical services and psychiatric services. We serve as a home base for our members.

Keith: There's no cost to join?

Amy: No. We go out there, and we've raised money. We have a support from the county. We have a grant from the county. We get support from the State of Florida, Department of Children and Families. We also apply for grants, and we have benefit events. We have lots of individual donors acquired over the years who support our organization.

There's no cost for members. They do have to pay a small...We have very reduced-price lunches and breakfasts, which is part of running a clubhouse -- restaurant almost -- but it's a wonderful model. There's [laughs] nothing like it anywhere else.

Keith: I agree. It sure sounds like that. Alex, tell us a little bit about what you've gained by being a member of The Key Clubhouse.

Alexander: Sure. I used to isolate, and in 2015, I found myself very isolated. I had severed ties with family, I went through a divorce, I was very alone, and I started to reach out a little bit.

My sister found The Key Clubhouse online, and she told my mom...They started reaching out because they knew I wasn't doing well. She suggested that I go to The Key Clubhouse to do a tour. I went to the tour, and first of all, it gave me a place to socialize and to not feel alone, because this world can be very cold if you're alone on yourself.

It affects your mood, and you find yourself not being able to do anything to lift yourself out of that space. The clubhouse helped lift me out of that darkness. I did a tour, and I started attending. I was accepted into the clubhouse. I started going there on a daily basis. I almost started treating it like a job from 9:00 in the morning till 5:00 in the afternoon.

I got very involved in the communications department doing a newscast that we do there. We produce a newscast three or four times a week, at least when COVID wasn't around, we did. We decide things together. We run the club along with staff members.

Eventually, that devotion to the club led to a job with the State of Florida, Career Source of South Florida, which I've now been working approximately six years, the time I've been at the clubhouse.

Now, the culmination of it all is this wonderful apartment and the clubhouse on the first floor. We've been limited to our access to the clubhouse because of COVID, but we're all very looking forward to the clubhouse opening completely as it was before.

Keith: I'll bet. That's wonderful, and thanks for sharing all that with us. Debra, tell us a little bit about what a member does during the day. What's a typical day look like? Maybe some of the specific activities that are available.

Debra: Before I answer that specific question, I did want to add something to Alex and Amy that you asked.

"What makes the clubhouse unique, or so effective?" I think was your specific question. I always like to try to give people a different perspective, because it is very unique, it is very different, it plays a different role in the system of care of people with mental illnesses.

The clubhouse -- which is why I love it -- we meet that profound human desire to be needed, to feel as an important member of a meaningful group, and at the same time, we convey each member the sense of concern for all.

What Alex was saying is that -- and it's very similar to our other members -- they tend to isolate, they're by themselves, so they don't get to feel purposeful. When you wake up, people go to

work. They have responsibility, they're needed. That's what we do. We provide that piece, and the truth is it's not made up. The truth is it's real.

When we open up in the morning, the messages have to be gotten. A member goes to the phone in the reception area, gets the messages from the night before, people have to sign in. Now, with COVID, you have to take the temperature, you have to fill out the screening protocol, all of that. A member and a staff do that together.

Somebody has to open the snack bar. We make breakfast. A member comes in that's attached to the culinary. They're making bagels, coffee. Now that we have a larger facility, we're going to be doing a hot meal every morning.

The members come in and make breakfast. Somebody's gotta go to the bank and sell the tickets. We sell meal tickets. A member is back there with the staff selling the meal tickets, all for the preparation of, "OK, 9:30 is our morning meeting. Right now, it's 9:00 because we're in a hybrid."

Because of the pandemic, we're doing some communications virtually and some in person, but at 9:30, each unit has a unit meeting. We have a communication unit, a business unit, and a culinary unit. Each unit is having their same meeting at the same time of what's going to happen in that unit that day. Do you follow?

Keith: Yes.

Debra: In a corporation, you have department meetings -- department head meetings, or department meetings -- this is what our unit meetings are. Every morning at the same time, complete structure, so members know what to expect when they come in.

Then lunch is served, meal tickets are sold at the bank, members and staff go into the bank now and sell tickets. Then there's members back in the kitchen making the lunch. There's members serving the lunch like a restaurant.

It looks like a business, and this is very hard to give you the picture verbally. It's great if people would be interested in coming and touring the facility at a safe time, so you can see us in action, what it looks like. Everybody's working. Very dynamic culture, very dynamic field.

They know they're expected to work and they're needed, and they've got to be responsible because people are counting on them for lunch, or people are counting on them for their meal tickets, or people are counting on them.

We have to do attendance for our funders, everything the members are involved in from top to bottom. We don't do anything, and as the executive director, I don't make all the decisions. We have house meetings. Right, Alex?

Alexander: Mm-hmm.

Debra: We have house meetings, and we talk about issues that some people bring up that's not working like, "We're not doing enough socials, or the business unit doing the attendance on time." They become very quality improvement-oriented. Our organization's very

quality-oriented. If the food is not right, or they want different food, they bring it up in the house meeting.

If they want something from the communications, we do a WKEY broadcast. If somebody wants to make suggestions on different improvements in the broadcast, they bring it up at the house meeting. These are all things like any community would do. It's a club, and they own it. We are working side by side. The staff is no different than the members.

Keith: I love that model. What about recreation or social events? What are some of those...?

Alexander: Sure. We do all types of things. We go to museums. A couple of years ago, we went to Art Basel, which is an art festival here in Miami. We've been to the Perez Museum. We go to the movies. We go to the bowling alley. We go to the parks. We go to the beach. We do all sorts of things together.

Debra: We go to Midtown...What's it called?

Alexander: Wynwood.

Debra: Wynwood, where all the art is. Miami is rich in cultural art stuff. I think all clubhouses try to embrace the community's recreational activities, and I think we're lucky in that way.

Alexander: I have to say, the Clubhouse is open even on major holidays like Christmas Day, Thanksgiving, Halloween. The staff comes in, and a lot of times we organize a meal. We organize a party.

To keep people from isolating, we organize things on days which, quite honestly, they should have off. They come in. We put things together to keep people from being alone on those sometimes very difficult holidays.

Keith: A lot of dedication there for sure.

Debra: I've been working in clubhouses for 11 years. I started in Fort Myers. In the last 11 years, my Thanksgiving has always been at a clubhouse. 11 years. Before that, it was like, "We go out with the family," but now it's Clubhouse.

The thing is that's the most loving place to be during the holidays because everybody is so happy to be together and truly grateful. This year is going to be real special, period.

Keith: As I imagine, last year, in front of the holidays, y'all couldn't do those same things.

Debra: Last year, we catered the Thanksgiving dinner to all of our members. Then we did a Zoom at their Thanksgiving together. Remember, Alex? We all delivered the meals. Amy delivered meals. Board members delivered meals. Then we all got on a Zoom together. It was interesting, but hopefully, we're OK.

Keith: Oh, wow. Pandemic can't stop y'all. That's for sure.

[laughter]

Keith: That's wonderful. Alex, tell me a little bit more about what your typical day looks like some of the activities that you'll do on any random given day. You've mentioned the communications work and the broadcasting. What are some other things you engage in?

Alexander: Keith, it's been a while now that I've been working for Career Source. At least three days a week, I work part-time. I go into Career Source where I help people apply for benefits. Right now, it's unemployment benefits. You can imagine COVID has produced a huge hole in the employment system. A lot of people are claiming benefits.

Now, in turn, after Key Clubhouse helps me, I help people with life situations. They need money for rent. They need money to feed their families. Now, I help them achieve a little bit of support to Career Source. First of all, from about 8:00 in the morning to about 1:00 in the afternoon, I go to Career Source three days a week, and I help people file for unemployment.

On a typical day, then I'll come back home, I'll grab something to eat, and go down to the club. Right now we are setting up the new Clubhouse. We're getting new equipment for the communications department, the video room, all that has to be put together.

Typically, years ago, before COVID, I would come in, go into the communications department. We would research a new script. We would have people research the weather, sports, social events, entertainment news. We would have one member research a topic. Then he would write a script. We would film the script.

We would edit the video, and then produce a video of the WKEY Newscast, which will be presented to the Clubhouse at lunchtime the next day. That will take up the rest of the afternoon. The Clubhouse is opened, I believe, from 9:00 to 5:00.

Keith: As we mentioned, there is hundreds of clubhouses across the world, not just in Florida or even the United States. How does someone find and join a clubhouse, Debra?

Debra: You can call 305-693-3508. You can go on our website, www.keyclubhouse.org. If you're not in the Miami area, you can also look up online Clubhouse International, which will list all the clubhouses around the world. Like I said, that's out in New York, but we've got them in Hawaii, in Michigan, in Ohio, in California, a couple in New York. They're all over.

There's 200 of us in the United States. We're also in France, in Italy, in Sweden, in Norway. Japan has a few clubhouses. You can go to Clubhouse International. You can look us up. I can certainly help somebody find another clubhouse, and/or we have the Florida Clubhouse Coalition. We've got 10 clubhouses in the state of Florida.

The Key Clubhouse is going to be the only one of its kind with housing on top of the clubhouse. We've got some wonderful clubhouses in Florida and a very strong coalition.

Keith: That's wonderful. Even though we're the Disability Rights Florida podcast, there's a lot of people that listen outside of Florida, and believe it or not, the other parts of the world. It's good to know that there's those resources out there and that even wherever they are, there might just be a clubhouse near them. That's wonderful.

Thank you guys so much. This has been very informative, and learned a lot about clubhouses today, and especially the Key Clubhouse. Thank you guys so much for being my guests. I appreciate it.

Debra: Thank you, Keith.

Alexander: Thank you.

Amy: Thank you, Keith.

Keith: Thank you. Thanks again to Debra, Amy, and Alex for being my guest today. You can learn more about the Key Clubhouse of South Florida at keyclubhouse.org. To learn more about clubhouses in general, or to find one of the nearly 300 clubhouses in the world, visit Clubhouse International at clubhouse-intl.org.

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