

## Gate City: Breaking through the stigma of mental illness

Cynthia Whitaker was in the last semester of her doctoral program in psychology 20 years ago when a freak accident changed her understanding of mental health and altered an already promising career path.

Whitaker, who was named president and CEO of Greater Nashua Mental Health on Tuesday, was driving through a snowstorm when a young driver lost control of his father's SUV and plowed into her. "I ended up in a wheelchair, had to have people help me cook and clean. I couldn't navigate stairs to the upstairs bathroom," she recalls.



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In a recent presentation to the Greater Nashua Chamber of Commerce, Whitaker described how the trauma transformed her from someone providing mental health services to someone needing them. "I found myself having anxiety, flashbacks, unable to work on my dissertation, and honestly at times even suicidal."



Cynthia Whitaker is president and chief executive officer of Greater Nashua Mental Health.

Courtesy

“When I think back on it, that was really a pivotal time for me, and it’s how I ended up where I am today,” says Whitaker, who had been leading the nonprofit as interim CEO since July. “I was suffering with PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) in silence because there I was, in school to be a healer, thinking, ‘I can’t need healing!’”

In the ensuing years, she rose through the ranks at the mental health agency, always with a focus on de-stigmatizing mental illness, and reminding those around her that the people who save others often need to be saved themselves. “I truly wouldn’t be here in the role that I’m in, functioning the way that I do, if I hadn’t finally broken through that stigma,” she said.

Whitaker is well-qualified to bring that message to residents of the Gate City and beyond, as Greater Nashua Mental Health celebrates its 100th anniversary this fall. The agency evolved from modest public health origins in the 1920s, monitoring street cars for sanitation, teaching citizenship and English to new immigrants and helping with “fresh air camps” that brought urban kids for respite in rural New Hampshire.

In 1963, President Kennedy signed into law the Community Mental Health Act, which called for the creation of community mental health centers to get people out of the hospitals and back into the community. “We’ve been a community mental health center ever since there was such a thing,” says Whitaker.

Nashua’s mental health center is one of 10 such organizations across the state, each with its own niche. “Our deaf services program makes us different,” says Whitaker. “We partner with the nine other centers to support anyone who is deaf or hard of hearing in their region.”

The Nashua center also serves as the treatment center for defendants in the Nashua Drug Court, offers a “first episode psychosis” program for young people, and has fulltime staff fluent in Spanish and American sign language.

As of Nov. 1, Greater Nashua Mental Health began providing mobile health crisis services in Nashua. The mobile unit is one of three required under the terms of a 2014 legal settlement between the state and the New Hampshire Disability Rights Center, known as the Community Mental Health Settlement Agreement. The other two are in Concord and Manchester.

Greater Nashua Mental Health and other agencies like it will have a big role to play as the state starts to implement the recommendations of the governor’s Commission on Law Enforcement Accountability and Transparency, one of which calls for mental health professionals to be embedded with tactical police units on emergency calls that involve people in a mental health crisis.

And when the new 988 number for mental health emergencies goes live in 2022, that role will become even more significant.

“Our ultimate goal is that people will call us when the police don’t need to be involved, and if we get to the situation, we can help determine if police need to come or not,” says Whitaker.

New Hampshire once had a community-based system of mental health services that was the envy of most other states, but that hasn't been the case in recent years. Thanks to organizations like Greater Nashua Mental Health and the Disability Rights Center, we are slowly starting to claw our way back.

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