

## MESSAGE FROM OUR CEO



As cliché as it might sound, there really is a feeling of newness and excitement about the start of a new year. It's the perfect backdrop to build upon the past and chart out hopes and goals for the coming year. As we settle into our second year at the Delmar Divine location, I'm happy to say there's a lot of forward-looking energy at MHA-EM.

We continue to deepen our commitment to the mental health of children and adolescents by expanding our PEACE (Preventing the Effects of Adverse Childhood Experiences) Clinical Program and our Student Wellness Program. Embracing our core B4Stage Philosophy and adding staff with expertise in specialized modalities are two ways we demonstrate the "why" behind our existence. Our "why" is grounded in data that show how early intervention and treatment give kids the best opportunity to thrive at crucially important developmental stages and in later life.

PEACE's intentionally-timed strategies help the child and the family interrupt and mitigate the negative impact of factors that lead to poorer health – both physical and mental – and diminished opportunities at later stages in life. These strategies and interventions help create stronger parent-child bonds, increase positive childhood experiences, and generate a ripple effect that spreads through the family and into other critical spheres of the child's development. Celebrating with our first family to have completed the PEACE Program was a special moment for our team. It clearly reinforced our belief in the power of helping families upstream, before behaviors and symptoms are more difficult and costly to treat.

Our Student Wellness Program - which occurs in the school setting - continues to grow. It provides early assessment, outreach to parents, fast access to clinical treatment, and follow-up from MHA staff. We are grateful for all the schools, agencies and providers who partner with us to make the program so far-reaching and successful.

As always, visit [mha-em.org](http://mha-em.org) to learn more about and access all of our programs, find educational articles on mental health conditions, strategies for living with a mental illness and/or supporting loved ones, prescription assistance, and more.

My hope for you and your family is the new year is starting off well but know that if you or your child is struggling with a mental health concern, we are here to help!

Sincerely,

Suzanne King, President & CEO



Filming our Agency Video



Staff Holiday Party



Boys & Girls Club Halloween



Navigate STL Back to School



St. Charles Community Services Summit



Ballpark Village Movie Night

# BREAKING STIGMA, BUILDING HOPE

December 1, 2023 was a night to remember! Over 300 individuals and 23 companies attended our Ring Out Hope Gala at the Four Seasons- St. Louis and raised over \$240,000.

We kicked off the night with a cocktail hour, guests shared their personal connections to mental health on our “Why Wall”, explored the new Giving Tree raffle and socialized. Our supporters packed the ballroom for an uplifting program showcasing our new agency video, passionate speakers, a live auction, and an encouraging impact video. The video followed the journey of a 4-year-old, J.J. and his family as they benefited from our clinical program, demonstrating the positive effects of our PEACE (Preventing the Effects of Adverse Childhood Experiences) Clinical Program on both children and their families mental health. At the after-party, we celebrated the event’s success by dancing the night away to the music of Down Time while enjoying chocolate shakes and Red Hot Riplet French fries.

The proceeds from Ring Out Hope makes a significant difference in the lives of people who need mental health

support. It contributes to life changing supports, such as, free individualized therapy for families with children birth through age 18, providing an institutional payee through our Rep Payee Program and mental health screenings of hundreds of school aged children. Contributions are also directed to ending the stigma that surrounds mental health conditions, which ultimately leads us to our dream to build a community and empower people by revitalizing our approach to mental health support... one life at a time.

As our President & CEO, Sue King, mentioned that night, “**at the core of our work, our focus has always been finding light in the darkness, and most importantly holding hope, especially for those who can’t see the light. Hope is the belief that no matter how difficult the present may be, a brighter tomorrow is not only possible but within reach. Thank you for showing that when our families can’t see tomorrow, you actively hold the hope and that hope is contagious.**”



## BELL OF HOPE AWARD



We were honored to present our 2023 Bell of Hope award to LaDonna Haley who retired earlier this year, but not before making a lasting impact on the behavioral health field and countless lives. LaDonna began her career in 1993 as a young, passionate social worker who wanted to help those living with mental health conditions, along with

the professionals and caregivers supporting them. In her early career, LaDonna managed a column published in The Globe Democrat called “Open Mind” .She went on to help create the curriculum for the Crisis Intervention Program that is currently being used to train St. Louis City and County police officers. Over the course of 21 years, she trained over 2,300 officers.

Additionally, LaDonna single handedly managed the MHA-EM Helpline for 30 years before it ended. She helped tens of thousands of people who called in crisis, or who were looking for mental health resources for themselves or a loved one. LaDonna’s contributions to the field have helped reduce stigma surrounding mental health and have helped improve the way our community assists those in crisis.



# Understanding Mental Health Occupational Therapy: An Interview with Madeline Contreras, OTR/L

## What is occupational therapy (OT) and how is it specialized for children's mental health?

In OT, our goal is to help people do the things they want and need to do, engaging in both meaningful and even mundane daily activities. That could include participating in your own self-care, such as getting yourself dressed or feeding yourself in the morning, to more complex things like going to work or to school. In mental health OT, we work on how mental health conditions or traumatic experiences impact a child's ability to do those activities. We use different strategies to help kids engage in life in ways that are meaningful to them. That might include using sensory-based strategies to find effective coping skills or creating environments that are conducive to being able to complete tasks, like helping kids create a space that feels safe or helping to develop routines.



## How would a parent know that mental health OT is the right approach?

If someone's child is having difficulty regulating their emotions or managing symptoms of mental health conditions such as anxiety or depression, and those challenges are interfering with their ability to engage in the activities that make up childhoods, then OT can be a great option.

What makes OT different from more traditional mental health therapy, is that we are actively doing the things that are challenging for kids and their parents during our sessions. If a child is having trouble engaging in play, then we work on play. Caregivers can learn to help their children manage their emotions and practice coping skills through a back-and-forth playful interaction. If it's the morning routine that is the most challenging for a family, I can come in the mornings, and we walk through that routine together and try different supports and strategies. OT is all about 'doing' and supporting the child so that they are successful in the activities and environments that are meaningful to their family.

## How long do sessions last?

Sessions are typically 45 minutes to an hour. We work together as long as it takes to meet your goals which are chosen by the family. I spend time talking with the caregivers and the child about their current challenges and what they hope to be able to do in the future.

## Where do OT sessions take place?

One thing that's important in OT is addressing issues in environments where they take place. Whether that's at home, in school, the grocery store, or anywhere out in the community. There's a lot of flexibility to be able to meet clients where the need is so we can practice skills in a meaningful context.

## What inspires you when working with kids?

I love it when I can help families find those joyful moments together. Caregivers often put pressure on themselves to make every interaction with their child a learning opportunity. Those times when I'm able to take the pressure off caregivers and show them that just engaging in play with your child and enjoying your child has so many wonderful benefits for their development, including their ability to manage their own emotions when you're not around and build their self-esteem.

I remember there was one parent doing a Play Doh activity with their toddler and she looked at her kid and said, "You're a lot of fun, we're going to play more often." I just love hearing things like that!



## The Vital Importance of Trauma Therapy for Children

Our newest therapist, Natalie Williams, specializes in TF-CBT. Trauma focused cognitive behavioral therapy (TF-CBT) is designed for children/adolescents and their caregivers to help them learn coping skills and guide families through the trauma to a place of healing. TF-CBT aims to reduce children’s posttraumatic stress symptoms by helping them process their traumatic experience and learn to manage emotions. Natalie joined MHA-EM in October and is already carrying a full case load, this demand goes to show just how vital FREE mental health support is in our community and speaks to the need.

Natalie graduated from UMSL with her MSW. She is a mother of three boys (and two cats) and loves spending time outdoors in the city at the zoo and botanical gardens.

If you were inspired reading our newsletter, please consider making a donation to help us continue to provide this life-changing services.



**THE BELL**  
WINTER 2024

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