

# VolunPEER of Roseland provides peer-led mental health support to those in need



**ROSELAND** - The outpouring of support her family received from the community after a fire destroyed their house on Thackery Drive in March 2022 led Cherie Castellano to create a peer support organization.

The Roseland Volunteer Fire Department rescued their two dogs trapped in the flames, [including one named Bruiser](#) who received cardiopulmonary resuscitation and oxygen to keep her alive during the incident. Fire Chief Rich Loveless, Assistant Chief Perry Lee and the firefighters who responded that day were rewarded with [a commendation by the Borough Council](#) last September.

Castellano said she and her family knew they wanted to do more for those who helped them piece their life back together. She decided to put her 25 years of experience as a trauma psychologist helping first responders work through their mental health issues and her husband's background in law enforcement to work - thus, VolunPEER was born.

At its core, the purpose of the new nonprofit, which opened its first center in Roseland this past November, is to provide peer mental health support to people in need, free-of-charge.

Castellano said the way it works is volunteers are trained by licensed professionals on how to provide peer support. Once they have passed their training, they will be paired up with groups or individuals looking to improve their mental health with shared life experiences.

For example, a police officer would meet with a police officer trained in peer support.

She said the service is open to disaster survivors, first responders, trauma survivors and specialty groups like clergy members, those who work in a field involving people with special needs, college students, athletes, and LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer) individuals.

VolunPEER trained nearly 80 people during the past year, including members of the Red Cross, breast cancer survivor groups and other nonprofits.

"Everybody loved it," Castellano said. "The reviews were amazing."

She said the plan is to partner with the Roseland Public Library and other area organizations to put on programs starting in January centered around using peer support to address mental health.

### **Addressing An Unspoken Need**

Castellano said she had a feeling the idea of a peer support center in the area would be successful, but she did not realize just how much.

She said a lot of people are finally waking up to the idea of taking stock of their own mental health and bolstering the camaraderie lost during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"I have this overwhelming feedback from people saying, 'Somebody's got to talk about mental health, somebody's got to bring us together, everybody was so isolated during Covid, let's start to community build, let's start to work together,'" she said. "I think that's amazing."

Mayor James Spango was very supportive of VolunPEER opening up a center in town. Thomas O'Bierne, an Essex Fells resident who is very involved in the Roseland community and owns a business in town, was able to provide office space.

Castellano said a lot of people came up to her during Roseland Day, where she and her team had a booth, and opened up about their struggles.

She said the way she thinks about recovering from trauma is that it is more about growth from the experience.

"You can actually come through a traumatic event...if you have a good sense of yourself and a strong series of relationships and a belief in a higher power," she said. "It's not that it doesn't hurt to go through difficult times. We all don't want to be broken, but that you might end up better.

"Trauma provides an opportunity for you to sort of see what you're made of and see your resilience and recover and have a new normal where you're a better version of yourself," she continued.

Peer support to her, she said, is about focusing on people's strengths during their recovery from a traumatic experience.

With all of the positivity surrounding VolunPEER since its initial launch, Castellano said she is looking forward to being able to host group sessions at the office, starting in January.



### **Fire Department Honored Again**

VolunPEER held its first gala, celebrating trauma survivors, on Friday, Nov. 17, at the Highlawn Pavilion in West Orange.

One of the groups recognized was the Roseland Fire Department for their rescue efforts during the Castellano's house fire, and their countless contributions to the community.

Cherie Castellano said the entire department has more than 350 years of combined experience in the department, and honoring them with an award was a way to showcase how integral the organization is to Roseland.

Assistant Chief Lee has been with the organization for 39 years himself.

He said the department was "very humbled" to be recognized for its work.

"All the members on this department, when we signed up, we took an oath to serve the community, to preserve and protect life," he said. "That's why we do this and not for any recognition. This is what we signed up for. We're glad to do this."

The other award recipients included Ed and Sue Goldstein of Warren, founders of the Stacey Goldstein Breast Center at Overlook Hospital and emergency patient support fund for breast cancer patients enduring financial hardships; Valerie Velasquez-Stetz, a September 11, 2001 responder survivor from the Jersey City Police Department and current World Trade Center Outreach Director for Barasch & McGarry Law Firm based in New York City; and Dr. Genevive Kumapley, president and founder of the New Jersey-based nonprofit MyGOAL Autism and VolunPEER board member.

Castellano said she is already anticipating an even bigger and better event next year.

For more information about how to get involved with VolunPEER, visit <https://volunpeer.us>, call (551) 312-7578 or email [volunpeer4u@gmail.com](mailto:volunpeer4u@gmail.com).

