Staying H.O.P.E.ful with AFSP,

AHRC, Citizens, and BCCS

By Kate Zimmerman, AHRC Nassau POM Department

Team Stay; H.O.P.E.ful

Left to right: Joe Cariello (front), Bridget Cariello, Kristine Jones, Kate Zimmerman (Team Captain), Lorien Longo, Samantha Rodonis, Michelle LaSpina, Joe LaSpina.

I was assisting in setting up for The Day of Community Engagement at Wheatley Farms during COMPASS validation week, helping our community partners get their materials ready for the day. That's where I met and spoke with Dennis Duka from The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP), who told me about the walk and suggested I create a team.

So that's what I did. Later that day, Stay; H.O.P.E.ful was born. The name is a combination of all the things I needed to hear when I was trapped in the darkness: **Stay;** your story doesn't end here, and H.O.P.E. - **H**old **O**n **P**ain **E**nds. A Google image search and a PowerPoint slide later, my team had a logo and was ready to go.

I shared the link to my Facebook page and within minutes Team Stay: H.O.P.E.ful had its first members. While this was not a work-related event, I wanted to include as many people from AHRC as possible in the day. I finally got the help I needed through our employee assistance program and had chosen to make the call instead of giving into the darkness because of the kind words from a highly respected coworker when I was at my lowest. If AHRC was going to be a part of the journey, they were going to be a part of the whole journey. It was only May, and even though the walk was still months away, the folks at AHRC did what they always do; they showed up. Donations came in from departments across the entire family of organizations, from members of executive management to self-advocate leaders, friends and family.

On October 26, AFSP hosted its annual Out of the Darkness Walk at Jones Beach. Nearly 2 years after seeking help through our employee assistance program, I finally felt strong enough to not only share my story, but to help look for others still stuck in the dark. I walked with the support of Samantha Rodonis, Bridget and Joe Cariello from AHRC, Lorien Longo, Michelle and Joe LaSpina from Citizens Options Unlimited, and Kristine Jones from Brookville Center for Children's Services. Together as Team Stay; H.O.P.E.ful we were able to raise $785 for suicide prevention.

On the day of the walk, we met at Jones Beach, some of us for the first time, and took part in the honor bead ceremony demonstrating that no matter where you may be on your journey, you are never alone and there is an entire community of people ready and willing to help. It was an impactful day for me in many ways, but there was one moment that went straight to my heart.

Lorien and I held the team banner as we walked and, on occasion, had to pause briefly for people to read and truly absorb its entire message. At one such stop as we were heading back to the main event area, a fellow walker stopped to read the banner and began to cry. She looked at us and said "Absolutely. People can't see that it is a permanent solution to a temporary problem. Staying hopeful means staying alive." We shared tears and heartfelt embraces of support. As we began to part ways I handed her a keychain with our team logo, smiled and said, "we'll see you next year". She held the keychain to her chest with both hands and mouthed "Thank you."

It was at that moment that Stay; H.O.P.E.ful did exactly what I had hoped it would do; it served as a light for someone experiencing the dark. It was also at that moment that my journey became bigger than me and Stay; H.O.P.E.ful became a permanent part of it all.

The walk is over, but the fundraising is not. The online team fundraising pages stay open through the end of the year. When the date for Out of the Darkness 2026 is released and the captain registers, the page re-opens.

Stay; H.O.P.E.ful is here to stay.

Scan the QR code to join or donate to Team Stay; H.O.P.E.ful in support of The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention

Resources:

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention: AFSP.org

Suicide and Crisis Prevention Hotline: 988

National EAP: nationaleap.com 1-800-624-2593