

# Lehigh Valley Story Telling Projects 2021



# Table of Contents

3	-- Taylor Verrekia
4-5	-- Roberto Rosario
6-7	-- Kylie Ridley
8	-- Julia Maruscak
9-12	-- Emily Perruso

## Alliance Program Read All About It

Alliance hall began 26 years ago when people needed food when they were out of school. It is for the city kids of Allentown ages 7-13. You can hear about the program through word of mouth, through the school districts, and flyers. One. They have had hundreds of children come, and it use to be five days, but is now 4 days. The true Alliance bureau feeds children and a gave them a little activity to run around at the Alliance site. They eat the lunch on the floor and do activates at gym. The Alliance program kept grew after each year until it outgrew the original site. Recreation programs needed more sites. The camp had breakfast and lunch and it also was a full day when the schools opened up their doors. It is a safe, fun, and free program for kids that can't pay for camps. The camp feeds children and give them time to play allowing the kids to go to the pool. It has a wounder fall staff and a place for kids to grow. There is lots of comrade with kids and staff with different backgrounds. Everyone has a role model for each other. What makes Alliance Hall camp so special is the growth within the camp. A boy was terrible and was ready to age out but then later become the best counselor for the kids. This program never gives up on kids and gives the opportunity for people get to truly bond with everyone involved.

JHG has lived in Allentown, PA since she immigrated from Vietnam as a teenager and proudly declared that this is her home. JHG states she is one of too many grieving mothers in Allentown experiencing "a parent's worst nightmare."

Her life was changed 9 years ago on August 24, 2012 when her son, K, was slain. He was shot 7 times in his bed at home and discovered in a pool of his own blood by JHG when she came home from work at 4:00 AM. The horrific execution made the tragic state of Allentown real to JHG. At the time, JHG said her son had been involved in a gang for at least a year and more actively in the months before his killing. She said she didn't condone his involvement, but she believed he did not bring it home with him. On this unfortunate night, he didn't have a choice.

It's a tragic story that is all too common in this locale: A hard working family that struggles to make ends meet, a youth left to their own devices, and dangerous illegal activities that result in pain and heartbreak for everyone involved.

Any family would struggle to manage the grief caused by the untimely loss of a loved one. JHG's situation was made even more difficult because of her son's gang affiliation. She joined support groups for families who had lost children, but felt outcast when they learned the circumstances of K's death. She sought help from the police to find justice for her son, but couldn't get answers. At every turn, she felt that the world dismissed her even though she was afflicted by the same pain that any other mother could feel. Throughout it all she was steadfast that she would seek her son's killer and do it the **right** way. She spoke out against violence and publicly broadcast that revenge shootings would not be right to remember her son. She was committed to the criminal

justice process even though her son's case would go unsolved for nearly 7 years. JHG believes that her son's case was given insufficient attention as a result of systemic disregard for people of color by police as well as stigma against victims of gang violence. JHG fought to push for a thorough investigation into her son's murder. After seeing the lack of attention her son's case was given, she knew she had to take matters into her own hands. She drove the investigation herself, obtained private investigators, evidence and witnesses to discover her son's murder and support a case to lead to his successful conviction. Weeping and trembling with anger, JHG shouted across the courtroom at the man who killed K, imploring him to look her in the eye. "You killed the wrong kid." Today, she is adamant that the criminal justice system should strive to treat all victims of crime with dignity and respect, regardless of the circumstances.

It's a horrific crime: the killing of a child. And in Allentown, it's been repeated again and again. The deceased leave behind scores of grieving relatives thus perpetuating a cycle of violence that credible messengers like JHG strive to disrupt. It's her pain that compels JHG to push past her "selfish" moments, when she just wants to hole up in her home, and get back into the community to help kids like her son. JHG says that her son was not only the victim of murder, but the victim of a system that ignored and abused him until he had nowhere to turn except the streets. Today she is a credible messenger working with Promise Neighborhoods of the Lehigh Valley's Zero Youth Violence initiative. She has dedicated herself to the mission of helping the youth of Allentown find a sense of hope, a sense of belonging, and a sense of agency.

"The hope," she said, "is that that K has the power to change lives."



## “Mothers Stand Together “

Interview write up:

She has lived in Allentown since she was a teenager, and she now works as a credible messenger with Promise Neighborhoods of the Lehigh Valley. In 2012 her 17-year-old son was tragically and violently murdered. She found him in his bed after being shot multiple times. It was determined to be gang related. She went on to discuss that his death was a product of systematic issues, and that there were multiple points in his life where adults could have interrupted the process. After several years, the investigation eventually went on the back burner. She took matters into her own hands and brought his killer to justice herself – she put herself in situations that were uncomfortable and unsafe. This took 5 years and 11 months. She is still working on the appeal process to this day.

Her work at PNLV is work of passion and purpose. She wants to prevent another mother from experiencing what she has experienced. She has founded her own support group “Mother to Mother” which is a support group for mothers who have lost their children due to drug overdose, suicide or gun violence. She founded this after feeling judged by other moms in other support groups, and wanted to provide a safe space for people in all different types of situations.

On a deeper level, she explained that she wanted to show families that grief and pain often leads to healing. If grief/trauma at this level remains unhealed, or it can rip families apart. She was determined to hold her family together and ultimately extremely successful at turning the situation around for herself and giving back to her community in an extremely impactful way. She is now working on starting a sibling support group for the younger family members that may be impacted by these types of traumas.

## “Beyond the Walls”

When asked how healthcare providers can take better care of their patients, the person I interviewed suggested looking beyond the walls of the hospital, into the community. The interviewee, who lost her teenage son to gun violence, is an advocate for the people in her community. She mentioned both a positive experience with a healthcare provider and negative experience with a different healthcare provider surrounding her son's death, and came to the conclusion that all healthcare workers should familiarize themselves with the community they serve. She described the support group she started, which allows parents to grieve for the stigmatized loss of their children and the youth-violence prevention program she works for. She also described the significance of a graduation, as many sacrifices are made for students to receive their diploma. Together with her community, she works through her trauma and fights for the future of her city.



# *Intern Weekly Digest*

Interviews with Casa Guadalupe & Alliance Hall Summer Camp Staff Members. . . by Emily Perruso



## Everything is Connected!

Phoebe

Connectedness seemed to be the overarching theme during my interview with Phoebe, Education Coordinator of cohort 9 (2nd - 8th grade) at Casa Guadalupe in Allentown. As Phoebe stated, “This is the place for thinking outside the box. We provide enrichment activities, as well as health clinics, WIC information, programs for expecting moms, after-school programs for kids and a senior program.” She emphasized that there is a sense of community at Casa Guadalupe and in some cases, it’s the only place where kids get a meal and see other people outside their immediate family. It’s a place where healthy relationships are built. Casa has helped participants displaced from hurricanes in Puerto Rico and has helped to restore electricity to families shut off by the electric company.

Phoebe pointed out that kids want to be better, graduate from high school, get a job and that Casa is the place where kids want to come back to. The program is so inspiring that one of the participants who started in 3rd grade is still participating as a high school student.

Phoebe described how the struggles during the pandemic were magnified for the participants at Casa because it had to be shut down. She was most concerned about ensuring that the children were safe and that their needs were being met. Plus, Casa is a safe place to be. Her concerns were eased a bit when the YMCA provided lunch meals and Casa provided a drive-by for families to gather food as well.

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## We're all in the same storm, just in different boats

Andrea

Andrea is the Education Coordinator, Instructor at Casa Guadalupe. She was quick to point out that most people don't realize that Casa Guadalupe is a multifaceted social organization with a lot of close knit ties with other community partners. Her enthusiasm and dedication were evident while she described her role as an education coordinator. She said, "You are chosen to be here and influence the lives of the kids and their families and it's very humbling when you discover that." Andrea went on to say, "There is always a zeal to get things done in a timely manner."

The entire staff was challenged during the pandemic to come up with creative ways to help their community, as well as innovative ideas to use technology. Like everyone else, Casa used Zoom to connect with kids. On a personal level, Andrea shared that nearly every member of the Casa community knew someone who was lost to Covid.

Andrea wanted to make sure to focus on the "real" needs of the families and how to help them overcome their fears and anxiousness of the pandemic. She proclaimed, "It's a time of restoration, which is to remind the kids of who they are and who we are and that you are there for them because we're all going through this together and we need to move beyond making assumptions and generalizations about people." Andrea finished the interview with a familiar quote by author Damian Barr, "We are all in this storm, the same storm, but we are in different boats."

Click [HERE](#) to learn more on the Casa Guadalupe website





## Twenty six years in the making

Tina

Started 26 years ago to find places to feed children between the ages of 7-13 during the summer/recreation program, Alliance Hall Summer Camp filled a tremendous need within the Allentown community. Tina is a nutrition and physical activity manager at the Allentown Health Bureau. She describes the camp as a “safe and fun place for the kids” and each year more and more kids show up for the program. Tina pointed out that the “wonderful and diverse” camp staff is what makes the community so great. She noted that some current staff members even attended the camp during their youth.

In order to keep the program running, Tina often needs to raise funds for activities like swimming, as well as finding much needed staff for the summer. Some of the summer staff members come from Bridging the Gap interns, United Way, 6th Street Shelter and the Department of Parks and Recreation. Tina noted that each year the different backgrounds and various skills of the staff help build a camaraderie among the membership.

Tina pointed out that this year has been very challenging after not having camp last year, even though the number of participants is half of what they usually are each summer. The five day weekly program has been cut down to four days per week due to schools closing on Fridays and the difficulty in getting information out to parents since children were not physically attending school.

When asked to share her favorite memories over the years, Tina spoke about a young boy that was labeled a “terror” by a supervisor. The young boy begged for the opportunity to become a counselor when he turned 14 years old. The young teenager did become a counselor and a great asset to the program because the younger kids listened to him and respected him. He became a role model. Tina pointed out, “You never give up on someone.”

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