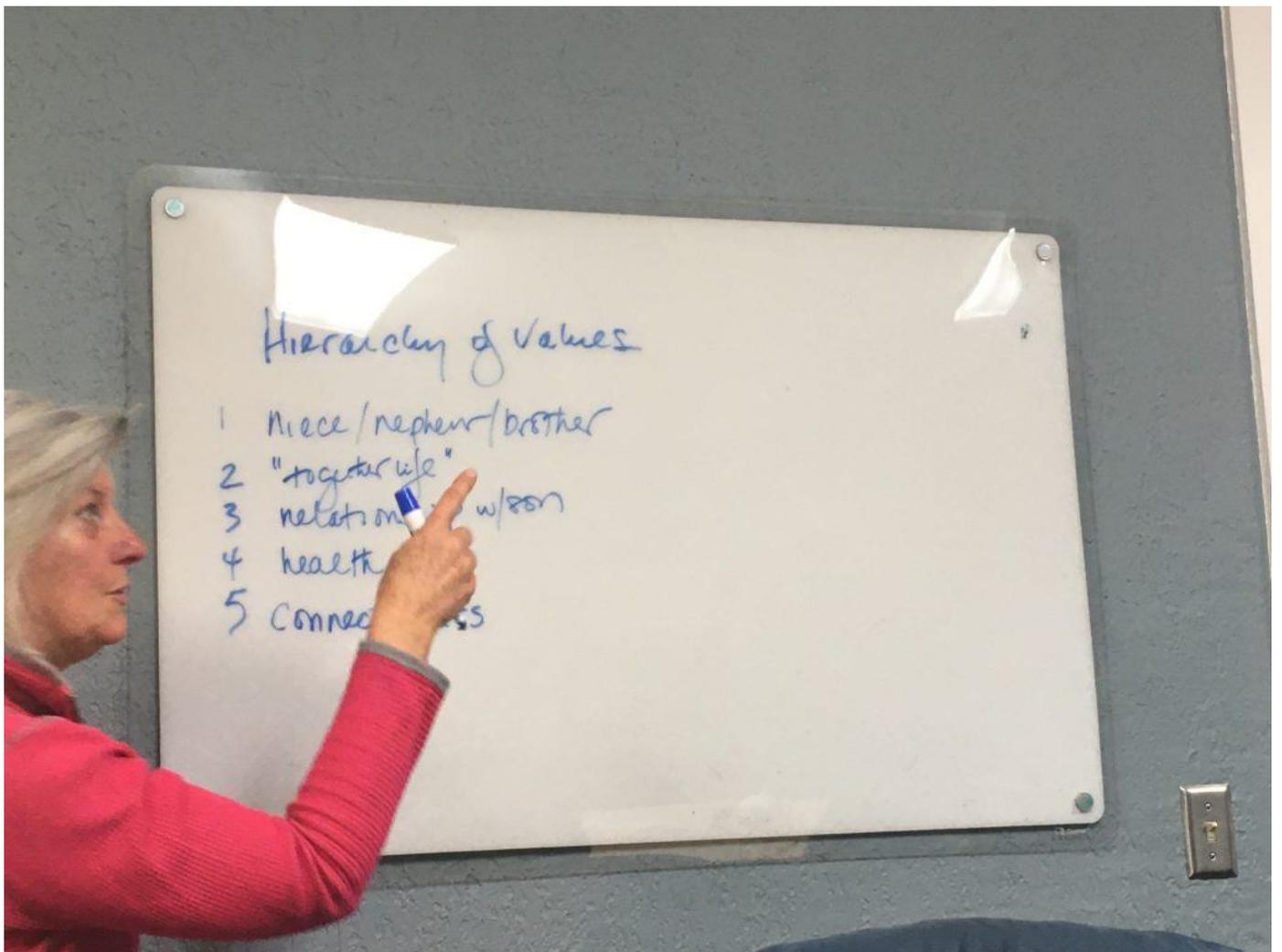


SMART opens dialogue for families affected by addiction



*Jean Grossman leads the group whose loved ones are struggling with addiction.  
KELLY NICHOLAIDES/ FOR MONTCLAIR LOCAL*

**By KELLY NICHOLAIDES**

*for Montclair Local*

Jean Grossman asks “Laura” how her week is going and if she has rewarded herself for any progress. Laura’s mother passed away in April and had lived a long and relatively healthy life, but the untimely death of Laura’s friend who struggled with alcoholism compounded her sadness. Grossman says she knows it’s harder for Laura to cope with loss as the holidays approach, but she congratulates her for “putting one foot in front of the other.”

“I’m doing okay, but not feeling okay. I’m just trying to find a balance of life, with self-care and social work. I’m making progress, but sometimes I judge myself about whether I’m making progress fast enough,” Laura said to the group that meets on Wednesdays at the Mental Health Association of Essex/Morris on Fullerton Avenue. The group is comprised of people who have loved ones struggling with addiction.

As her roommate’s alcoholism progressed, Laura learned that she couldn’t change him. “Some people get sick and tired of their behavior, but know they need help. You realize people are sick, and living that way. Many don’t get the opportunity to make the decision to change,” Laura said.

There were periods of time Laura felt on her own, because everyone she knew was drinking or getting high, she said.

The group uses SMART (Self-Management And Recovery Training), an Ohio-based non-profit established in 1994 as an alternative to Alcoholics Anonymous and other 12-step support groups that use a spiritual approach to recovery. In Alcoholics Anonymous users admit powerlessness over addiction and battle it through a combination of prayer, faith in God, making amends to the individuals they harmed, and developing a moral inventory. By contrast, SMART Recovery uses a science-based approach to develop self-empowering skills in order to accomplish four points: build and maintain motivation; cope with urges; manage thoughts, feelings and behaviors; and live a balanced life.

Twenty years ago, Grossman embraced SMART Recovery. She was disenchanted with Al-Anon in helping her cope with her then husband’s alcoholism. Grossman’s son had also begun to self-medicate with alcohol. Grossman attended a SMART meeting in Hackensack.

“I got something different that I was not getting at Al-Anon, but had stayed because of my husband to help get his life back on track,” Grossman said.

The support group varies from Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous, Grossman learned.

“I was looking for something more, and someone who was active in recovery suggested SMART for its pragmatic tools to make changes in your life. AA hasn’t kept up. It’s spiritually-based. Not everyone wants to

say, 'I'm so and so and I'm an alcoholic' and not everyone believes in a 'higher power.' We [at SMART] don't use labels. The tone is conversational. There's no advice given, but ideas are welcome. We don't debate issues," Grossman explained.

Grossman walked out of her first SMART meeting with traction she says she didn't have before, and implemented the tools with her husband.

She later became a certified facilitator to help others and now runs meetings in Montclair.

SMART uses Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) and a hierarchy of values tool. Attendees at the November meeting were asked to list what they value the most and rate it on a scale of one to 10 in terms of how they maintain those values, which can range from family, career, a relationship, a virtue or themselves. Exercises for CBT aim to change motivations. They include brainstorming how to move forward, rating the importance of changing and one's confidence level. Emotional self-management includes rating feelings from moderate to high for anger, guilt, anxiety and depression. Participants write down how they behaved and if it was helpful or hurtful, and for the long term or short term.

The inability to stop using drugs or alcohol affects both the users and their families as well.

"CBT [Cognitive Behavioral Therapy] was originally used for anxiety. People who have it and people who love someone who has it have the common denominator of addiction," Grossman said.

Exercises help the group form better decision-making skills to use in their reactions to scenarios such as a loved one coming home intoxicated. Options may range from confronting the individual and getting into a major argument, or disengaging altogether and waiting until they're sober before initiating a discussion.

A \$14 handbook is used to manage life with someone fighting addiction.

These methods are an overview, not a deep dive into SMART Recovery. For holiday challenges to addiction recovery and helping loved ones, Grossman suggests visiting the [smartrecovery.org](http://smartrecovery.org) web site section on the topic. It includes tips on using the SMART handbook and online toolbox. Visitors can also find meeting times and online support on the site.

Grossman welcomes newcomers to the Montclair meetings for friends and family of those struggling with addiction.

"The goal is to meet you where you are. It takes 5-7 meetings before someone decides it's right for them," Grossman said of the program.

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## 2019 MFF: 'Life with Layla' is a child's-eye view on addiction



*Layla sings at a drug prevention walk, honoring her late Aunt Melissa. COURTESY LIFE WITH LAYLA*

*Life with Layla*

*Directed by Ken Spooner, Mike Mee*

*Wednesday, May 4, 7:30 p.m.*

*Montclair Kimberley Academy*

*Upper School Campus, 6 Lloyd Road*

*Q&A with co-directors Ken Spooner and Mike Mee, and producer Steve McCarthy to follow.*

*Co-presented by NJTV.*

*New Jersey Films competition*

[Montclairfilm.org](http://Montclairfilm.org)

**By GWEN OREL**

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Both Mike Mee and Ken Spooner knew they wanted to make a documentary about heroin addiction.

“My dad put a newspaper in front of me every day, saying another kid passed, do your next film on this,” Mee said. “For me, that was my spark telling this story. Most people know somebody that was addicted, or died from addiction, or has a family member struggling with it.”

They put out feelers on Facebook asking if anyone would be interested in being filmed about the epidemic.

Spooner too said that he’s lost people to the addiction. “We started shooting in 2015. Steve [McCarthy] came on in 2017 as producer.”

McCarthy, news producer at the School of Communication and Media at Montclair State University, had been Mee’s and Spooner’s professor when they were at MSU in 2013.

They were chosen to go abroad with McCarthy to Jordan for the making of “Hayatuna,” a documentary about directed by the Swedish NGO Spiritus Mundi and its work to bring music to children in Jordan. “Hayatuna” played at Montclair Film Festival in 2018.

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[READ: 2018 MFF; HOMETOWN HEROES, ‘MADE IN MONTCLAIR’](#)

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“Life with Layla” is not a typical addiction film, Spooner said. It’s only about heroin, not about opioids or other addictions. It follows the family only over a nine-month span; there are no talking heads, no statistics.

“We show and don’t tell throughout the film,” Spooner added.

Layla is a 7-year-old girl, whose Aunt Melissa has died of addiction before the movie begins. She also speaks about the addiction and prison issues of other close family members. Her Uncle Greg’s heroin addiction is growing dangerous. Layla and her mom, Kate, work to bring Greg home.

“We thought it was a unique angle,” said Spooner. “I haven’t seen a young girl like her that’s mature and with it, that knows exactly what’s going on within her family. We thought it was a unique idea to make her the storytelling device.”

And having her speak will remind audiences of how addiction impacts a whole family, said Mee. “This epidemic that is occurring is ultimately going to affect children, if things don’t change. If we don’t do something about this problem, the next generation of high school students is at stake as well. It was important to show the younger angle,” he said.

People in Layla’s family talk about heroin addiction as a disease, and addiction in general, to alcohol or other substances, seems to be a family burden.

But it isn’t a disease that’s airborne, like Hepatitis, and some people would say that it’s a choice.

Spooner said that though they don’t appear in the film, experts they spoke to explained that the drugs change the brain after addiction. It is a choice to take them but it becomes a physical illness.

“The grandmother didn’t want to interview with us. She’d suffered with alcoholism. I think she’s doing the best she can.” In the film, the grandmother talks about how on each of her birthdays, one of her kids has been in jail. “Some of the things almost seem routine for the family, in a weird way. This year someone’s in prison, this year someone else.”

Layla’s mother Kate is the one that holds that family together after the death of Kate’s sister Melissa. She’s also the only one that doesn’t have an addiction issue, said Spooner. Kate manages to be a great mom to Layla and her younger sister Alanna.

And Kate works to raise awareness, goes on addiction walks, Mee added.

“What’s important that people take away is that they’re humans,” said Mee. “That’s why we spent such a long time with one family. We wanted to show the good, bad and ugly. None of us are perfect. That’s the takeaway. They are not just homeless addicts in an alleyway, they are uncles, brothers, fathers.

“And it’s another reason we focused on Layla.”

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## In brief: CARE Van to offer free addiction services



On Thursday April 21, 9 a.m. – 2 p.m., the CARES outreach vehicle will be at Glenfield Park, 21 Maple Ave. Stop by Hope One for: Access to Detox; Access to Rehab; Access to Mental Health Services, Access to Recovery Services and Information and Support.

There will be free Narcan training, Narcan kits and screening for services.

The Opioid Overdose Prevention Project is made possible by funding received from the New Jersey Governor's Council on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse, New Jersey Department of Human Services, Division of Mental Health and Addiction Services and Morris County Prevention Is Key, INC.

For more information go to [caresnj.org](http://caresnj.org) or contact CARES 973-625-1143 ext.23.

