

Rising

Finding Her Family

Jackie, who lives at a Rising Ground supervised community residence for adults with Intellectual/Developmental Disabilities, is reunited with family members after more than 55 years.

"It feels really good," says Jackie when asked what it is like to see her brother and sister after more than five decades. It is her smile more than her words that truly expresses her joy. For the first time in a long time, Jackie radiates happiness instead of sadness when asked about her family. The reunion was put in motion after one of Jackie's bi-annual life plan meetings with her Rising Ground care team.

"A life plan is a service plan that's developed by the person in conjunction with their team of support," explains Ruth Tokarczyk, Rising Ground's Vice President for Intellectual/Developmental Disabilities (I/DD). "Their team includes the residential staff, the day program staff, and the individual's care manager."

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Top: Jackie (center) with her brother Raymond and sister Yvonne.

Bottom: Jackie (left) & Yvonne on the day they were reunited.



Gala
March 14, 2024



Join the Celebration!

Our annual Gala, our biggest fundraising event of the year, will take place on Thursday, March 14 at The Metropolitan Club in Manhattan. The elegant evening will include a convivial cocktail hour followed by a seated dinner and the opportunity to hear directly from people we support, providing an insightful and inspiring firsthand account of the life-affirming work that we do with children, adults, and families. A truly special occasion that you don't want to miss, individuals and companies can support this event by sponsoring, purchasing tickets and tables, or putting a message of support in our digital journal. For more information, please visit RisingGround.org/2024Gala or contact Meredith Beitzl in our Gala Office at meredith@blbnyc.com or 212-465-3234.



Supporting and strengthening families to help them rise above adversity is at the heart of what we do.

From our CEO

Dear friends,

I hope you find the story of Jackie and her successful quest to find her family, aided by the Rising Ground staff who care for her, as inspiring as I do. We are happy to share it with you in this newsletter. It is one example of how our programs and services expand beyond the individuals we directly support to include the extended family. While Jackie will benefit from reconnecting with her family and having them be active advocates for her in her continued care and in her life, I am certain that having Jackie back in their lives is equally enriching for them.

The end of year holidays along with our Thanksgiving Food Giveaway and Holiday Gift Drive events highlighted the continued and growing need of families within the communities that we support. Thank you to everyone who contributed to our efforts to provide additional support during this special time of year.

Our work ensuring that family members are both part of and drivers of the care we provide is pervasive and helps to form a strong foundation for future success that can last a lifetime. It is no accident that an essential component of much of our work is family stabilization and strengthening. Our Enhanced Family Foster Care, intimate partner violence prevention, Justice for Youth and Families, and health and community programs specifically find ways to not only keep families intact, but to provide them with support and resources to enable them to be more resilient and to rise above adversity. We work with each family and each family member to resolve the conflicts that brought them to our care, working with a firm belief that change is possible. Together we create plans that become the roadmap to the family's — and each family member's — progress. As families set their own goals and move toward achievement, we also help guide them to any additional resources needed, such as food, housing, or healthcare.

Every day at Rising Ground you will find examples of individually focused, non-judgmental, caring support that has a constructive ripple effect on families and communities. As we start the new year, I look forward to sharing many more of these stories.

I thank you, as always, for your continued support of the life-affirming work we do.

Alan Mucatel
Chief Executive Officer



Seasonal Celebration: Fall Benefit 2023



Kerry Streets, Sandra Pinn, Dolores Osborne, Dr. Joyce Coppin-Mondesire, Jacqueline Streets, and Steven Grant.



Alan Mucatel, Dr. Ariz Mehta, and Dorothy Mehta.



Alsuna Millington and Brigette McLeod-Williams.



Glynis O'Leary and Matthew Porter.



Matt Del Percio, Jared Deregator, and Pamela Orrego.



L-R: President of the Board of Directors, Matt Del Percio; board members David Theobald, Matthew Porter, Bob Schanz, and Joyce R. Coppin-Mondesire; RAPP Supervisor Bria Saunders and RAPP student Sianna; board member Brigette R. McLeod-Williams; board Vice President Allen Waxman; board members Duncan James Turnbull, Dorothy Mehta, Susan S. Benedict; and Rising Ground CEO Alan Mucatel. Photos by Ben Asen Photography.

Rising Ground friends, supporters, board members, and staff gathered at our Fall Benefit Cocktail Reception at the Bowery Hotel in October to salute Rising Ground's life-affirming work. A highlight of the evening was CEO Alan Mucatel speaking to high school senior Sianna about the Relationship Abuse Prevention Program (RAPP), one of Rising Ground's 101 programs, and its impact on her life. There was also a silent auction of beautiful artwork created by young people from our Passage of Hope unaccompanied migrant child program. We extend our deepest appreciation to Atlantic, Tomorrow's Office, Lamb Insurance, Mohawk Insurance Services, Susan Benedict, and Joyce Coppin-Mondesire for their generous sponsorships of the event.

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Finding Her Family

The life plan identifies each person's strengths, dreams, and aspirations. It is part of Rising Ground's over-arching mission to provide everyone in care with safe and enriching opportunities to participate in the world around them, and to lead full and meaningful lives. At her July meeting, Jackie, who is 68 and resides in the Bronx, expressed a clear and firm goal: "I want to find my people."

Jackie, who has been in Rising Ground's care since 2012, was not in contact with any family members. She knew she came from a large family and spoke to Assistant Residence Manager Jatava Sevorwell about some of the family members that she remembered, providing names, but the information was too general for a successful internet search. Jatava suggested that Jackie might want to consider an Ancestry DNA kit. As well as extracting your DNA and identifying your ethnic origins, the kits give people the chance to register their results so that other people who share DNA with you can send you a message. With Jackie's consent, a kit was purchased, Jackie provided her sample, and Jatava sent it off. At the beginning of September, they received her results. It included several "matches" for possible relatives. Cautious about reaching out to anyone, Jatava waited to see if anyone would reach out to Jackie. In mid-October she received a message from what would turn out to be one of Jackie's cousins. After verifying his legitimacy, they connected by phone. The cousin, who lives on the west coast, said he was in contact with two of Jackie's siblings, her younger sister Yvonne and her older brother Raymond. Yvonne and Raymond were not on the west coast – they both live in the Bronx, Raymond just a few blocks away from Jackie's home over the past 10 years.

For Yvonne and Raymond, the biggest surprise was not that Jackie wanted to make contact, but that she was still alive. Raymond, who is the oldest child in the family, said their father had repeatedly searched for Jackie over the years. In 1981 she was featured in the *Daily News* newspaper as a missing person. Raymond said some time in the 1990s their father – who has since passed away, as has their mother and three other siblings – was told or given the impression that Jackie had died, and the trail to finding her had gone cold.

On October 16, Yvonne called Jatava and was overjoyed when she was told, not only could she talk to Jackie, but that Jatava could bring her to visit that very afternoon: "Her sister was so happy to have found her and was anxious to see her again. I mentioned I could bring Jackie to her since she lived here in the Bronx. Later that afternoon Jackie and her sister Yvonne met for the first time in over 50 years. She spent that afternoon with her sister getting reacquainted."



Above: Jackie (left) and her sister Mary.

Throughout the following week Jackie and her sister spoke several times and arrangements were made for Sunday dinner at her sister's home. On Sunday, October 22 Jackie had dinner with her sister and her older brother, Raymond, who recounts not seeing Jackie in over 60 years. Jackie has also met two of her nieces — one in person and one via video chat — and her sister Mary. She is yet to meet another brother, Robert. Jatava has since purchased a cell phone for her so that she can talk to her family more frequently and in private. Yvonne and Raymond have visited her at her home and plan to make it a regular Sunday excursion.

"When I saw that it was her, I just grabbed her and hugged her so tight and started crying," says Yvonne. "I could not believe it, but I thank God that she is alive."

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L-R: Yvonne, Jackie, her niece Lanekias, and Raymond in Yvonne's home following their first Sunday dinner together.

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Ruth Tokarczyk says Jackie's story is an unusually happy one: "This is really one of the first times I've had this experience, to be able to witness someone's desire to find a truly long-lost family member and finding them! I got tears in my eyes. This is such a beautiful story. A lot of the time, the older people we support have no family anymore. So many of them have passed on."

Dr. Rupert G. F. Pearson, Assistant Vice President of I/DD agrees that Jackie's request and the successful outcome is uncommon. He said that, unfortunately, there were more instances where families who had a member of the family in care requested that there be no further contact, making Jackie's story even more special and moving. "Her situation is unusual in every way you can think about."

Jackie attends a day program during the week. When she is at home, she loves to listen to music on her radio and is a skilled jewelry maker, working with beads to make colorful bracelets and necklaces that she is happy to now be able to give to her sisters and nieces.

For Yvonne, finding Jackie again has made her resolute about taking care of her and being as much of an advocate for her as she can. She and Raymond have provided Jackie with new clothes and are happy to indulge her renowned sweet tooth with gifts of candy. But more than anything, they want to give Jackie their time and love.

"Me and my brother are not going to stop. We're not going anywhere," says Yvonne.

Raymond concurs: "This has been going on for a few decades for us. We lost her, we found her, then we lost her again. To know for a fact that she's alive and that I can contact her, that's everything in the world to me."

Ruth Tokarczyk says the experience is truly transformative: "Jackie is very sensitive. Always around the holiday time she would get depressed because other people had families and she didn't. It really is an inspiring story, that she was offered the DNA test, understood it, and then was able to find family including her brother living a couple of blocks away – it's unbelievable." ♦

Program Activities

Pumpkins, and Turkeys, and Santa – Oh My!

The Fall, as well as the holiday season, were busy ones at Rising Ground, with events taking place citywide.



Families from the ParentChild+ program enjoy a day at Rockefeller State Park Preserve hosted by Kayla & Kimberly Rockefeller.



The Brooklyn JustUs team's outstanding group Halloween costume as the Scooby-Doo crew.



The team from the Children's Learning Center in Manhattan dressed in purple in support of Domestic Violence Awareness Month in October.



Staff from the Safe Space Drop-in Centers in Queens wearing green in support of National Runaway Prevention Month.



Parents, foster parents, and children gathered at Rising Ground's Brooklyn office for a festive holiday party hosted by the Enhanced Family Foster Care team. A special guest was on hand to deliver presents.



Rising Ground's Soundview Family Resource Center partnered with Our Lady of Mount Carmel in the Bronx for our annual Thanksgiving Turkey & Food Giveaway this year, distributing over 100 turkeys donated by 9HUGS.

In the News

In December Rising Ground's CEO, **Alan Mucatel**, was named to *PoliticsNY* and *amNY's Nonprofit Power Players List*. In response to the question "What policy changes could be made to aid in your work within the nonprofit sector?" he answered: "Nothing makes more clear the degree to which the people we support, the work we do, and the people who do the work are undervalued in our society than the way our contracts with the government are so poorly funded and executed. This includes time of payment, bureaucratic delays, and so on. Wholesale reform of this business relationship would be the single greatest help to our work and to our ability to assist the people we serve."

Rising Ground's Queens Safe Space Drop-in Centers were profiled in the *Queens Courier News* and *QNS.com* online during November, which was **National Runaway Prevention Month**. The story titled "NYC nonprofit providing homeless and displaced youths with key resources in Jamaica, Far Rockaway" featured **Racquel Jones**, the program director for our Jamaica Drop-in Center who shared: "Rising Ground is very passionate about addressing youth homelessness. We work with over 2,000 youth each year, and they come into the location and see that there are others going through the same things. They are also met with friendly and compassionate staff there to help transition them from homelessness to independent living."



Rita Agyapong at the Safe Space Drop-in Center in Jamaica "Shares the Warmth" with winter clothes donations.



Safe Space Jamaica Director Racquel Jones, center, with young people attending a holiday party.

Focused on the Future

For many people, the start of a new year is a time for self-reflection and goal setting. Young women from Rising Ground's Transitional Independent Living programs had a head start on 2024 participating in a series of functional life skills workshops offered by the New York Junior League's LIFT (Lead, Inspire, Focus, Thrive) committee. The workshops began in October and will run through May.

LIFT's mission is to help youth to build healthy relationships and improve their self-esteem and confidence. The volunteers also mentor at-risk teenage girls at Rising Ground as part of the Junor League's broader mission to provide life skills programs to youth and adults who are navigating periods of difficult transition.

The current LIFT workshop series, held twice a month, began with a *Feminist Self-Defense* course led by instructor Rachel Piazza. This session included learning physical strategies based in Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu to navigate a range of threatening interactions, as well as discussions on boundary setting. There have also been two *Financial Fitness* workshops that have promoted financial health including managing a checking account, maintaining good credit, budgeting, and saving for retirement. These sessions were structured around open questions and discussions, followed by a brief presentation, closing with a hands-on budgeting simulation. In December the LIFT team also hosted a Winter Social at Bryant Park for the young women that included ice skating and refreshments. Previous workshops have been attended by young women from Rising Ground's Residential Treatment Center.

The LIFT committee is co-chaired by Joyce Fain and Kathryn Davis. Kathryn says LIFT includes around 15 volunteers and sits within the New York Junior League's Childrens' Health and Welfare council. The committee has worked with Rising Ground for several years. "Our volunteer committee loves engaging with Rising Ground's young women. We welcome the opportunity to support future female leaders of our communities, connect young women with their interests, and to develop transferable skills that serve us all."



Images: The *Feminist Self-Defense* workshop.

Have Your Team Join Ours!

If you and your corporate colleagues or fellow members of your civic organization are interested in a group volunteer activity, Rising Ground will work with you to create the opportunity that is right for your team and that will help advance our organization's work. For more information on group volunteering, please contact Sharon Pyle at SPyle@RisingGround.org.



Above: The *Financial Fitness* workshop.



Driven by the belief that each of us can thrive when life has hope and opportunity, Rising Ground provides caring support and proven paths to positive change, helping New York City area children, adults, and families rise above adversity. Founded as an orphanage in 1831, Rising Ground is a leading nonprofit human services organization that has been at the forefront of evolving community needs and is a leader in utilizing results-driven, evidence-based practices. Today, the organization's work is a positive force in the lives of more than 25,000 individuals across 101 programs at 138 sites.



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