

Rising

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GROUND
NEWSLETTER
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Mekhi's Journey from Risk to Resilience

At just 20 years old, Mekhi faced a seemingly insurmountable challenge—a potential 7-to-10-year prison sentence after being charged with possession of a loaded firearm. This wasn't the first time Mekhi had encountered hardship.

As early as age 10, he experienced racial discrimination by police officers, planting seeds of mistrust in the judicial system and fostering deep anger and frustration toward law enforcement.

Mekhi was referred to Rising Ground's Atlas program and has been receiving therapy, equipping him with skills he now applies to his daily life. This is evident when he describes using a decision-making technique during a potentially aggressive encounter and making a conscious choice to walk away from conflict. Rising Ground Functional Family Therapist Ariel Vasquez, who has been working with Mekhi and his family this past year, is proud of the constructive changes evident in Mekhi as he steps back from behaviors that have led him to brushes with the criminal justice system.

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Photo: Mekhi and Rising Ground Functional Family Therapist, Ariel Vasquez.



Members of the Diamond Club and Rising Ground CEO Alan Mucatel.



Carlton Mitchell, Tony Cohen, and Pierre Duverger.

Celebrating Service

In December we celebrated the service and vast contributions of our **Diamond Club**, the employees who have worked at Rising Ground for 25 years or more. Currently, the Diamond Club has an impressive 35 members with many of them gathering for a festive luncheon for a good meal and camaraderie. The luncheon was also an opportunity to acknowledge the retirement of three of our longer-term colleagues whose contributions to our work and the organization have been so significant: **Carlton Mitchell**, Senior Vice President Children and Family Services (37 years); **Vincent (Tony) Cohen**, Residential Director, Residential Treatment Center (33 Years); and **Pierre-Michel (Pierre) Duverger**, Revenue Cycle Manager, Finance Department (30 Years). We are profoundly indebted to Carlton, Tony, and Pierre and wish them all the best in their retirement.

Mekhi's Journey from Risk to Resilience

"It was very important for Mekhi to feel a sense of gaining his power back," says Ariel. "It's not about pushing that anger aside. It's not about dismissing that you have every right to feel angry, but don't allow your anger to dictate your responses in the moment, because the moment that you do, that is the moment that they win. I'm very, very proud of him."

Mekhi's story is a powerful example of how Rising Ground works with individuals at elevated risk for violent or criminal behavior, demonstrating that therapeutic services, paired with strong family, community, and neighborhood support, can create meaningful constructive change.

Atlas, developed in response to New York City's efforts to improve its criminal justice system, works to reduce cycles of violence and justice system involvement through community-based therapeutic and healing services. A voluntary community violence intervention program, Atlas builds on the crucial role that neighborhood connections play in lifting its members. It seeks to address the risks and needs of individuals released from incarceration on their own recognizance who are at heightened risk of future victimization or justice system involvement. The program offers participants therapeutic services to address past trauma, mentorship, education and employment opportunities, and access to supportive community networks.

Initially, Mekhi was hesitant to engage in therapy, fearing judgment. However, with the encouragement of his immediate family, he took courageous steps to try. From their very first call, Ariel worked to build trust, grounding their connection in values of loyalty, family, and strength. Mekhi shared feelings of shame and embarrassment over how his legal troubles had affected his family, who have continued to show him unwavering support. Ariel helped him to see his desire to honor his family's loyalty as a key driving force for change.

Through the evidence-based model Functional Family Therapy (FFT), Ariel has helped Mekhi harness the support of his family and girlfriend to rebuild his life. Over six months, Mekhi and his loved ones strengthened critical communication skills, allowing them to process deep-seated feelings about his legal situation and the systemic injustices

they had experienced. Together, they explored how cultural and historical stigmas had shaped Mekhi's perspective and behavior.

Through role-playing and scenario-based exercises, Mekhi reflected on past encounters with law enforcement and learned to approach similar situations with more thoughtful decision-making. By examining his options and weighing their potential outcomes, Mekhi discovered he had more power over his actions and responses than he had previously believed. This realization was pivotal in reducing feelings of helplessness and fostering a sense of control over his life. He has particularly embraced the SODAS decision-making technique (Situation, Options, Disadvantages, Advantages, Select One) and breathing exercises.

"The program really helped me with knowing how to digest the situation and consider the options that I have in front of me. So even if it's a bad situation, I realize I still have multiple options to choose from. I can either make it worse, I can keep it neutral, or I could try to make it a little bit better."

He found himself applying the SODAS technique on a recent shopping trip: "I was getting a beverage, but I was on the phone. I guess I was taking too long and the store owner started to get mad. He told me I had to get out of the store now. I was trying to explain to him that I was going to buy something. I could have tried to argue with him, but I decided to just leave and not buy anything so there would be no problem. I could continue my day and just go to the next store instead of taking it further."

During the final phase of treatment, Mekhi worked on applying these skills to broader areas of his life, such as managing disagreements with supervisors or teachers in his vocational program. He has learned to better identify and regulate his emotions, slowing his response time to avoid reacting impulsively. Mekhi realized that while he couldn't always change the actions of others or the environments he encountered, he could control his response—turning moments of potential conflict into opportunities for growth and self-respect.

The work he has done in the Atlas program has not only helped Mekhi but has had a positive impact on his relationship with his family and his girlfriend, all



Mekhi and Ariel with his parents.

of whom have been involved in his therapy.

"I wasn't one to really say too much. I usually kept it to simple words. I wouldn't really explain myself or say how I was feeling," says Mekhi. "Through the work with Ariel, I re-looked at

myself and learned how to express things better. I have used an emotion chart to figure out what I was feeling and what my triggers are. Once I found the triggers, I could explain why I got upset. Learning to do that has changed me in a deep way."

Mekhi's mother, Selena, describes Atlas and Ariel as a "blessing to our family."

"Through FFT, we learned so much about each other and so much about Mekhi. He was never a child who expressed himself because he always felt he would get in trouble. After working with Ariel and her providing him with various techniques to work through his feelings, he has been so much more open with us. Although the situation that brought about the services wasn't favorable, it has turned

out to be a blessing. Mekhi has matured so much and it's mostly due to his work with Ariel. I pray the outcome of his case is favorable so he can show the courts what a change he has made in his life. We will forever be grateful for what Ariel and Atlas has done for our family," says Selena.

Today, Mekhi is a testament to the transformative power of therapeutic support and family involvement. He has successfully refrained from any new legal issues, completed his vocational training as a HVAC technician, and strengthened his relationships with his loved ones. He continues to use the skills he developed in therapy to navigate challenges and overcome triggers. Mekhi and his family remain in touch with Ariel and the Rising Ground team, sharing updates on his progress and celebrating milestones.

"The situation I was in negatively affected me and my family, but it also brought us closer. Thanks to your program, I honestly, for real, feel like it helped me open up to my family and to ask them for help. I was in a mental state where I was kind of giving up, but it brought me hope." ★

In the News

In November Rising Ground signed a lease for 27,000 square feet of office space at 111 Livingston Street in downtown Brooklyn. We will be relocating our multi-program service hub to this location in 2025. The news was covered by business publications including *The Business Journal*, *CityBiz*, *Commercial Café*, *Commercial Observer*, *Connect CRE*, *The Real Deal*, and *REBusinessOnline*. The news also prompted *Crain's New York Business* to include Rising Ground's leasing of space at 1333 Broadway for our administrative offices in an article about companies moving to Manhattan's core business district to take advantage of lower rental costs.

Stephanie Menyhay, Rising Ground's Senior Director of Paths to Healing which encompasses our programs for survivors of intimate partner violence, appeared on BronxNet TV's OPEN morning program to speak about our work with survivors and families during Domestic Violence Awareness Month. Stephanie spoke to host Kibin Alleyne about our longstanding Criminalized Survivors Program which assists individuals who are incarcerated because of events associated with being in an abusive relationship, our Relationship Abuse Prevention Program for middle and high school students, and about the importance of providing therapeutic support to young children who have experienced trauma. You can view this interview on our website news page.



Crain's New York Business photographing CEO Alan Mucatel, COO Lissa Southerland and Broadway-based employees

