

Tar Heel Footprints in Health Care

*A periodic feature that recognizes individuals whose efforts—
often unsung—enhance the health of North Carolinians*

Sean McHugh

As a certified peer support specialist with SouthLight Healthcare, Sean McHugh is not making appointments with clients to meet him in his office; he is out in the community, sometimes leaving his home at 5:30 A.M. to find clients who are experiencing homelessness or do not have access to a phone. This practice of engaging with clients in the community is what McHugh says he enjoys most about his work. "People can tell you one thing over the phone or in an office, but when you go and witness what they are going through, you are able to connect with them on an entirely new level."

Peer support specialists are individuals who have been in recovery from a significant mental health or substance use disorder for at least one year before becoming certified through North Carolina's Peer Support Specialist Certification Program. Because of their lived experience, peer support specialists like McHugh have a unique ability to promote others' recovery. McHugh works with 6 to 7 clients at a time for up to one year, spending anywhere from 3 to 12 hours per week one-on-one with each client depending on the needs of the individual. In this role, McHugh largely serves as a model of self-advocacy, demonstrating recovery oriented attitudes and actions, as well as teaching functional skills that will help clients with self-determination. Accompanying clients to appointments, referring them to other community services, and assisting them with decision-making, McHugh helps them navigate complex service systems and reduces the fear many individuals feel when seeking help.

McHugh became a full-time peer support specialist in June 2017 after making a substantial career change, leaving a successful, 20-year career in radio broadcasting. McHugh says that reflecting on the essential role peer support played in his own recovery 6 years ago from an opioid addiction following surgery led him to want to change direc-

tion and become a source of hope for someone else. As a result, he returned to school, attending evening classes at Wake Technical Community College while continuing to work in broadcasting. In early 2017, McHugh completed his peer support certification while working toward an associate's degree in applied science in human services technology with a concentration in substance abuse.

This career change is one of the things that makes McHugh stand out to his supervisor at SouthLight, Jennifer Whitfield. According to Whitfield, McHugh has enthusiastically jumped into this new role. "His humility is astounding," Whitfield says, adding that McHugh's kind demeanor and fearless approach have made him particularly adept at working with individuals who are experiencing complex mental health symptoms. "He builds rapport quickly with his clients and is dedicated to supporting the other members of the peer support team."

Although he has only been at SouthLight for a short time, McHugh has already seen remarkable growth among his early clients. One of his first memorable clients has remained in recovery, obtained part-time employment, and secured his own apartment in the 8 months that McHugh has been working with him. "He had almost nothing when I first met him; he had basically given up on life," McHugh said. He is hopeful that he may one day see one of his own clients become a peer support specialist, as he was inspired to do after benefitting from someone else's guidance. McHugh looks forward to con-

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tinuing to support individuals struggling with mental health and substance use disorders in his current capacity. “[As peer support specialists], we have life experience that you can’t really put on a résumé,” he says. “I am glad I can use these experiences as tools to help someone else.”

McHugh frequently works with individuals suffering from opioid use disorders and hopes that growing awareness and increasing prevention efforts will help more people realize that substance use disorders can affect anyone. Targeting opioid use disor-

ders in North Carolina will require comprehensive efforts on the part of many stakeholders, including policymakers and health care providers, in order to make a broad impact across the state. However, the distinctive trust built by peer support specialists like McHugh will continue to be an integral part of reducing stigma and supporting the recovery of the most severely affected individuals. **NCMJ**

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