

About 2 years ago, I recall sitting around a table outside of the USM library with several other students. We were pondering what this recovery center would be called. Where it would be. Who would utilize it. We were throwing out the most ridiculous name ideas and fantasizing about the possibility of a University of Southern Maine recovery center.

I was at the time, struggling with my own recovery and my own identity. I was sitting with this amazing group of people, people I aspired to be like, too nervous to put sentences together. Too scared to have ideas. Too ashamed to look people in the eyes. And Way too hungover to enjoy the sun burning onto my pale skin. My primary emotion at that time was fear and when I'm afraid, like many of us, I freeze.

I was frozen in my life. The middle of summer, frozen like an icicle. My limbs cold, my lips sealed shut, and my hands clasped to the bench. Taking all my strength not to flee, from that moment and from my life.

Lost in my own thoughts, as I often was at the time, the group's energy seemed to come to a consensus. "The ROCC" That's what we will name it! The Recovery Oriented Campus Center. Yes, that's it! It's great. Jess was laughing at the idea of rocks being our mascot or something like that. Andrew was pumped, with a big smile on his face. And Farley was supportive of the name.

It sounds cheesy now, but I really remember feeling hope in that moment. Looking out at the trees and appreciating the oxygen they allowed me to have. I felt hope. A word that meant very little to me at the time, but a moment of relief from the fear. Later that summer a ROCC peer would share with me this Emily Dickinson Poem:

"Hope" is the thing with feathers-

That perches in the soul-

And sings the tune without the words

And never stops- at all

And sweetest- in the gale- is hear-

And sore must be the storm-

That could abash the little bird

That kept so many warm

I've heard it in the chilliest land

And on the strangest sea

Yet- never- in Extremity

It asked a crumb -of me

That summer, I strung together some sobriety time, but it was never about that. Never about the days, never even about the sobriety. It was always about the hope and it will always be about the hope.

I could have never have estimated the power the ROCC would have that coming year. The incessant need to flee from my life started to quiet. The groups at the ROCC, particularly the queer recovery group, drew me closer and closer to people and to myself. I could “check-in” with a group of people who “got it”. I remember “checking-in” at one group and saying, “You know, I never knew how helpful talking to people was!?”

I also learned about advocacy through the ROCC. I learned about the power of language. About how to use my story to change the community. Through the Young People in Recovery group and through the National Alliance for Mental Illness NAMI group I became empowered. Not only could I have control over my own life, I could also have a positive impact on those around me!? Recovery was wicked exciting.

I learned that those with a substance use disorder are ranked as the number one most stigmatized group in the world. I learned that the language we use to talk about ourselves and those around us matters. That Substance Use Disorder is so often comorbid with post-traumatic stress disorder. That most of us at some point in our lives will struggle with a various mental health condition. And That recovery is for everyone, at any time. There is no threshold, no test, and no certificate that can say when you are in recovery. You are in recovery when you say you are or maybe even before that.

The Recovery Oriented Campus Center was the most influential part of my college experience. I made some amazing friends, who are still my favorite people. Most of them are sitting before me now. I learned how to be (a) “human” at the ROCC. And by that I mean, how to love myself through my imperfections. How to dream about something bigger than myself. How to reach out to those around me, when everything feels like it’s falling apart.

How to ponder in the wonderment of the “what if” of life, rather than ruminate in the “what if” of fear.

Someone recently asked me, “What does recovery mean to you.” I froze, but this time it wasn’t out of fear, like that time so many months ago in front of library. That time so many struggles ago. So many laughs ago. I froze this time, because sometimes there are no words.

Recovery is the oxygen we get from trees. It’s the song I heard once from a bird that wouldn’t seem to get off my back. That relentless song of hope. It’s a friend texting you back at 2AM because they know and you know... It’s us being here in this moment. Together. Alive. Grateful.