

Leslie Chaison and the People's Medicine Project: Winners of the 2016 AHG Community Service Award



Leslie Chaison leading a workshop with young students

The winner of the 2016 AHG Community Service Award (CSA) is Leslie Chaison and the People's Medicine Project of Greenfield, Massachusetts. The People's Medicine Project (PMP) is a grassroots collaborative that seeks to be a bridge between the region's abundant wellness resources and the people that need them the most.

PMP serves with the vision that all people have a right to wellness and an empowered connection to their health. PMP addresses community health disparities by increasing access to alternative healing and serving clients who are unable to afford alternative healthcare, with a particular emphasis on individuals facing addiction, recovery, trauma, and poverty.

PMP started in 2013 as a medicinal herb garden where three herbalists offered free workshops and herb harvests to the community. As a result, PMP found a partner and opened a clinic at Western Mass Recovery Project, a resource center for people recovering from substance use. While Leslie Chaison originally maintained the garden, taught workshops, saw herbal clients, and made medicine, her responsibilities have taken a turn toward administration and community relationship building.

As the program grows, PMP is challenged with ensuring that the organization's capacity can keep up. PMP currently has 10 alternative health practitioners serving about 80 clients, with multi therapy and follow up care. The project is volunteer run, but is currently seeking funding to support organizational development and sustainability.

PMP offers three major services: A free alternative health clinic, the medicinal herb garden, and free herbal workshops.

- The alternative health clinic focuses on building client-practitioner connections, multiple-therapy support, and attention to follow-up care. The practitioners strive to meet clients exactly where

they are, while honoring the clients' own capacity for healing.

- The herb garden at the Greenfield Community Farm is a place where clients and community members can tend and harvest herbs and make medicinal preparations. For some clients, direct connection with the garden offers profound healing and sense of purpose, while reconnecting them with the traditional knowledge of plants.
- The free herbal workshops are presented by PMP to community groups and service agencies. Because knowledge of personal health creates a sense of empowerment, sharing of knowledge is a core element of PMP's vision.

For other groups working to start community clinics, Leslie offers that it's important to be open and to follow the community's energy and resources, while keeping expenses low at first. Another key to PMP's success, according to Leslie, is their approach to building strong relationships by respecting other agencies' missions and showing up at community meetings to build networks for resource sharing and referrals.

Leslie's herbal medicine background includes studies and mentorships with Bonnie Bloom, Gail Faith Edwards, Chris Marano, and Tony(a) Lemos. Leslie lives with her family on the South River in Conway, Massachusetts, where the land supports a diversity of medicinal and food plants, both wild and cultivated. Leslie says that she is forever grateful for the plants and their teachings and is passionate about being part of an herbalist movement that values justice, inclusivity, and connection. ■
<http://www.peoplesmedicineproject.com/>

To learn more about the AHG's Community Service Award or to make a nomination for the 2017 award, please visit <http://www.americanherbalistsguild.com/community-service-award>.