

# news

SPRING/SUMMER 2014



## From Fear and Uncertainty to Independence and Success

### A domestic violence survivor's journey

It's hard to imagine that Xenia, the confident, determined woman running her own restaurant and serving up continental and Latin American specialties to happy customers at Ernie D's in Schenectady, had once felt trapped in an abusive relationship.

"I was fearful about the uncertainty of our future," she said. "What would be next for my son and me if we left?"

In 2010, at 33, she was the mother of a 10-year-old son, and a culinary student at Schenectady County Community College. Several months into a relationship, her boyfriend became jealous and possessive, berating her and making irrational accusations. He would peer into classroom windows, watching her in school; he would wait until she came out, seeking to control her every move. She frequently bore the bruises of his physical abuse, and constantly felt that she had to walk on

eggshells. She became overwhelmed and dropped out of school.

One day, after being hit and kicked, Xenia said "Enough is enough." She did not want her son to grow up thinking that this was an acceptable way to live. With the help of her family, from whom she had hid the abuse, the police were called and her abuser was arrested. Xenia's mom then urged her to call the Equinox Domestic Violence hotline.

When Xenia first walked into the Equinox Domestic Violence shelter, she said it was a step not just for her, but also for her son. "I had to move on for him, and be strong."

While at the shelter, her son received counseling and support, and Xenia made sure that he continued to be busy and to enjoy afterschool activities—keeping life as normal as possible for him. "He never once asked why we were there," said Xenia. "He

understood that it was temporary, and that I was taking care of him and keeping him safe."

"It was my privilege to witness Xenia's amazing path to achieve safety and to reach higher ideals," said Maribel Jerominek,

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## CEO's Message

### AFFORDABLE CARE ACT AFFECTS EQUINOX CLIENTS, EMPLOYEES

Equinox has been diligent in addressing changes resulting from the Affordable Care Act (ACA). The ACA affects Equinox as a provider of mental health services as well as an employer. For our mental health clients, the ACA is a double-edged sword. On the plus side, the new law has increased the insurance coverage options making it easier for clients to receive necessary mental health treatment. It has also opened up a new world of insurance options to expanded Medicaid, managed Medicaid, and managed Medicare from mainstream insurance companies. Another positive: the ACA has created a new model of service delivery, called Health Homes. Equinox is a partner in a Health Home program (Capital Region Health Connections) in which we are collaborating with other community agencies to provide holistic care for our mental health clients that addresses their social, behavioral, and physical health needs.

There is still confusion, however, in navigating the extremely complicated healthcare marketplace. Further, some clients are finding that their new insurance coverage has a deductible and/or co-pays that they cannot afford. In response, Equinox now has contracts with over 10 insurance companies, each offering a number of product types. Unfortunately, this means more staff time spent on required credentialing, prior authorizations, and medical chart requests and each has a different billing mechanism. On the other hand, these options are helping to ensure that our clients are able to receive the care they need.

As an employer, Equinox has always strived to offer plans with robust coverage, so there is little change in that regard. Our biggest challenge, as with most employers, will be to provide employees with health insurance plans that remain affordable, as determined by a specific calculation under the ACA beginning in 2015. We continue to research options that meet ACA requirements.

With warm regards,

*Dorothy S. Cucinelli*

Dorothy S. Cucinelli, PhD

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## Equinox Counseling Center Responds to Heroin Epidemic

Use of heroin – a highly addictive and potentially lethal drug – has skyrocketed across the country in recent years. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, there has been a 79% increase in heroin use between 2007 and 2012. Urban, suburban, and rural communities alike are scrambling to deal with the societal, health, behavioral, and criminal consequences of heroin addiction.

The escalation has been attributed to the widespread prescription of opioid pain killers, such as OxyContin and Vicodin beginning in the 1990s. Opioids are a synthetic form of opiates, which are drugs derived from the opium poppy plant. Like their illegal relative, heroin, they are very addictive.

"The heroin epidemic is directly linked to the use and overuse of prescription medication," said Michael Ballester, Director of the Equinox Chemical Dependency Counseling Center. "Their availability and high addiction potential, coupled with later measures by the medical community, pharmaceutical companies, and legislators to limit access to them created a pathway directly to heroin. It was a perfect storm."

Heroin is also cheaper than prescription drugs on the black market. "In 2011, one OxyContin pill on the street would cost about \$50 to \$80. It's not uncommon to hear from clients that they may use up to 10 pills a day or more, compared to a bag of heroin, which could be picked up for about \$3 to \$10. That's a day's use for less than a pack of cigarettes," said Ballester.

Addiction to heroin, which can be snorted or injected, occurs frighteningly fast and is intensely powerful. Tolerance builds so quickly that addicts require stronger and stronger doses to keep from feeling deathly ill, let alone to achieve a high.

"At Equinox, we have seen an across-the-board increase in opioid/opiate use," said Ballester. "We are also seeing more people selling heroin and more people getting arrested. Staff participate in community meetings and events to help raise awareness, and we are working hard to address it on the treatment side. We use a holistic, multidisciplinary approach and provide comprehensive assessment, treatment planning, case management, and counseling."

Counseling Center staff are trained to administer the drug Naloxone in the event of an overdose. Naloxone blocks opiate receptor sites, temporarily stopping the overdose and hopefully providing enough time to get someone to the hospital for further treatment, before it wears off.

"A large amount of Counseling Center hours are now dedicated to those affected by heroin, because we are seeing so much of it, and because the end result of heroin use can be death. We also have been referring many more individuals to higher levels of care – intensive outpatient, inpatient treatment, or residential care."

The scale of the problem is bringing together the combined efforts of the legislature, communities, treatment providers, and law enforcement officials to address heroin and prescription pain medication abuse.

"There are open and honest conversations on where the problems are, addressing its use and treatment," said Ballester. "There are a number of medications that are being used, in combination with treatment services that are helping those addicted. Treatment works, but it can be a long uphill battle." ●



Counseling Center staff, Rachael Dickinson, Jeanne Sterns, Michael Russo and Director Michael Ballester, joined other addiction professionals in answering viewers' questions as part of CBS-6 Capital District Answers Team on April 24. The topic: "Hooked: the Heroin Epidemic"

# Equinox's Community Snapshots



## BECOME A MENTOR – IT'S A LIFE-CHANGING EXPERIENCE!

The obstacles to a successful adulthood can feel insurmountable for youth growing up in poverty among gang violence, substance abuse and other dangerous behaviors. But Equinox's mentoring programs – Journey (for ages 13-18) and New Pathways (age 18-24) – are empowering at-risk young people to make positive life choices, and develop and reach their academic, career, and personal goals. Mentors receive training and support, participate in structured activities at Equinox as well as in numerous field trips. The Journey Program meets every other Saturday from 4:30- 7:30 pm. New Pathways meets every Monday from 6-8 pm. Both programs require a one-year commitment (September to August). Please contact Matt Rector at [mrector@equinoxinc.org](mailto:mrector@equinoxinc.org) or 518-434-6135 x 5332, for more information. Pictured left: Pamela (mentor) and Za'Karrah participate in a New Pathways nutrition and healthy grocery shopping activity at ShopRite.

## 2014 ANNUAL GALA: A ROARING TWENTIES AFFAIR

A rip roaring time was had by all at Equinox's Annual Gala, A Roaring Twenties Affair, on April 11th, at the Holiday Inn on Wolf Road in Colonie. Nearly 200 guests enjoyed a wonderful evening, including music by Doc Scanlon's Rhythm Boys, chef stations, desserts by "Sweet Friends of Equinox," Charleston demonstration & lesson, photo booth, and silent auction.



Michael and Lynette Tucker, left, share a moment with Honorary Co-chairs, Dan and Sally Nolan



Members of the Equinox Board gathered for a photo at the gala, left to right: David Meyers, Terri Crowley, Board Chair Karen Asher, Lorraine D'Aleo, Linda MacFarlane, Elmer Streeter, M. Sherry Gold, Lauri Rosmarin-Plattner, Steve Baboulis, CEO Dorothy Cucinelli, and Dennis McDonald



Dancing to the swing music of Doc Scanlon's Rhythm Boys

## ACCOLADES FOR EQUINOX BOARD

In recognition of their tireless and exceptional efforts in accomplishing the merger between ClearView Center and Equinox, the Equinox, Inc. Board of Directors received the 2013 Board Service Award from the Tech Valley Non-Profit Business Council.



#### A FAMILY AFFAIR

Volunteer Head Chef, Tom Tibbitts, and daughter Alli have made Equinox's Thanksgiving Day Community Dinner a family tradition for 25 years (actually, even before Alli was born). According to Alli, she cannot imagine spending Thanksgiving Day any other way!



#### THANKS TO KEYBANK

On May 14, a team of KeyBank employees volunteered their time and energy to paint the floor of the adventure-based basement at 95 Central as part of KeyBank's Neighbors Make the Difference Day, an annual community service day. Thank you KeyBank...what a difference a fresh coat of paint makes in brightening up the space used by Equinox's Youth Outreach Programs for recreational and team-building activities.



#### CONGRATULATIONS TO EQUINOX CFO

Equinox CFO Andy Joslin was selected as a winner of the 2013 CFO of the Year Awards, presented by The Business Review. "Andy is an exceptional leader who is highly respected by the board and staff of Equinox," said Equinox CEO Dorothy Cucinelli. "I am delighted that he was recognized by his peers with this prestigious award."

#### LET'S TALK TURKEY AND MORE!

12,000 pounds of turkey, 1,200 pies, 3,600 volunteers—just a few of the many ingredients that made the 44th Annual Equinox Thanksgiving Day Community Dinner a huge success! This cherished Capital Region tradition provided meals to 10,000 individuals who were lonely, homeless, or in difficult circumstances. The dinner was entirely funded by donations of cash, food, and in-kind services from individuals, groups, schools, congregations, and businesses. Equinox is especially grateful to its lead community partners: CDPHP, Price Chopper, Hannaford Supermarkets, NYS OGS, and the First Presbyterian Church in Albany. And, many thanks to the more than 3,600 volunteers who helped cook, serve, deliver, and clean-up. The Equinox Thanksgiving Day Dinner is a genuine community effort.



#### MORE THAN T-DAY

Equinox is widely known for our Annual Thanksgiving Day Community Dinner, but we are so much more. In October and November 2013, Equinox and WNYT-NewsChannel 13 teamed up for a five-part series highlighting a different Equinox program each week, including domestic violence, chemical dependency, mental health, and youth services. The series began with Annette Esposito, Equinox Case Manager, who joined WNYT anchor Subrina Dhammi to talk about Equinox's efforts to help victims of elder abuse. The series concluded with CEO Dorothy Cucinelli and Director of Development Christina Rajotte talking about the Thanksgiving Dinner and thanking the community for its unwavering support.



#### EQUINOX TEENS SHINE AT DRAWING UP CENTRAL

28 area artists entered sidewalk chalk drawings in the Drawing Up Central competition sponsored by the Central Avenue Business Improvement District on May 10, as part of Albany's Tulip Fest weekend. Congratulations to Savannah Bennekin and Truquan Watson. This Equinox youth team was awarded 2nd place for their Lion King drawing.

# Foundation Grants Help Equinox Best Serve Our Community



## MENTAL HEALTH FOUNDATION SUPPORTS INSIGHTS PROGRAM

Equinox is grateful to the Mental Health Foundation for awarding us a second grant of \$5,000 in support of our innovative *InSights* program. Mental health issues usually first occur during the ages of 18-22. *InSights* focuses on this vulnerable age group by giving college students who are dealing with mental health issues a wide array of supports and strategies to help them to stay on track in school and life.

## NEW WASHER & DRYER, FURNITURE AT YOUTH FACILITIES, THANKS TO RMHC

Thanks to a generous grant of \$13,000 from the Ronald McDonald House Charities, we were able to purchase security cameras for our Transitional Living Program (TLP), supervised apartment living for homeless youth age 16-21; a new washer and dryer for the Equinox House for Youth (EHY), our emergency shelter for runaway and homeless youth age 13-17; and new laundry facilities and new comfortable furniture for the Youth Outreach Center (YOC). The YOC is a second home to close to 2,000 teens every year, and that puts a lot of wear and tear on the furniture. An average of 20 loads of laundry is done at the YOC each week. Teens who do their laundry at the YOC may be living on the streets, may not have appliances in their home, or may lack the means or transportation to use a laundromat. Sometimes the teens at EHY or at the YOC are washing the only clothes they own.



## A Journey to Success *continued from page 1*

Manager of the Domestic Violence Shelter. "She overcame danger, fear, and adversities with amazing courage and determination. Her powerful story will never stop inspiring me."

Maribel was especially impressed at Xenia's willingness and desire to take advantage of all the continuing supports and resources offered by Equinox through Project Break Free to help her build a healthy and independent life for herself and her son. Project Break Free, designed to assist victims in making the transition out of the domestic violence shelter, provides case management and counseling, as well as subsidized transitional housing and transportation.

"No matter how down and out you are or how low life seems, you must pick yourself up," said Xenia. "Equinox gave me financial assistance and moral support. Maribel was there for me and made me feel stronger. Anytime I felt I would fall down, she would be there. I never felt alone. Maribel's words and encouragement made a big difference in my life. And she was so great with my son."

Today, Xenia would tell someone struggling to leave an abusive situation: "When you're going through a crisis, you're not alone. There are people and organizations, like Equinox, who want to help and can help, but you need to be willing to take that first step – you need to be strong enough. Asking for help is a sign of strength, not weakness. The key is wanting to get out and change your life, to depend on yourself, not someone else."

Xenia went back to SCCC. This time, she completed her Culinary Arts degree and a degree in Hotel and Restaurant Management. Her professional training got an added boost when she enrolled in an entrepreneurship and small business development program through

a partnership of Equinox, Hudson Valley Community College, and the Verizon Wireless Domestic Violence Entrepreneurship Program.

It's no surprise that Xenia, who was born in El Salvador to a comfortable middle class family and moved to the U.S. at age 15, dreamed of owning a catering business. Her great grandmother was a cook for a wealthy family in El Salvador, and her grandmother – who taught Xenia how to cook – was a caterer.

With the help of a \$5,000 grant from Verizon Wireless and a low-cost business loan from the Community Loan Fund, she purchased Ernie D's on State Street in late 2013. "It was so exciting the first time I opened the door, and realized this is my business; I'm working for myself."

She hasn't changed the name of the restaurant, but she's always trying something new and fresh on the menu – adding a variety of made-from-scratch Latin American dishes. She also has a growing catering business.

And, she has been in a "healthy, wonderful" relationship for three years. "Before you can say you love someone, you have to love yourself. If you love yourself, you will do everything in your power to be strong and fight for yourself."

*Equinox operates Albany County's only emergency shelter for victims of domestic violence and their children, as well as for elderly victims of abuse. Equinox Domestic Violence services include a 24-hour hotline, counseling, transitional housing, case management, and advocacy. For more information, call (518) 434-6135; Hotline: (518) 432-7865. ●*



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Visit us at [equinoxinc.org](http://equinoxinc.org), and at [facebook.com/EquinoxAlbany](https://facebook.com/EquinoxAlbany). Or visit us in person. Call (518) 434-6137, ext. 5366 to schedule a tour. We'd love to see you!

## SAVE THE DATE!

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 21ST

Join Team Equinox for the 10th Annual Out of the Darkness Walk in Albany's Washington Park. Sponsored by the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention – Capital Region NY, this walk is in support of local survivors of suicide loss, to provide healing and to educate the community about suicide prevention. Interested in walking or making a donation to Team Equinox? Visit [www.equinoxinc.org](http://www.equinoxinc.org).

## WAYS TO GIVE

With the support of our caring community, Equinox can continue to help all those we serve move forward on their paths to recovery, healing, and independence.

**MAKE A DONATION** Donations may be made online ([equinoxinc.org](http://equinoxinc.org)) or mailed to Development and Community Relations, 95 Central Ave., Albany, NY 12206.

**HONOR OR MEMORIAL GIFTS** A donation to Equinox is a wonderful way to honor someone special, mark an important occasion, or remember a loved one's legacy.

**MAKE A PLANNED GIFT** of cash, real estate, stocks, bonds, personal property, or life insurance. Your legacy will help sustain the critical work of Equinox.

**WISH LIST** Many of the items on our Wish List, such as personal hygiene items, socks, and sheets and towels, are in continuous need of replenishing. These modest items make a world of difference to our clients who may be going without them. Visit [equinoxinc.org](http://equinoxinc.org) to see our complete Wish List. If you would like to make a donation, or **HOLD A DRIVE** to collect items on the Wish List, please contact Karla Gareau at [kgareau@equinoxinc.org](mailto:kgareau@equinoxinc.org) or 518.434.6137, ext. 5309.



Donate online  
[www.equinoxinc.org](http://www.equinoxinc.org)



## EQUINOX HOLIDAY GIFT DRIVE A SUCCESS

Warm and cozy in her new pjs, a sleepy Sapphira, snuggled a new friend. Thanks to the community's generous response to the Equinox Holiday drive in December, we were able to distribute toys, clothing, and other gifts to many of our youth and children of DV clients.



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