

19 Neighbors: She doesn't shrink from fight with 2 foes — addiction and a pandemic

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By Dan Gigler / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

19 Neighbors is a series about 19 Western Pennsylvanians and how they are helping, hoping and coping during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Asked how COVID-19 has affected her work life, Saige Gracie responds with a deep breath, a weary sigh and a long pause. One can hardly blame her.

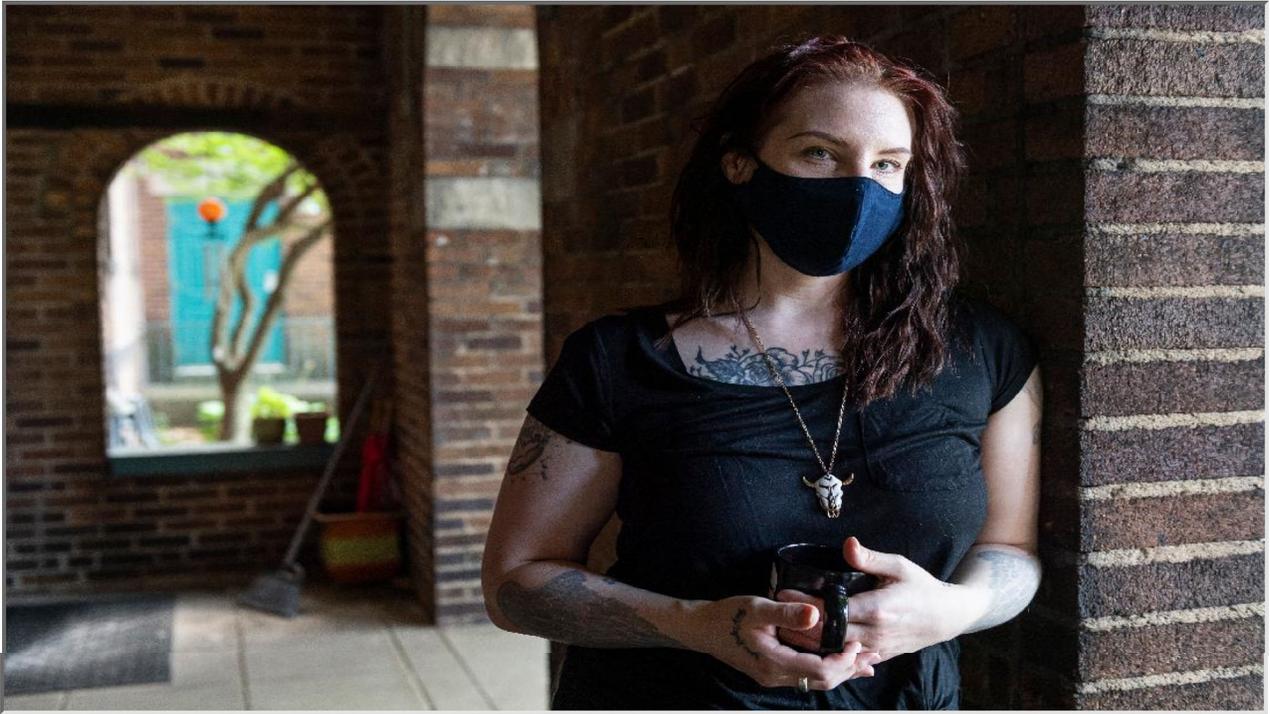
As the lead clinician at [POWER House](#) in Swissvale, she's on the front lines of a deadly American epidemic — drug overdoses — made worse by a pandemic.

"I can recall moments being at the house and ... feeling that desperation and anger and grief. It felt so much like a waking nightmare because everything you know how to do as a helper was just removed," she said.

"I remember very vividly the feeling of, 'How are we gonna pull this off and for how long?' ... There were days when [I] could barely make it to the car so the clients wouldn't see [me] crying."

But this grandchild of Holocaust survivors — her grandfather was a young prisoner in the Auschwitz concentration camp when it was liberated — does not shrink from a scourge that has killed 760,000 Americans since 1999. In, 2017, over 70,000 people died, two-thirds of them from opiates.

POWER — which stands for Pennsylvania Organization for Women in Early Recovery — opened the doors of this former convent in 1991 and now helps approximately 1,800 women in the region each year.



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The recovery center where Ms. Gracie works is a 26-bed, in-patient step-down facility for women who have completed more rigorous rehabilitation programs. According to POWER, its patients can “sharpen the tools they’ve learned in more restrictive levels of care and ... apply them to scenarios in the community so that they can be successful living independently.”

That includes working jobs, engaging with others and interacting with family members. It all ended abruptly when the new coronavirus hit; it could race through this place the way it has in halfway houses and college dormitories. That caused a tremendous amount of anxiety among patients, Ms. Gracie said, but not because they were overly worried about getting sick.

“You have a population of people who have worked tirelessly to move through withdrawal, to attend to their responsibilities, and now that they feel they’re in a place emotionally and physically ready ... life has just paused, not just for them but for the entire world,” she said.

“It feels so personal when you’ve been struggling for so long.”

Many restrictions applied to the staff, too, so they wouldn’t put their clients at risk. So what did they do?

“We got creative. We’ve always had to be creative. We’re involved in something where there’s high burnout and high turnover,” Ms. Gracie said.

Over the past six months, POWER staff, mentors, volunteers and clients have pulled together, saving each others' lives and sanity, she said.

“Everyone has shown up to really make it known how much we are all in this together, how much we care and how absolutely imperative it is that we all stick together for the sake of the women's health and well-being,” she said.

An emergency declaration by Gov. Tom Wolf allowing for telehealth services for drug and alcohol treatment has been instrumental, she said, as has the general public's acceptance of the need to wear face masks to limit the spread of the virus.

“We are consistently rolling the dice on finding that balance between how much risk can we allow and how much can we restrict [them].... The clients in our care can't grow if we keep them in the house,” Ms. Gracie said.

Research and past pandemics indicate that COVID-19 will eventually recede. But there is no end in sight for addiction and its ripple effects.

After a slight decline nationally in overdose deaths in 2018, the trend in 2019 was up and 2020 is expected to be worse because of the pandemic. So far this year, nearly 200 overdose deaths have been reported in Allegheny County and 839 in the five-county area, according to Overdose Free PA.

“Wherever there is desperation, there is increased use of a substance to cope and that's not exclusive for opioids,” Ms. Gracie said. “There's also been an increase in alcohol consumption. There's been an increase in suicidal ideation. We have an entire community going through a universal struggle isolated, and that does worry me.... With the added issue of fear of sickness or loss of loved ones, abuse of substances has shot through the roof.”

The 37-year old native of Portland, Ore., has been heartbroken over the unrest and wildfires that have engulfed her birthplace. But she has also fallen hard for the city she has called home for two years.

“There's kind of a personality that goes along with Pittsburgh,” she said. “It's all the in-your-face of the East Coast with a twinge of Midwestern politeness. It's beautiful and green, and folks are just weird.... I love it here.”

Ms. Gracie has also fallen in love with the resilience she has seen in her clients.

“Seeing someone who had been disempowered find their power was an absolutely miraculous experience,” she said. “I wanted to do that every day, even through all the other stuff that comes along with social work — the bad days, the low pay and the politics.

“I could not get enough of watching someone realize their potential.”

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