

Ritty Makes a Difference on the Line through Heartfelt Compassion and Much More

Of all the topics that are discussed on the Mental Health Association in New Jersey's Peer Recovery WarmLine, there's one that is unique to Peer Specialist, Ritty. "How old are you?" Ritty doesn't mind. That question often leads to a compliment. Callers tell him he's wise for his age, which is 26.

Ritty is known for his ease of conversation. From heavier topics — including his personal experience with depression and anxiety — to lighter ones, like Krispy Kreme doughnuts, it's easy to imagine why he's good at his job.

The Mental Health Association in New Jersey's [Peer Recovery WarmLine](#) is a peer-run call-in service providing ongoing telephone support to people in recovery from mental illness.

For the past nine months, Ritty has been inspiring hope and making a difference through his role.

When it's helpful and appropriate, he shares parts of his own story. All told, he's got a decade of experience. As a teenager, he was diagnosed and treated with medicine. In recent years, he began tapering off the medication, working with his doctor. He says it's had both challenges, like weight change, and rewards, such as a renewed clarity in thought and greater self-awareness.

Ritty's journey to the Peer Recovery Warmline began during a walk with a neighbor and friend, Ruth Kaluski, who works for MHANJ.

"She suggested that I'd be a strong fit for the job. She thought that it would be a good way to use my experience to help others. That it would help me recover," recalls Ritty.

That turned out to be true.

In what he fondly calls a "synergistic relationship," he says his peers, callers, and the call line coordinator have each contributed to his recovery, which has enabled him to return to school. In fact, he's currently working on his doctoral degree in clinical and school psychology at Kean University.

Looking back over the past months, he says that telling parts of his story utilizing the Intentional Peer Support framework has allowed him to more effectively

process his experiences. By connecting with people who have had similar experiences, he has been able to share in a way that he has not experienced with family and friends.

In addition, he says that hearing people talk about their interpersonal problems has helped him better understand points in time when his behavior unintentionally alienated those within his circle of family and friends. He says insights gained on the job have helped him interpersonally.

For Peer Warmline Coordinator Julie McMillan, it's been a privilege to witness Ritty's journey of overcoming adversity and using his experience to lift up others.

"Through empathy, compassion and encouragement, Ritty assists people who struggle with their distress in developing the coping skills and tools to avoid crisis and hospitalization," said Julie. "He inspires hope that recovery and healing are possible."

Ritty lives in Essex County. His mother, who is his "best friend," also has struggled with anxiety and depression. In addition to his studies, Ritty is an academic coach for students struggling with obsessive-compulsive disorder, a research assistant at a New Jersey psychiatric hospital and volunteer with OCDNJ (Obsessive Compulsive Disorder New Jersey).