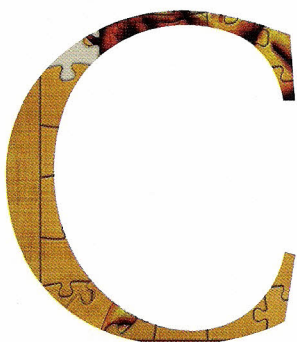


CONNECTING THE DOTS ON BRAIN DISORDERS

From New Horizons to non-profit organizations offering support services, the Treasure Coast is changing the way we look at brain disorders and improving awareness about mental health. Here, we look at the innovative ways doctors treat patients suffering from Alzheimer's, dementia and substance abuse while lending a hand to families in need.

By SUZANNE WENTLEY





Carol Koji remembers when her world started to crumble.

She was 28, living in Fort Lauderdale and raising three boys, who were all in diapers. Even though her marriage was solid and problems were few, she started feeling anxious and depressed. She felt anger toward her husband, with whom she really had no reason to fight. She began to cry a lot. Her everyday tasks piled up as her mental state grew dark.

"Everything hit all at once," says Koji, now 64 and living in Port St. Lucie. "I had an outburst one night. All I know is I got angry, and I was throwing dishes against the wall."

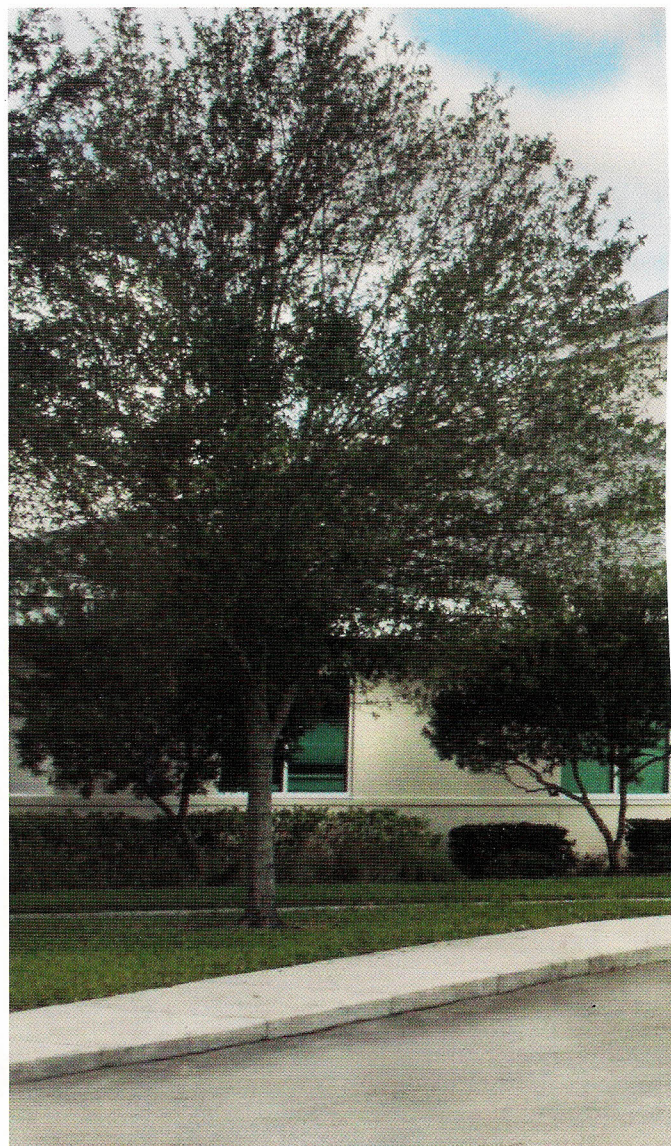
That night was her first experience with the Baker Act, the common name for the Florida Mental Health Act of 1971, which allows for the involuntary institutionalization of those who are deemed to be harmful to themselves or others. She stayed in a mental hospital in Hollywood for a month before moving back to Long Island to live with family for years.

Even though doctors prescribed medicine to help with the chemical imbalance causing her mood swings and outbursts, she didn't always take the pills. Sometimes the prescriptions even made things worse. Her relationship with her family suffered; she had trouble sleeping, eating and being productive.

"I was fighting the world and my medicine. I was not stable," she says, sporting cropped, gray hair, pearl earrings and bell-bottom jeans.

When she and her family moved to Port St. Lucie in 1994, she connected with New Horizons of the Treasure Coast and Okeechobee, and found a doctor who, for the first time in her life, diagnosed and helped her with the bipolar, schizoaffective disorder.

With the resources available locally for those suffering from a variety of mental health concerns, Koji, like thousands of people throughout the Treasure Coast, started her path toward independent living filled with fulfilling rela-



tionships and simple happiness.

But for many who confront mental health issues or know those who do, the path is never easy. Stigma, ignorance and prejudice scare many from seeking the help they need.

"Back in those days, I was very silent. I didn't tell anyone about my illness," Koji says, now under care of a doctor and case manager at New Horizons. "I accept my illness now. We all have a cross from God. I carry this cross, and my hope is that I can help someone as a result."

Hundreds of staff members and volunteers throughout the non-profit community here are working to help others, too.

Rossana Gonzalez, the director of community relations and fund development for New Horizons, says there are more programs and resources available for mental health and substance abuse patients now than ever.



affect a large portion of the population.”

With a \$24 million a year budget, New Horizons has a 33-acre campus with many buildings only accessible with the swipe of an authorized keycard.

There’s a building just to house medical records for the thousands of people seen over the years. Next door, there’s a building for outpatient services that Koji uses now that she has been prescribed a medicine that works for her. There are also outpatient facilities in downtown Fort Pierce, Stuart and Okeechobee.

There is also a clinic specifically for Clozaril injections, a relatively new medicine to treat certain mental and mood disorders on a monthly basis. The medicine is said to reduce suicides and hallucinations.

Walk through another door, and there’s what looks like a regular doctor’s office. Indeed, a primary care clinic with a pharmacy opened to provide help for the special needs mental health patients often face with their health.

A look inside New Horizons

With its main facility located on Midway Road in Fort Pierce, New Horizons has been the primary place to turn for mental health crises locally for 56 years. It is visited by approximately 11,000 people each year—9,000 adults and 2,000 children.

“There is no health without mental health,” Gonzalez says. “Mental illness does not show, necessarily, but it can



Studies show that the life span of those battling mental health disorders are up to 20 years shorter than those without such conditions. If a behavioral disorder makes a patient paranoid and untrusting, chances are he or she won't want to be seen for a simple cholesterol check.

"They feel comfortable when they are on this campus," Gonzalez says. "It's a win-win."

Next door, there's a section for short-term residential treatment for those who are transitioning from a crisis, as well as an area for those whose crises have just begun.

Ambulances carrying local residents who have been involuntarily arrested under the Baker Act—or the Marchman Act, which involves those under the influence of drugs or alcohol who may harm themselves or others—pull into the back entry for emergency screening.

There's also a program through the judicial system, known as Mental Health Court, which provides those arrested with therapeutic services that can keep them out of jail and offer the help they need.

Seafoam green brick walls lead back to a special courtroom with closed circuit televisions to judges, who work with the local sheriff's departments and state attorneys to decide adequate care for those whose symptoms have become potentially dangerous.

Everyone who comes to New Horizons is seen, regard-

less of income. Eighty-four percent have low or no income, Gonzalez says.

Overcoming addictions

On the New Horizons campus, there are also 12 beds dedicated to detoxification from drugs and alcohol.

"We are always full here," Gonzalez says.

Hobe Sound resident Derrick Roupp took advantage of New Horizons almost too late. Once a waiter at a country club in south Stuart, Roupp was a heavy abuser of drugs and alcohol. He frequently went to pain clinics in Palm Beach County to score Roxicodone, which he recklessly mixed with booze even when he was due into work or caring for his 2-year-old daughter.

One morning, he got a job to drive someone from the country club to the airport in Fort Lauderdale. He stayed up all night doing drugs before picking up his charge. He delivered them to the airport safely, but on the way home fell asleep at the wheel and smashed his vehicle into a tree.

Five and a half months later, he awoke from a coma with his right leg missing.

"I was in St. Mary's [hospital] for six months, and I had no insurance. So I had to come straight home with no rehab," he says. "Thank God I have a great mother. She



New Horizons of the
Treasure Coast

doing is being present with them, you can heal the loneliness they are suffering from that cannot be cured by medicine. We can give them joy and love, and that means a lot to the family members.”

Von Aldenbruck, who also sits on the board of directors for Treasure Coast Hospice, is matched with a woman named Pat, with whom she meets once or twice a week. The two sit closely and hold hands, interact and smile. Sometimes Von Aldenbruck sings. The bond is unmistakable.

“When I’m with her, nothing else gets my attention, and she responds,” she says. “She responds to me in ways that she hasn’t responded to anyone in a long time.”

Memory Bridge, which offers trainings throughout the year, has about 30 volunteers (they’re called “Bridge Builders”) locally. They are always looking for more, because the results are obvious.

Von Aldenbruck says she watched as Pat said her first words in years. When the two are

together, Pat will take her medicine and engages in activities. Her quality of life simply improves, she adds.

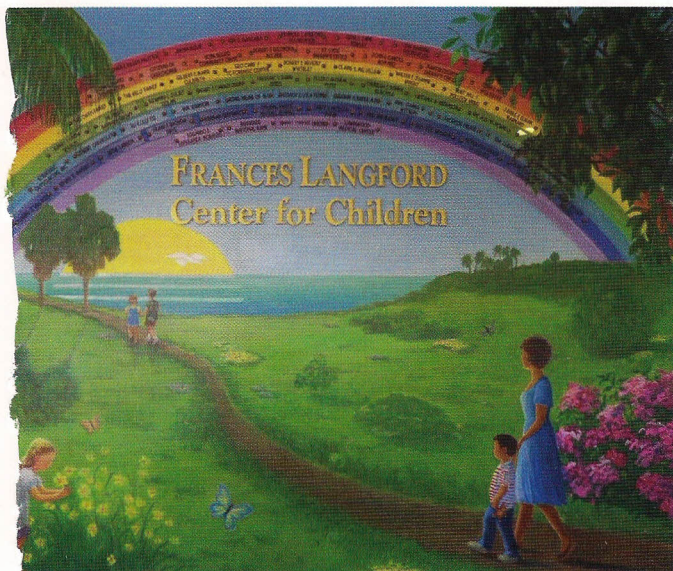
Children need help too

Old and young are helped on the Treasure Coast. Tykes & Teens in Martin County is a non-profit that provides therapeutic services for children, and New Horizons recently opened an outpatient facility for youth, too.

Prevention is key to keep kids out of New Horizons’ crisis center for children, which has 20 beds for children up to 17 years old who may be suffering from a drug addiction or attempted suicide or a non-fatal but still serious cutting episode. They tend to stay an average of three or four days.

“We see a lot of kids with depression or anxiety,” says Dr. Veronica Martin, who oversees the crisis center in Fort Pierce. “We stabilize them and provide resources in the community before discharging them.”

Walking through the center, a visitor may



An illustration at the Frances Langford Center for Children

see some children are laughing, maybe getting ready for an art therapy class. Other youth seem despondent, still in need of intensive help. Suicide is the third leading cause of death for youth age 15 to 24 years old, according to the Florida Suicide Prevention Coalition. It's an issue locally, too.

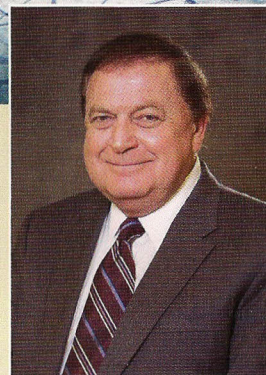
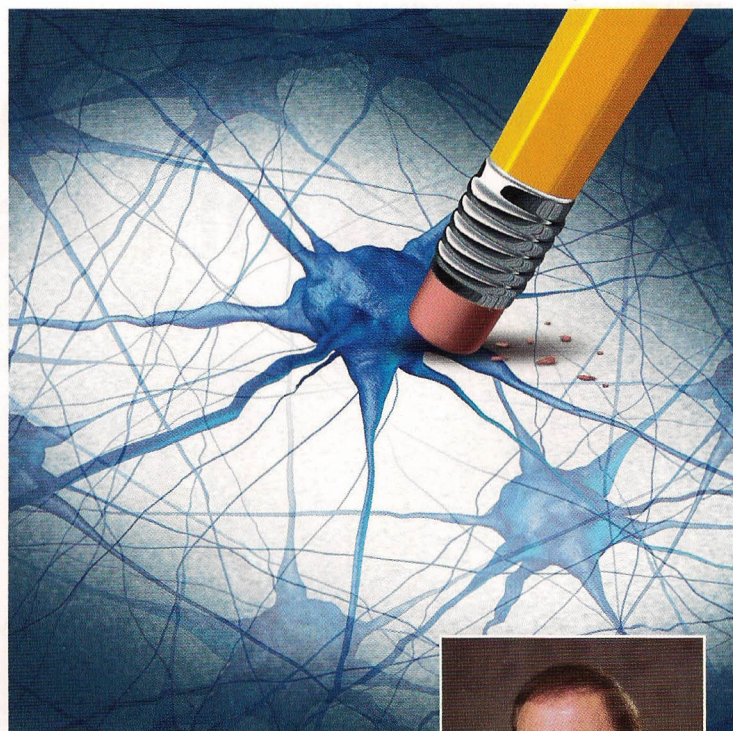
John Poli, a New Horizons program manager for the Student Assistance Program, uses his position to identify children who are in need of extra mental health help. He and his team teach students in third through fifth grades in St. Lucie, Okeechobee and Indian River counties about the dangers of drugs and alcohol, as well as conflict resolution.

"It's building skills to teach anger management, decision making and life skills," he says. "We are also able to help teachers, who are the first line of defense."

Regardless of age, the key to good mental health is overcoming the stigma and finding resources that are readily available throughout the Treasure Coast.

Carol Koji, who suffered for years before finding stability and support at New Horizons, says trust and honesty are important. Her case manager, Tammy Pike, is a valued advocate who Koji depends on.

"She has helped me in so many ways," says Koji, who now spends her days visiting her grandchildren, listening to music and writing poetry. "I really encourage people to be open and don't be afraid. They are here to help." ■



A 5-Step Action Plan for Mental Health

John B. Romano, CEO of New Horizons of the Treasure Coast Inc., had the vision to bring Mental Health First Aid to the Treasure Coast right after the tragic Sandy Hook Elementary School shootings in Connecticut. With a simple, yet powerful program, ALGEE, you can save an individual from danger and help them treat a mental health disease. "If someone in your life, whether it's a family member or a friend, seems to be in need of mental health intervention, don't pass it off as not a problem or as somebody else's problem," Romano says. "Give a mental health professional an opportunity to help in evaluating the seriousness of someone's behavioral issues."

1. *Assess for risk of suicide or harm*
2. *Listen non-judgmentally*
3. *Give reassurance and information*
4. *Encourage appropriate professional help*
5. *Encourage self-help and other support strategies*

Many people on the Treasure Coast have already been trained in Mental Health First Aid—it's just as important as first aid for cuts or bites. Find out more about Mental Health First Aid at www.thenationalcouncil.org/about/mental-health-first-aid/.