

The Current

SPRING 2026

“You have to decide what you feel,” says Zach from his Peer Support Specialist’s office at our OnTrackNY program. *“You have to do what you decide is important for you to do. Even if it feels hard.”*

Pursuing a Master of Social Work degree is hard. Embracing recovery from mental illness is hard. Using lived experience in combination with clinical training to truly reach others in their darkest moments may be the hardest thing of all, but Zach does all these things with conviction, empathy, strength, and most of all, hope.

As an adolescent, he performed for adoring opera crowds on Broadway and envisioned a future in the performing arts. When he turned 15, his voice changed, and the future wasn’t so clear. Zach remembers, “I had my first depressive episode then. I wanted to get help, but my family didn’t really believe in mental health.”

Zach studied music in college, but “my voice never really got there. I had come to terms with my queer identity, had some success in music, but was rejected from graduate school.” Experiencing this drastic shift in life plans and a move upstate to provide support for a family member, led Zach to a dark, challenging place and a “dehumanizing experience” in the medical system. “I felt my life was over,” he says of those dark days.



Then, things started to change. Zach found an agency that provided mental health and supportive vocational services. “I felt understood. I met an employment specialist who showed me a career path, and I thought, ‘I could do this.’” He became a NYS Office of Mental Health-certified peer specialist, continued to learn and build skills, and became an advocate for others in treatment. He then moved to the Office for People with Developmental Disabilities system, supporting those in care and teaching life skills. Last year, as he continued his graduate schooling in social work, he joined the OnTrack team at Northern Rivers. In his role, he supports young adults experiencing early-onset psychosis, helping them navigate their changing lives with wisdom, empathy, and compassion.

Today, the teenager who received applause for singing songs written by others has become an adult who has found his own voice--and helps others do the same. “I have a lot of reason to hope. Mental health challenges are something you learn to live with, like any chronic illness. I keep growing professionally, and I feel successful. I have a path forward.”

NORTHERN RIVERS

BOARD of Directors

OFFICERS:

Chair Ferdinand Morales
Vice Chair Susan Fogarty-Jacques
Treasurer Vince Commisso
Secretary JoAnn Smith

BOARD MEMBERS:

David Cost	John Malone
Jermaine Cruz	John Monteiro
Brian Cumming	Michael Paulsen
Randall Devaney	Nicholas Payton
Jamie Dughi Hogenkamp	Brittany Vogel
Michael Lipschultz	Susan Zongrone

60 Academy Rd
Albany, NY 12208
(518) 426-2600
development@NRFS.org
www.NRFS.org



Bill's Current... cares

May is Mental Health month, and we're proud to share a story of mental health recovery in this issue. Mental health is health, and taking care of your mental health is every bit as important every day as taking your vitamins, getting exercise, and eating right.

Just like you'd visit a doctor if your ankle swells up, serious mental health issues mean a trip to a trained professional. Getting help no matter what sort of challenge you face is a good thing, and that's why it's so important we continue to destigmatize mental health treatment.

That's also why we continue to advocate for our workforce in the NYS budget. Our workforce is one of the key drivers that empower us to develop innovative programming to help communities enhance available resources and support children, adults and families.

The other key? Support from people like you. If these pages are your introduction to Northern Rivers, welcome! And if you're already an old friend, please enjoy a few highlights that you've made possible.

William T. Gettman Jr.
Chief Executive Officer



Small Monthly Gifts. Life-Changing Impact.

At Northern Rivers, no one does this work alone.

Our Chosen Family Giving Society is a community of monthly donors committed to showing up, month after month, for the children and families we serve.



Join today with a simple monthly gift - scan here to get started.

50 YEARS OF EDUCATION

We recently hosted a 50 Years of Education Celebration to honor our history across three schools, The Neil Hellman School in Albany, The School at Northeast in Schenectady, and the Early Learning Center in Schenectady. We aren't only looking back though; in the coming years we will invest in the future of our education system! Our students are special and they deserve a space that is worthy of them. Stay tuned for updates!



MAKING A DIFFERENCE

We are so proud to share that three of our interns from last year went on to accept roles with the organization and are still working with us today. The interns, Vanessa, who is a day treatment clinician, Adriana, who works as a health home care manager, and Jonathan who is an IAPP clinician, are all loving their roles. In Adriana's own words, "I love that I get to meet clients where they are at through Northern Rivers. I feel like I am getting to make a real connection and impact with my families."



AN INSPIRATIONAL HOMECOMING

A familiar face returned to our Albany Campus in March. Leah Stiles, founder of the nonprofit, Sea Waves Inc., retired Navy Senior Chief, bestselling author, and former resident of our RTF program as well as a student at our Neil Hellman School stopped by to speak with some of our students. Leah was able to share her inspirational story, answer important questions, and encourage our students to dream big!



EMPOWERING YOUTH, ONE BEAT AT A TIME

Our Family Resource Center offers so much to youth in our Albany community by providing classes, workshops, food, and hygiene products to youth in our Prevention Programs just like Denico who has been loving our BPM Music workshop. In this workshop, he is coached on beat-making and explores his artistic interests in a safe and supported environment. Thank you so much to our community partners who make this program possible!



“ I have a lot of reason to
HOPE.

Mental health challenges

are something you

learn to live with,

like any chronic illness.

I keep growing professionally,

and I feel successful.

I have a path forward.”

~ Zach, OnTrackNY program
read more inside

Northern Rivers Family of Services
The Current

Amy's Mental Health Tips

**It is important to prioritize your own mental health;
here are some practical everyday tips to help you do just that:**



- Nourish your body and mind with healthy habits, movement, fresh air, and time unplugged.
- Make rest a priority by allowing space for sleep, breaks, and quiet moments.
- Explore mindfulness tools like meditation, journaling, or wellness apps that work for you.
- Lean on supportive connections with friends, family, and loved ones.

Amy B. DiRamio, LCSW-R,
Chief Officer of Behavioral Health Services