



Fletcher Group Partner Success Story

SMART IN VIRGINIA

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PAYING IT FORWARD

People the world over feel compelled to help others overcome the same challenges they've overcome. That impulse seems especially powerful in the recovery community. One good example is Leon Richardson who rehabbed the first time at 17 and nearly three decades later became a resident at a Piedmont Recovery Residence in Martinsville, Virginia that he now oversees as Program Manager. "It's still one day at a time," says Leon, "but I'm living proof that recovery is possible. That drives me to lead by example to help others find a new purpose in life just as I did."



SMART RECOVERY'S ROLE

SMART Recovery's evidence-based Successful Life Skills Training program played an instrumental role in Leon's recovery and is a mainstay at the four recovery homes and recovery center where Leon works. The program not only helps residents develop the coping skills needed for recovery. Residents and staff who complete the program can also earn a SMART Recovery Trainer's Certificate with which they can pay forward SMART's benefits by training others.

THE VALUE OF LIVED EXPERIENCE

The National Council for Mental WellBeing says the sharing of lived experience promotes social connection and accountability, validates the experiences of others, and promotes feelings of understanding and solidarity. SMART Recovery applied the same principles in 1994 when it was launched in an effort to meet the increasing demand of health professionals and their patients for a secular, science-based alternative to the widespread 12-Step recovery program.

EMPATHY'S THE KEY

Lived experience goes beyond sympathy, says Leon Richardson. "We sympathize when someone loses a loved one, but it stays their experience, not ours. Empathy is different. It comes from sharing the same experience. It's what lets you say, 'I know where you've been because I've been there.' Lived experience can't be taught or faked. It overcomes barriers because you're in it together, facing the same challenges, the same triggers, the same wins, the same losses."





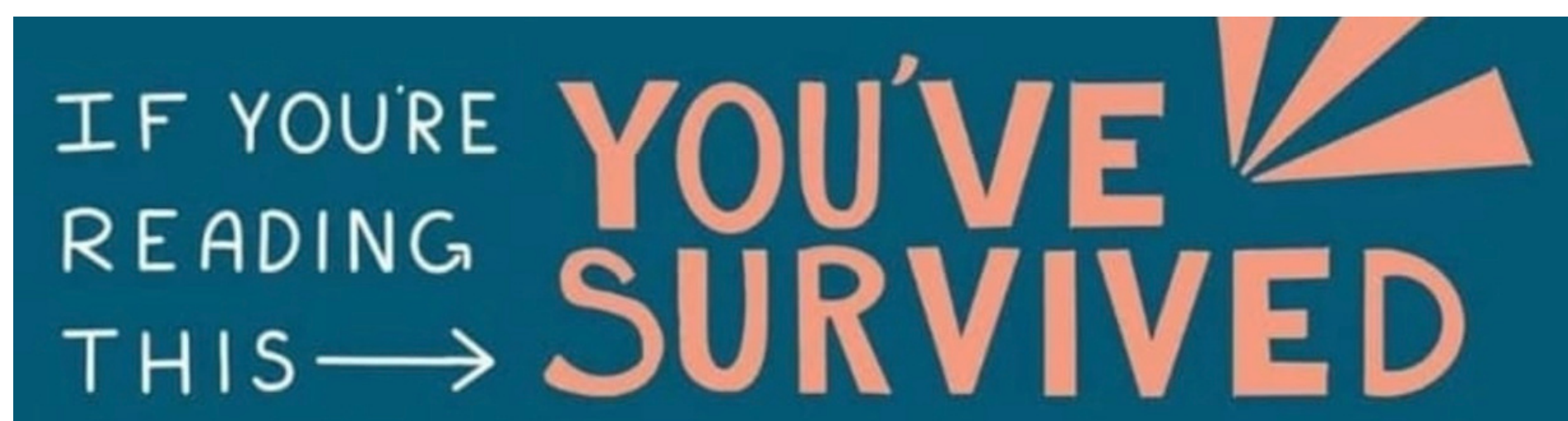
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SO DIFFERENT, SO EXCITING

"The materials and atmosphere are so different," says Leon of SMART Recovery's Successful Life Skills Training. "Because the meetings are less restricted than typical AA meetings, people can open up more, relate more, and make stronger connections. There are scheduled topics and study lessons, but there's a lot of leeway in how you work with those things. And we can talk about anything, including our triggers, urges, and how to recognize and deal with them. It's not like listening to a lecture. You participate together as a free-flowing group. It's different and fresh. And in our line of business, fresh is good."



LEARNING'S FUN!

SMART helps people focus more on themselves," says Leon. "You strengthen the group by strengthening yourself in relationship with each other."

One other thing that makes SMART meetings so effective is the speed of progress. "Our residents love how much they're learning and getting from it," says Leon. "Participation is high because they're so excited. One fellow I transported to social services today told me he can't wait for the next SMART meeting."

IT GOES BOTH WAYS

"I can walk into a room now with my head held high because of the work I do advocating for those who don't have a voice, who are too weak, or don't have the tools. Even though I'm on staff, the clients here, including those here on their first day, help me as much as I help them. They're just like I was, wondering if they're going to make it, learning day by day to love themselves. Knowing that I can help them makes my life meaningful. It's why I can look in the mirror and be proud of what I see."

HOW IT STARTED

"I was directed to the Fletcher Group and SMART Recovery by my supervisor, Monica Flora," says Leon. "Monica's always looking for new opportunities and has been a fan of SMART for some time," Fletcher Group Program Manager Michelle Day then arranged for Piedmont to receive a \$1,200 stipend generously provided by the Elevance Health Foundation to ensure that SMART's effectiveness in rural recovery homes is accurately documented.

