



FALL 2024

# MESSAGES

A PUBLICATION OF MEG'S GIFT, INC.



## FROM THE BOARD

We live in a world marked by alarming global conflict, economic challenges, constantly changing weather patterns, and polarizing political rhetoric. Communities struggle to provide the resources families desperately need in order to thrive. These realities evince the seemingly insurmountable task of creating hope and using it to build a better future. MEG's Gift remains steadfast in its belief that progress happens when communities are empowered to use their most valuable assets; the individuals within them. We know change starts with us and it is our mission to continue to advocate for and support mental health care in our community. Our hearts are humbled each year by the generous and ongoing support of our donors and we are deeply grateful for all who have and continue to support us. We couldn't do this without you!

In 2015, we held our first annual Golf Tournament, Dinner and Silent Auction. That year, we donated \$60,000 to St. Joseph's Neighborhood Center. Since then, we have held 7 additional golf tournament events, attended numerous community events and published 8 editions of MESSAGES; all while keeping Megan's never changing compassion for others at the heart of all we do. In total, we have donated \$460,000 back into the Rochester community. Yet, as the world inevitably evolves, so must MEG's Gift.

We are excited to announce a change to our major fundraising event this year and proudly introduce our "Legacy of Love" event. The event will take place on Saturday November 16, 2024 at Shadow Lake Golf Club. It will honor our beloved Megan, who, despite her struggles with mental illness, always gave selflessly to others. The event will feature a plated dinner, keynote speech, live music from the Delmonico String Quartet and an online auction. Hakeem Rahim, an esteemed mental health speaker and trainer from New York City, will deliver a powerful keynote address. Additionally, Monroe County Sheriff Todd Baxter will serve as the Master of Ceremonies. Full details can be found on page 4.

It has been ten years since we lost our precious daughter Megan to depression. Her absence is a constant presence in our lives and in the lives of many who knew and loved her. Our commitment to helping others who struggle with mental illness remains unwavering. Through the work of our charity, we aim to carry on her loving spirit and support those affected by mental illness.

MEG's Gift is her legacy.  
Please join us in fostering this legacy.



### 2023 BENEFICIARIES RECEIVE \$85,000

Pictured above, MEG's Gift presents \$65,000 to primary beneficiary NAMI Rochester! An additional \$20,000 was awarded to the Children's Institute Full story on page 2.

# Beneficiary Update 2023



## NAMI Receives \$65,000



Pictured L-R : Kathy & Ray Garbach, Donna Leigh-Estes, Cindy Constantino-Gleason and Jim D'Amico

Thanks to you, our 2023 primary beneficiary, the National Association of Mental Illness (NAMI) in Rochester received an amazing \$65,000 donation. This significant contribution will support NAMI Rochester's efforts in providing advocacy, education, and support to individuals and families affected by mental illness.

Donna Leigh-Estes, the Executive Director and CEO of NAMI Rochester, highlighted the profound impact of the donation saying, "we were and continue to be humbled by the support received from MEG's Gift." Leigh-Estes noted that these funds will allow them to grow "NAMI Connections", a peer led group that provides safe support spaces in community activities for those in need, including baseball games and museum visits.

Leigh-Estes shared that NAMI Rochester is working hard to launch a first-of-its-kind mental health support program for local high schools, called NAMI on Campus clubs.

NOC Clubs are a direct response to the rising critical need for quality mental health resources for today's youth. High school NOC clubs will foster an inclusive environment where all students are encouraged to seek guidance as they learn how to safely navigate through their own mental health journey.

By providing support to high school students, NAMI continues to strive to eliminate any mental health stigma and provide students the platform to feel safe talking about their issues. Thank you for helping us support NAMI.

## NAMI Walk to Honor Megan

Inspired by Megan's unwavering compassion for others, love for nature and her ability to put others before herself, NAMI has announced that their annual Gary Stern Memorial Walk will honor Megan's legacy.

**WHAT:** Family friendly 1.5 mile walk through Rochester's Neighborhood of the Arts

**WHEN:** September 28, 2024 | 8:00 AM - 12:00 PM

**REGISTER:**

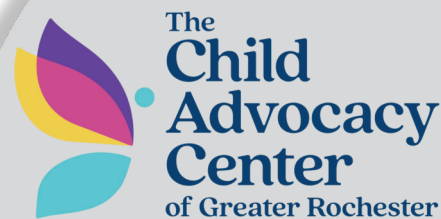


## Children's Institute Receives \$20,000

In addition to our \$65,000 donation to NAMI, MEG's Gift was also able to donate \$20,000 to the Children's Institute. The Children's Institute plays a vital role in improving the social and emotional health of children. This funding aids the Children's Institute in bridging the gap between research and practical application, helping to implement evidence-based programs and conduct vital research. The Children's Institute's work ensures that children thrive in nurturing and inclusive environments, thanks to partnerships with schools and community agencies. We are thrilled to support their important work.



Pictured L-R : Anne Marie White, Kathy & Ray Garbach, Diana Trentini



# 2024 PRIMARY BENEFICIARY

MEG's Gift is thrilled to announce The Child Advocacy Center of Greater Rochester (CACGROC) as the primary beneficiary of our fundraising efforts for 2024. Formerly Bivona Child Advocacy Center, CACGROC stands as a beacon of hope for children in our community by advocating for them with trauma-informed, child-centered preventative, investigative and restorative services. CACGROC's dedication to the welfare of children aligns perfectly with the mission of MEG's Gift and we are eager to support their vision of a future where all children grow up safe and protected, free from abuse.

Since opening its doors in 2004 as Bivona Child Advocacy Center, the agency has provided 30,000 children in the greater Rochester region with intervention services. Additionally, the agency provides 50,000 children with prevention services in local schools annually. At a recent celebration of their twentieth year, the center reintroduced themselves as the Child Advocacy Center of Greater Rochester. Leaders of CACGROC believe this rebranding better reflects who the agency is today.

Jaime Anderson, Vice President of Development, Strategy, and Policy, shared that partnering with MEG's Gift has come at an opportune moment, as the organization expands its services to a second location in Irondequoit at Skyview on the Ridge. It is expected to open in early 2025.

Dr. Daniele Lyman-Torres, President & CEO, expressed gratitude for the ongoing support, saying, "[CACGROC] is a resource in our community for children who have experienced the unimaginable. Now, more than ever, our children need mental health support. Meg's family shares a deep commitment to creating hope and to improve the mental health of our community. I am grateful for their philanthropic support and for sharing our mission and our resources. Together, we can help children develop the strength to overcome their past traumas."

Together with CACGROC, we believe that can make a significant difference in the lives of children, helping them overcome past traumas and build a hopeful future.

## BEACON PLACE

CACGROC's new location opening in early 2025 will provide critical preventative and restorative services for children and families who are most at risk for abuse and neglect. Some of these services include:

- Parent Prevention Academy and Resource Center.
- Ongoing therapy groups for children and caregivers, including art therapy & recreational therapy
- Assessment and referral services



# LEGACY of Love

NOVEMBER 16, 2024  
SHADOW LAKE GOLF CLUB

## JOIN US!

This special evening honoring Megan's "Legacy of Love" includes a plated dinner, an empowering keynote address from Hakeem Rahim, musical performances by the Delmonico String Quartet and an online auction. Monroe County Sheriff Todd Baxter will serve as the Master of Ceremonies.

Speaker and trainer Harlem Rahim has testified before the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives, been featured in national publications including USA Today and TED talks, and shared his personal 17-year journey with mental health with thousands. His work focuses on transforming the stigma around mental illness into pillars of wellness, acceptance, and joy

*Keynote Speaker Hakeem Rahim*



## EVENT DETAILS

**Ticket Price: \$160/person**  
Registration & hors d'oeuvre  
reception begins at 5:00 PM

To register/learn  
about sponsorship  
opportunities, scan  
here





# 2023 TOURNAMENT DAY



Our annual Golf Tournament, Dinner and Auction event brings together people from our community who believe in our mission. Held in late summer at Shadow Lake Golf Club, the event is marked by a strong feeling of connection and love. Megan's loving legacy is brought to life each year. This past year was no exception, as we were met with perfect summer weather and an amazing turnout of golfers! We are overwhelmed each year by the generosity of our sponsors, donors and volunteers. THANK YOU! We could not do this without you.

## AND THE WINNERS ARE....



**18 Hole Course**  
Kevin Zeman, Don Burger, Anthony Giordano, Jeff McCaffrey



**Executive Course**  
Sam Mastro Simone, Mike Calouri, Mike Pattison, Mike Marciano



**Longest Drive (Male)**  
Aaron Bower



**Longest Drive (Female)**  
Vasantha Ravindra



**Closest to Pin (Male)**  
Tom VandeLogt



**Closest to Pin (Female)**  
Wendy Wright



# THE LONELINESS EPIDEMIC



By: Jess LeDonne

Last year, the U.S. Surgeon General, Dr. Vivek Murthy, issued a report stating that the U.S. is experiencing a "loneliness epidemic". The report describes the impacts of loneliness on public health and outlines what can be done to combat it. At first blush, calling loneliness a national epidemic may sound extreme, but the report shows how essential social connection is to our mental and physical health. While humans have always had to rely on each other to survive, obtaining quality human connection is increasingly difficult in our modern world, and because the impacts of loneliness are "costing the health industry billions of dollars annually", Dr. Vivek describes it as a "major public health concern" and "more widespread than other major health issues in the U.S."

Importantly, this report shares some startling statistics on the health risks posed by loneliness, including:

- 🕒 Increasing risk of heart disease by 29%
- 🕒 Increasing risk of stroke by 32%
- 🕒 Increasing risk of developing dementia by 50%
- 🕒 Increasing risk of premature death by 32%
- 🕒 Increasing risk of mental illness and addiction



# A RISING PUBLIC HEALTH CONCERN?

In general, we know and accept social connection as a basic human need. Neuroscientists have long studied the relationship between social connection and quality of life, finding that those with stronger social bonds tend to live longer, healthier lives than those who lack them. More interestingly though, research has shown that the human brain has actually evolved over time so that it not only needs, but expects, close proximity to others.

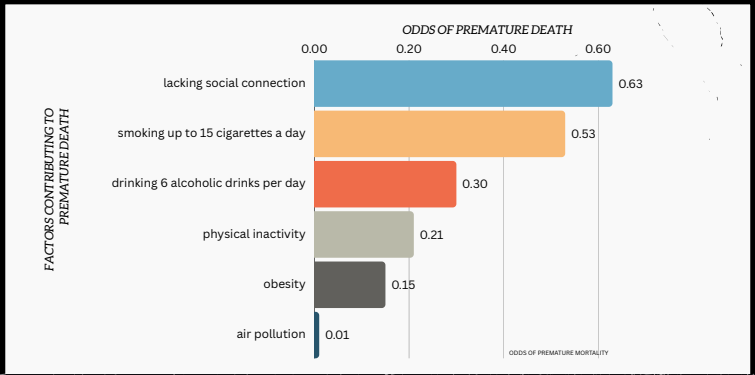
Advances in technology have made it possible for us to connect instantly with anyone, anywhere, at any time. Yet every year, more American report feelings of loneliness. Thus, social connection is more than simply the amount of relationships and interpersonal interactions one has on a daily basis. The extent to which a person is socially connected depends on the structure, function and quality of their connections.

The question, then, is; if human connection is so essential to our survival, and the impacts of loneliness are so extreme, how did we get here? How did we enter a national loneliness epidemic where about one-in-two American adults have reported experiencing loneliness?

Although lack of connection and feelings of loneliness have increased over the last several decades in the US, the crisis became more extreme during

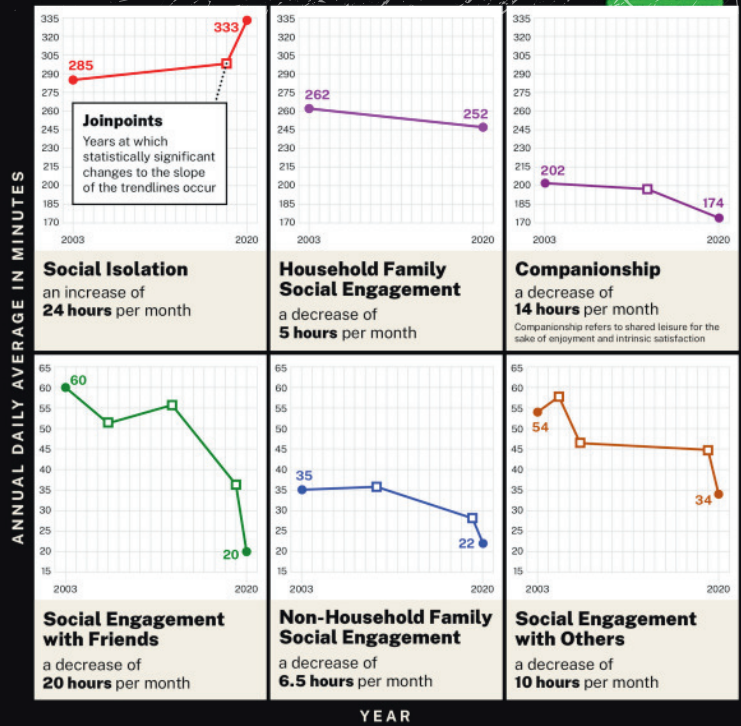
“  
If human connection is so essential to our survival, and the impact of loneliness is so extreme; how did we get here?  
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## LONELINESS AS DANGEROUS TO HEALTH AS SMOKING



## National Trends for Social Connection

From 2003 to 2020, time spent alone increased, while time spent on in-person social engagement decreased.



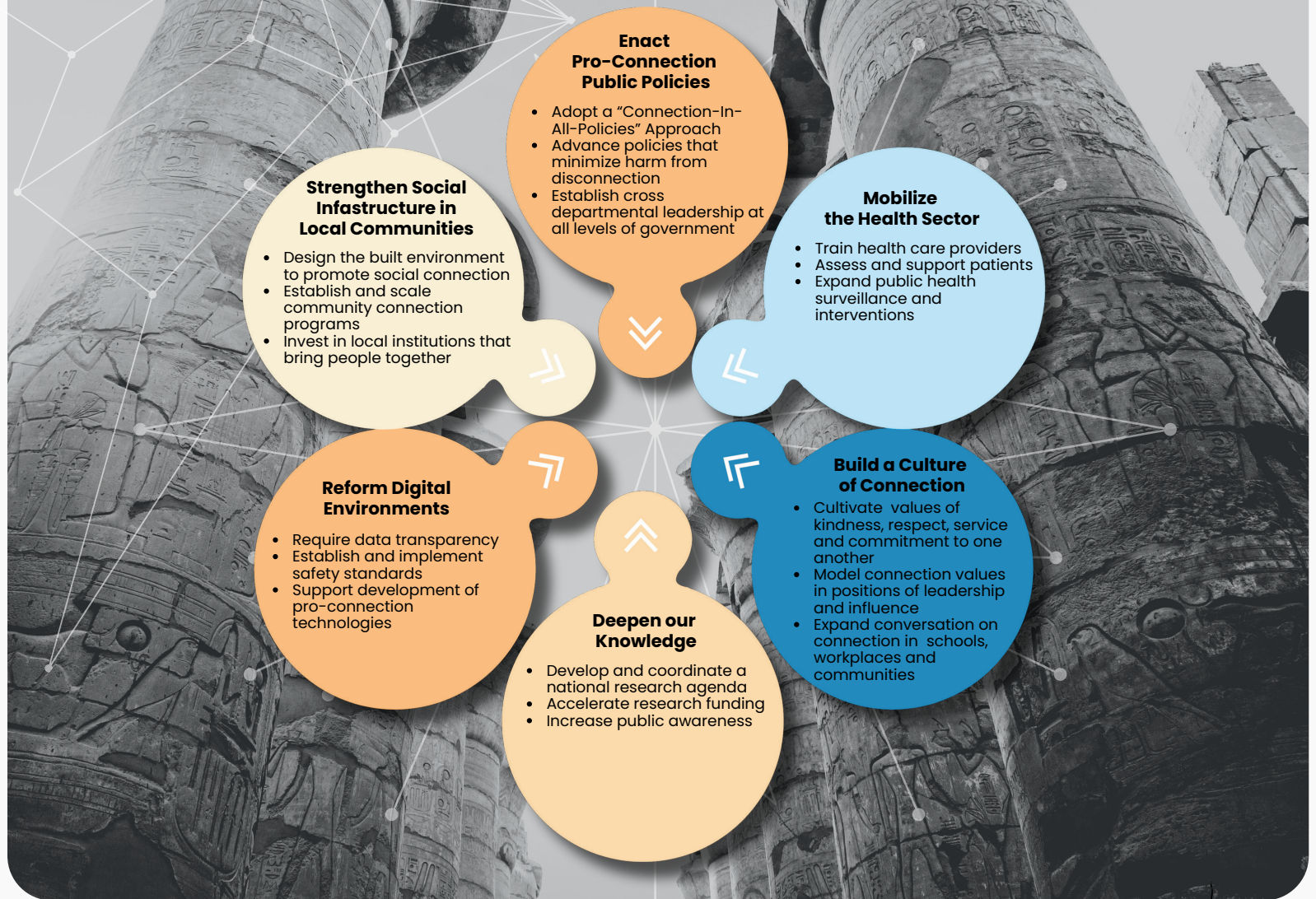
the COVID-19 pandemic when staying home was mandated and social distancing became the norm. Though technology allowed for some reprieve from the pressure of staying connected during COVID, it may have caused more harm than good.

Studies show that people who use social media for two hours or more daily are more than two times as likely to report feeling socially isolated than those who were on social media apps for less than 30 minutes a day. Relatedly, the advisory shows that young people aged 15-24 are more susceptible to feelings of loneliness and report spending less time with people in person.

Dr. Vivek believes that in order to change, “[i]t will take all of us – individuals and families, schools and workplaces, health care and public health systems, technology companies, governments, faith organizations, and communities – working together to destigmatize loneliness and change our cultural and policy response to it.” While declaring this ambitious goal, Dr. Vivek’s proposes a solution, the “National Strategy to Advance Social Connection”, as outlined on the next page.



# The Six Pillars to Advance Social Connection



## HOW WE CAN STAY CONNECTED

While many of these pillars focus on broad governmental, societal, and policy changes, we can absolutely still do our part at the individual level to create more socially connected communities, which have been shown to have improved physical and mental health, more preparedness and resiliency in the face of adversity, more economic prosperity, and reduced levels of crime and violence. Thus, Dr. Vivek's report urges us to opt for in-person connection over social media, to join community groups, to parent in ways that model healthy screen-free connections, to take time out of each day to connect with a friend or family member, and to minimize distractions during conversations.

Lastly, for those feeling the impacts of loneliness, the report urges us to be open with health care providers and to reach out to a loved one, counselor, or crisis hotline such as the 988 Lifeline or the Crisis Text Line in times of struggle. "Millions of people in America are struggling in the shadows, and that's not right. That's why I issued this advisory to pull back the curtain on a struggle that too many people are experiencing."





# THANK YOU DOUG



SAYING GOODBYE TO OUR EDITOR

As we wrap up this edition of MESSAGES, we'd like to pause to acknowledge the tremendous efforts of our editor Douglas Bufano as he passes the reigns to Jess LeDonne.

Doug's tenure as editor began with our very first edition of MESSAGES in 2016. With a PhD and extensive professional background in psychology, Doug had a unique ability to bring informative, researched based topics to our readers in a way that was also deeply personal to our mission and vision.

Doug's close relationship with his niece Megan and the grief felt in her absence is evident within the pages of each edition of MESSAGES.

From his thoughtful selection of personal reflections of Megan to his creation of mental health related articles, Doug's efforts have been instrumental in fostering a deep connection with our readers.

We are forever grateful for Doug's hard work and commitment and his impact on this publication will be greatly missed.

*Graphic Designer note: Working closely with Doug on MESSAGES has been a gift to me. His stories about Megan and his insights on mental health have helped me in my own journey towards healing. I have not only gained a mentor, but a friend that I love dearly! Thank you Doug!*

From  
**GRIEF** to *Belief*  
A Father's Journey



By: Ray Garbach

Experiencing the loss of someone you love is traumatic. But when the loss was my child, my world was turned upside down. That's what my family experienced when in February of 2014 we lost our Megan in her struggle with mental illness. We clearly did not see that coming. I think it safe to say that as parents we are not wired to have our children predecease us.



In the first several months after the death of Megan, I found myself questioning whether I did enough to help her with her struggle. I found myself wondering: "What if I did this, or what if I did that," but that only haunted me more with no satisfaction that the outcome would have been different. Instead, it showed me how terribly afraid and sad Megan must have felt trying to deal with her pain.



It absolutely tormented me to think how alone Megan must have felt, alone with no sense of where to turn for help, which only added to my sadness. My feelings of sadness were like tsunami waves rushing over me out of nowhere threatening to sweep me away. Feeling helpless over a long period of time, it started to become clear that a power beyond my mortal self was my only pathway forward out of profound grief.

Knowing that I could not change the past, my thoughts turned to find a way to help others who struggle with mental illness. After all, this is what Megan would have wanted. Over the course of her short life, there were countless times that she helped those who were in need. Whether it was feeding the hungry, offering her help to the homeless, or caring for those who struggle, Megan was there with a spirit of love and compassion. It was this loving spirit that prompted my family to start our foundation, MEG's Gift.

Over the course of the past 10 years, I have had a reoccurring dream of being on the boat in the biblical scene being tossed around in a violent storm and in fear of sinking. I am awakened as the storm is calmed and a voice speaking asking, “why are you terrified... do you not yet have faith?” Each time I have this dream, I wonder what other storms in my life that faith in a higher power might calm.



It is at that time I know just where Megan can be found...in heaven helping me to minister to those who struggle with mental illness through MEG’s Gift.

In the stormy periods of our lives, when panic chokes our hope, and fear threatens our faith, let us call on a higher power. We must never forget that a greater power than panic or fear is sleeping soundly in our sinking boat.

# REFLECTION

TEDx Rochester Community Event



MEG’s Gift treasurer Katie Scalzo was invited to speak at a TEDx Rochester event in April at the Memorial Art Gallery. This exciting afternoon, focused on the central theme of “reflection” featured inspiring talks and innovative ideas from several community leaders. Katie, Meg’s sister, is a mother of five and a staunch advocate for mental health. Katie shared a moving reflection of her personal journey through loss and grief to inspire change and resilience in others. Thank you to all the event organizers, speakers and those in attendance!



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*"I love you from the top, middle and bottom of my heart"*

**A familiar closing to messages from our Meg.**

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**MEG's Gift, Inc. is a 501(c)(3) public charity**

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