

Mariposa Wellness Center Opens in South County

Mental health consumers in recovery in Watsonville have a new venue for accessing mental health, employment and wellness-focused services. After some initial delays, the Mariposa Program finally began to take shape in early October with the hiring of a new program coordinator, Gerardo Sandoval (see interview profile below.) Mariposa opened in early November with Mental Health Service Act (MHSA) funding.

The program is designed to provide supports for recovery for those who no longer need more intensive services. The recovery vision for mental health consumers promotes concepts of hope, personal empowerment, respect, social connections, self-responsibility, and self-determination. It also promotes consumer-operated services as a way to support recovery, and strives to reflect the cultural, ethnic and racial diversity of mental health consumers. Programs such as Mariposa are part of a national movement to promote recovery.

Currently, the Center is open five days per week, from 9:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. and employs five part-time program assistants, each with unique skills and experience related to recovery. The Mariposa Wellness Center offers a rich menu of groups, classes and activities, including music, art, poetry, Spanish and dual recovery anonymous (DRA). Many of these groups are led by present and former mental health consumers, now engaged as paid staff or volunteers.

County Mental Health staff have been supportive of the Center by filling in some service gaps and encouraging clients to visit, as have staff at Paloma House. They also partnered with Mariposa staff and participants in hosting a beautiful Thanksgiving dinner in celebration of the vibrant sense of community that prevails in Watsonville.

The services have been met with open arms! According to Gerardo “consumers say they have a ‘sense of warmth and comfort’ at Mariposa, and I feel that, too. I’m happy here; it’s a good fit.” One consumer I spoke with says “I love Mariposa! It is cool. People can come and socialize; it gets them out of their house.” But, it isn’t just a cool place to hang out, he says “I’m clean and sober and going to Mariposa helps”.

There is a Wellness Center in North County (at MHCAN), but Mariposa is developing its own unique blend of supports and programming. Gerardo states that reflects the Watsonville community, with consumer peers leading the way. Ninety percent of those employed are from the community. Families play an important role and are actively engaged in Mariposa. Older adults and transition age youth (18 to 25 year olds) are also actively involved. The appeal may be summed up in Gerardo’s statement that “It feels like home; it doesn’t feel like a center.”

While Mariposa has a variety of services, the staff and consumers still have hopes for more. The consumer I spoke with said it would be nice to get a van, then “we could go on outings and fieldtrips; that would be good.”

Profile of Mariposa Program Coordinator Gerardo Sandoval

Thanks to Jodie Wells for contributing this interview profile of Gerardo Sandoval, the new Program Coordinator for the Mariposa Wellness Center.

Gerardo comes from East Los Angeles. He grew up in the housing projects where he soon learned that his interests differed from those of his peers. He discovered he took pleasure in helping others!

Gerardo began his career in human services at the age of 14. He volunteered his time for four years at the local General Hospital and received a “Volunteer of the Year” certificate from the mayor. In high school, he also worked as peer counselor for Planned Parenthood. Later, while attending college at the University of California at Santa Cruz, he became employed as staff member for the Summer Youth Program in which he participated as a youth.

Gerardo shared with me that, while he has been influenced by many experiences, events and people over the years, part of what motivates him is believing he can have an impact on people’s lives. “What I want to accomplish is to be able to provide a step for people that can make a difference.” I asked him to elaborate and he said, “I was told one time that if I had an opportunity to do anything, that ‘anything’ would be to make a difference. Not just make a variation but a change in someone’s life, like the change someone made in mine by taking the time to instill in me the idea that I could go on to college. This thing we call ‘giving’ is powerful and it creates a chain reaction. Even beyond the immediate impact, it can create a long lasting impression.” I was pleased to hear Gerardo’s comments. More than ever, I believe, we need this spirit of humanity.

Asked about his vision for the Mariposa Wellness Center, Gerardo replied, “I would like to see a well-rounded center that creates a positive local impact—both among the participants and within our community. “



Gerardo Sandoval