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'THERE IS SOME SILVER LINING'



Sarah Naylor takes customers' orders at Kitchen Sync during lunchtime on Nov. 18. MATT BURKHARTT/GREENVILLE NEWS

Amid COVID, Kitchen Sync restaurant in Greenville is finding a way to provide healthcare for its employees

Lillia Callum-Penso Greenville News | USA TODAY NETWORK – SOUTH CAROLINA

Before reopening his restaurant following the mandatory shutdown in March, Kevin Feeny threw himself into research. The owner of Kitchen Sync read studies about how the novel virus spread, he poured over online ordering systems and researched tents and furniture for outdoor dining, he examined government grant and loan options and how to use them to retain employees and to safely remodel his restaurant. • And, Feeny also determined how to pay for healthcare for his staff. • It's not that the idea hadn't been there, it's just that Feeny couldn't figure out how to make it work in an industry that on average has a 5-10% profit margin. An independent operator with one restaurant lacks funds and bargaining power to negotiate lower rates with insurance companies.

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Sobbing pedestrian case still unsolved

Greene died nearly 20 years ago in hit-and-run

Nikie Mayo Greenville News
USA TODAY NETWORK – SOUTH CAROLINA

The drivers were coming from different directions when they saw her — a woman in the middle of White Street in Anderson, sobbing, according to the county coroner.

It was shortly after 3:45 a.m. on July 19, 2001, and she was on the road, dressed in shorts and a couple of T-shirts, barefoot.

Walter Clemishaw was a truck driver then. He was on his way to work, stopped on George Albert Lake Road and about to make a left onto White Street when he said he saw the woman stumbling on the pavement.

"I called 911," he said in a recent interview. "I felt like she needed help."

Another driver saw her, too, and between his account and Clemishaw's, they described seeing the woman sit on the pavement, stand, and then sit again as they approached to help her, according to records from the Anderson County Coroner's Office.

Seconds later, a car roared down White Street.

"Whoever it was never slowed down, never hit the brakes," Clemishaw said in a December interview. "It was more like they sped up, really. It all happened in just a few seconds."

The car hit the woman, who was later identified as 33-year-old Laura Greene.

Clemishaw said he was still on the phone with a 911 dispatcher when it happened.

"They wanted me to check on her — check her pulse and stuff," Clemishaw said. "I wouldn't do it. I knew. I knew she was dead."

Nearly 20 years have passed since Greene died on White Street that summer day, and investigators still don't know who ran over her — or why.

Anderson County Coroner Greg Shore, who has served in that role for

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Greene

Serenity Place women share stories of addiction struggles

Haley Walters Greenville News
USA TODAY NETWORK – SOUTH CAROLINA

Serenity Place, at 6 Dunean St., sits along the Norfolk Southern railroad line near what once was the largest mill in Greenville County. A hundred years ago, the Dunean Mills community thrived with a school, daycare, churches and services for the hundreds of mill workers and their families who lived there. Though the community built around

the mill withered over the years, signs of revitalization are creeping into the old mill village just southwest of the city of Greenville.

For the last five years, hundreds of women battling drug addiction have come to Dunean for Serenity Place, a residential treatment facility that accepts mothers with substance use disorders and their young children.

For 50 hours each week, they rebuild their lives as they begin their lives as

mothers.

Now, their stories are coming alive in the pages of a compilation called "Blossoming in Recovery."

Dale Savidge, a drama therapist and executive director of the Applied Theatre Center, handles the creative side of recovery, has spent the last year-and-a-half compiling poems, writings and art created by the women of Serenity Place for the new book.

"We really want to introduce the

women to a variety of therapy because not every therapy is going to be a right fit for every client," he said. "We really use any therapy that we think would help them open up, and it seems like they've really opened up and flourished in this psychodrama group."

On every page a woman shares a little bit of herself in whatever creative way she chooses. Many of them write about

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USA TODAY

Vaccination: How will you know when it's your turn? **9A**

Booming business

Dallas-Fort Worth area will play host to more bowl games than any other metro in the nation. **1C**

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Kitchen Sync

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In June, Feeny, along with his co-owners, sister Karin Farrell and Karin's husband, Johnny Farrell began paying for healthcare for all 35 Kitchen Sync employees.

"I do believe there is some silver lining," Feeny said.

Healthcare, not insurance

During the summer, Kitchen Sync signed up for a membership with Palmetto Proactive. The direct primary pay company works on a monthly membership fee model that pays for preventative care, urgent care, and referrals without going through insurance.

Feeny pays \$60 per employee per month for access to the care. It is not insurance, as direct primary care does not cover catastrophic events. But so far, it has covered most of what, at least Kitchen Sync's employees, need.

And those needs include Covid testing.

In June, Feeny asked all employees to get Covid tests before reopening Kitchen Sync. Two tests came back positive and so owners decided to wait to open.

In July, all employees got tested again this time with all negative results and the restaurant reopened on July 31.

The restaurant has had no cases of the virus since, but for Feeny at least, having someone to call if they did is huge.

"We've got a system where now we've got a doctor involved," Feeny said.

People can access a doctor in person, through a virtual visit, or by phone 24/7, and a doctor can help walk Feeny and the employee through whether to get

tested, whether to quarantine or whether it's safe to come back to work.

"So, it's not myself or a manager trying to make the decision all the time," Feeny said. "Like, well, CDC says this and DHEC says that, it's still so confusing.

"I wish I'd have discovered this five years ago."

Health benefits are rare in the restaurant industry

That an employer provides health benefits is not rare in the U.S., where the onus is on employers to provide benefits for employees. But what is rare is that Kitchen Sync is an independent, single-unit restaurant.

The restaurant industry, with its 5-10% average margins, means most owners simply cannot afford to pay for benefits. Larger groups sometimes do, often leveraging benefits as incentives for employees to remain with the company, but it's nearly impossible for smaller restaurants to do so.

Just 31% of restaurants offered employees healthcare benefits, according to a 2019 Toast report.

Feeny had researched benefits before Kitchen Sync opened in 2016, but he couldn't make the numbers work, he said.

He discovered Palmetto during a chance conversation with Nicole Cendrowski, co-owner of Fireforge Crafted Beer. The Cendrowskis use the service for their employees as well, and currently have five of the 22 mostly part-time staff covered.

Covid changed things.

Sarah Naylor never had insurance the entire time she worked in restaurants. Instead, the 40-year-old who has been a server at Kitchen Sync for nearly two years was covered through her hus-

band.

Now, Naylor uses Palmetto both for preventative care but also for specialized treatment for the back, neck, and hip pain that has plagued her for years.

She received regular monthly treatments that have made a huge difference, she said.

But for Naylor, having easy access to Covid testing if she needs it, has been a game changer in how safe she feels working in a public interfacing job.

Recently, she wanted to visit her mom and so she got tested.

"I did have reservations starting out because it's a novel virus and we don't know much about it," Naylor said of returning to work. "But I feel like Kevin handled it the best way. He covers all the bases and it makes you feel more safe working there."

How direct primary pay care works

Ten years ago, Palmetto was the only such company in South Carolina, said Liz Conroy, business development manager with Palmetto, and one of the few in the U.S.

But the model of primary healthcare without going through insurance has grown. Palmetto now has five offices around the state. Individual patients pay a membership fee of \$70 and employer members pay \$60 per employee for care that includes among other things, reduced prescriptions, vaccinations, sick visits, and minor procedures. Some things like regular therapies require a co-pay, but much is free, Conroy said.

The biggest boon for Feeny is access.

"A lot of people in the restaurant industry don't have a relationship with a doctor," Feeny said. "A lot of them are either young or not well off enough. There are a lot of ER visits and doc in the box.

They just don't have the wellness component of it. And this has really been able to provide that for some of our staff for the first time."

Planning for the future

For now, Feeny is able to pay for the Palmetto Proactive membership through a special

Still, there is a cost attached. Feeny is currently paying for the Palmetto Proactive membership through Kitchen Sync's KiSS fund. Two percent of every sale goes into the community fund, which was set up when the restaurant opened five years ago and is slated for use on community impact projects.

Kitchen Sync's first project was purchasing solar panels for Jasmine Kitchen, the café that opened early this year and is the social enterprise arm of the non-profit Jasmine Road.

Since the start of the pandemic, the KiSS effort has been on a temporary hold, which has allowed Kitchen Sync funds for employee healthcare.

But, Feeny is looking at ways to keep healthcare going. Like other elements he and his partners have added during the pandemic – curbside pickup, more extensive outdoor dining, and installing new, specialized air filtration systems – he sees healthcare as a permanent fixture.

"We have had to adapt and change and mold in order to be resilient in this pandemic," Feeny said. "This primary healthcare relationship is absolutely one of those that I may not have discovered, and we are going to be a stronger business that takes better care of their people because of it."

Lillia Callum-Penso covers food for The Greenville News. She can be reached at lpenso@greenvillenews.com or at 864-478-5872, or on Facebook at facebook.com/lillia.callumpenso.

Stories

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their addictions, regrets, lessons learned and hopes they have for themselves and their children.

A goodbye letter to drugs

Holland Hagy is one of them. She returned to Serenity Place for the second time after relapsing this year.

"I spiraled so quickly in three months, and I didn't have a DSS (Department of Social Services) case, I didn't have anything that brought me here but her," she said as she bounced her daughter, Tayla-Lee, on her lap. "I knew the road I was headed down, and I knew Serenity Place would be a safe place for me to grow and keep her here with me."

During therapy, she tried writing for the first time.

She came to Savidge's group intending to write a letter to her parents to let them know how she was beating her addiction, but then the letter turned into a

poem. And the poem took on a much more powerful meaning.

"I didn't even know what I was writing about until I did it," she said. "And then it kind of spiraled into a goodbye letter to drugs, and when I read it to Dale, he really, really liked it, and the more I read it and thought about it I decided I wanted it in the book."

The art of recovery

By the time Shantel Lee got to Serenity, her decades-long addiction had taken over her life. She quit her job and brought her 3-year-old son, Jahlil Ritter, to Serenity, the scariest decision she says she's ever made.

"I just told my son that it would be our new adventure," she said.

When she arrived, she imagined her thoughts were like a New York City subway - a hodgepodge of different sorts of people standing together shoulder-to-shoulder, she said. It's what she captures in her colorful, chaotic artwork.

"I'd like people to grasp the concept of the chaos that we come in with in our minds and in our hearts, and the chaos that we experience and how we feel, be-

"I'd like people to grasp the concept of the chaos that we come in with in our minds and in our hearts, and the chaos that we experience and how we feel, because 90 days later, it's nothing like that."

Shantel Lee

cause 90 days later, it's nothing like that," she said.

A mother's story

In contrast, Faith Godfrey shows how she came to find clarity and direction in motherhood.

In the book, she writes a short, direct statement about overdosing six times in a year. Nothing was ever enough, not until a few months ago when she had her daughter, Sophia Rosemond, she said.

"When I write it down, I can read it and understand more of what I'm feeling without getting nervous," she said. "I want to write a book for her, a book about my life and how it came to her and

how she changed everything."

She says her goal is to be independent and provide stability for her daughter.

"She's my purpose, my reason for everything," she said. "She saved my life, and I just want other people to see that your children can be enough."

And Alexis Ball's poem, "I Am Built From Every Mistake" recalls the pain and time she's lost with her children due to her addiction.

"It just all hit me like a ton of bricks," she said.

Ball, a mother of three, was wrapping up her time at Serenity and looking for a job by the time the book was published.

"I was thinking about the time I've spent without them and how I miss spending time with them," she said.

The Greenville County Medical Society sponsored and paid to publish the book, which will be available for purchase at local bookstores and copies will be provided to future women entering Serenity Place.

Haley Walters writes about crime and courts. Email her at hwalters@gannett.com and follow her on Twitter @_haleywalters

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