

# THE BALTIC NAVIGATOR



Dear Friends,

As we navigate 2025, we do so with great momentum, building on a year filled with impactful community events, program launches, and meaningful partnerships that continue to position us as leaders in peer-led mental health services.

With the invaluable guidance of our outstanding Board of Directors and the dedication of our exceptional executive team, my commitment remains stronger than ever: ensuring that vulnerable New Yorkers have access to the resources they need on their journey to wellness and recovery. This commitment has inspired the launch of the Joanne Forbes Foundation, named in honor of our Founding Board Member, Joanne Forbes. Joanne's expertise in peer advocacy and mental health has shaped our mission, and through this new foundation, we will continue to advance equity, amplify advocacy, and empower individuals as we work to bridge critical gaps in behavioral health services. Stay tuned for more details on this exciting initiative!

As we grow our mission, we are also expanding our reach within the community. Through Baltic Street Wellness Solutions' new partnership with Richmond University Medical Center, we will now serve more Staten Island residents—enhancing access to care in underserved areas while incorporating the invaluable perspectives of peers with lived experience.

This year, one of our key goals is to raise greater awareness of the transformative impact of peer support. To do that, we want to hear from you. We encourage every peer at Baltic Street to share success stories and heartfelt testimonials from the incredible work you do each day. The difference that peer support makes in people's lives is profound, and it's time for others to see it too—whether they be government officials, community partners, or potential donors. Let's share our stories and continue to establish Baltic Street Wellness Solutions as a leading voice in mental health advocacy.

We also remain dedicated to diversity, inclusion, and unity through our Affinity Groups: Baltic Street's LGBTQIA+ Pride Committee and our Justice, Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Access (JEDIA) Committee.

In these challenging times, our work is more crucial than ever. New Yorkers need our services, our support, and our advocacy. For those facing mental health challenges, we have always been—and will always be—a safe space. Through our collective efforts, we will continue to be a beacon of support, positivity, and hope in 2025 and beyond.

With gratitude and determination,

Taina Martinez-Laing  
CEO  
Baltic Street Wellness Solutions

## March 2025

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# AROUND THE AGENCY

## Tania Martinez-Laing Honored by the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)

Baltic Street Wellness Solutions CEO Taina Martinez-Laing was honored by the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) NYC Staten Island for her unwavering commitment and advocacy in the local mental health community. Honored at NAMI NYC Staten Island's 31st Annual Gala in December, Taina was recognized for making a difference in the lives of people living with mental illness and their families. In conjunction with the NAMI honor, Taina was presented with a Certificate of Special Congressional Recognition from U.S. Congresswoman

Nicole Malliotakis. Additional elected officials honored Taina with certificates of recognition, including NYS Senator Jessica Scarcella Spanton, NYS Senator Andrew J. Lanza, NYS Assembly Member Michael Reilly, NYS Assembly Member Sam Pirozzolo, NYC Council Member David M. Carr, NYC Council Member Joseph C. Borelli, Richmond County Public Administrator Hon. Edwina Frances Martin, and Richmond County District Attorney Michael E. McMahon. Congratulations to Taina on these prestigious and well-deserved recognitions!



## A Look Back: Coming Together to Celebrate a Successful Year

After working hard all year, it was time to let off some steam! On December 12, the entire Baltic Street Wellness Solutions team gathered together for a festive, all-day holiday party at our Isaac Brown Healing Arts & Community Center.

The day was all about camaraderie and of course, delicious food! Staff enjoyed an array of tasty breakfast items, and later, a generous luncheon spread comprised of fabulous food representing diverse cuisines, including classic Chinese and Jamaican dishes. A large band played an eclectic mix of jazz, hip-hop, and oldies, as many peers danced and sang along.

Festivities also included games and raffles with exciting prizes, such as an electric fireplace, a spa day for two, televisions, a PlayStation5 gaming console, crockpot, and other goodies.

Board members and community partners were also in attendance, as several team members were honored for outstanding achievements throughout 2024. RiseWell Community Services was recognized as Baltic Street's "Outstanding Community Partner of the Year." We look forward to our continued partnership with RiseWell in 2025!

Commenting on Baltic Street's memorable celebration, Modupe Mujota, Co-Deputy Director of Programs and Regional Manager of the Adult Home Initiative, says, "It was very nice to be in the new space – it was the first time that many people had seen it. And it was wonderful to have everybody together, dancing to the great music, unwinding and letting their hair down!"



# Joining with our Partners to Spread Joy



During the holiday season, Baltic Street Wellness Solutions was proud to partner with other organizations on three festive giveaway events to spread joy to children and families living in marginalized communities across New York City.

For the third consecutive year, Baltic Street partnered with the Brooklyn Museum, F.O.O.D. Foundation, and Grandma's Hands to present a Holiday Toy Giveaway, held December 15 at the Brooklyn Museum. The magical event brought the community together to foster connections, support families, and make the holiday season brighter for children. Set against the backdrop of the museum's Egyptian Galleries, the free event provided each child with a toy and a winter essential. There were also raffles and games with special prizes, a DJ, and other surprises. Children and their families were invited to view the museum's Egyptian exhibits, which is the largest collection outside of Cairo.

Approximately two dozen organizations and companies helped make this event possible, including: the Office of Council Member Crystal Hudson, Lions International, Divine Kinnection, Toys for Tots, Med CPR Troop Community Outreach Team, the Joanne Forbes Foundation, RiseWell Community Services, Lifeseed Media, WAF, C.R.I.S.P. (Cora Rose Institute for Social Progression), KJ's Corner, BWPC, D.R.E.A.M., Agape Food Rescue, Auntie Tyra's House, New York Smart Center, Goodlife Enterprise, Ezekiel Lodge #25, Kingston Public House, NYC Black Women's Political Club, KJ's Korner, OES Ladies of Faith #001, and FunBash USA.

"It was a wonderful event in a beautiful setting, and a testament to how the community can make a difference in the lives of children and families by coming together," says Christopher Rogers, Program Director for the Baltic Street Adult Home Initiative and Chief Marketing and Development Director of the Joanne Forbes Foundation.

The successful event was followed by the Assembly District 58 "Vital Voices" Toy Giveaway on December 21, where Baltic Street proudly partnered with F.O.O.D. Foundation, RiseWell Community Services, and Assemblywoman Monique Chandler-Waterman. Hosted at P.S. 198 in Brooklyn, the event brought joy and much-needed resources to children and families and was another heartwarming example of the power of collaboration and community support. The giveaway was coordinated by Christopher and F.O.O.D. Foundation CEO Dr. Jacqueline Love. Baltic Street staff and volunteers worked alongside local partners to create a festive and supportive environment that celebrated the season and created a joyous atmosphere.

Two days later, Baltic Street again joined forces with F.O.O.D. Foundation and RiseWell Community Services to sponsor an uplifting holiday giveaway at the New York SMART Center in East New York. Led by Christopher and Jacqueline, this community-driven event also brought together Baltic Street staff, volunteers, and local partners to provide toys and essential resources to underserved children and families.

"These initiatives reflect Baltic Street's ongoing commitment to equity, inclusion, and compassion, ensuring every family feels seen, valued, and supported – especially during the holidays," Christopher says.

# Program Spotlight:

## Isaac Brown Healing Arts & Community Center

Last November, Baltic Street staff, program participants, community members, and more gathered at the exciting ribbon cutting ceremony for the Isaac Brown Healing Arts & Community Center. So what has the Center been up to since then?

"We are fulfilling the dream of the Center's founders, Isaac Brown and Sara Goodman, helping people become the best they can be," explains Laurie Vite, Co-Director of the Isaac Brown Healing Arts & Community Center.

With an array of workshops and activities, the Center offers a safe space for approximately 2,000 participants to find their calling and embrace their self-expression. From creative writing to crochet-a-longs to pottery to photography clubs, there are many programs to choose from, offering holistic solutions to anyone in need of mental health support or who simply wants to connect with others or themselves. The Center also provides meditation workshops, one-on-one art classes, budgeting support, and insights from bi-monthly speakers to guide people on their journeys back to work and school. There's even a hydroponic garden and an informative workshop that examines the impact of food on mental health.

"Whatever people want to do, we are here to guide them holistically," explains Co-Director Freddie Grant. "We are all peers. We completely understand the journey and everything we all go through. There is no label or stigma here."

Expanding beyond the theme of Baltic Street's 2024 Symposium, the Center holds regular support groups that aim to better understand loneliness and the triggers surrounding the emotion. There's also a "Vet-to-Vet" support group that meets regularly on Zoom.

"By taking a holistic approach, we want to show people that a diagnosis does not define who we are and what we can accomplish," Laurie points out.

She, herself, has navigated the challenges of anxiety, and is grateful for the opportunity to use her lived experience to help others. "By seeing them grow, I grow, too," Laurie says.

Freddie often witnesses transformations right before his eye. "Community members can be quiet and shy, but when they come to the Center, they turn into social butterflies as they hone their skills, connect with others, and find their voice," Freddie says. "Creativity is the perfect avenue to express things you may not be able to put into words."

Soon, the Center will be expanding its programs, offering more opportunities for participants to find their creative voice. A new music studio is set to launch in March, followed by a number of spring and summer activities.

Community members received a sampling of the Center's programs during a recently held Showcase that was open to the public. "We want people to know that vulnerable New Yorkers have a safe space in these uncertain times," Freddie says.

On March 28, the Center will partner with the newly launched Joanne Forbes Foundation, resource partners, advocacy groups, and services providers to present a free Community Resource Fair. The goal of the event is to improve access to behavioral health services and community-based resources while supporting and empowering vulnerable communities.

Laurie says, "With every program we offer, we want people to feel seen and valued. The first step is to walk through the door, and then take it from there."



*Laurie Vite and Freddie Grant, Co-Directors of the Isaac Brown Healing Arts & Community Center*

# Meet Annalisa Rivera-Franz: Featured Artist & Participant, Isaac Brown Healing Arts & Community Center

Since being diagnosed with Hypermobility Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome (a genetic connective tissue disorder) in 2002, leaving the house can often be challenging for Annalisa Rivera-Franz. So when the Isaac Brown Arts Healing Arts & Community Center went virtual during the pandemic, perhaps no one was more grateful than Annalisa.

"I immediately took advantage," Annalisa recalls. "Baltic Street brought the world to me through my computer."

She remotely met the Center's Co-Director Laurie Vite and then-Co-Director Sean Brennan during a virtual show-and-tell event. As Annalisa presented her paintings, Laurie and Sean were immediately impressed and encouraged her to attend more workshops.

Twenty paintings later, Annalisa is fully ensconced in her art at the Center while appreciating the healing effects of the creative outlet. "Art has always been a form of therapy to help me cope with internal and external struggles in my life," she explains.

Annalisa has been navigating a Post-Traumatic Stress (PTS) diagnosis and the ongoing responsibilities of being a caregiver to her husband and mother, which can sometimes lead to high levels of stress. For Annalisa, art is like a "form of meditation." She's been creating imagery since she could "put a crayon to a piece of paper." These days, she often paints acrylic portrait paintings in impressive displays of representational art. One of her pieces, Sven-Goulash, has even appeared on "Svengoolie," after catching the eye of the show's producers.



While attending programs at the Isaac Brown Healing Arts & Community Center, Annalisa enjoys developing and creating her own projects, including the innovative "Persona Unveiled." She explains, "I've always been the type of artist who is good at replicating what I thought. So one day I thought, 'What would happen if Little Debbie ate too much of her snacks?'" The result: Little Debbie Diabetes, featuring a glucose monitor on Debbie's arm with her classic Swiss Rolls on a pitchfork. Annalisa's fellow program participant gifted the piece to Sean in a wonderful display of support and encouragement for artists, and for the love of art and the enormous benefits it has for the mind and spirit. Annalisa is now working on painting number two in the three-part project.

During the Center's ribbon cutting ceremony last November, Annalisa proudly displayed 11 of her works for more audiences to see. "It was the first time I ever had a solo exhibit, so it truly meant the world to me," she says. "As someone with physical and mental health challenges, getting out there is extraordinarily hard. Having such a great artistic opportunity and achievement makes me want to continue on."

In addition to creating beautiful paintings, Annalisa also embraces digital art tools, perhaps inspired by her early career of designing websites for a tech company. Currently, she's a big fan of photography. Annalisa shoots photos as much as she can, and participates in the Center's community outings when the opportunity allows. She hopes to organize a group photography exhibit at the Center displaying photos she and other members of the group captured at the New York Public Library.

Annalisa plans to continue attending the Center's virtual events every other week as her and her husband's health allow. Trivia workshops led by Baltic Street Wellness Solutions Resource Specialist Lorna Vilabrera are a particular favorite of Annalisa, and she also enjoys attending the Center's "Human Discovery" program. With a bachelor's degree in psychology, Annalisa has always had an interest in the field, and credits Baltic Street Wellness Solutions for their person-centered approach to mental health.

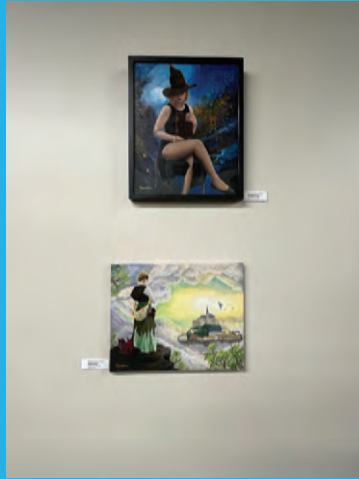
"What I love about the Isaac Brown Healing Arts & Community Center is that it is one of the rare places in New York where you don't have to provide multiple pieces of paperwork from a doctor to prove I have a mental health issue," Annalisa points out. "New York City may have a lot of resources but there's a lot of red tape that comes with them. With the Isaac Brown Center, I can just go."

In addition to the Center's accessibility, it also provides a warm, welcoming, accepting environment. Annalisa says, "Everyone welcomes you as you are no matter what your mental health diagnosis is. I've gained new friends and family and I have a bigger forever social circle!"

The support Annalisa receives at Baltic Street also fuels her creativity. "The facilitators always point out the positives in a person's work, and as participants, we all root for each other. We're encouraged to keep going and we do."

Follow Annalisa on social media! Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/dabblerscornerarts>, Instagram: @dabblerscornerarts

# A Look at Annalisa Rivera-Franz's Work



**“As someone with physical and mental health challenges, getting out there is extraordinarily hard. Having such a great artistic opportunity and achievement makes me want to continue on.”**

– Annalisa Rivera-Franz

# Employee Spotlight: **Joselin Mota**



Joselin Mota, or “Joss” as many of her colleagues call her, joined Baltic Street Wellness Solutions a year-and-a-half ago. She was hired as a Housing Specialist in the agency’s Bronx and Brooklyn HomeWORKS Supported Housing Program before quickly being promoted to Senior Housing Specialist. Now a Program Manager, Joss’s goal is the same: to make program participants “feel comfortable and safe, and to help them find their voice.”

That mission was instilled in her by her mother, who remains Joss’s biggest inspiration in everything she does. “I come from a single parent household. My mother came to this country as an immigrant with the American Dream. That dream turned into making sure we all have a voice,” Joss explains. “Now I can speak through my own experience and provide insights and support to the people we serve, so that they, too, feel heard and seen.”

Each morning Joss wakes up determined and motivated to impact more lives, thinking, “What will I do in my role as a peer?” The answer: quite a lot, from the moment she makes contact with a participant until all their needs are met. That can mean meeting someone at the hospital or helping a participant navigate feelings of loneliness on their path to wellness and recovery.

“All these things are a part of me also,” Joss says. “As a peer, I

have a deep understanding of what our participants are going through. I, too, have experienced homelessness and mental breakdowns. I have walked in their shoes.”

Growing up in a family of 10 in the Bronx, Joss and her siblings lived in fear of being taken away by social workers. Now, years later, she is grateful to be part of an organization like Baltic Street dedicated to making a difference in the lives of others.

“When I interviewed for the Housing Specialist position, I was asked why I want to work for Baltic Street. I replied, ‘Because I am looking for a home, not just a position,’” Joss recalls. “I want to be here and to care for those I work with.”

Joss’s empathy and compassion for program participants is unwavering, and she’s one of their biggest champions. “What is most rewarding is seeing the impact of our work firsthand and being able to live to tell it,” she points out. “I don’t know many organizations doing what we are doing – assisting people through and through – from when they first walk in until they reach their journey.”

Witnessing her program’s success stories is truly close to her heart. One participant recently shared his story with other community members at Baltic’s Street’s Isaac Brown Healing Arts & Community Center. “He wanted people to know that your past does not have to be your path. Thanks to Baltic Street, he has a stable home, which we just saw, and it’s amazing! It’s truly a blessing to see,” Joss says.

She and her team of three housing specialists never hesitate to go above and beyond for residents living in Baltic Street’s 87 supported housing units, including buying new furniture! However, their most pivotal role is always advocacy, especially when working with the elder community.

**“It’s about being the voice for those who feel like they don’t have a voice. We are peers. This is what we do. We walk it, we talk it.”**

– Joselin Mota



## Alvin Rodriguez Jr. Honored by Baltic Street

Congratulations to **Alvin Rodriguez, Jr.** on being recognized as Baltic Street's **Employee of the Month for January!**

Alvin's dedication and passion for advocacy have truly made an impact in the lives of others. His tireless efforts have been invaluable in furthering our mission. Through Alvin's courage and commitment, he continues to break down barriers and uplift those in our community.

Kudos, Alvin, on your well-deserved honor!



## JANUARY 2025 EMPLOYEE OF THE MONTH



Your hard work, dedication, and positive attitude continue to inspire us all. Thank you for your outstanding contributions—keep up the great work! 🌟🌟

# Save the Date: **Community Resource Fair**



Many New Yorkers face significant barriers when accessing behavioral health and community-based resources. To help bridge those gaps, Baltic Street Wellness Solutions and the Joanne Forbes Foundation are teaming up to host the inaugural Community Resource Fair at the Isaac Brown Healing Arts & Community Center on March 28, 2025, from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m.

The Resource Fair will bring together community partners, advocacy groups, and service providers. This free, public event will provide attendees with direct connections to organizations, services, and opportunities to enhance their well-being, independence, and quality of life. Attendees will have the opportunity to engage with resource partners in the areas of behavioral health, housing, employment, advocacy, and family support, while learning about available programs to help individuals and families navigate life transitions, as well as volunteer opportunities to join the advocacy movement.

The March Resource Fair is the first of our planned quarterly events, as we strive for continued access to essential behavioral health and community services for Brooklyn residents and all New Yorkers. For more information about participating in the Community Resource Fair, email [foundation@balticstreet.org](mailto:foundation@balticstreet.org) or call **347.764.7847**.



## **Baltic Street Wellness Solutions**

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