

Jennifer Newbold- Revolutionizing Mental Health Treatment in Santa Barbara



When you walk into Jennifer Newbold's office, the first thing you see are three abstract paintings hanging above her desk. Similar in style, they all boast different color schemes, and the vividness of the paintings adds a relaxed element to her office. The paintings were done by PathPoint participants, individuals with disabilities who utilize PathPoint's numerous services and programs to find ways to achieve independence and express themselves, either through art or pottery or other creative means. Jennifer bought the paintings on her own dime to support her clients and their artistic endeavors, showing her deep commitment and connection to the people she serves as Director of Behavioral Health.

The second thing you notice about Jennifer Newbold's office is Jennifer herself. Dressed in a bright turquoise top, she is quick to crack a joke and make you feel at home. As I walk in to her office, she laments to me about how her email was just hacked, sending a spam email to *everyone* she has ever emailed. And when you're as high up in your career as Jennifer, that's a lot of people. But Jennifer isn't too worried about the email; "people told me the second they got it that they knew it wasn't from me, because it was signed Jennie. And anybody who knows me at all knows that I would *never* go by Jennie!" She lets out a laugh, giving a carefree shrug and exclaiming, "what's an email hack to my already busy life? Just another problem to solve!"

Jennifer has been working at PathPoint for the last thirty years, and has been the Director of Behavioral Health for the past fifteen. She knew PathPoint before it name was changed (it was formerly Work Training Services) and she was one of the pioneers who paved the way for mental health treatment in Southern California. Her innovative and specialized approach to treating mental illness has been a resounding success, and her leadership has won PathPoint prestigious awards and accolades. But when you first meet her, her humility and sense of humor are what stand out the most; she exudes a kind of warmth that is rare to find in a person, and even harder to find in a leader.

Childhood and Early Career

Perhaps it was her early childhood that shaped Jennifer into the compassionate woman that she is today. "We moved around a lot as a child, so I always felt a little bit like an outsider," Jennifer tells me as she settles back into her chair. "I had a twin and we were both redheads, and let me tell you, moving from Canada to California was a shock. We were angelic, had never heard people swear... we definitely stood out." She moved around periodically during her adolescence, including to provincial Texas, a difficult place to live if you are an outsider. As she struggled to fit in during her teenage years, Jennifer developed a profound empathy for other perceived "outsiders" that ultimately

shaped her career trajectory. “My first job ever was working for a blind teacher,” she claimed. “I guess I always adhered to this theme of working with people who aren’t your average successful person, but manage to find a way to succeed anyways. I really admire that in a person.”

Jennifer then attended school at UC Santa Barbara, earning a B.A. in Sociology and a minor in Anthropology. Unsure of what she wanted to do with her life, Jennifer took a job opportunity at Work Training Services as a program manager for individuals with disabilities in Santa Barbara. She soon realized that she had a natural affinity for working in such a profession, and she settled down into her new career for the next thirty years. To further her scope of abilities, Jennifer went back to school to become a licensed counselor, which ultimately opened the door of opportunity to her. During the late 1990’s, PathPoint experienced a structural change, and the Behavioral Health Division of PathPoint was completely revamped. At the time, Jennifer was considering changing careers, but CEO Cindy Burton stepped in. “She knew I was thinking about moving, but suddenly there was this opportunity for me to step into a leadership role as the Director of Behavioral Health, and she asked me to take it.” In 2002, Jennifer became the new Vice President, and through the years her division has seen unparalleled expansion and growth at her expert guidance. At the celebration of Jennifer’s thirtieth year at PathPoint, CEO Cindy Burton exclaimed, “Jennifer listens to people and values their input. She’s a servant leader; that’s her strength. Her staff respond well to that. Here’s to another 30 years!”

A Day in the Life of the Director of Behavioral Health

When I asked Jennifer what she does during a typical day, the first thing she says is she “drives a lot.” She lives out in Ventura, and commutes forty-five minutes each way, five days a week. She listens to music to help her through her long commute, though her favorite music is not what you would expect. She asks me to guess her favorite genre, and I listed country or rock- both seem to fit her persona. She laughed at my suggestions, and claimed that nobody ever can guess her favorite music. It’s electronic dance music, a genre popular with college-age students and avid partyers. “I am really not a lyrics person. I am all about the actual music, I don’t care at all about lyrics, I like to make my own up!” Jennifer laughed, as she explained to me her love of EDM. Her twelve-year-old daughter also likes EDM, though she and Jennifer differ in their favorite artists. “She was really into Sia, but I couldn’t stand her! It sounded like she was yelling all the time. So finally, my daughter and I decided that we both like the Chainsmokers- it’s a nice blend of what she likes and what I like.” Jennifer’s love of EDM runs in the family; indeed, her twin sister, who lives in ---, also listens to electronic music. It’s a hidden interest of Jennifer’s, something not a lot of people know. “Whenever we have ice breakers, I use this as my fun fact about myself. People are so shocked!”

But Jennifer’s day isn’t just a commute; in fact, that is her only time to unwind during her hectic schedule. Once Jennifer gets to work, she is the leader and problem-solver, helping her employees deal with difficult clients and daily dilemmas. Through the mundane tasks and overwhelming crises that arise, Jennifer’s love for her work is

evident. She discusses each client with the sort of familiarity and empathy that you can't teach, and her warmth and charisma are evident throughout her division. Of course, working with the mentally ill is an extremely draining job; difficult clients and strenuous circumstances put a constant weight on the backs of each of Jennifer's employees. As their leader, Jennifer sees it as her job to bring an element of humor and happiness to those she works with. "This type of work is very hard, and I firmly believe in finding the humor and joy in every situation," Jennifer tells me. "I love to laugh, particularly at my mess-ups. I love to laugh at myself! Sometimes, with a job like this, you just need to be able to find the humor and not take things so seriously." Jennifer instills this mentality throughout her division, and has created a unique culture of employees whose commitment to Jennifer and each other is fierce. "I want to create an environment where people feel valued and want to stay." And Jennifer has succeeded; as you walk through the halls of Behavioral Health, you can hear counselors laughing and joking with each other, case managers sharing an interesting story or helping each other out with a difficult situation. Jennifer has somehow managed to create a family-like atmosphere in the workplace, which, as any boss knows, is no easy feat.

But Jennifer's job isn't all laughter and joy; she deals with the sticky politics of mental health in a society where access to social services is becoming more and more at-risk. "With this current administration, people are very worried about cuts to social services, and sometimes the culture at the county is overwhelmingly negative towards behavioral health." As Director, Jennifer attends all county events and meetings, and fights on a daily basis for the future of PathPoint and behavioral health services. But everyday, the future gets more and more uncertain for mental health; "some entitlements are 'sexier' to give money too, and at the end of the day, mental health is not 'sexy'" claims Jennifer with an angry shake of her head. Unfortunately, this is true; mental health is still a topic that is taboo to most of America, and our history of locking people away in psychiatric institutions doesn't bode well for the future of mental health. But Jennifer continues her fight for the mentally ill, all while utilizing her characteristically warm and humorous personality. "One of the hardest things I have to do is take information that is overwhelmingly negative from the county, and spin it in a way that is positive and constructive for my employees." Not one to be the bearer of bad news, Jennifer tries to phrase things in a more positive light, looking for the silver lining in everything. "It's really hard, which is why joy and laughter is such a big part of what I do. I think to myself, how can we rejoice in what we are doing? We need to have joy in this job, even if it is utterly absurd."

Jennifer's Approach to Mental Health Treatment

Jennifer's warm and forgiving nature extends to her treatment of her clients. One of the points Jennifer strives to make is that she doesn't want to create a uniform standard, but rather wants to expand the scope of society and create a culture in which everyone can fit in, no matter their differences. Her approach to mental illness is revolutionary- most other treatment centers focus on trying to make symptoms go away. Instead, Jennifer believes in allowing for a diverse experience in people, and advocates helping people manage their symptoms instead of getting rid of them. She follows a Harm Reduction

Model, in which symptoms that can cause barriers and harm are worked on and reduced to help clients achieve a more balanced life. But she fully believes in letting each individual have their own unique quirks and character traits, so long as they are not risky. “We have this one guy who talks to himself, which of course is fine on its on,” says Jennifer. “So we look at the barriers that are hindering his success- is he not paying attention and walking into the street? Is he talking so loud that his neighbors are complaining? That is when we step in.” Jennifer and her team helps clients find outlets, such as through music and art, to help them manage their symptoms. Of course, medication is typically necessary, though most of Jennifer’s clients are on a low dosage. “I want to allow people to be who they are- I am a person who sees the value in everybody.” Jennifer advocates a society that maximizes strengths and respects a person’s individual experiences and personality. Though this approach is relatively new to the mental health field, it is quickly gaining traction, as revolutionaries like Jennifer are able to reveal the high rates of success of this approach.

Looking Towards the Future

Jennifer has dedicated the last thirty years of her life to PathPoint, and her commitment has completely revamped the way people approach mental health in Santa Barbara. But Jennifer’s life isn’t all work; in her free time, she enjoys gardening and cooking, and hanging out with her daughter. “She’s twelve, going on forty,” Jennifer jokes. “She’s very mature for her age.”

As our interview comes to a close, I ask Jennifer what she thinks the future of behavioral health will be. Her face falls slightly, and she lets out a little sigh. “Honestly, I was really excited about growth opportunities last year, but in this politically-charged climate, I think we need to be really cautious about our next steps.” Of course, this doesn’t mean that Jennifer won’t seize all the available opportunities that come her way. “I want our commitment to our clients to be steady. We get money through grants, and slowly but steadily, we build and expand.” It is through this mentality that Jennifer has been able to take the fledgling Behavioral Health Division and completely transform it into a multi-faceted division that offers a wide variety of services and programs to help the mentally ill in Santa Barbara. The truest testament to Jennifer’s success is her clients; through the atmosphere and programs she has created, the participants have been able to thrive and find success and independence that they could not have achieved on their own. In only thirty years, Jennifer has been able to redefine what it means to be mentally ill in Santa Barbara, and her influence will be seen for decades to come.