



## 40 Years of Serving the Community

BY JENNA CAPUTO

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In the late 1970s, tragedy struck the community when four Niskayuna High School students committed suicide. The events were unrelated to each other, but it highlighted a desperate need, and one health teacher decided to take action. Bob Winchester encouraged the Niskayuna School District to conduct a mental health needs assessment, which resulted in two important findings: 1.) A vehicle was needed to develop and deliver programs, forums, workshops, and prevention, and 2.) There was no “link” outside of the schools to unite the community.

Concerned community members formed two groups to address these issues. Speaking with neighboring communities to see how they dealt with similar issues, the committees also met with CAPTAIN of Clifton Park, a group that performed similar work to what they hoped to do. As a result of their research, the Niskayuna Community Action Program (N-CAP) was born. N-CAP’s services fall into three categories: Youth Substance Misuse Prevention, Safe Healthy Community, and Niska-Day.

“N-CAP was formed in response to the deaths of four Niskayuna High School students over the course of five years. There was outreach to support friends and families of each of these individuals but that outreach did not include any significant efforts to address the root causes of the diverse problems that led to the deaths of these individuals. N-CAP was formed to help all of the communities who contributed students to the Niskayuna School system establish a sense of community and foster a sense of pride in what students’ families and the community had and could accomplish. Since its establishment, N-CAP, through its many

actions and activities including Niska-Day, has continued to address the root causes of a lack of community pride and identity,” says Bob.

Thanks to federal grant funding, their primary focus has been on youth substance misuse prevention since 2013. Using data to help with their goal, N-CAP strives to reduce teen drug and alcohol misuse through education, student engagement, parent awareness, and policy changes. At one point, Niskayuna youth





Niska-Day Parade



Kristin Sweeter &amp; Marissa Matteo

usage of legal recreational drugs was significantly above the national average. Through targeted efforts using the newfound data, N-CAP raised awareness, reduced access, and provided education for students, parents, and partners throughout the community. Starting the education process with students earlier, they also incorporated “social norming” techniques to combat the idea of legal usage. Their education process included the parents, alerting them to the fact that these substances students are using today are not the same as they were in years past. The potency had drastically increased. There were also several new delivery methods parents needed to be aware of. “It was imperative that our education efforts were correct, current with the times, and supported by local data,” says Kristin Sweeter, grant coordinator.

Their efforts proved successful, dropping the youth usage rates to below the national averages within two years. However, their work was not done. Vaping was becoming more popular, and they wanted to be preemptive in their fight against that as well. Using the same theories as before, they began to spread the word. They partnered with other organizations in the district to administer education campaigns, policy change, increased signage throughout the community, billboard competitions in the middle schools, curriculum support, and parent education sessions. Knowing that real change has been proven to happen at a student level when students are invested in the cause and can impact change from within, these initiatives were all student led.

N-CAP also provided funding to install vape detectors in the middle and high schools. These devices sense condensed moisture in the air and send an alert to administration. Through continued usage, staff was able to see the hotspots where vaping was taking



Jeanne Sisnow, N-CAP President

Maria Freund with daughters Gretchen DeBobs & Erin Cassady Dorion



place, like high-frequency bathrooms. This allowed them to position personnel at those locations during high-traffic times. With the increased awareness among families of the detectors in the schools, along with consistent usage of the detectors, they were again able to reduce the usage within the schools.

N-CAP provides programming for parents within the district as well. One of their most popular events was their *“Living and Working with a Middle Schooler... or Why Alligators Eat Their Young,”* aimed at parents of middle schoolers to help them deal with this time of change. Topics included things like *The Hormone Stampede – Are Their Brains On Vacation?* And, *Do They Really Do Homework in School?*

Twice a year they participate in National Drug Take Back Day, sponsored by N-CAP, the DEA, and the Niskayuna Police Department. Residents can come to Town Hall to deposit their unused or expired medication to be safely destroyed. Through this program, over two tons of medications have been kept safely out of the hands of youth and out of the landfill.

Another youth-led, adult-guided program from N-CAP is *Be Aware, Stay Engaged (BASE)*. This student coalition promotes substance misuse prevention through peer education, community-service projects, and substance-free social events. Some of their events include serving meals at the Schenectady City Mission, volunteering at the Northeast Regional Food Bank, and collecting donations for winter clothing drives for the City Mission and Things of Their Very Own. They also host fun activities like scavenger hunts with prizes, yoga classes, park meetups, and go karting.

Each year, N-CAP offers two \$500 scholarships to Niskayuna High School seniors who have made significant contributions to the community through their volunteer work and participation with N-CAP.

Niska Game



This year’s winners were Brooke Dempsey, who will be studying education & dance at University of New Hampshire, and Jacob Yanoff, studying economics and applied mathematics at Yale University.

But those are not their only youth programs! N-CAP spearheads other events like the community’s involvement in the *Youth Summer Conference* hosted by Youth to Youth International at Bryant University in Smithfield, Rhode Island each year. This four-day event includes a variety of training sessions during the day and social events in the evenings, engaging youth in positive change, leadership, and advocacy. Each year, our local youth find inspiration and motivation that jumpstarts many of our community programs. They also participate in the *Annual Youth Summit*, hosted by NECAP (Northeast Community Action Program) each fall at the Capital Center, inviting a handful of youth from each school district to attend sessions with speaker presentations and panels discussing the topics surrounding substance misuse prevention and recovery. Their overnight *Leadership Training* at Camp Chingachgook engages Niskayuna youth in team building events like ropes courses, rock climbing, and the polar bear plunge, with a guest speaker and campfire in the evening. The *Sticker Shock* campaign aids the youth in spreading their prevention messages by partnering with local liquor stores to hang tags during prom and graduation season reminding the community, “We don’t sell to minors. Thank you for not buying for minors.”

Outside of BASE, N-CAP also has a separate club called *The Warrior Project*. Made up of the elite athletes at Niskayuna High

1<sup>st</sup> Niska-Day & N-CAP Volunteers

School, the students pledge not to use substances as role models for their peers. They also have their own list of events and volunteer opportunities and host the pep rally and Lift Off, focusing on Niskayuna athletes, as well as hosting fundraising events to benefit the Wounded Warrior Project and Nisky Now organizations.

While N-CAP focuses on the youth, their programs aren't just for kids. In response to their mission's second category of a "Safe, Healthy Community," N-CAP provides programs, activities, and forums that address concerns in the community and promote safe and healthy living and an improved quality of life. These activities have included parenting programs, Niska Game, mental health and suicide prevention forums, and health fairs.

COVID obviously impacted their usual functions, making

accessing the students in person almost impossible and cancelling all of their annual youth events, allowing them to only offer prevention lessons virtually from March 2020-January 2021. "COVID has impacted us like many other organizations, forcing us to look at ways we connect and maintain partnerships and relationships in a more digitally enhanced world," says Kristin. "As we move into the future, we will continue to offer opportunities to connect virtually including meetings, trainings, and get togethers. By adding this opportunity and platform we encourage people to participate on the go, from home, in their car, etc. It breaks down the barriers for working partners and parents to be able to participate and be engaged without the hassle of arranging childcare, work coverage, or company priorities."

N-CAP is proud of the way they were able to pivot and still provide support for the community. Youth club meetings went virtual. BASE worked on a project for members to create artwork with inspiring messages to hang in patients' rooms at a local nursing home as well as hosting other virtual events like wellness bingo, trivia, and game nights. Once it was safe to do so, students passed out free hand sanitizer bottles at the farmers market at town hall, as well as created videos to post on the website and social media pages. N-CAP is looking forward to bringing back their usual in-person events as it is safe to do so.

N-CAP's biggest event of the year is the famed *Niska-Day*. Originally created in an attempt to bring everyone together in a festive atmosphere and to create a stronger sense of community, this community day is modeled after an event held by the Village of Alplaus. The event has come a long way since the first celebration in 1982. Normally, the fun-filled day includes a large parade through town, craft tent, business and information tent, live entertainment all day, performers, food court, amusement park rides, bike auction, giveaways, and a huge 3' x 3' cake. This year will look a little different but will still be quite the celebration of N-CAP's 40 years of serving the community. On **August 21<sup>st</sup>**, instead of one big parade, they will be hosting smaller neighborhood parades, followed by a community picnic at the Craig School fields featuring food trucks, live music, Sparkles the Stiltwalker, a performance by the Puppet People, and fireworks around 9pm.

Niska-Day has not only become the most anticipated day in the Niskayuna community but also a multigenerational event not only with attendees but with the volunteers as well, as the previous generation passes on the duties to their children and grandchildren. They have had many memorable events through the years, from "Niskystock," the year of pounding rain and mud water on the fields, to the year with intense wind that became so bad they had to surround the tents with school buses to keep the wind from blowing the tents down. They've persevered through bitter cold (including snow!), power lines down on the parade route, and crazy weather. As past Niska-Day chair, Denise Leader, said, "The bottom line is that no matter what, people still attend! There is only one day a year like it! The committee has often said, 'If we put the tents up, they will come!'"

N-CAP's successes over the years could not have happened without their strong bank of volunteers and community partners. "From the beginning, N-CAP has been a grassroots organization of concerned neighbors united in a shared vision of the community," says Denise. "Over 40 years, many individuals have stepped up to lead and some have served for years. We could not have the impact we do without them! Forty years later and we are still fulfilling our mission to improve the quality of life in Niskayuna, and Niska-Day has grown and become one of the longest continuously running community celebrations in the Capital District."

*For more information about this year's Niska-Day, visit [niskaday.org](http://niskaday.org).  
For more information about N-CAP's programs or volunteer opportunities, visit [ncapnisky.org](http://ncapnisky.org).*