

Miguel Mondays: Weekly Ritual Helping to Make Break-Throughs at Solnit Hospital



Miguel Santos, Children's Services Worker at Solnit South Hospital

As a student athlete at the University of New Haven, Miguel Santos was trying to figure out his major. He settled on psychology because, ultimately, he knew he wanted to work with and help people. After graduating with a degree in clinical psychology, Miguel returned to his native New Jersey. One day, he got a call from his buddy, a supervisor at a residential treatment facility in Connecticut, who asked if Miguel would come in for an interview.

"I was looking for something new, something to start my career. I worked at group homes for about three years and went for an interview at Solnit [South] Hospital when it was still called Riverview. That was seventeen years ago and I've been here ever since," recalled Miguel.

Now a Children's Services Worker at Solnit South Hospital Manhasset, Miguel's supervising clinician noticed how the youth there gravitated to him and asked if he would be interested in running a group on Mondays. That group was dubbed "Miguel Monday" and has become a ritual and a reprieve looked forward to at Solnit hospital. Miguel was surprised by the longevity and popularity of his weekly group.

"I said 'sure, I'll start a group on Monday' but I didn't expect it to be something that would be still going today and a custom that the kids would really, really enjoy. And, they do a great job at engaging."

Julie Price, Behavioral Health Unit Supervisor at Manhasset, said Miguel and his weekly group, which has become an eagerly anticipated part of the unit's routine, have transformed the way youth at Solnit hospital engage with their environment and their peers. It has also led to many break throughs.

She said Miguel Mondays offer a unique opportunity for the youth at Solnit South to connect, learn, and have fun together as it offers a space to bond, explore life skills, and take part in activities that encourage both personal growth, future planning and group participation. Importantly, the sessions help the youth build confidence in both their abilities and their aspirations.

Topics at Miguel Mondays have ranged from life skills such as job applications, job interviews, personal finance and budgeting, and taxes. Additionally, the group enjoys lighter activities that encourage self-expression and fun, including karaoke, physical fitness exercises, and even participation in larger unit events like the talent show.



Miguel as a college student at University of New Haven where he played soccer.



Outside of his position at Solnit Hospital, Miguel runs his martial arts studio Mongoose Training Academy.

they're going out in the world."

He said that is what Miguel Mondays are all about.

"It's about life skill groups and giving the kids some kind of education on what's important and what's going on in the community. And what skills you'll need to be able to function in the community."

Based on the feedback, the youth who participate love Miguel Mondays. And they truly come out of their shells and engage in the discussion. So much so, that these cherished groups were cited by his supervisor in the write-up awarding Miguel Solnit Hospital's "Employee of the Month" for February 2025.

"They engage, they do an excellent job. The majority of the group, they're really partaking and do a good job participating in it."

Miguel's calm demeanor and charisma help the group run smoothly. He listens, he teaches and the youth clearly look up to him. He is trained to deescalate chaotic situations but it is also a trait that comes naturally to him.

"Years ago I was a part of the STAR team here, and that was one of the big things - being able to use verbal de-escalation and focus less on the physical aspect of things. [During a crisis that requires de-escalation], we can tell how that worked or this worked and apply those and other therapeutic methods to try to help and support the child who's in crisis. That was something that I worked on and learned. I saw for myself how that really helped."

His supervisor said Miguel's calm and empathetic approach to care allows him to connect with the youth in a way that goes beyond traditional programming. His skillful approach to co-regulating and de-escalating youth has earned him the respect and admiration of both staff and youth at Solnit resulting in the affectionate nickname of "Child Whisperer."

One of the "Miguel Monday" groups focused on grocery shopping. Miguel printed out coupon fliers and borrowed a replica cash register from the math teacher at Solnit. Most recently, Miguel taught the group the ins and outs of budgeting for and purchasing a vehicle, including hidden costs to look out for like carrying insurance, local car taxes and DMV fees.

"I wanted to help the kids get an idea of budgeting and what the costs are right now in the stores when they go shopping because eventually these are skills that most of our kids will need when

"The kids that I worked with directly, being able to coach them, just being patient, I was able to help them with what they were dealing with emotionally and guide them through those tough moments."

Miguel said it is his love for the kids he works with that motivates him to continue to dive into this work despite the day-to-day difficulties that occur at the hospital. He also carries that passion outside of the halls of Solnit.

"I love to work with kids. That was the big thing. Through my background being a martial artist, I ended up starting my own outside program. It was something that I really wanted to do in the community especially for the kids that we work with who don't have a lot of resources."

With the help of donations and fundraising, Miguel started his martial arts studio, Mongoose Training Academy, three years ago. While there is a fee to participate in the academy, Miguel awards scholarships to children of families who cannot afford the tuition. Two youth currently at the academy who received scholarships have proven their dedication to the training and that is the payback Miguel finds most rewarding.

"These kids showed they really wanted to do this and they really wanted to put in the effort. I had given out multiple scholarships previously, from businesses or donations from friends, and one of the things we found was some of the kids weren't really taking advantage of it."

"In those cases, some of it was because they didn't have transportation, or there's a parent situation. I had one kid who was so talented, but the mother had other kids and the mother worked all the time because she was a sole provider. That was sad to me because I couldn't really help in the sense of transportation."

But the story of the youth who had to drop out due to transportation had a happy ending partially because of Miguel's belief in and positive impact on that youth. One day, that youth sent a text to update his former martial arts instructor on things.

"He's a good kid. He'll text me once in a while and I'm so proud of him, because he texted me to say he's getting a full scholarship to Western New England to play football. And I was like, wow, man, that's amazing that you were able to accomplish that. I already knew he was a good athlete, and it was great to see that, coming from the situation that he was coming from, he was able to accomplish all of that."

"I was just really proud to be a part of his journey and that he still reaches out to me."

Miguel remains motivated by the break-throughs he sees occur with the youth at Manhasset and by the "great group of people" working side by side with him. He made sure to give his colleagues a shout out by acknowledging the team effort it takes to do their jobs effectively.

"The passion [Manhasset staff] have for helping the kids, it makes it really easy to come to work every day. They're here for the right reasons. I know DCF, at times, is in the news for the bad, but people should definitely see how much good work comes out of this on a day-to-day basis."