

# Rising

## Mekhi's Journey from Risk to Resilience

**A**t just 20 years old, Mekhi faced a seemingly insurmountable challenge—a potential 7-to-10-year prison sentence after being charged with possession of a loaded firearm. This wasn't the first time Mekhi had encountered hardship.

As early as age 10, he experienced racial discrimination by police officers, planting seeds of mistrust in the judicial system and fostering deep anger and frustration toward law enforcement.

Mekhi was referred to Rising Ground's Atlas program and has been receiving therapy, equipping him with skills he now applies to his daily life. This is evident when he describes using a decision-making technique during a potentially aggressive encounter and making a conscious choice to walk away from conflict. Rising Ground Functional Family Therapist Ariel Vasquez, who has been working with Mekhi and his family this past year, is proud of the constructive changes evident in Mekhi as he steps back from behaviors that have led him to brushes with the criminal justice system.



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Photo: Mekhi and Rising Ground Functional Family Therapist, Ariel Vasquez.



Members of the Diamond Club and Rising Ground CEO Alan Mucatel.



Carlton Mitchell, Tony Cohen, and Pierre Duverger.

## Celebrating Service

In December we celebrated the service and vast contributions of our **Diamond Club**, the employees who have worked at Rising Ground for 25 years or more. Currently, the Diamond Club has an impressive 35 members with many of them gathering for a festive luncheon for a good meal and camaraderie. The luncheon was also an opportunity to acknowledge the retirement of three of our longer-term colleagues whose contributions to our work and the organization have been so significant: **Carlton Mitchell**, Senior Vice President Children and Family Services (37 years); **Vincent (Tony) Cohen**, Residential Director, Residential Treatment Center (33 Years); and **Pierre-Michel (Pierre) Duverger**, Revenue Cycle Manager, Finance Department (30 Years). We are profoundly indebted to Carlton, Tony, and Pierre and wish them all the best in their retirement.

# The Ripple Effects of Positive Change

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**From our CEO**

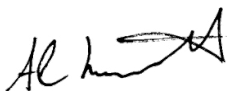
Dear Friends,

At Rising Ground, we speak about “meeting people where they’re at.” It’s a phrase that reflects our commitment to understanding and accepting a person’s current situation, perspective, or emotional state, and engaging with them in a way that is relevant and most supportive to their needs. This means not imposing our own expectations, judgments, or solutions on people, but acknowledging that every person’s situation is unique and responding in a compassionate and tailored manner. In essence, it emphasizes respect, patience, and adaptability in interactions with others and it is at the very heart of our work. This is particularly true in our Atlas program, part of our community-focused juvenile justice services and supports. Meeting people where they are at for Atlas, featured in this issue, also means allowing participants to define “family” on their terms. It can encompass friends, partners, teachers, or other community members with whom they share a close connection and who they want to be a part of their therapy and healing.

As Mekhi’s story illustrates, when we support young people, there can be a ripple effect that helps build stronger, more resilient families, reduce social inequalities, break cycles, and foster thriving communities. By providing this support to 30,000 individuals each year, we create ripples that reach over 72,000 adults, children, and families throughout New York City and lower Westchester.

As we begin the new year, we will continue to deepen and expand these connections through our mission-driven work, meeting people where they are at and providing them with the skills and tools to bolster their relationships and positively contribute to their communities.

**As ever, I am grateful for your support and I hope many of you will join us at our Gala on Wednesday, March 12 at an exciting new venue, the Tribeca Rooftop, where we will celebrate inspiring successes and raise critical funds essential for us to continue this vital work.**



**Alan Mucatel**  
Chief Executive Officer





Janice Dye Owens and Brigette McLeod-Williams.



Rising Ground CEO, Alan Mucatel, with members of the Board of Directors: Susan Benedict, Karen Myrie, Robert Schanz, Dorothy Mehta, President Matt Del Percio, Secretary Brigette McLeod-Williams, Vice President Allen Waxman, and Gary Moross.



Gary and Beth Moross.



Alan Mucatel, Nijah Afflic, and Rocco.



Lindsay Ornstein, Damaris Ramsingh, Stephen Powers, Susan Sampogna, and Diana Amado.



Jane Garcia Buhks, Susan Benedict, and Pen Stanton.

## Together We Thrive: Fall Benefit 2024

In October, friends and supporters of Rising Ground gathered for our **Fall Benefit** cocktail reception held at La Vibra NYC in Manhattan. CEO Alan Mucatel provided updates on the organization's work and gave a glimpse of exciting program expansions to come in 2025. The evening also introduced guests to 21-year-old Rocco who spoke about his experiences in the Atlas program and how he is moving forward positively in his life, pursuing his dreams in the fashion industry. To learn more about Atlas see the article on page 1.

## Preparing Youth for the Future

Young people from our **Preparing Youth for Adulthood (PYA)** and **Mentored Internship Program (MIP)**—both part of our Enhanced Family Foster Care services—took part in a workshop focused on career development and financial literacy in December. Both programs work with young people in foster care on developing life skills as they move towards independent living and self-sufficiency.

The workshop, held at our Harlem hub, focused on job interview skills and negotiation. Participants took part in mock interviews with Rising Ground Board Member Dorothy Mehta and Eliana Mehta. The mock interviews allowed candidates to practice and refine their interview techniques, including body language, tone, and pacing. This practice helps individuals develop a more engaging and confident presence, which is crucial for making a positive impression on potential employers during actual interviews. It also encourages candidates to think critically about their responses to common and challenging questions, enhancing their ability to articulate experiences and qualifications effectively and

preparing them to handle unexpected inquiries with poise and clarity.

Participants were then given information and tips on effective salary negotiation. This included advice on researching industry standards, articulating their unique value, and evaluating the complete compensation package.

The workshop was one of several professional development opportunities offered by volunteers. If you or your company is interested in working with young people in Rising Ground programs, please contact Sharon Pyle at [SPyle@RisingGround.org](mailto:SPyle@RisingGround.org) to discuss opportunities.



L-R: Independent Living Specialist Shanice Sinclair, Dorothy Mehta, and Parent Advocate Maya Marshall.



Young people participating in the workshop.

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## Mekhi's Journey from Risk to Resilience

"It was very important for Mekhi to feel a sense of gaining his power back," says Ariel. "It's not about pushing that anger aside. It's not about dismissing that you have every right to feel angry, but don't allow your anger to dictate your responses in the moment, because the moment that you do, that is the moment that they win. I'm very, very proud of him."

Mekhi's story is a powerful example of how Rising Ground works with individuals at elevated risk for violent or criminal behavior, demonstrating that therapeutic services, paired with strong family, community, and neighborhood support, can create meaningful constructive change.

Atlas, developed in response to New York City's efforts to improve its criminal justice system, works to reduce cycles of violence and justice system involvement through community-based therapeutic and healing services. A voluntary community violence intervention program, Atlas builds on the crucial role that neighborhood connections play in lifting its members. It seeks to address the risks and needs of individuals released from incarceration on their own recognizance who are at heightened risk of future victimization or justice system involvement. The program offers participants therapeutic services to address past trauma, mentorship, education and employment opportunities, and access to supportive community networks.

Initially, Mekhi was hesitant to engage in therapy, fearing judgment. However, with the encouragement of his immediate family, he took courageous steps to try. From their very first call, Ariel worked to build trust, grounding their connection in values of loyalty, family, and strength. Mekhi shared feelings of shame and embarrassment over how his legal troubles had affected his family, who have continued to show him unwavering support. Ariel helped him to see his desire to honor his family's loyalty as a key driving force for change.

Through the evidence-based model Functional Family Therapy (FFT), Ariel has helped Mekhi harness the support of his family and girlfriend to rebuild his life. Over six months, Mekhi and his loved ones strengthened critical communication skills, allowing them to process deep-seated feelings about his legal situation and the systemic injustices

they had experienced. Together, they explored how cultural and historical stigmas had shaped Mekhi's perspective and behavior.

Through role-playing and scenario-based exercises, Mekhi reflected on past encounters with law enforcement and learned to approach similar situations with more thoughtful decision-making. By examining his options and weighing their potential outcomes, Mekhi discovered he had more power over his actions and responses than he had previously believed. This realization was pivotal in reducing feelings of helplessness and fostering a sense of control over his life. He has particularly embraced the SODAS decision-making technique (Situation, Options, Disadvantages, Advantages, Select One) and breathing exercises.

"The program really helped me with knowing how to digest the situation and consider the options that I have in front of me. So even if it's a bad situation, I realize I still have multiple options to choose from. I can either make it worse, I can keep it neutral, or I could try to make it a little bit better."

He found himself applying the SODAS technique on a recent shopping trip: "I was getting a beverage, but I was on the phone. I guess I was taking too long and the store owner started to get mad. He told me I had to get out of the store now. I was trying to explain to him that I was going to buy something. I could have tried to argue with him, but I decided to just leave and not buy anything so there would be no problem. I could continue my day and just go to the next store instead of taking it further."

During the final phase of treatment, Mekhi worked on applying these skills to broader areas of his life, such as managing disagreements with supervisors or teachers in his vocational program. He has learned to better identify and regulate his emotions, slowing his response time to avoid reacting impulsively. Mekhi realized that while he couldn't always change the actions of others or the environments he encountered, he could control his response—turning moments of potential conflict into opportunities for growth and self-respect.

The work he has done in the Atlas program has not only helped Mekhi but has had a positive impact on his relationship with his family and his girlfriend, all



Mekhi and Ariel with his parents.

of whom have been involved in his therapy.

"I wasn't one to really say too much. I usually kept it to simple words. I wouldn't really explain myself or say how I was feeling," says Mekhi. "Through the work with Ariel, I re-looked at

myself and learned how to express things better. I have used an emotion chart to figure out what I was feeling and what my triggers are. Once I found the triggers, I could explain why I got upset. Learning to do that has changed me in a deep way."

Mekhi's mother, Selena, describes Atlas and Ariel as a "blessing to our family."

"Through FFT, we learned so much about each other and so much about Mekhi. He was never a child who expressed himself because he always felt he would get in trouble. After working with Ariel and her providing him with various techniques to work through his feelings, he has been so much more open with us. Although the situation that brought about the services wasn't favorable, it has turned

out to be a blessing. Mekhi has matured so much and it's mostly due to his work with Ariel. I pray the outcome of his case is favorable so he can show the courts what a change he has made in his life. We will forever be grateful for what Ariel and Atlas has done for our family," says Selena.

Today, Mekhi is a testament to the transformative power of therapeutic support and family involvement. He has successfully refrained from any new legal issues, completed his vocational training as a HVAC technician, and strengthened his relationships with his loved ones. He continues to use the skills he developed in therapy to navigate challenges and overcome triggers. Mekhi and his family remain in touch with Ariel and the Rising Ground team, sharing updates on his progress and celebrating milestones.

"The situation I was in negatively affected me and my family, but it also brought us closer. Thanks to your program, I honestly, for real, feel like it helped me open up to my family and to ask them for help. I was in a mental state where I was kind of giving up, but it brought me hope." ★

## In the News

In November Rising Ground signed a lease for 27,000 square feet of office space at 111 Livingston Street in downtown Brooklyn. We will be relocating our multi-program service hub to this location in 2025. The news was covered by business publications including *The Business Journal*, *CityBiz*, *Commercial Café*, *Commercial Observer*, *Connect CRE*, *The Real Deal*, and *REBusinessOnline*. The news also prompted *Crain's New York Business* to include Rising Ground's leasing of space at 1333 Broadway for our administrative offices in an article about companies moving to Manhattan's core business district to take advantage of lower rental costs.

Stephanie Menyhay, Rising Ground's Senior Director of Paths to Healing which encompasses our programs for survivors of intimate partner violence, appeared on BronxNet TV's OPEN morning program to speak about our work with survivors and families during Domestic Violence Awareness Month. Stephanie spoke to host Kibin Alleyne about our longstanding Criminalized Survivors Program which assists individuals who are incarcerated because of events associated with being in an abusive relationship, our Relationship Abuse Prevention Program for middle and high school students, and about the importance of providing therapeutic support to young children who have experienced trauma. You can view this interview on our website news page.



*Crain's New York Business* photographing CEO Alan Mucatel, COO Lissa Southerland and Broadway-based employees



# Program Activities

## Gratitude & Giving

With program expansions, including several community-centric services, Rising Ground is reaching and supporting more people than ever before. Throughout November and December, we strived to provide food, toys, gift cards, warm clothing, and more to thousands of children, young people, adults, and families. It is a time of year when we ask for help and, as these pictures demonstrate, it is a time when our supporters and donors truly step up. Thank you!



The East Flatbush Family Enrichment Center – The Yard, partnered with several other community organizations for a Thanksgiving Turkey & Trimmings event hosted at the Sesame Flyers International clubhouse. The Yard's new physical location will open in early 2025.



Rising Ground's Director of Community Engagement, Dishon Ahing with teacher, Kristine Murphy-Wedlock and students at Christa McAuliffe Intermediate School 187 who donated items to our Thanksgiving Food Drive.



In November, friends of Rising Ground had the opportunity to meet Tamarah (center) who spoke about her experience transitioning from foster care to independent living with the support of Rising Ground. Also pictured, Family Foster Care Parent Advocate Maya Marshall (left) and Fair Futures Life Coach Samantha Kinsey.

Rising Ground's Care Management team in Queens and the Jamaica Community Partnership joined forces for a Thanksgiving event.



Families in our ParentChild+ program and supported by our Soundview Family Resource Center enjoyed festive activities and received gifts at a holiday event.



Volunteers from Ernst & Young, including Rising Ground Board member Ellen Polansky (aka Mrs. Claus) distributed toys they had donated to children at our Arnes Center.



Spread the Warmth events at our Safe Space Drop-in Center in Jamaica saw much-needed winter coats, warm clothes, shoes, and more distributed to runaway and homeless young people. With thanks to all of the generous donors and volunteers and for the exceptional support from the Queens community.

# Gala

Wednesday, March 12  
at Tribeca Rooftop



Driven by our resolute belief that each of us can thrive when life has hope and opportunity, Rising Ground's life-affirming work helps New Yorkers rise above adversity and find paths to positive change. We bear witness to countless inspiring moments of strength, resilience, grace and light. We invite you to share examples of this joy with us at our annual Gala, raising critical funds and enabling us to continue this vital work. The Gala highlights the achievements of several of the individuals and families we support. This year's Gala will be held at the **Tribeca Rooftop**, on **Wednesday, March 12** from 6 pm. The evening includes a cocktail reception, seated dinner, and the opportunity to hear from people directly supported by Rising Ground. We offer a variety of sponsorship levels as well as single tickets to this event, our most significant fundraising event of the year. Please join us! You can purchase sponsorships and tickets from our website at [RisingGround.org/Gala2025](https://RisingGround.org/Gala2025) or call our Gala office at 212 465 3234.

## Essentials Drive 2025

In February, Rising Ground will launch an Essentials Drive to collect personal care items such as soap, shampoo, toothpaste, deodorant, sanitary products, and more. These items will be distributed to young people in our Runaway & Homeless Youth programs, including our two Safe Space Drop-in Centers in Jamaica and Far Rockaway, and to residents at our Transitional Independent Living facilities. Homeless youth often face stigma and isolation. Having access to personal care items allows them to feel a sense of normalcy, as these items are linked to routines of self-care that many people take for granted. Personal care items empower young people by fostering a sense of independence and supporting their ability to take care of their basic needs without relying entirely on others. They help bridge the gap between survival and thriving in a difficult environment, cultivating a sense of dignity, independence, and hope for the future.

We will share an Amazon link in February for people to purchase items and have them sent directly to Rising Ground. If your business, place of worship, or other organization would like to arrange to donate bulk items, please contact Sharon Pyle at [SPyle@RisingGround.org](mailto:SPyle@RisingGround.org) or phone 212-437-3551 for a list of items and to arrange collection.



Driven by the belief that each of us can thrive when life has hope and opportunity, Rising Ground provides caring support and proven paths to positive change, helping New York City area children, adults, and families rise above adversity. Founded as an orphanage in 1831, Rising Ground is a leading nonprofit human services organization that has been at the forefront of evolving community needs and is a leader in utilizing results-driven, evidence-based practices. Today, the organization's work is a positive force in the lives of over 30,000 individuals reaching 72,000 adults, children, and families across 101 programs at 143 sites.



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