Sertoma Star Services
Momentum
Agency News, Stories & Highlights

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Taking the Stage: Improv Club Builds Confidence Through Creativity

As David places the helmet over his head, his inhibitions slip away. Suddenly he is no longer standing in a library meeting room. He is an astronaut battling an alien on a distant planet. Laughter and cheers of encouragement fill the room as David fully steps into his "new" role. The energetic atmosphere of spontaneity is contagious, and for the next hour the group can be creative and free.

Welcome to Improv Club, an inclusive theater experience hosted once a month at the Homewood Public Library and led by Chris Rechsteiner, POMS Interviewer at Sertoma Star Services.

"Everyone has a place on stage at Improv Club," says Rechsteiner, who designs improv prompts for performers of all abilities, including neurodivergent participants and seniors. The sessions bring together community members, consumers from Sertoma Star Services, and staff. Getting up on stage is never required. Those who prefer can participate from their seats and still enjoy the laughter, creativity, and connection the activities provide.

For Rechsteiner, the goal is simple: help others shine.

"As the facilitator, I get things rolling, but it is the participants who truly make it great," she says.

During a recent session, the group imagined catching objects falling from the sky and then sharing what they had caught. Responses ranged from airplanes and elephants to birds and various foods. When one confident consumer shouted out "money," the room erupted in an enthusiastic roar of laughter and approval.

For some consumers, the idea of improv can feel intimidating at first. But with encouragement from staff and fellow participants, many find the confidence to join in. In one scene, staff member Ami played a talk show host interviewing a lineup of leprechauns, superheroes, and musicians, all portrayed by consumer performers. Having a familiar face on stage helped ease nerves and created a welcoming space to explore creativity together.

Moments like these reveal the true magic of Improv Club. In that shared space of imagination and laughter, participants are not defined by their challenges. Instead, they are storytellers, performers, and collaborators. Through creativity, connection, and a willingness to play, Improv Club gives everyone involved the chance to experience confidence, community, and the freedom to be themselves.

Where Compassion Meets Action

Honoring Our Sertoma Star Team

An agency like Sertoma Star Services is only as strong as the people within it. Our consumers and families are the reason we do this important work, but it is our staff who keep the wheels turning every day. Each year, staff gather for an agency-sponsored appreciation event to celebrate these efforts and acknowledge colleagues whose contributions have made a difference.

The following awards are peer-nominated recognitions of employees whose commitment builds stronger programs, deeper connections, and a more inclusive community.

The Dan Strick Memorial Innovation Award

Created in memory of Sertoma Star Services' former President/CEO, the Dan Strick Memorial Innovation Award honors employees who demonstrate creativity, forward thinking, and a commitment to improving the lives of those we serve. This year's honoree is **Simone Hawkins**, Administrator of Positive Behavior Supports.

"Simone has a rare combination of deep clinical skill, genuine relationship building, and steady, values-driven influence," wrote her nominator. She empowers staff through innovative, real-world training techniques and has built strong cross-departmental relationships to expand supports and resources for teams across the agency. Her collaborative approach and focus on positive outcomes for consumers set her apart. Simone also goes above and beyond to know the people we support as individuals, using that insight to anticipate needs and prevent challenges before they escalate.

The Leadership Award

This award recognizes employees who demonstrate diplomacy, inspire others, and lead teams to achieve positive results. This year, two individuals were honored: **Randy Daniel,** CILA House Manager (pictured with President/CEO Kelly Berardelli), and **Gene Sampract** (not pictured), Janitorial Operations Manager.

Randy is known for creative, out-of-the-box solutions.

His nomination highlighted how he collaborates with other managers to match individuals across programs who share similar interests, creating opportunities for meaningful connections and increased community outings.

Gene leads with patience, compassion, and integrity. His staff admires his communication skills and steady presence often seeking him out for advice."

The following award is presented to staff who demonstrate champion-like qualities by advocating for individuals, even when facing systemic challenges. This award is unique because it is based on nominations received from consumers or their family members.

The Consumer Champion Award

The Consumer Champion Award is shared by **Danielle Ciesielski**, Indiana Administrator (below, left), and **Christina Manzanales**, Indiana DSP (below, right).

Danielle's nomination included a family's reflection on how their loved one has flourished since joining Sertoma Star Services after a previous negative experience elsewhere. They commended Danielle and her team for placing the consumer at the center of every decision, stating, "We are extremely fortunate to have our team, Danielle, and Sertoma Star Services."

Christina's nomination is from Lexi Westerfield (below, center), who shared, "Christina goes the extra mile for me and all of the consumers she serves. She tries to get to know everyone as an individual and picks up hours to help so many people, including myself." Lexi described Christina supporting her socially, emotionally, and physically, adding, "Seeing Christina almost every day makes me smile. She is like family. She is amazing."

Below are additional awards presented at the staff appreciation event. These peer-nominated honors reflect the contributions and high standards of excellence each employee brings to their role.

The STAR Award

Amber Macon,
Direct Support Professional

Consumer Empowerment Award

Melanie Davis,
Mental Health Counselor

Angel Ruffin,
Community Living Facilitator

The Above and Beyond Award

Marland Heath,
Janitorial Crew Leader

The Bridge Builder Award

Janean Clifton,
Direct Support Professional

The Customer Service Award

Gina Foote,
Community Partnerships and Event Manager

Anthony Sanders,
Electronic Recycling Coordinator

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4343 West 123rd St., Alsip, IL 60803
(708) 371-9700

President/CEO:
Kelly Berardelli

Publisher:
Patricia Trebe, Chief Development Officer

Editor:
Susan Barnett, PR and Marketing Manager

Contributer:
Jennifer Wojcikowski,
Community Outreach and Education Trainer

Community Connections

Learning to Support Mental Wellness

In 2024, 23.4% of U.S. adults — about 61.5 million people — experienced a mental illness, representing more than one in five adults.* Despite how common mental health challenges are, many people still feel unsure about how to help when someone around them is struggling.

23.4% of U.S. adults experience a mental Illness

Most of us would know what to do if someone were having a heart attack. Far fewer people know how to respond if a friend or loved one is experiencing a panic attack, showing signs of depression, or struggling with substance use.

For more than a decade, the Community Outreach and Education team at Sertoma Star Services has been helping individuals and organizations develop these essential skills. Through both virtual and in-person trainings, the team provides workshops, speakers, and certification programs.

"Our mission is to increase mental health literacy, reduce the stigma associated with mental illness, and foster a culture of wellness in communities and workplaces," said Jennifer Wojcikowski, Community Outreach and Education Trainer. Certified facilitators deliver internationally recognized trainings like Mental Health First Aid while also offering customized presentations tailored to the needs of each audience.

These programs engage, educate, and empower a wide range of groups, including businesses, schools, healthcare professionals, first responders, veterans groups, faith-based organizations, and other community associations.

Sertoma Star's training offerings fall into three key content areas:

Workplace Wellness workshops help leaders and teams build supportive, resilient workplace cultures where mental health is recognized and valued.

Community Education trainings provide valuable knowledge for a range of participants. These include Mental Health First Aid certification courses as well as workshops on topics such as anxiety, depression, compassion fatigue, self-care, and mental health awareness.

Crisis Intervention trainings focus on recognizing and responding to urgent mental health situations. Facilitators are certified to teach suicide prevention and intervention programs such as QPR, safeTALK, and ASIST.

Mental health affects every community, workplace, and family. By learning how to recognize warning signs and respond with compassion and confidence, more people can become part of the solution.

Sertoma Star Services' Community Outreach and Education team is ready to help. To learn more about mental health and wellness or request a training, contact Gia Washington, Director of Community Education, at gwashington@sertomastar.org or (708) 748-1951 ext. 418.

Gia Washington

Jennifer Wojcikowski

*Data shared from nami.org

BOWL BASH

SATURDAY, JUNE 13

Doors Open 5 p.m. Bowling 5:30 p.m.

Info, tickets and sponsorships at
sertomastar.org/bowling

Advocacy in Action

Consumers Aeriol, Tracey, Jennica, and Jessica traveled to Indianapolis on February 12 to participate in The Arc of Indiana's Valentine's Day at the State House, an annual advocacy event bringing together self-advocates from across the state. During their visit, Jennica and Jessica met with Representative Carolyn Jackson (shown above), and the group also had the opportunity to speak with Senator Dan Dernulc. They proudly advocated not only for themselves, but also for the rights and opportunities of all individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

First Look Photos

Did you join us for First Look for Charity this year? Or are you curious what the event is all about?

Check out our photo galleries from this year's unforgettable evening.
sertomastar.org/FirstLookPhotos

Support the Impact Fund campaign!

The Impact Fund helps create real experiences for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities and those living with mental illness. Scan the QR code to open doors for the more than 2,000 individuals we support.

Interested in a digital version of the newsletter? Scan the QR code to see Momentum on the Sertoma Star Services website or visit **sertomastar.org/newsletter**.