

And now, the true stars of the show are introduced. Some of the GIFT students share their Core Gift statements - an affirmation that beautifully sums up the gifts crafted over their lifetime throughout the challenging 15-session/75 hour training process. Other students share their recovery stories - or, as we like to call them - "comeback stories." With every statement, with every comeback story, their words move like a musician's hands across heartstrings. With the help of former GIFT graduates, certificates are awarded to the students in a ceremonious fashion before taking a rather large family portrait.

Five GIFT graduations have taken place over a span of several, recent months. Each is unique, but equally awe-striking and reaffirming. These trainings were held across the Commonwealth in the following locations: Salem, Lawrence, Tewksbury, Northampton, & Framingham with a total number of 41 graduates.

Joan Mikula, DMH Commissioner, described the GIFT as one of the best things to have happened in Massachusetts for the betterment and recovery of youth and young adults in transition. Unsurprisingly, she has personally formed relationships with several GIFT graduates, me included. She has truly exemplified what it means to advocate for the needs of transition age youth (TAY), so much so that she was recently the keynote speaker at the Northampton GIFT graduation. Despite her busy schedule, Commissioner Mikula was adamant about staying afterwards to connect with the students and to meet parents and guests. She showed her true, warm, and genuine personality and dedication.

I would be remiss if I didn't highlight Ann Capoccia, one of our fiercest champions for young adults & the DMH STAY Grant Liaison. Both Ann and Heidi Holland, the STAY Grant Project Director, are regular speakers and guests at GIFT graduations. Heidi's unwavering support of young adults is evident in her frequent participation as a guest trainer, attendance at all GIFT graduations, and her continual encouragement and commitment to the career development of the graduates.

As part of the career development, GIFT graduates have the opportunity to become GIFT trainers or "GIFTers" through a train-the-trainer model. Building this type of capacity fosters sustainability and continues the consistent employment rates of GIFT graduates (*within 1 year, 75% of GIFT graduates are employed*).

The idea of having young adults train young adults stems from the concept that peer relationships are a strong force in recovery. With the expansion in numbers of trainers working at various state agencies, providers, federal grant projects, and advocacy organizations, the GIFTers will essentially pass the baton to future graduates looking to better their lives, gain employment, earn their education, and forge their own comebacks.

GIFT trainings will continue in 2016 across the state with the next one scheduled for February in Dorchester. For more information about GIFT Trainings, please contact Gustavo Payano [gustavo.payano@state.ma.us](mailto:gustavo.payano@state.ma.us) or Kim Bisset [kim@radiatecareers.com](mailto:kim@radiatecareers.com).