

Leslie Lagos

By Kerry J. Bickford, Former VOICES Newsletter Editor

Leslie Lagos began drinking as a teenager, but it did not seem like a big deal since she was surrounded by friends and family who did the same.

Lagos was the first in her family to go to college. While doing so, she found time to develop a business with a former high school teacher – an innovative idea focused on workforce development and honing the necessary skills and confidence needed for lasting, gainful employment. Lagos, her sister, and her mother all became involved in helping build this new enterprise from the ground up. It was a desperately needed concept for people who had fallen through the cracks or were re-entering society without the skills required to take the next step toward independence.

Lagos loved this work and spent several years immersed in a pursuit that had significant meaning for her. Still, something was amiss. "I had a great life, friends, and family, but something was wrong," Lagos says. "I was in pain. Despite my success, I felt fear, doubt, and insecurity until my best friend's mother reached out to me one day. She invited me to attend a 12-step meeting. That changed my life."

Soon, Lagos found time to attend more meetings and began to work through the steps. By age 25, she found herself sober and living her life one day at a time, a path she remains on and is thankful for every day.

Meanwhile, Lagos' older brother, Timmy, was wrestling with a dual diagnosis. Like so many others, he used alcohol and drugs to self-medicate. His life began a downward spiral while Leslie and others stood helplessly by. "Here I received this incredible gift (sobriety), and I wished I could give it to everyone," Lagos says, in an emotion-filled voice.

In 2013, Timmy lost his battle after a 20-year physical and emotional roller coaster. He was found on Thanksgiving Day, and while the official cause of death was an overdose, they wondered if he was simply tired of fighting. Either way, it was devastating for those who loved him and for a sister who wished she could have given him the gift of sobriety that had transformed her life.

While grieving the loss of her brother, Lagos was raising her family of four and balancing work and home life. She left her previous business to become involved with One Life at a Time. In 2018, the organization launched the Career Recovery Program, designed for career-minded people in recovery. Like her brother, many young people were emerging from recovery programs with no support network or follow-up services. If they were lucky enough to find a job, they often became stuck in a minimum wage position with no opportunity for advancement. Leslie was committed to changing this.

The program began by focusing on basic needs and nurturing self-esteem. "Heads came up," says Lagos, saluting the value of human connection. Participants began learning the skills needed to launch a career path resulting in meaningful employment. This included how to conduct a job search, prepare for an interview, dress for an interview, and so much more.

Around this time, a neighbor in Braintree connected Leslie to Robyn Houston Bean, a local mom who had lost her son to overdose. Houston-Bean began supporting Lagos' mission, helping expand her network, and sending her information and referrals. Although funding was a struggle, Lagos continued on this mission while launching the TPM Memorial Fund to honor the memory of her brother. The fund helps people in recovery who are in need of support. In a recent announcement, Houston-Bean explains, "The TPM Fund has been able to provide scholarships to high school seniors affected by SUD in Hull and Braintree, scholarships for those working in the recovery field, and a scholarship for yoga teacher training for individuals in recovery.

"Upon leaving One Life at a Time in 2022, I had faith there was something else I was meant to do," says Lagos. Houston-Bean confirmed this by inviting Lagos to join The Sun Will Rise, a nonprofit Houston-Bean had created in her son's memory. "Leslie is a mom, wife, sister, daughter, friend to many, and a person in long-term recovery," she says. "We are thrilled to have her on board to support our members and facilitators and to bring our foundation to the next level of support for the grieving community."

Leslie recalls that she "jumped at the chance" and described this new work as "honoring her brother's life and filling the void by turning loss into hope for others." She especially loves advocacy and raising awareness about stigma while educating the public about unintentional deaths resulting from opioid use.

"I am such a proponent of peer support, and Robyn has shown me the powerful benefit of peer grief support," Lagos explains. "As another wise woman once said to me, 'We need people,' something I didn't like to admit to myself, but it's so true. This includes finding 'your people,' the ones who understand like no other....who have 'been there' and are also in need of support for their daily struggle. It's powerful work, and my goal is to bring awareness to anyone grieving the loss of a loved one to substance use disorder. My personal and professional path has led me to this work, and I believe this is exactly what I was meant to do."