

2021 Innovator of the Year

Cherene Caraco

Promise Resource Network and Peer Voice NC



Cherene has been described as a disruptor, agitator, “fringe”, activator and innovator. For some, this has been a compliment, and for others, an attempt to discredit. Either way, Cherene has been committed to state, national and international reform of pathology-based, oppressive systems, practices and policies for 28 years. Cherene came by this passion honestly as a 13 year-old girl whose behavior was labeled as mental illness, rather than understood as trauma. This was the first of eight mental health diagnoses and it would take many years for Cherene to heal and find her voice. After working over a decade in conventional mental health systems, Cherene began using her voice to ignite social justice related change that is rooted in trauma healing and peer-to-peer support. In 2006, Cherene founded the Charlotte based non-profit, Promise Resource Network (PRN), that operates 16 open access initiatives that are led and staffed by a team of 85 people that are psychiatric, suicide attempt, trauma, substance use, incarceration and houselessness survivors. In 2019, PRN started Peer Voice NC as a statewide movement of people directly impacted by mental health issues to organize and mobilize around legislative and practice change. This legislative session, they introduced 4 bills with bi-partisan support that are aimed at reducing the use of mental health related confinement, establishing open access peer-run alternatives to psychiatric commitment, and introducing non-police community response alternatives with people experiencing mental health, poverty related, and/or substance use crises. Since COVID, PRN launched a 24/7 peer run warm line and a peer operated respite, Retreat@ The Plaza, where people experiencing mental health crises and/or thoughts of suicide can stay free for up to 10 days in a healing, unlocked, house staffed by suicide attempt and psychiatric survivors. This serves as the community’s first peer-run alternative to emergency department, congregate in-patient, and involuntary commitments. With Cherene’s leadership, in 2021 PRN has been ranked as the 2nd Best Non-Profit in the Country to Work For, following 3 consecutive years ranked in the top 10 by the Non-Profit Times.