

# WellesleyWeston

MAGAZINE

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## Addiction Meets Its Match

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**weston resident** Alicia Abad's father waged guerrilla warfare against the Japanese invaders of his native Philippines, carrying messages to U.S. forces. After the war, he was rewarded with a full scholarship to medical school on the GI Bill.

Today, in a very different kind of war, his daughter is a messenger, too. At the risk of overstating the parallels—after all, there's no comparing the terrors of the Philippines during World War II with the bucolic suburbs of Boston—she, too, is fighting an enemy that can be life-shattering, if not lethal: drug and alcohol abuse. Abad's frontline is Newton-Wellesley Hospital.

With her \$100,000 gift, she helped launch the Substance Use Services Council at the hospital. The advisory group is raising not just money but also awareness for a pioneering program that helps people break the grip of addiction.

"I made this leadership donation to step up and tell people that this isn't something that should be shameful or stigmatized," said the 56-year-old.

Newton-Wellesley's Emergency Department treated 1,500 cases stemming from substance abuse during the year ending October 1, 2018. More than a thousand of them involved acute alcoholism; 75 resulted from unintentional opioid overdoses, 10 of which involved Weston and Wellesley residents. Many of the 1,500 people treated suffered injuries resulting from being under the influence.

Count among them your neighbors, colleagues, and fellow country club members, according to Dr. Antje M. Barreveld, director of the new Substance Use Services program. "It extends much deeper into the fabric

of surrounding towns than any of us had really anticipated," Barreveld said. "Rates of substance abuse in our communities look very much like those in the rest of the United States. We're not by any means immune."

Until last spring, Newton-Wellesley, like many suburban hospitals, would hand patients with drug and alcohol problems a list of resources for getting help and leave it at that. No wonder, then, that clinicians in the Emergency Department were treating the same people multiple times a year, if not every week.

"We realized that this is not a way that we can continue to practice



care and that addiction needs to be treated just as seriously as other diseases like diabetes or infectious diseases or orthopedic injuries," said Barreveld.

Just as the hospital was gearing up the new program, Abad was looking for a new focus for her philanthropic efforts after stepping down as a board member

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—Dr. Antje M. Barreveld

*Left to right: Liz Johnston, P.A.; Antje Barreveld, M.D., Medical Director NWH Substance Use Services; Donna Goulet, M.A.; Catherine Armstrong, M.D., M.P.H., Associate Director NWH Substance Use Services*

of the Planned Parenthood League of Massachusetts. The daughter of a surgeon and a hospice volunteer, she was already as a teenager donating time to her local hospital as a candy striper. For a decade, she has served on the board of overseers at Newton-Wellesley Hospital.

Substance Use Services piqued her interest. She had just read *Dreamland*, Sam Quinones's 2015 award-winning book about the roots and repercussions of the opioid epidemic. Around the same time, she learned that a member of her extended family whom she had known since he was four had died in his parents' house of an oxycodone/alcohol overdose at the age of 28.

**“We’re all touched by this.  
Why wouldn’t you want to  
get behind it?”**

—Alicia Abad

Then a young woman who had played a regular role in her life confided that she had been an opioid addict for years. As a teen, this woman and her boyfriend dabbled with oxycodone. She enjoyed the high so much, she started using the drug on weekdays, too. When she could no longer afford it, she switched to snorting

heroin. Meanwhile, she was holding down a job and concealing her pursuit for the next high. Dreading the pain of withdrawal, she was afraid to quit. “Here’s a kid from a middle-class suburb nearby who was addicted to heroin,” Abad said. “That to me was eye-opening.”

Through the Newton-Wellesley program, Abad’s friend would have learned about medications to curb the cravings of drug and alcohol addiction. Kicking the habit doesn’t have to be like the ordeals depicted in the Danny Boyle movie *Trainspotting* or the Frank Sinatra classic *The Man with a Golden Arm*.



“It doesn’t have to be a really horrific experience by any means,” said Barrevel. “You slowly go up on medication until someone has no cravings.”

While many clients arrive at the substance use program through the recommendation of primary care doctors based at Newton-Wellesley, those who enter via the Emergency Department often need strong encouragement.

“As they become less intoxicated, they feel shame,” said Barrevel. “They just want to get out.”

That's when a key member of the Substance Use Services team steps in. This person is called the recovery coach, and the position is usually filled by someone who had his or her own battles with addiction. "The recovery coach can really connect with the person in that vulnerable stage. They can help to motivate them," Barreveld said.

The team, which provides medical treatment, mental health, and social services, collaborates with community organizations to identify treatment options best suited for each client.

"Just starting someone on medication isn't going to cut it," Barreveld said. "They need extensive psychological support as well as peer support and lifestyle changes." Among the partners is the Boston Bulldogs, a running group of recovery addicts.

"We are always supportive of the patient regardless of how they are doing," Barreveld said. "If things aren't working well, we need to rethink our treatment paradigm. Some people may need inpatient [care]."

The team also works with public health and public safety departments and educates medical providers about caring for patients with addictions and best practices for pain management.

Insurance reimbursements are expected to support half the hospital team's first-year budget of \$500,000, but donations will have to cover the rest. And if the program catches on—it's already treated more than 100 patients—costs will escalate.

That's where Abad comes in. With one son in college and the other starting his career, she has time to serve as evangelist for the cause. Since moving to Weston in 2000, she's developed a wide circle of friends and colleagues. They range from the avid cyclists she's met in her dozen years riding the Pan Mass Challenge for cancer research to her golf partners on the fairways of Wellesley Country Club.

Abad settled in Massachusetts after college. She met her first husband at Western New England University in Springfield, where she majored in business management and minored in computer information systems.

While she worked as a software consultant and educator, he helped build the backbone of the Internet. When he moved out to California to hatch a startup, she juggled a job and a first baby back in Massachusetts. Eventually, she joined him in a rental house in San Jose. At first, she questioned his sanity, but then his company went public with meteoric results.

Having friends and family in New England, they decided to move to Weston. Abad's mother was a farmer's daughter from Vermont with ancestors who came over on the Mayflower. She met Abad's father when he was doing a surgical fellowship in Boston.

Affluent Weston presents a contrast to the middle-class New York suburb of Paramus, New Jersey, where Abad was raised. While her father was head of surgery at a Catholic teaching hospital, her


neighbors included hairdressers and teachers, lawyers, and the owner of the local deli. Even in that multi-ethnic community, Abad's family stood out: the four daughters of a dark-skinned Filipino and a blond, blue-eyed Vermonter. "When my mother rolled us around, they used to think she was the nanny," said Abad.

In Weston, she sought to provide her sons with something of the multicultural experience of her own youth. She enrolled them in Roxbury Weston Programs, which runs a preschool in Weston dedicated to "the celebration of diversity and excellence in early care and education."

Serving on the preschool's board and later with Weston PTO, Abad honed her organizing and fundraising skills. In 2012, the woman who was educated by nuns as a child joined the Planned Parenthood board.

While substance abuse is not exactly a conversation starter, Abad has no qualms about broaching the subject with friends or at social events. All she needs to hear is "So, Alicia, what are you doing these days?" for her to talk about her new council.

Inevitably, people share their own stories about students' binge drinking and friends or relatives stricken by opioid abuse.

"We're all touched by this," she said. "Why wouldn't you want to get behind it?" 

**LOOKING FOR HELP** with substance abuse for yourself or a loved one? Contact Newton-Wellesley Hospital's Substance Use Services at [www.nwh.org/sus](http://www.nwh.org/sus) or 617.243.6062.

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