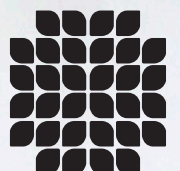


# Alumni: Why a Tribe Matters for Long-Term Recovery



## Support Systems Build Quality of Life

The enemy of successful recovery is isolation. In isolation, individuals sometimes only hear their own voices. Those voices, often clouded by negative self-talk, can weaken the resolve previously found during the best moments of the recovery journey. That's when other voices – those who understand you and support you – can make a life-changing difference. That's what a tribe is.

Recovery is a tough road to navigate and often leaves individuals feeling alone. Feelings of isolation are exacerbated when friends or family don't understand the challenges of the recovery journey.

Research has confirmed that developing a supportive network of family, friends, recovery community peers, and others, enriches an individual's quality of life and improves an individual's long-term resilience, and outlook for success, while decreasing the chances of relapse.

Whether labeled a tribe, a support system, a peer group, or another name, the premise behind a support network is that being surrounded by those who understand and encourage recovery helps individuals stay true to their goals. In addition, programs that foster a fellowship between members encourage individuals to confront their challenges without shame and social stigma and allow them to witness the same struggles in others. That is why 12-step programs are successful.

While Alcoholics Anonymous is usually top of mind when individuals think about 12-step programs, many organized groups have similar approaches. After residential treatment, Sierra Tucson recommends individuals seek ongoing support through a tribe, by either joining local 12-step programs and other support groups and by carefully choosing friendships and relationships that enhance and support recovery.

Online support group alternatives became popular during the pandemic and apps such as "I Am Sober," "Sober Grid," and others are a way to provide connections to others also looking for support. Regardless of what that tribe looks like, or how individuals meet one another, the most important thing is to choose what feels right to individuals with a focus on assisting them in achieving their recovery milestones.



## Grace, New York

### Online Support Meetings Created Community

Grace, a Sierra Tucson alumnus from New York, understands life-changing support. At 20 years old, she went to Sierra Tucson for bipolar disorder and alcohol use disorder. Encouraged by her family, boosted by the staff at Sierra Tucson, and inspired by those she met in treatment, she left after six weeks and returned home only to experience a new, different world – one that would encourage isolation. The COVID pandemic had begun.

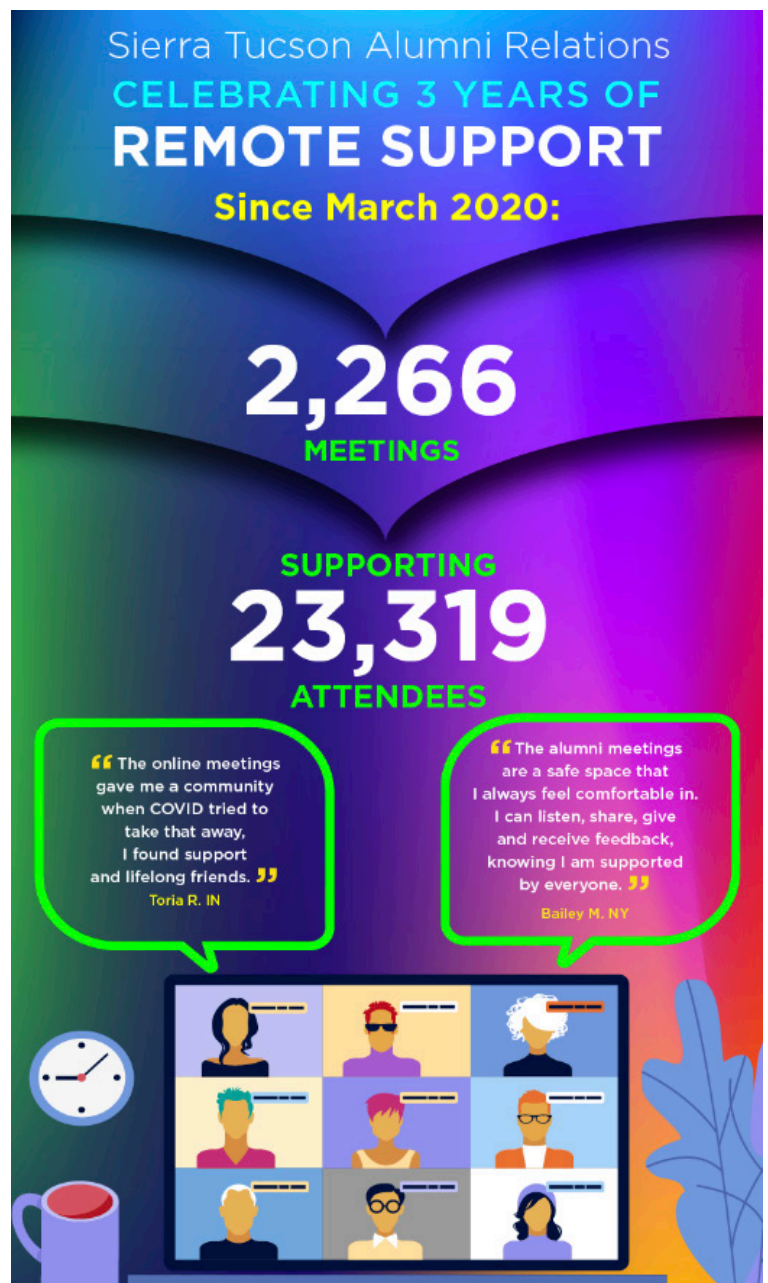
No longer enrolled in college and without a job, Grace didn't heed the discharge advice to start attending 12-step meetings regularly. She told herself she didn't need to. Within months, she relapsed. Luckily a friend she had met in treatment at Sierra Tucson regularly texted her, encouraging her to attend Sierra Tucson support meetings. Initially ignoring the encouragement, Grace's final descent into relapse several months later convinced her it might be time.

"Since then, I've been going to meetings ever since. They've changed my life."

In April 2020, recognizing that the new isolation culture fueled by the pandemic was not healthy for its Alumni population that had previously thrived at regular in-person support group meetings held in various locations around the country, Sierra Tucson began to hold online meetings through Zoom. Offered several times a day, several days a week, Grace found her lifeline and so have over 23,000 other Alumni attendees from around the world who continue to join various Sierra Tucson hosted online gatherings to this day. All in all, over 2,200 online meetings have been held since 2020.

Hesitant at first, Grace logged onto her first meeting. Her comfort level increased when she immediately recognized other participants she had known while in treatment at Sierra Tucson. Joining meetings several times a week became her respite. It became a place where she and others could find support and acceptance.

"When I first was going to the Alumni meetings, I was so scared. I didn't want to say anything. And then it became clear that I had nothing to be nervous about. You can share anything that you're feeling whether you had a really great day and want to share about your wins and successes, or if you had a day that wasn't so great, and you wanted to share about that too and get support from others. It is so nice to be able to talk about anything that you want and have people support you. I talked about things that I don't even tell my friends or anyone else because you can tell your tribe anything. They're always there to support you no matter what and that's the biggest thing for me."



For Grace, having a tribe means having a group you can relate to with a special and immediate connection that isn't easily found through encounters in everyday life. Grace has been attending the Zoom meetings for over two years and by witnessing the growth and progress of others she is now encouraged that she too can achieve recovery success for a lifetime.

“Something that motivates me is hearing other people’s stories. That’s why I love the Alumni group speaker meetings. Just hearing other people’s experiences, especially for me being so young, and hearing people who have years of recovery and sobriety under their belt, really makes me feel like I can do it too. I have begun to think, maybe it’s not so hard to stay sober for the rest of my life. In the beginning, I did not believe that I would be able to never drink again. And now, I actually believe that I’m never going to drink again.”

The lessons in recovery and through her involvement with her tribe are also helping Grace in other areas of her life. She’s found peace in knowing that she can’t control other people’s actions but that she can control how she reacts to them. She remains friends with her old friend group and has intentionally reframed her connection with them. She now limits her interactions with them to meeting for coffee instead of weekend drinking. She made her needs and boundaries clear to them on what she needs to stay sober and healthy. While they’ve come to understand and respect her needs, it’s her recovery tribe who didn’t require any of those conversations and explanations. They inherently understood.

While she reunited online with many of the friends she made while in treatment at Sierra Tucson, she also met plenty of new friends through the ZOOM meetings – some of which she met for the first time in person when she attended the Fall, 2022 Sierra Tucson Alumni Retreat (S.T.A.R.35). Grace has found that her tribe connections are enduring regardless of age differences or geographic gaps. The common language of recovery levels the playing field and has created strong bonds of lasting friendship.

“Some of the people I’ve met at the online meetings went to Sierra Tucson before I was even born! But as time went on, it didn’t really seem like they were that much older than me. We are friends and the respect is mutual.”

With the encouragement of her tribe, Grace remains active in her recovery. She is now a leader of one of the Alumni meeting groups and she recently was interviewed (using the name of Grace) by My Miracle Radio, a podcast by Sierra Tucson.

“I honestly don’t think that I would be sober if I didn’t start going to the Alumni groups..”



### Grace’s Tribe

Grace’s tribe consists of her parents, her brother, the Alumni Relations leadership at Sierra Tucson, her Alumni group friends, her sponsors, her therapist, and her friends from the AA meeting she attends.

“We’re so close because you can just tell the tribe anything and they’re always there to support you no matter what.”

## Samantha K., Vermont

### A Tribe Emerged as “The Silver Lining out of the Pandemic”

When Samantha decided she had to do something about her trauma it didn't take long for her to take her therapist's advice to get to Sierra Tucson. While she had been working on unresolved trauma for years, she didn't feel that she was improving and addressing what was at the core of her struggle. On April 28, 2018 she made a decision that changed her life.

“My therapist said I needed a higher level of care and she gave me two choices of places to go. I picked Sierra Tucson because of the holistic approach. This was on a Thursday, and I was on a plane Sunday.”

Her snap decision was fueled by her deep distress. She walked away from her teaching job turning over the last of the semester's lessons to another instructor and made no apologies that she had something personal to take care of. After only days at Sierra Tucson she was happy to discover that she went to a place that knew how to approach her challenges.

“When I got to Sierra Tucson, the one thing I realized is they understood trauma very well. They had many different types of trauma therapists. I met with my primary care group, the head of trauma, and many other therapists who were trained in various modalities. During the orientation, the presenter said, ‘Imagine that it's a buffet and you're here sampling what modality will be good for you.’ That resonated with me. It was a good way to look at it.”

As a result she tried different modalities including somatic experiencing, equine therapy, and revisioning among other things. She was happy to discover that in a few weeks she began feeling better. Part of the reason why her mood was improving is that she felt that the members of her primary trauma group were like her, which she found comforting. Yet, she wasn't interested in making friends or creating a social circle as part of her healing. It wasn't why she was there.

“I wasn't really vested in making friends at all. I kept in touch with my roommates for a little bit afterwards, but to be honest, I was there to do the word trauma work, and I wasn't trying to connect with people. I was going there to do my work.”

When she left Sierra Tucson she took her trauma team's advice and went to an IOP nearby her hometown. She also was on the hunt for a support group to connect with but as the pandemic hit in 2020, she still hadn't found the right group. Little did she realize that during a time that would become one of the most isolating moments in history she would find new connection and recovery growth that she never expected.

“In March 2020 when the world shut down Sierra Tucson started online meetings – three meetings a day, seven days a week. I started going and I was like WOW...this is what I've been looking for. There was a specific format to keep us all safe and safety is very important to me.”

As a trauma survivor and someone who wasn't interested in making friends in treatment and staying in touch with those she met when she was at Sierra Tucson, she was attracted to how safe the online meetings made her feel. She discovered people like herself that were actively working their recovery and all the challenges that accompanied it. It didn't matter

to her that some of the people on the calls were working on pain, or addiction, or trauma like her, it was important to her that they were interested in integrating the tools into their lives that they learned at Sierra Tucson, just like she was.

While safety was essential for her, what kept her returning to meeting after meeting was what she was learning through the group interaction. For someone who always felt alone in her trauma, she finally felt a constant presence and a safety net of support that she hadn't been able to find anywhere else. But it was what she was learning from the other group members that kept her engaged.

“I started realizing that I was learning things in these support groups that I could never learn in therapy. I was learning about how to provide feedback and about boundaries. I was learning a lot that complemented therapy. They're not a substitute for therapy, they're just different. When you connect, you are doing something for your recovery because the antithesis of that is isolation, so, by attending a meeting, we're connecting and we're helping each other in recovery.”

She feels that the meetings became a place of support and encouragement from a tribe that respects each other's experiences. She learned how to respond and provide feedback in that she believes has taught her about interpersonal communications in practical ways that can't be taught as effectively in traditional therapy sessions. The meetings also launched her into another level of support that came as a surprise to her -- attending the Annual Alumni Retreat. She said she would have never considered attending the Retreat had it not been for the relationships and support network built during the Zoom meetings.

“There was an online retreat in October 2020, and the CEO of Sierra Tucson at the time, Dr. Valerie Kading spoke, and she said, ‘Sierra Tucson is invested in you and your success as long as you're alive.’ I was like, wow! That still makes me cry to think about it. I don't pay to go there. I don't pay them anything today. But they still care about my success.”

### **Samantha's Tribe**

For Samantha, her tribe doesn't have to be the same group of people on every Zoom call. The magic for her is that the tribe ebbs and flows - different people every time, but with one important distinction - what makes them the same. For her that commonality is that everyone went to Sierra Tucson. She calls it the Sierra Tucson ethos.

“There are many levels of the tribe. The first time you show up on a meeting we will say, because you went to Sierra Tucson, this is your tribe and we are here for you. Every day you show up we will be here. Tomorrow we'll be here. And by that, I mean, not the same group of people, but, you know, different people at different times of day. But it's your tribe because the tribe gets it. The tribe is there to support you.”

## Mia W., Tucson, Arizona

### A Decade Later, Finding a Tribe was a Happy Surprise

In 2005, when a physician treating Mia W. at a local Tucson hospital recognized her dependence on opioids, he recommended she go to Sierra Tucson. She listened and decided to go. Consequently, her singular focus, when she went to Sierra Tucson, was to find a way to break her addiction to the painkillers that had been prescribed to her in increasingly higher and more dangerous doses since the late 1990s.

“I had no intention of creating a tribe or to connect with anyone. I wanted to get off the drugs and figure out how to live my life without pain. I didn’t understand at the time how much the connection with other humans was a part of that. Creating a tribe was not my intention. That was a beautiful fallout.”

An unrealistic expectation in treatment is the belief that there will be a “cure” in 30 days. However, recovery is a series of learnings that take time to sink in to become part of an individual’s lifestyle. Upon leaving Sierra Tucson she attended the Sierra Tucson Annual Alumni Retreat nearly every year, yet she fully admits that she still wasn’t giving recovery her all. She believes she wasn’t in the mental space to do the necessary recovery work, nor did she understand the necessity of building a community to create tribal support.

“I went to Sierra Tucson in 2005. It did not happen right away for me. I’m a slow learner. I relapsed multiple times after and I did not connect with people while I was there, or immediately after. I did it slowly. It was like the seed was planted and grew slowly for me. It took many years for me to see that if I have connection with other humans, it makes all this other stuff work.”

For Mia, the seed was planted and the seedling nurtured by attending the Retreats each year and by staying in contact with Sierra Tucson Alumni Relations. Through those interactions, an understanding grew that a better life was possible if she could continue to connect with others. But it wasn’t until she moved to a new neighborhood and began making friends within that community that she realized that her continual relapses were keeping her from fully being herself and enjoying her life the way she knew was possible. Her ongoing reliance on substances was holding her back from creating the deep friendships and connections she wanted to make.

“The quest for community created that inner drive for me to stop taking the pills. It was really difficult though because I had been on and off the opioids for many years. This time however I reached out to Tim at Sierra Tucson Alumni Relations. I told him I was struggling, but I knew down deep Sierra Tucson had my back since it had always been made clear to me that their presence would remain for the rest of my life. When I reached out, he said there were support groups in town I could attend. So, I showed up and that was pivotal! It got me through withdrawal and really launched me exponentially into the tribe.”

While the in-person groups helped her understand the value of a tribe, it wasn’t until the online Zoom groups started during the pandemic that she fully began to understand the true potential of tribe relationships. Thanks to the Zoom meetings, Mia’s tribe expanded to include people from around the world. Relationships that started as a chance meeting

with random group members have now evolved to become lifelong friendships. Today the new friends coordinate trips to meet up in person in addition to reconnecting yearly at the Annual Alumni Retreats.

“My tribe is now a huge presence in my life. It’s incredibly powerful. I can’t even explain how different my life is because of it. The Zoom groups brought a whole different level of tribe to me because I suddenly had this group of people in my life, and we were connecting daily. It was a worldwide pandemic, and even though the world was shut down, we were not.”

Mia attended most of the Sierra Tucson Alumni Retreats since she left treatment in 2005 and she had kept in contact with some members of the staff. However, she admits that she only distantly kept her “toe dipped in the water of recovery.” While it took years for her to fully understand the importance of community and the role of a supportive tribe, she said she subconsciously knew that she was never far from their support when she was ready.

“I knew I had a lifeline through maintaining that connection with just a few people at Sierra Tucson. It took me a long time to comprehend that this was what I needed. Now I realize that I can’t do recovery without the connection of other humans.”

Her attitude of persistence and determination to keep working the program and using the tools that Sierra Tucson provides built a successful support structure that has enriched her life. Deep down Mia knew that Sierra Tucson’s process would work if she believed it would and if she would make the effort. That belief and hard work has changed her life.

“Like we say, trust that the miracle will happen.”

### **Mia’s Tribe**

Mia’s tribe started with the in-person Sierra Tucson groups she attended. The Zoom groups expanded her tribe worldwide, including a new friend in Australia who is planning to catch up with the Sierra Tucson Zoom tribe when she comes to the US to visit this year for the Annual Alumni Retreat.

Today, Mia’s tribe is diverse. In addition to Sierra Tucson friends around the country, her tribe includes her two daughters and other family members, her best friend, a ladies’ group from her old neighborhood, her 12-step meeting friends, her trauma therapist, and her psychologist, along with many others.

Mia is certain that her willingness to create a recovery tribe has helped her become attracted to those who also have a story and are willing to share it. Even her dog trainer (who is also in recovery) is now part of her tribe.

“The people in my tribe have learned how to make life work. That’s the kind of person that I resonate with. I now seem to attract people who have really made their life what they want it to be, and I find that they just appear now that I’m open to it. Maybe it’s my intentional energy connecting with other people’s positive, intentional energy. I know I need a strong community, a strong village, a strong tribe to thrive, and I’m committed to it.”



Grace, Samantha, and Mia, along with countless other Sierra Tucson Alumni have experienced the value in creating and building their tribes. Tribe has been called “your family of choice.” They are people who probably know you better than anybody else and they are the ones that can be trusted with your heart.

The in-person connections through group meetings, the Annual Alumni retreats, and the online support group calls born out of the pandemic all allow Alumni to see something very important - visual affirmation. Seeing others nodding their heads in unison when stories are shared, and witnessing how struggles turn into tears of relief at the telling of them assures each group member that everyone’s journey is legitimate. It is letting go of the vulnerability to share your story and be heard that creates deep connections and allows true healing to take hold. That’s the safety and value of the Tribe.



