



# Thought leader interview: Creativity Expert Gayle Bluebird

*SAMHSA VOICE Award winner Gayle Bluebird has been involved in the development of peer-related programs since the early 1980s.*

**Magellan is very pleased to share our recent virtual interview with Gayle Bluebird in our *eMpowered for Wellness* e-newsletter!**

**(PSWHW)** Thank you for taking the time to participate in our virtual interview. Can you share some background regarding your leadership in the area of creativity in the mental health and wellness field?

**(Gayle Bluebird - GB)** First, thank you for asking me to do an interview with you. I am honored and am always glad to talk about creativity and the arts.

I became a leader in arts and creativity years ago, in the 80s when I found a role for myself organizing talent shows - and later, through pre-conference “creativity days” focused on the arts at peer-led Alternatives Conferences. That role was voluntary; I made it up as I went along, believing that the arts and creativity were as important as other recognized components of recovery. However, there were others over time who contributed as much time as I did to elevate the status of creativity.

I discovered that people not only enjoyed themselves while engaging in the arts, but also found it easier to express themselves about their mental health issues or past histories of trauma. One of my goals was to promote the arts as a means of “telling our stories.”

I have spoken at many conferences about the importance of creativity, which is defined as “creating something new that did not exist before by seeing things in a new way.” Creativity could be visual arts, writing, performance art, humor, dance, gardening, music and so many other things that people may not recognize as being creative.

In 2012, I helped to develop a peer specialist curriculum when I was the peer services director in the state of Delaware. One of the ways the curriculum was different than others is that it had a module for creativity, and almost a full day was spent in training. Peers loved it, as it was enjoyable for them while they learned how to use creativity with others as peer supporters. To my knowledge, we were the only state who had adopted creativity in training materials.

**(PSWHW)** Creativity seems to be an integral part of so many individuals' wellness. What is your favorite form of creative expression? How did you begin exploring it in your own wellness?

**(GB)** My creativity: I am a poet and a writer. Poetry requires few words and I like to play with word combinations, descriptions of sounds, colors and realistic images. Writing poetry is a way of my being honest, a plan of improving myself, hoping that others can identify with me. At times, poetry has saved my life, giving me hope when I was most alone.

I also developed a character, Henrietta, an alter ego of myself, which I have presented at talent shows. Henrietta dresses outrageously, sometimes with big 20s-style high heels. Henrietta is always confused no matter how hard she tries. Little does the audience know how much Henrietta is a part of me, just trying to live in a constant state of confusion. Henrietta allows me to laugh at myself and take myself more lightly.

**(PSWHW)** You have done a great deal of work looking at aspects of creativity and wellness. What have you learned over the course of this work, and what recommendations would you make to peers to support their own wellness with creativity?

**(GB)** I have never liked collecting data or filling out forms to prove something that you think you already know. However, it has become increasingly critical to have evidence that a new approach has been researched. Creativity is hard to measure - but Cathy Malchiadi, a psychologist, wrote an article in *Psychology Today Magazine*, December 2015, in which she states, "Making art ...may be as important to your health as balanced nutrition." While there is not a lot of research to support her statement, there are increasingly more studies showing the value of music and other forms of art that have confirmed that creative expression has a powerful impact on health and well-being on various patient populations. It has been shown that there are actual physical changes to one's body while doing art, such as lowering blood pressure, improvement in immune system, and slower heart rate.

**(PSWHW)** Your work around creativity and personal wellness are of particular interest to our readers, given their work in peer support. How can peer specialists include creativity to improve individual well-being?

**(GB)** Peers can use their WRAP (Wellness Recovery Action Plan) plans at home to help them identify creative activities they most enjoy. Scheduling time for creativity is hard when people spend much of their time on social media, TV, and with various forms of technology. One way to be active and disciplined is to join a group, workshop or class that focuses on creativity. Have arts materials available in full sight; too often they are stuck away where you can barely find them. Find out if there is a peer center in your community, as creativity will be an integral part of programming. I recommend that people have journals to write in. Not only can you write in it but doodle, make drawings, collages, etc. It is a way to keep yourself on track; also my favorite gift to give friends and relatives for all occasions.

**(PSWHW)** Based on what you have learned about the powerful impact that creativity has on wellness, what guidance would you offer to help individuals working in peer support roles change health outcomes of the individuals they are supporting?

**(GB)** I like talking about how peers can incorporate creativity in their work as peer specialists. The first thing I always say is, “Be a person, not a name tag.” Dress creatively. Wear something that stands out, a recovery button, a hat. Be colorful. I once saw a peer specialist dressed all in gold. A bit much, but he stood out.

Be a natural conversationalist. Avoid canned phrases, even if taught in recognized peer trainings. Use your own common language and when possible reflect someone’s culture when you become familiar with it.

Create a “hope tote” or “creativity tote bag.” Decorate your bag and put simple art supplies in it; keep in mind that if you are working in inpatient settings they are scrutinized for safety. You might include markers, paper, glue sticks, pictures and photographs for collages, pens, paper, joke books, crossword puzzles and though I hate to say it, an adult coloring book, for which there are now hundreds of themes to choose from. A creative project might be for peers to make their own “hope tote” to later fill with their desired arts materials. Don’t forget sewing, knitting and embroidery, often favorite activities for women, (and yes, even guys!).

Group activities might include poetry readings or “slams,” dances, not just popular dancing but circle dancing and square dancing, drum circles, and singing groups. Activities that directly achieve wellness and creativity include Zumba, Tai Chi, meditation, healthy cooking and being a creative cook.

My favorite activity is water aerobics. I might not be the creative teacher of the class but I feel creative when I move my body, soothing some of the creaks and cracks.

Be a creative peer specialist: find things people are interested in. Plan activities that allow someone to explore who they are, such as drawing self-portraits, painting recovery pillowcases, designing mandalas, etc. Don’t forget that creativity can include designing comfortable, attractive environments. Use lots of color for books and games; create a garden and showcase peer artwork on walls.

**(PSWHW)** What are your thoughts about the role of technology devices (from telehealth to social media networks) as tools to help improve access to creative outlets?

**(GB)** I am hardly the one to talk about technology and creativity because I struggle every day just to use my computer, let alone use all of the apps on my cell phone, but I see that people are doing pic art, drawing and designing directly on their computers. I like social media such as Facebook because it allows me to stay in touch with people without having to call.

**(PSWHW)** If you were to recommend one creative wellness practice to support someone in a peer support role, what would it be?

**(GB)** My recommendation for your creative future is to live in a world of fantasy and imagination whenever you can (not all the time!). Explore different art mediums; try things you hadn’t tried before. When you find your favorite creative niche, cultivate it. Spend time with it. Make it a daily practice. Of all the things I have read about creativity, is to do it, do it, do it, even if your desire is just for enjoyment. Artists started out being creative. When

you can start calling yourself an artist is up to you. I now call myself a poet but I don't remember when I felt confident enough to say that. Good luck.

I am also available to come to you and give your peer community a boost – to an arts festival, arts workshop or even keynote! You can get in touch with me at [gaylebluebird1943@gmail.com](mailto:gaylebluebird1943@gmail.com).

**(PSWHW)** Thank you very much for your time and willingness to share your perspective with our readers! Your dedication and contributions to the field of creativity and peer support provides much needed resources and tools for those supporting others.

### About Gayle Bluebird

**Gayle Bluebird, RN**, has been involved in the development of peer-related programs since the early 1980s. She has served in multiple capacities in different agencies both in Florida and at the federal level. She also served as peer services director in Delaware for five years prior to her retirement in 2015. She is most known for her work as an arts networker and promoter, for peers who have had psychiatric experiences.

Since an early Alternatives Conference in Utah, Gayle has coordinated talent shows and events that have allowed individuals to share their original talents related to their mental health experiences. She has served on many of the Alternatives Conference planning committees, often trying to ensure that our past history of the consumer/survivor movement is included in the present arena.

With Holly Dixon and Franzwa Watson, she developed a training module for peer specialists' certification in Delaware, the first state to make artistic expression essential. Bluebird has also worked to make psychiatric facilities more calming, insisting that hospitals develop comfort rooms, paint walls with colors that are pleasing to the eye and decorate with individuals' artwork.

In 2010, Gayle Bluebird received a SAMHSA VOICE Award at Paramount Studios in Los Angeles, of which she is very proud. Some people might remember Henrietta, her confused, outrageous alter ego character who has watched her age and is now ready to come forward as a Senior Henrietta with new confusions and typical problems that go along with old age. Gayle is proud to speak about how far the arts have come and to encourage the fire to keep burning for people to be creative and proud!