

# UI Rehab

A black and white photograph of a man with a beard and mustache, wearing a light-colored sweater over a collared shirt and a patterned tie. He is sitting in a wheelchair, smiling at the camera. In the background, a sign on the wall reads "NEVER NEVER QUIT". To the right, there are some mechanical parts or equipment.

UNIVERSAL'S  
EVOLUTION  
1989—PRESENT

LETTERS FROM  
LISA LASSO &  
ADAM STEINBERG

QUOTES FROM  
OUR UI VETERANS

**JERRY LASSO**

**"Disability is just  
a state of mind..."**

# TIMELINE

**1989**

**June:** Universal was legally incorporated.

**1995**

Universal became Medicare certified and JCHCO accredited.

**2002**

Opened up our first NJ group home at 33 Mt. Pleasant Ave in East Hanover, NJ.

**2007**

Universal first expands into Southern New Jersey.

**2010**

Gallery U first opens in both Michigan and NJ. At this time, UI also began looking into PA facilities because of its proximity to NJ; it's within driving distance and could be modeled after the NJ facilities.

**2012**

First group homes in PA were purchased.

**2023**

For 10 years, Universal has continued to grow in NJ and PA. We currently have 20 residential homes in PA and 25 residential homes in NJ.

**March:** Universal first opens up the doors.

**1990**

**August:** First client ever at Universal.

**November:** Adam Steinberg joined Universal as a business partner.

**1999**

**January:** Jerry Lasso passes away.

**2003**

Acquired our first rehab company in Michigan called J.A. Diddy.

**2008**

Acquired our next company from Michigan called Therapeutic Rehabilitation, run by the previous owner and founder Tracey Wolfe, who still runs it to this day as the Executive Director.

**2011**

The beginning of the closing of all state run DDD facilities. Universal opened our first four DDD group homes. The DDD population came with a completely new set of rules from the state that had to be complied with and adapted to.

**2013**



Hello Readers,

Universal Institute was founded thirty-three years ago. This edition focuses on the founding of this unique facility. Founded by Jerry Lasso in 1989, its goal was to be the premier rehabilitation and wellness center. We are excited to share with you this special issue full of content from some of our leaders in the field.

I, myself, never met Jerry because he passed away three years before I came to Universal, but throughout my 16 years as a client, interacting with dedicated staff/clients, I've learned to **NEVER SAY NEVER!**

We would like to thank Lisa, Adam, and all of the UI Veterans for contributing content and making this edition possible!

Yours truthfully,

Sean Nave – UI News Times Editor



# A Dream Comes Alive

By: Lisa Lasso (CFO)

As the Co-Founder of Universal Institute, my career began in a place that I would have never expected. In 1980, when I was twenty years old, my fiancé Jerry Lasso became paralyzed at the young age of 24, throwing our two lives together in a total whirlwind. Jerry was extraordinarily determined not to let his disability get in the way of life.

Despite our situation, we forged on to get married, have twins, and open Universal Institute against all the skepticism and doubts from the naysayers.

While Jerry promoted and began to put Universal on the map, my prior financial background experience became the foundation to the success of handling the finances of Universal. Jerry and I discovered how powerful we were as a team, balancing each other's strengths and weaknesses in a way that would plant the seed to the future growth of Universal. While receiving rehabilitation services from a facility in California, Jerry was so capable and relentless with his rehab that he was offered the position to promote and market the same company at which he was receiving

services. Jerry became a public relations titan and was able to draw a tremendous amount of attention to the world of spinal cord injury. His proven ability to promote earned him massive recognition from famous actors and celebrities in Hollywood. Jerry and I ran fundraisers at the Playboy Mansion, attended the Academy Awards and the American Cinema Awards several times while living in California. The reason Jerry became so successful was because he himself was also a client and lived

and also to begin the arduous process of opening our own out-patient rehabilitation center. Jerry's determination and hope pushed us through all the negative people who believed they knew best and who attempted to discourage us by telling all the reasons why Universal would fail.

As someone who possessed a spinal cord injury himself, Jerry knew better than anyone else exactly what was needed to get the job done. In 1990, we opened the doors to what we considered the most



## JERRY WAS EXTRAORDINARILY DETERMINED TO NOT LET HIS DISABILITY GET IN THE WAY OF LIFE.

with the experience of someone who had to adapt to his own spinal cord injury. As Jerry always said, "Who better to advocate for the disabled than someone who is disabled themselves?"

When I discovered I was pregnant with twins, we decided to move back to New Jersey to be closer with family



comprehensive, intensive, and innovative out-patient rehabilitation facility in the country. We offered services five days a week for seven hours a day as part of our program to achieve the maximum functional gain available to our clients. Jerry would literally drive around the country knocking on the doors of various insurance company CEOs in order to fight to keep insurance coverage for his clients. Jerry convinced many of them that while the insurance companies may pay a little more money initially for therapy, his plan would ultimately save them money in the long run.

With my unconditional support, our early success was driven by Jerry's incredible vision and entrepreneurial skills. Clients came from all over the world to receive this aggressive and effective therapy. Jerry promoted Universal on several television shows including, but not limited to, several episodes of "Geraldo Rivera", "Montel





Williams", "Hour Magazine", "The Faith Daniels Show", CNN, INN, and many others. As Universal began to grow, we became JCAHO accredited and Medicare certified. As the insurance reimbursement industry began to change, the Medicare reimbursement rules drastically changed along with it. Almost overnight, the insurance reimbursement devastation had a tremendously negative impact on Universal. Not wanting to lose everything we had worked so hard to achieve, we decided to run an ad in the Wall Street Journal for any buyer/investor that could help our business stay alive.

**S**erendipitously, the Wall Street Journal ad attracted an investor named Adam Steinberg, who would eventually become our official business partner in November of 1999. Adam's infusion of cash kept Universal alive at its weakest moment. Universal then began to restructure the entire business by expanding our services to include brain injury and residential services. Sadly, three years after Adam joined Universal, Jerry unexpectedly passed away. Despite our shock and grief, Adam and I vowed to continue to build and to grow Universal Institute in a way that would continue Jerry's vision. Jerry's legacy has remained the spirit of what Universal is today. Having been alongside Jerry since day one, I know how important my loyalty, persistence, and intuition were and still are to the success of Universal Institute. Since Jerry's passing, I have taken on a leadership role that has molded me into the calm and capable leader I am today.

Sometimes, we do not choose our destiny; instead, our destiny chooses us. Today, I am the proud Co-Founder and Co-Owner of a company that started from one man's determination to refuse to let adversity get in the way of his hopes and dreams. His overwhelming positivity allowed Jerry and I to ignore all the naysayers who told us that our "impossible" dream could never be achieved. With our unique environment and services, I am incredibly proud to be part of an organization that truly helps people with all types of disabilities live their most fulfilling life ever.

**Our mission has always remained the same: to provide the highest level of quality rehabilitation services with a comprehensive approach in an extremely positive environment. At Universal, the client is the center of our universe; we will always aim to provide the resources for our clients to chase their dreams and to, "Never say Never."**







## A letter from CEO, Adam Steinberg:

Universal was unique to me in many ways. If you can believe it, in those days the company

served mostly Spinal Cord injuries and was hardly in the residential business at all. Jerry and Lisa had built the business as an outpatient center and had only just started dabbling with residential when I met them. I saw an opportunity to expand the residential programs and leverage Universal's highly specialized infrastructure to serve the entire scope of disability.

I grew up the 5<sup>th</sup> child in a Family of Physicians. My Dad, three sisters and brother are all medical doctors. So I guess that you could say I was the black sheep. It was hard for me to resist the temptation of following in the family footsteps but I was able to pull myself away and study business. I received my Bachelor's and MBA from the Stern School of Business at New York University. Prior to Universal, I worked on Wall Street but always had the desire to strike out on my own and invest in businesses that I could actively manage and grow. I considered various industries but based on my familiarity with the medical field I always found myself gravitating towards healthcare.

When I first met Jerry I was surprised to see that he was in a wheelchair. While I had a great deal of exposure to the healthcare industry, disability was still a bit in the shadows back then. Thank God that has changed today, nearly a quarter century later.

By the end of our conversation his wheelchair disappeared and I really saw only the person. It was at that moment that I decided to invest in Universal. I was thrilled at the idea of investing in something that could positively impact the lives of real people. Jerry and I worked very closely to build the business and quickly became very close friends, even best friends. Our different backgrounds complemented each other and we were able to make incredible progress on growing Universal very quickly. We would drive around together for hours on end inspecting the development of current projects while scouting for new locations to expand on. I have many fond memories of our conversations and some very funny stories that usually involved trying to get Jerry into some inaccessible location while in his wheelchair. His passing was a very hard personal loss for me but I promised to continue pursuing our dream and advocating for the disabled.

When you build an organization like Universal with the goal of being the leader in Home and Community Based Services there are always going to be challenges. They range from cost management and scheduling to ongoing reimbursement battles and changing regulations. But when it comes to challenges, there is nothing that comes close to Covid. Universal had to re-write the playbook to protect our clients and staff from what was a once in a century Pandemic. The Universal team pulled together in every way to quickly create new safety protocols, therapy delivery techniques, medical support plans, food distribution processes and of course, the creation of the Quarantine Zone or "QZ". Just thinking about the incredible care and commitment of every Universal staff member for the well-being of our Clients truly warms my heart. At the same time, I have to take my hat off to our clients and their families who had just as difficult of a time adjusting to the new normal. They handled it like champions and were instrumental in getting us all over to the other side.



# REFLECTIONS ON MY FATHER



It will be twenty years this January since my father has been gone – I miss him still. I consider myself lucky, though, because his spirit lives on in Universal. Sometimes I imagine that Universal turned out exactly how he wanted – a place where people challenge the status quo, who don't accept textbook definitions, who refuse to be bound by labels. Then again, maybe it's become nothing like he ever envisioned. Sometimes our dreams are so big that they surprise even ourselves. Back when he was alive, Universal was so much smaller than it is today, but the dream was the same size: to create a rehab facility unlike any in the world. My father had a purpose; he never wanted to be treated as another statistic, and he wanted to create a place for others to experience that same freedom – freedom from low expectations and freedom from life sentences.

As an adult now looking back, I realize how much Universal is a part of my family's life as if it was a third sibling. Universal has grown up with us – it's the same age as my twin sister and I, coming into this world thirty-three years ago. Just like it would be hard to imagine my life without any of my family members having existed, it would be just as difficult to imagine my life if Universal never came to be. Our lives and growth have run parallel, each of us overcoming adversity, experiencing setbacks

and triumphs, being pushed to the brink of collapse but somehow surviving. That's what Universal has always been - a survivor, just like each of the clients that it treats.

People ask me what it was like growing up with a father who was in a wheelchair my entire life. I can't answer that question because I never knew he was in a wheelchair. He never once acted paralyzed or disabled, never made excuses for the things he couldn't do, and he acted just like any other parent. To me, he was just Dad. We fought and laughed, he embarrassed me and pushed me, he loved me and my sister more than anything and always supported us. I think children are naturally resilient, adaptable, open-minded, and never prejudiced like adults. Growing up with a father in a wheelchair taught me that as humans our differences are minimal while our similarities are great; I learned compassion and empathy from having a father like him. I learned to laugh at the absurdities of life, to find humor in the darkest moments, and to challenge

the entire world if we must in order to get what we want.



Of all the lessons I learned from my father, one of the wisest decisions he ever made was choosing the right partner – my mother. My parents taught me the definition of balance. I learned that at some point in our lives, all of us need someone to

believe in us when we don't believe in ourselves.

In the beginning, Universal was just my father with a vision and my mother there to support him, each adding their own strengths and skills to their endeavor. I watched my father succeed over and over again alongside my mother, but also fail many times too. I learned what it means to possess perseverance, to have the courage to see things through no matter what, whatever it takes. To stay the course when the world keeps telling you that you are going to fail.



My father and mother taught me that the human spirit is unconquerable, that it can create miracles and overcome any obstacle with enough time, work, patience, and self-belief. My father taught me to break the mold of what is expected of us as individuals - he had two arms full of tattoos, a ponytail, an eyebrow and a tongue ring; he rode his Harley every Sunday and let the entire neighborhood know it. He had a huge heart with a tough exterior but was really a big softie on the inside. In a way, he was the physical embodiment of Universal. He taught me that to fit in and conform to someone else's expectations would mean to die on the inside.

All these years later, Universal has taken on a life of its own, fueled by the people who work here; those people are now just as much a part of Universal as my father and mother, and their contributions are no less heroic or important to the story. Still, as a boy and now a man I've watched Universal grow into something that, objectively, is the most unique rehab facility I have ever seen. A strong vision is like that – it's a magnet that pulls people in while charging them up at the same time. Universal has become a place of refuge for those who have lost their way, a place where both bodies and hearts can be healed. I've always had the perspective that Universal is a huge family – a family that welcomes the crazy and the timid, the strong-willed and the downtrodden, as long as they have something inside of them telling them to



survive and to live on, no matter how faint that voice might be. To live again – perhaps in a different way – but to smile and stay alive, to really *live* - that is the gift that Universal has given to so many.

My father loved to say this – not only was he the owner but he was also a client. He was a paraplegic in a wheelchair just like the people he treated. He knew from personal experience the changes that happen to someone's life after an accident or injury; he knew the frustrations and the doubts, the discrimination and the medical diagnoses - he knew them, he lived them, and he defeated them.

Universal is not the same without him here - how could it be? But time does not stop for any of us, so we adapt and overcome. The people who are left behind must always find a way to press forward, carrying on our shoulders the spirits of those who are gone and have come before us. It is the responsibility we bear for being alive. Personally, I have the ability now to add to the vision myself, to leave my own mark and to help enrich the lives of the clients who I've grown up around as a child. I feel such a profound gratitude that I was given a front row seat to witness the business that my mom and dad created that has helped the lives of so many. It gives me hope for the future to see how something so great can come from nothing but a dream and a desire.

*Gerard Lasso*



# Quotes from Our UI Vets

## Megan Collins (Care Coordinator):

I have been working at Universal for 13 years. I initially started working here because it was so close to home (I live right down the street!), but what has kept me here for this long are the clients. 100%, don't even have to think about it...THE CLIENTS. I love getting to know all of them, hearing their stories, and being able to help in their lives any way that I can.



My favorite memory is when Hurricane Sandy hit. Most of the clients were displaced from their group homes and many were temporarily "living" in the gym at Livingston High School. Each day when I would go to the high school to visit it appeared to be complete chaos...but it wasn't. It was our clients, our staff, our therapists all pulling together to make it work...keeping each day as normal as possible with everyone being cared for and happy during an otherwise devastating time. When I think back about that time (and I often do), it reminds me that Universal really is like a family. And it makes me smile.

## Jaymee Bernstein (Executive Director of Residential Services):

I have been working at Universal since January 2001.

I choose to continue working here because I truly love all the clients and it makes me happy to see that we can make a difference in their lives by being at Universal. I believe in our mission and believe we offer the best services and supports to our residents. Taking clients out of nursing homes and placing them back into the community, in a home, makes me feel proud.

I have so many favorite memories, all the special cruises and vacations we have taken the clients on over the past 10 years, PROM was SPECTACULAR, and having the honor of meeting and working with Jerry Lasso.

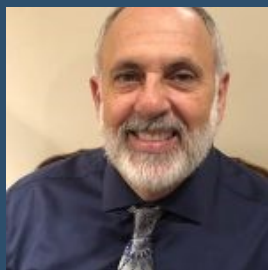
He taught me how to advocate for our clients and never say never! Anything is possible!



## Michael Scudillo (Chief Compliance Officer):

As of December 2022, I have been at UI for 22 years. I originally applied for a part-time OT position and ended up being hired as the co-director of rehabilitation. It was a great opportunity so I went for it. I've become the Chief Compliance Officer and have stayed for 22 years because I know that the owners and my co-workers truly want what's best for every client we serve.

My Favorite UI memory was working with the founder of the company, Jerry Lasso. He had a vision of what rehabilitation should be for every person that needed it and he was every client's biggest advocate. He was also one of the funniest people I have ever known. It was an honor to work with him.



## Wendy Domac (Director of Residential Services):

December 26<sup>th</sup> 2022 was my 21<sup>st</sup> year at Universal. I was so impressed by Jerry's "out of the box" vision and the teams positive energy, I had to work here! Advocating for our clients, watching them make progress and live their best life has been very fulfilling for me and is one of the many reasons I continue to work here. I love being a part of the Universal family and look forward to seeing us grow even bigger!

I have so many great memories working at UI but one of my favorite memories is when I opened my first group home (77 Shrewsbury) in January 2002, and assisted eight new hopeful clients adjust to community living and start their rehabilitation journey.



### Nancy Gerhardt (Medical Director):



I have been here 12 years. I was working case management (which I loved). I came to check Universal for client placement 16 years ago, I was amazed at the

program. There was only 12 group homes at that time. I could not believe the size of the day program (especially the gym). I saw all the clients participating in so many activities. Jaymee and Wendy knew how impressed I was with Universal. Several years later, when the RN position became available I interviewed and was offered my current position. Today, this program still amazes me. I never thought I would come to love all our clients so much. Each client so different, but every one of them with so much to teach me. My favorite UI memory was the ice storm, which kept clients and staff here overnight. Erin Lasso and I handled all the meds for clients. It was challenging, but, great spending time with the clients. My best job by far.



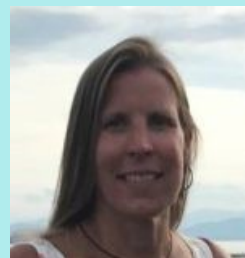
### Chris Iglesias (Director of Rehabilitation):

I have worked at Universal for 18.5 years.

As a Physical Therapist, working with our clients who have neurological conditions is challenging but more rewarding. The opportunity to be a part of their achievements make it worthwhile.

My favorite memories include all moments when I see my clients smile when they achieve their mobility goals.

### Kristin Walsh (Director of Rehabilitation):



I have worked at Universal for over 20 years. From the moment I interviewed and toured Universal, I knew it was an establishment where I would have opportunities to develop as a clinician. I am thankful for the trust that Michael had in me many, many years ago when I was a new graduate.

If I had to sum up what has kept me here this long, I would attribute it to waking every day and truly enjoying work. I am dedicated to the care of our clients and promoting their greatest potential. I admire that Universal is a dynamic agency and is constantly adapting and expanding to meet community and client needs.

I cannot pinpoint my favorite memory at Universal but I am constantly reminded through the eyes and smiles of our clients the reasons we do what we do! When I get the urge to walk down memory lane, I pull out my schedule (it used to be handwritten, copied, and delivered to my office) from the very first week I started working at UI and flashback to the clients I was treating. I also relish the milestones that I have witnessed among the clients, my UI family, and personally within myself: growth on a personal and professional level, the progression of clients, expansion of facilities, the development of programs and staff, and the foundation of life-long friendships. I am always looking forward to see what develops at Universal.

### Suzie Organista (Executive Director, Clinical Operations):

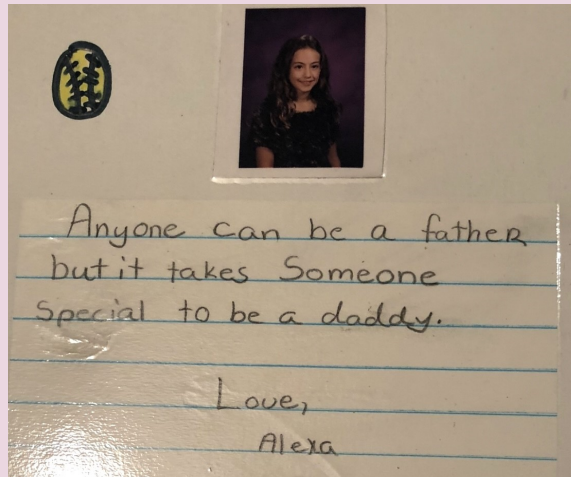


When I applied for the position, I was informed that I will be the first Cognitive Therapist. Talk about being a veteran! So that sounded like a challenge that I was willing to take on. Additionally, UI was looking for someone with a Behavior management background, which I have, so I thought I'd give it a shot.

18- ½ years later, my position has evolved as UI grew and I'm still taking on the challenges. Oh, and Cognitive therapy is now a big & thriving department!!!! I love the opportunity to make a positive difference in others' lives, no matter how small my contribution may be.

There are so many memories that I can think of but what stands out the most is that the darkest moment in my UI memory is also the proudest moment. Two and a half years ago, UI and the world went through the unprecedented experience from the COVID pandemic. As we all know, it affected us in so many ways. But what I remember the most is the way we gathered together as a family to ensure that our clients & our fellow co-workers were supported. And we continue to do that everyday to this day. We are a resilient bunch here at UI and that is something that I truly cherish.





### Alexa Lasso (National Reimbursement Specialist):

One of my favorite memories with my Dad was going to work with him at Universal when I was a small child. He had this amazing ability to roll into work every day and be so tough, yet so lovable. Everyone had the utmost respect for him. Our clients always looked up to him and aspired to be like him. His positive attitude and dynamic personality gave most people the perception that he did not have a disability. He would be so amazed to see what Universal has become and I feel so grateful to not only work here but to be part of his vision to create Universal. I miss my Dad so much and know he is truly my guardian angel!

## UI'S STRONGEST & LONGEST

Introducing Gene, our longest current client & Gary, our longest staff



I recently completed 26 years of service at Universal in early September. I am proud of having the distinction of being the longest tenured employee in the entire company.

When I started in 1996 Universal did not have a group home program, all the clients back then were out-patient only. It is remarkable to witness the transformation to what Universal has become today with a flourishing residential group home program.

My favorite Universal memory was the annual Halloween Party that was organized by Lisa Lasso. Back then Lisa's kids Gerard and Alexa were 7 years old and attended the party along with the staff and clients.



**Gary Montagna**  
(Senior Director of  
Reimbursement  
Services)



### Gene Pavolick (client since 1999):



My favorite Universal memory was when Jerry used to come over on his Harley. We used to sit outside, talk

and have good conversation.

I've been a client at Universal for 22 years. If you want to be successful in your rehab show up, do activities, and go to your therapies.

The biggest difference I see in Universal compared to when I first started is the amount of staff we have at the program. We used to only have one group home when I started. Now we have many group homes, clients and staff.

## LESSONS FROM WORKING AT UI:

In order to work here you should always be super flexible and have an open mind. There's just so much to learn and so many people to learn from. You really want know as many people as you can and learn from as many departments as you can because in the end, it will benefit the clients.



**Interview with Rachel Vaglio, our longest rehab staff. She has been with UI for 24 years.**

## HE WAS QUITE A GUY...

It was a family business, so Jerry was very much a part of everything. His office was where the TEA Center is now, and he had an open-door policy for the clients and the staff. He would always come into the gym and talk to the clients and eat lunch with all the staff. On any given day there were only about 20-25 clients at a time, and all the sessions were one on one because that's what Jerry wanted.

Back then the twins were around 7 or 9 years old, and Lisa worked nights and weekends a lot; she would come in and have the kids at UI over the weekend. The twins would run around and make a mess and then I would come in on Monday morning to find cookies and balls everywhere. So, I went into Jerry's office and was able to approach him about it – "Jerry, your kids left a huge mess over the weekend," to which Jerry responded, "Well, sounds like you have to clean it up!"

**There has been so much growth. What have been the best changes you've seen over the years?**

When things were smaller, you knew everyone in all the departments so it was easier to communicate about the clients and what they needed. However, back then the clients didn't have much down time and we didn't have an enrichment department, just a small cog department. Now, we have the staff to DO THINGS so I really like the integration of all the outings that are scheduled for the clients during the week and weekends. That's one of the best changes I've seen – we are really getting them out and supporting their lives. That made a huge difference.

I absolutely love "Fun Fridays" – the themes and the contests are really fun and the clients really enjoy the therapists getting involved in all the events.

**What do you think Jerry would say?**

I think he would make us get rid of the scrubs! He didn't like things to look so clinical so he would not like the scrubs - but I think he would love the fun stuff we do with the clients and would probably join the outings. I could see him jumping on the van and going down to Long Branch with the clients.



