

NYS Senate Hearing on the Treatment Court Expansion Act (S.4547)

Dear Senators and Members of the Committee on Alcoholism and Substance Use Disorder,

Thank you for holding this important hearing on the urgent need to pass the Treatment Court Expansion Act (S.4547), a transformative piece of legislation that would give far more New Yorkers the chance to participate in mental health diversion.

My story began in the fall of 2022. At the time, I was in crisis. My mom was dying of leukemia, an excruciatingly painful process for all of her children, but especially for me, her favorite. She went into a coma days after surgery for a bone marrow transplant, and sadly, never woke up. Seeing her in the hospital, lying helplessly, hooked up to tubes and machines, triggered a serious mental health spiral. Even before she died, I had checked myself into a psychiatric hospital, for what would later be diagnosed as grief-induced psychosis. I was held there for about a week, and within a few days of being released, I got the call that my mother had passed away.

The days that followed are a blur. I went back to my apartment, and in a drug- and psychosis induced rage, destroyed everything. Eventually, I started roaming the streets and subway system with a samurai sword, a kitana which was gifted to me from my mother. On the subway platform at Chambers Street, I encountered a panhandler, who I perceived as acting very aggressively toward me. We ended up fighting, and I hit him with the sheath of my sword.

I was arrested and charged with felony assault. The next day was my mother's funeral, but instead of grieving with my family and saying goodbye, I appeared before my arraignment, where the judge set bail and sent me to jail. I spent the next six months at Rikers Island. I was already going through hell, but this was hell on earth.

My mom sent an angel to meet me though: Gabriela Mejias, a public defender assigned to my case. She understood that I needed treatment, not jail, and she spent the months that followed fighting like hell to get me that treatment. Eventually, she convinced the prosecutor and judge to let me into the Felony ATI court part, a diversion program.

This was the beginning of a new chapter. I spent about a year doing intensive programming -- therapy three times a week, weekly group therapy, AA and NA meetings, etc -- and regularly checking in with the court. The treatment provider staff and the case managers were so kind and warm to me, and gave me a safe space to process the trauma I had lived through.

By the end of 2023, I started working again, pursuing personal training and acting. I made new friends and restored my relationships with my siblings and other family members. I became close with other participants in the ATI court part, as well. In June 2024, I officially graduated from the program. My charges were dismissed and my case was closed.

It's been over a year since I left the ATI court, and I have never been stronger. [My story was profiled by the NY Times](#), which gave me the chance to reclaim the salacious narrative of this experience. My acting career has taken off. I have a thriving personal training business. I am closer than ever with my family and still keep in touch with Ms. Mejias and the treatment programs who helped me.

Now I also have the chance to give back, do service, and advocate for policies that can give more people the opportunity I had. The Treatment Court Expansion Act would do that. My path is not the norm, but it should be. I am proof that mental health and substance use crises are treatable. We must eliminate every barrier to accessing these crucial, life saving services.