

# PAST LESSONS, FUTURE INSIGHTS

AN INTERGENERATIONAL APPROACH  
TO YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH

MENTAL HEALTH AMERICA  
YOUNG LEADERS COUNCIL  
2024 ANNUAL REPORT



# **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

## **BACKGROUND**

Founded in 1909, Mental Health America (MHA) is the nation's leading national nonprofit dedicated to the promotion of mental health, well-being, and illness prevention. Our work is informed, designed, and led by the lived experience of those most affected. MHA's mission is to advance the mental health and well-being of all people living in the U.S. through public education, research, advocacy and public policy, and direct service.

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# INTRODUCTION

Youth mental health stands at a pivotal moment, with increasing rates of anxiety, depression, and other challenges significantly affecting young people. The COVID-19 pandemic, often described as a “once-in-a-lifetime event,” has had a profound impact on an entire generation’s mental and physical well-being. Lockdowns, social isolation, and collective grief have marked a critical period in the lives of today’s youth, and the full extent of these effects is still unfolding.

Yet, history tells us that such “generation-defining” events are not new. Previous generations have faced their own periods of upheaval – whether it was the Civil Rights Movement, the AIDS crisis, or the 2008 Recession. These moments of intense societal stress have shaped the mental health of those who lived through them. While the challenges today’s youth face are distinct, there is much to be learned from the resilience and strategies of those who came before us.

***These crises do not create new problems in isolation but exacerbate and bring to light existing vulnerabilities that were once invisible. The visibility of these issues presents an opportunity to address them comprehensively, but only if we recognize that mental health is deeply interconnected with broader social, economic, and cultural factors.***

To fully understand the current youth mental health crisis, it is essential to consider the historical context of collective mental health. Throughout history, societal crises have often revealed the underlying fragility of mental health, forcing communities to confront issues that had previously been ignored or inadequately addressed. From the trauma of global conflicts to the public health crises of the 20th century, each moment in history has spurred advancements in mental health advocacy and support, yet challenges persist.

This report, authored by members of the Young Leaders Council (YLC), a program of Mental Health America, seeks to bridge the past and the present. Through interviews with individuals across different generations and cultural backgrounds, we explore how past traumas, coping mechanisms, and community support systems can inform our approach to youth mental health today. Our aim is not to diminish the unique challenges of this era but to enrich our understanding by drawing on the lessons embedded in history.

## **SIGNIFICANCE**

As society evolves, so too will the challenges related to mental health. This ongoing work underscores the necessity of intergenerational collaboration – learning from the past while innovating for the future. By examining the connections between past and present mental health challenges, this report highlights the importance of a collective, community-centered approach to addressing the current crisis. Our goal is to create a more resilient and supportive environment for today's youth by building on the foundations laid by previous generations.

## **PURPOSE & SCOPE**

This report seeks to connect the past with the present by examining how historical and cultural contexts shape our understanding of mental health. By engaging in meaningful conversations with those who have navigated previous generational crises, we aim to uncover lessons that can inform and strengthen modern mental health advocacy. Our focus is on learning from the experiences of previous generations to better address the mental health needs of today's youth, acknowledging that while our context may be different, the underlying struggles are often shared.

Through this work, we aim to keep the conversation on youth mental health active and evolving. By reopening the discussions sparked by the COVID-19 pandemic and situating them within a broader historical context, this report seeks to sustain the momentum toward meaningful and lasting change.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The insights in this report are drawn from in-depth interviews conducted by YLC members with individuals from diverse backgrounds. These interviews were designed to explore how major historical events, cultural contexts, and personal experiences have shaped mental health across different cultures and generations. By focusing on themes such as trauma, resilience, community support, and the evolution of mental health awareness, the interviews offer significant insights that resonate with and challenge modern approaches to youth mental health. By comparing these findings with current trends and issues in the field, we can better understand the implications for advocacy and identify ongoing gaps that need to be addressed.

# **BACKGROUND**

Youth mental health has become a growing concern in recent years, with significant increases in anxiety, depression, and other mental health challenges among young people. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)<sup>1</sup>, in 2021, more than 42% of high school students reported experiencing persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness, a dramatic increase from previous years. This trend is not isolated; it reflects broader societal pressures that today's youth face, including academic stress, social media influence, and uncertainty about the future.

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these existing challenges. During the pandemic, young people experienced unprecedented levels of social isolation, disruption to their education, and economic instability within their families. A study published in *The Lancet* found that the prevalence of depression and anxiety symptoms among youth doubled during the pandemic. The long-term effects of these disruptions are still unfolding, but early indications suggest a significant and lasting impact on mental health.

In addition to the pandemic, other factors continue to affect youth mental health. The increasing visibility of climate change, political unrest, and social justice issues has created an environment of heightened anxiety and uncertainty. Social media, while offering connection, has also contributed to a rise in cyberbullying, sleep disturbances, and unrealistic comparisons, further straining young people's mental health.

Despite these challenges, there has been progress in recognizing and addressing youth mental health issues. Advocacy efforts have led to a broader recognition of mental health as a critical public issue, resulting in more supportive policies, greater access to resources, and a shift towards early intervention. Schools, communities, and policymakers are increasingly aware of the need for these mental health supports for youth. However, significant gaps remain in access to care, particularly for marginalized groups, and the stigma surrounding mental health continues to be a barrier to seeking help.

This backdrop underscores the importance of understanding youth mental health within a broader historical and cultural context. As this report explores, many of the challenges facing young people today are not entirely new but are echoes of the struggles faced by previous generations. By examining these connections, we can better address the ongoing crisis and work towards a more resilient future for today's youth.

# **PAST LESSONS, FUTURE INSIGHTS**

In conversations with parents, grandparents, friends, and colleagues, we spoke with individuals from a broad range of backgrounds who have witnessed and endured events such as the AIDS epidemic, the assassination of JFK, 9/11 and the War on Terror, the Great Recession, and the Chinese Cultural Revolution. These shared experiences, spanning generations and cultures, provide a deeper understanding of resilience, trauma, and healing. Here's what we learned from these powerful stories.

## **THE ECHOES OF PAST TRAUMAS REVERBERATE THROUGH GENERATIONS, SHAPING COLLECTIVE AND INDIVIDUAL MENTAL HEALTH.**

**Trauma and anxiety have been persistent aspects of the human experience, particularly in times of crisis. Across generations, these experiences have not only shaped individual lives but have also left lasting imprints on collective memory. The interviews conducted for this report reveal striking parallels.**

The AIDS crisis of the 1980s and 1990s, for example, was a time of intense fear, stigma, and loss. In one interview, a participant recounted the pervasive anxiety that accompanied the epidemic, noting how it was not just the fear of illness but also the social isolation and ostracization that intensified the trauma.

*"The major events of the AIDS epidemic had a significant impact on my mental health. There was a pervasive sense of fear and paranoia about the disease, which was compounded by the lack of accurate information spreading around my high school and later on, college atmosphere at the time." (Yi She)*

This reflects the dual burden of physical and psychological trauma experienced during that time, a burden that was reflected in the experiences of young people during the COVID-19 pandemic.

One of the most striking aspects of our interviews was the vividness with which our participants recounted their experiences. Despite the many years that have passed, the



emotional recall of these traumatic events was incredibly detailed, evoking a strong response even years or decades later.

*"I was sitting out on the ground under a tree reading a book, and a bunch of people came out of the building and said, 'The president's been shot.'... It was one of the saddest days in history, and I can remember it like it was yesterday. I remember the distinct sensory details." (Judy Britt)*

*"One vivid memory I have is from 1989 when the first major HIV outbreak among drug users was identified in our region. The fear was palpable. We heard stories of people in detox centers testing positive, and it felt like the virus was spreading faster than we could comprehend." (Yi She)*

This powerful memory retention highlights how deeply trauma can be etched into our minds, underscoring the importance of recognizing and addressing our emotions both in the moment and upon later reflection.

**Moreover, trauma does not end with those who directly experience it.** It often becomes intergenerational, influencing the mental health of descendants. This is particularly evident in communities that have endured systemic oppression. Research shows that descendants of Holocaust survivors, for example, have higher levels of anxiety and depression, a pattern also observed in communities affected by slavery, colonization, and systemic violence.<sup>2</sup> For young people in these communities, inherited trauma manifests as vulnerability to mental health disorders, distrust of institutions, and chronic stress.

*"We really did not discuss mental health... My mother never took a day off for her mental health...The only thing [my mother] knew was to tell me to pray. I understand how that may be beneficial to her, but it wasn't beneficial to me... I was the first person in my family to seek therapy in 2009, and a whole new world opened up for me." (Guy Anthony)*

*"I have to learn that it's OK for [my family] to see me rest, and for them to see me listen to my body and do the things that I need to do. They need to see me say those things out loud and not think that it's a bad thing. It's just a real thing." (Kristen Mancini)*

Addressing the current youth mental health crisis requires acknowledging how past traumas shape present-day experiences. It's essential to provide young people with the tools to process both their own and inherited traumas to build a more resilient future.



There has been an evolution in how trauma is both perceived and addressed by young people. While there is increased awareness and availability of support, they are not always equitably distributed or accessible to those who need them most. Significant stigma still surrounds mental health issues, particularly in marginalized communities.<sup>3</sup> Ongoing challenges in accessing care, including financial barriers, cultural stigma, and a shortage of culturally competent providers, mean that many young people continue to struggle in silence.

**The digital landscape introduces new challenges for young people navigating trauma.** Being highly connected online means they are constantly exposed to a barrage of distressing content—a 24-hour news cycle filled with tragedy, a continuous stream of opinions, offensive comments, and expressions of distress from countless individuals, both strangers and those they know in real life. This relentless exposure can overwhelm, making it difficult to process emotions or find a sense of peace.

In times of collective crisis, the aftermath increasingly unfolds on social media rather than through in-person interactions. Young people often process these events mediated by screens and algorithm-driven feeds, which can amplify distress and create an echo chamber of despair. This contrasts dramatically with the experiences of some of those interviewed.

*“Because of the planned economic system, everything was controlled by the government, even down to things like bedding... It was not a question of if you wanted it or not, it’s just how it was...The lack of decisions and choices my grandmother faced as a young woman living through the Cultural Revolution had one silver lining: She did not feel much regret in her life, because she could not do anything anyway. The youth of today face a plethora of overwhelming, overstimulating, and over-consumptive choices that make this type of separation from the material world quite impossible.” (Diana Chao on Yumin Zheng)*

## **HEALING IS NURTURED THROUGH COMMUNITY, COLLECTIVE CARE, AND SHARED MEANING.**

**Historically, community support has been a cornerstone of mental health, especially during times of collective trauma such as wars, public health crises, or social upheavals.** In these moments, people build vital spaces where individuals can come together, share their experiences, and find solidarity. This collective support not only provides comfort but also fosters resilience in the face of adversity.

For example, one interviewee explained the way she drew strength from her identity as a military wife. She found solace and meaning in patriotism and love for her country during challenging times, particularly following the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. She noted that shared values within her community helped her cope with the unpredictable challenges of military life. Patriotism and shared national identity also came up in interviews from those who lived through the September 11 attacks

***“I had never seen that kind of patriotism at that level before in my lifetime. It didn’t matter if someone identified as a Democrat or Republican. This rough period in history showed there is strength in unity and numbers and people looking out for each other.” (Joseph Andrastek)***

We can see how this sense of collective identity and shared goals can be a powerful tool for healing, offering individuals a way to find meaning and purpose in the midst of chaos. Yet, the current US landscape can feel increasingly fragmented for those seeking unity; political polarization is rising,<sup>4</sup> participation in civic and service groups is falling,<sup>5,6,7</sup> and communal “third places” are disappearing.<sup>8</sup> This erosion of traditional forms of community speaks to a broader generational shift. **This isn’t to say that young people lack a sense of shared identity—it simply takes a different form.**

With the rise of the internet and social media, young people can now find and build communities around facets of their identity, whether related to gender, race, or even niche interests like pop culture fandoms. While this ability to “find your people” can be empowering and provide deep connection, there’s also a risk of siloing oneself. Algorithms can push users into hyper-identification with certain aspects of their identity, discouraging the broader engagement with and exchange of ideas that foster understanding and collective growth. In this way, the values of solidarity and collective healing remain—but are being redefined, for better and for worse, to meet the demands of a generation inhabiting a new digital landscape.

***“I’ve joined a bunch of Facebook groups that I’ve curated in a certain way on purpose... [I seek] people who talk more about real life... It’s not just all the negative. It’s more like a community. It’s been helpful to just know I’m not alone. This is something real. It is something other people are dealing with. I’m not crazy.” (Kristen)***

Community support extends beyond shared identity; it also encompasses shared responsibility for one another's well-being. Collective care is not just about addressing

immediate crises but also about fostering a sense of duty to support the general welfare of one another: The well-being of each individual is tied to the well-being of the entire community. This can significantly ease the psychological burden on individuals.<sup>9</sup>

*“In our town, there was a strong push for public education on HIV/AIDs. I remember attending community meetings where health workers explained how the virus was transmitted and the importance of not sharing needles. These meetings were part of a larger national campaign to increase awareness and reduce stigma.” (Yi She)*

To navigate the complexities of modern mental health, it is essential to strengthen community ties in both physical and digital spaces. Advocacy should focus on rebuilding and maintaining communal bonds that may have weakened due to the rise of digital interactions. This can be achieved by encouraging in-person gatherings where possible and fostering environments where people can connect more deeply and authentically.

At the same time, efforts should be made to enhance the quality of digital interactions. This could involve creating online spaces that prioritize genuine connection and support, where individuals can share their struggles and successes without fear of judgment or the pressure to conform to unrealistic standards. Promoting the use of digital platforms for community-building initiatives, such as virtual support groups or collaborative art projects, can also help replicate the benefits of physical community in the digital realm.

*“In a world so rife with division, it’s difficult to feel as though any space can be made for yourself whatsoever. Nonetheless, there are people who will give you the time you deserve. Seek them out. Embrace them, and take the leap of faith that is trusting them with your vulnerability. Maybe you’ll get hurt, but no amount of hurt can ever overcome the force of community. When people embrace vulnerability, they learn that they don’t have to hold their struggles all by themselves; they have a community of people capable and wanting to hold it with them.” (Kaisar Perry)*

## **EFFECTIVE HEALING REQUIRES A BALANCE BETWEEN SUPPRESSING TRAUMA AND OVER-IDENTIFYING WITH IT.**

There is a balance to be found between acknowledging trauma and preventing it from becoming all-consuming. While it’s essential to confront and process traumatic experiences, it’s equally important not to let them define one’s identity or overshadow other aspects of life. This mindful integration allows individuals to carry their past with them, without being consumed by it.

One interviewee's reflections following the Kennedy shooting provide a poignant example of this balance. She described feeling "really sad" about the event but also expressed gratitude that nothing worse had happened and that the vice president was safe. This illustrates how processing trauma can involve both acceptance of what occurred and an appreciation for the positives that persist.

*"They often said to each other, '不要自己折磨自己' ('Don't be the one to torment yourself.')" (Diana Chao on Yumin Zheng)*

Another interviewee described how, over time, his challenges became a part of him—like his shoes, always with him but no longer the center of his attention. He wasn't hiding his past, but it didn't dominate his thoughts either. Instead, he focused on what gave him hope and what he was excited about. This shift in perspective came after making a conscious effort to acknowledge and give weight to his traumas. By doing so, he allowed them to become a part of his story, but not his entirety.

*"...[C]entering positive mental health within our organizations... that's the best thing one can ever do for their community." (Guy Anthony)*

This mindful integration of trauma, where past experiences are acknowledged but not allowed to consume one's identity, was a commonality among several interviews, suggesting that it can be a key component of effective healing. By navigating this space, individuals can find a healthier balance between the weight of their past and the potential of their future.

**By fostering environments that emphasize joy, agency, and connection, we can create spaces where trauma is acknowledged but can coexist alongside other facets of one's identity.** This approach to healing is particularly relevant in today's youth mental health landscape, where their struggles can often feel overwhelming but are often met with dismissive attitudes. Encouraging youth to engage with their trauma in healthy, forward-looking ways can help build resilience—without employing a harmful "bootstraps" mentality.

*"As a society, we're so go, go, go. The more you produce, the better you are. But there's something to be said about taking care of yourself and your body... That's where we kind of have to learn to advocate for ourselves and just say: this is how I'm feeling, and this is what I need to do." (Kristen Mancini)*

**Joy isn't a distraction from trauma, but a reminder of life's fullness and potential.** Actively seeking happiness and fulfillment should be an intentional practice in healing-

focused youth spaces, as well as a regular effort in young people's daily lives. This can happen through creative expression, connection with nature, community gatherings, shared activities, or personal relationships. We must allow young people to experience life's fullness and potential and help them envision a future that isn't dictated solely by past hardships.

*“Hug people and be kind when you can and that in and of itself will promote mental health within the family and community. Can a human being be shown too much love?” (Joseph Andrastek)*

Equally important is the need to support resilience in a way that doesn't dismiss or minimize the real struggles youth face. We can do this by fostering agency and empowering young people to feel control over their lives and actively shape their healing journey. This can be supported through access to resources like therapy, peer networks, and platforms that allow them to share their voices and advocate for their needs. This modern interpretation of resilience is about creating environments where healing is possible because individuals feel supported, understood, and valued.

## **SELF-ADVOCACY MUST BE MATCHED BY SYSTEMIC ACTION FOR TRUE MENTAL HEALTH PROGRESS.**

While promoting a more modern and holistic approach to resilience, it's important to recognize that the current popular understanding—focused heavily on individual coping strategies and self-help—can sometimes overshadow the need to address the deeper, systemic causes of stress and trauma. **Issues like systemic inequality, environmental instability, and the pressures of modern life require more than just individual resilience; they demand structural changes.**

A powerful example of this was highlighted by one interviewee who lived through the height of the AIDS crisis.

*“During the AIDS epidemic in Yunnan Province, there were several significant community and collective efforts aimed at supporting mental health, though they were often overshadowed by the immediate need to control the spread of the virus... The establishment of harm reduction programs such as methadone maintenance treatment and needle and syringe exchange programs were pivotal.” (Yi She)*

The interviewee noted that substantial progress came from addressing the public health crisis at its root, through targeted interventions. No amount of mental health support

alone could have made a meaningful impact if the systemic issue wasn't tackled. Similarly, today's mental health efforts must focus on creating structural support for at-risk populations, addressing the conditions that drive mental health crises—rather than expecting individuals to manage the overwhelming burden on their own.

*“There was tremendous community support, because everyone was struggling. But because everyone was struggling, there was a culture of ‘just tough it out.’...It was mostly the neverending poverty that gave her the most grief...She feels that now, because she no longer has a desperate need for anything, she no longer gets anxious.”*  
(Diana Chao on Yumin Zheng)

Another interviewee, who entered the job market during the 2008 Recession, identified financial instability as the primary cause of their mental health challenges. They recounted delayed milestones, working extra jobs to support their family, struggling to find housing, and the challenge of finding jobs that paid even minimum wage. In the absence of structural support, the interviewee's community relied on close friends, neighbors, and family members to share job opportunities and other resources.

*“At times, I just feel like me and some of the people I grew up with are just behind in life.”* (Gabrielle Gonzalez)

Even decades removed from the acute financial turmoil of the recession era, young people today still echo this sentiment. Coming of age during the lockdowns of the COVID-19 pandemic, many young people feel similarly hindered in their personal and professional development. The pressures of housing insecurity, job instability, and financial inequality remain prominent, continuing to shape the mental health landscape. These challenges are not just personal hurdles; they are systemic barriers that demand a collective response.

**Without addressing these systemic inequalities, resilience alone will never be enough.** Young people can't be expected to continually overcome societal obstacles without the support of broader policy changes aimed at reducing the root causes of their stress. Mental health advocacy must prioritize economic and social reforms—such as affordable housing, job security, and equitable healthcare access—to create an environment where mental well-being can truly flourish.

# MENTAL HEALTH CARE MUST BE CULTURALLY ATTUNED, INTEGRATING ALTERNATIVE METHODS THAT RESONATE WITH INDIVIDUAL EXPERIENCES.

The interviews reveal a clear disconnect between the supports typically offered and the specific needs of diverse communities, underscoring the importance of making mental health care more accessible, personalized, and culturally attuned.

One interviewee emphasized how art became a restorative practice, allowing them to externalize internal struggles. **Creative outlets like art can serve as powerful, culturally resonant tools for mental health care, especially for individuals who may not feel comfortable or understood in more traditional therapeutic settings.**

Similarly, today's youth are finding healing in alternative practices like music, crafting, and community engagement.

*"Art became a part of my healing. It allowed me to get out of the house for multiple hours of the day... I was able to escape the harsh realities of my childhood at home and become someone completely different." (Guy Anthony)*

Another interview highlights the way popular mental health frameworks fail to consider the unique cultural nuances of diverse communities. The interviewee recalled physical symptoms she experienced that could not be explained by any specialists at her provincial hospital in China. At the suggestion of a family member, she sought psychological care.

*"My uncle told her to see the psychologist, and she yelled at him 'I'm not crazy!' But she went, and the doctor told her to hang out with more people and prescribed her some medication. She only saw later that the doctor had written down her diagnosis as mild depression." (Diana Chao on Yumin Zheng)*

As globalization continues, the world increasingly learns of psychology and psychiatry through Western frameworks. However, while these approaches often focus heavily on psychological symptoms, many cultures primarily recognize physical symptoms when diagnosing illness. Had this interviewee's physical symptoms been better understood as part of a broader mind-body connection, it might have reduced the stigma surrounding mental health treatment in their community.

Beyond culturally-informed outreach and education, there is a need for mental health



care systems to expand their approaches to care and support. Young people are increasingly embracing alternative forms of healing, including spiritual healing practices, somatic therapies, art and music therapy, nature-based therapies, and more. By validating these alternative methods, mental health systems can offer more inclusive, personalized care that meets youth where they are—emotionally, culturally, and experientially.

**We must create systems that not only respect diverse cultural approaches but also actively incorporate them alongside more traditional methods.** By doing so, we can provide marginalized communities with the care they deserve—care that acknowledges their unique experiences and empowers them to heal in ways that feel authentic and accessible.

## **CONCLUSION**

Youth mental health today stands at a critical crossroads, shaped by the lasting effects of generational trauma, ongoing systemic inequalities, and the evolving demands of modern life. **The lessons from past crises reveal a clear truth: individual resilience alone is insufficient to address the complex challenges young people face.** True progress requires a dual approach—empowering individuals with the tools to advocate for their own well-being while simultaneously pushing for systemic changes that address the root causes of their distress.

In this current moment, where intergenerational divides often feel more pronounced, the importance of intergenerational collaboration cannot be overstated. The stories shared in this report show that the experiences and insights of previous generations offer valuable wisdom for navigating today's mental health challenges. While young people face unique pressures in an increasingly digital, fast-paced world, the struggles of past generations reveal timeless strategies of resilience, collective care, and healing that can guide us forward. **Bridging this divide—by learning from one another and combining fresh perspectives with hard-earned wisdom—is essential to creating a more united, supportive approach to mental health.**

To build a more resilient future, mental health care must be accessible, culturally attuned, and holistic. The stories shared throughout this report underscore the value of integrating alternative methods of healing that resonate deeply with diverse experiences. By expanding our understanding of what healing looks like and embracing these

personalized approaches, we can create spaces that not only address trauma but also foster joy, agency, and connection. As we continue to navigate the complexities of youth mental health, it is essential to strengthen community bonds, promote collective care, and advocate for policies that alleviate the structural burdens young people face. Only by combining individual empowerment with broader systemic action can we hope to create a world where mental well-being is not a privilege, but a reality for all.

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# APPENDIX:

## ADVOCATE & PROGRAM SPOTLIGHTS

Meet the members of the 2023 -2024 Young Leaders Council and co-authors of this report.



## **JONATHAN JEAN CHARLES** Counseling Outreach Peer Education (COPE) at University of Miami

### **PROGRAM SUMMARY**

*Counseling Outreach Peer Education (COPE)* is a group of undergraduate peer educators who promote the University of Miami Counseling Center resources and facilitate student well-being through campus outreach initiatives. COPE peer educators are recruited in the Fall academic semester and are trained on how to facilitate conversations with the student body surrounding mental health topics that impact college students. COPE peer educators raise awareness of mental health concerns including suicide prevention, body image, academic stress, anxiety, and depression.

The role of a peer educator requires the ability to connect with students with empathy and authenticity. COPE peer educators collaborate in different presentations, workshops, and tablings to organize events and spread more information about a variety of mental health topics. COPE has many campus-wide events including programs for Suicide Prevention Day and Overdose Awareness Day. Raising the Flag is an annual program COPE holds to spread awareness of sexual assault on undergraduate college campuses. *The Clothesline Project* is another annual program where a variety of different shirts with statistics and messages regarding sexual assault are placed on ropes across different university walkways. The purpose of the program is to support survivors of sexual assault and domestic violence. Many students in the past have noted how empowered they were to speak out about sexual assault after hearing the voices of many students who were victims.

COPE peer educators also give presentations for different organizations including student organizations on campus and other departments at the University of Miami. Presentations include topics such as self-renewal, self-compassion, mental health and undergraduate student leadership, and belonging.

## **GETTING STARTED**

COPE was initially founded in 2012 to provide an opportunity for undergraduate students to serve as liaisons for the University of Miami Counseling Center. It has now grown into an organization focused on mental health outreach, community building, and peer education on mental health concerns.

## **NOTABLE HIGHLIGHTS**

- COPE has about 30-40 peer educators per semester.
- COPE partners with many departments and student organizations in the University of Miami community to extend mental health outreach. Some of these organizations and departments include Student Government, Committee on Student Organizations (COSO), and the Division of Student Affairs.
- The University of Miami Counseling Center offers individual and group therapy, psychiatric services, workshops and outreach programs, and consultation services as part of its overall mission to address the mental health needs of UM students.

## **ENVISIONING THE FUTURE**

I truly believe that the vision of youth mental health is bright. We are now entering a time where mental health is not as much of a stigma as it once was, especially in historically marginalized communities. Generation Z is well known for social media usage, and it can serve as a great tool to mobilize communities for more support for destigmatizing mental health. Social media can also be utilized to inform people about current policy decisions regarding youth and adolescent mental health.

## **STAYING CONNECTED**

- [COPE Main Website](#)
- [Become a Peer Educator](#)
- [COPE Instagram](#)



# **KEEGAN LEE**

## **ADVOCATE SUMMARY**

My name is Keegan Lee, an Author, student researcher, and Activist. I am the author of “60 Days of Disconnect” with Dr. Bilal Ghandour, Ph.D., an instructor and creator of a digital wellness program for parents and educators, and teach social entrepreneurship at the Leysin American School in Switzerland. I also present around the world at conferences, host workshops, and focus on teaching parents and schools their crucial role in developing the young minds of tomorrow. I am currently serving on the youth boards at Mental Health America and the American Academy of Pediatrics. I have received grant funding and mentorship from Netflix’s “The Social Dilemma” and TikTok’s Department of Data Security and Safety by Design to travel the world teaching the youth about how to build a more humane digital world. As I continue to expand the impact of my three modes of activism—my book, course, and public speaking—I plan to pivot into the realm of scientific research to uncover certain treatments and scientific knowledge in the fields of psychology and neuroscience. In my free time, I love to run, drink coffee on a terrace under the sun, and absorb unique pieces of a culture everywhere I travel.

## **ADVICE FOR YOUNG ADVOCATES**

When you find meaning in something that you are incredibly passionate about, and feel the fire in your soul, even if it is not incredibly rewarding in the beginning, that is something beautiful to hold on to - to be intrinsically motivated by something. I would say that activism and creativity in finding these outlets is energizing, because they give us empowerment that we are a part of something much larger, and meaningful than ourselves. But to know that you are moving a mission forward, and finding meaning in something you love so very young, is something to not ignore. My father always asks “What will you do to leave your mark in this world?”

A profound question indeed, yet can be simple. Mental health is something that unites us all, if this is your passion, if this is the area you want to leave a legacy in, you will be incredibly fulfilled because you are helping the very essence of the human condition. So, I would say the first step would be to start. Find the mentors, network, people in the space that can help guide you. Being in an activism role can bring so much more benefits than the mission you aim to help: you learn communication, relationship building, problem solving, public speaking, and so much more which will only help you in the trajectory of your life.

## **CHALLENGES & SOLUTIONS**

One of the greatest challenges in mental health advocacy work, or any activism work for that matter, is finding avenues that garner the greatest publicity and reciprocity from your target audience. I have learned that a narrow focused audience such as parents, educators, or youth is important in sharing information with the world – especially if you want it to get noticed so that others can learn from it. I have shared resources for more general audience members, but it is always nice to get direct feedback from those to whom your materials are uniquely tailored to suit. I have learned to create a versatile set of resources, various modes of learning, and tailor my communication styles to suit particular audience members so that they can gain the support most specific to them. There are other challenges such as funding your work, finding the right mentors and maintaining those relationships, and even finding time to commit to the work you're doing whilst managing other parts of your life such as academic endeavors. However, what I have found is that despite these challenges, my activism has allowed me to live a more well-rounded lifestyle that is interdisciplinary and energizing in so many ways.

## **ENVISIONING THE FUTURE**

I envision the future of mental health to be one that is collaborative, human-centered, and holistic in terms of care, treatment, and awareness on all levels. I believe teaching the youth starting in the household to understand why it is important to stay aware of mental health, and others well-being is crucial. Additionally, ensuring mental health is being talked about in schools and teachers are provided with the necessary training and tools they need to be able to educate others and themselves on the topic will be essential. I hope that we continue to emphasize the beauty of intergenerational wisdom as a source of motivation and knowledge in dealing with mental health because it shows the beauty of looking to those both older, and younger than us to gain methods and strategies to take care of our mental health. What is beautiful about it is that we see some common themes in how people took care of themselves years ago and how we still use some of the same strategies showing the basic human elements that are unifying decades later.

Additionally, we are seeing other factors that we can lean on and experiment with that might aid in moving the mental health movement even further. Nevertheless, I would like to see the future of mental health as one where we continue to lean on each other, understand what best works for ourselves and those that are in need, and always continue to ask questions, and innovate.

## **STAYING CONNECTED**

- [Website](#)
- Instagram: @keegan\_\_lee
- [LinkedIn](#)





# DIANA CHAO

Letters to Strangers

## PROGRAM SUMMARY

Letters to Strangers is the largest global youth-for-youth mental health nonprofit, seeking to destigmatize mental illness and increase access to affordable, quality treatment particularly for young people worldwide through the following three avenues: 1) letter-writing exchanges; 2) science-informed education; and 3) grassroots advocacy. For each, we conduct a variety of locally-relevant sub-programs.

**1) Letter Exchanges:** We have an evidence-based, art-therapy-informed bespoke letter exchange protocol with accompanying moderation, safety, and discussion guidelines reviewed by leading medical professionals. Chapters on school campuses or in local communities follow these procedures to conduct their own anonymous exchanges, while those outside of a Chapter can participate in their own way using our online letter exchange platform. The latter platform also forms the database from which we curate bundles to deliver to isolated individuals as part of our COVID-19 Letters Collective.

**2) Science-Based Peer Education:** We published the world's first Youth-for-Youth Mental Health Guidebook at 80,000 words. Written entirely by 14- to 21 year olds and reviewed by medical professionals, it comes with a supplementary teacher's curriculum and is taught to students worldwide. We facilitate free mental health education to over 25000 students in-person every year and provide over 100 hours and over 50,000 pages of free content in multiple languages online. We also have a seven-part YouTube educational series, each lasting around 30-40 minutes to fit within a typical class lesson, exploring the intersections of race, ethnicity, youth, and mental health. We actively work on translations and addendums to these materials to provide deeper dives for more demographics.

**3) Grassroots Advocacy:** We have been running annual mental health scholarships for the last 6 years, being among the first to award support for mental health-related higher education and treatment particularly to underserved populations to increase the number and diversity of the mental health professional workforce. In addition, we run the first toll-free pan-African mental health hotline out of our Liberia office, host annual art festivals with our 12 India city chapters, created the first student mental health task force at Rutgers University Honors College, and put together a first-of-its-kind mental health treatment fund for Princeton University students unable to otherwise access/afford healthcare.

Overall, our impact is nuanced, culturally-sensitive, and driven by passionate young people wanting to make change from the ground up.

## **GETTING STARTED**

Letters to Strangers was founded by Diana Chao as a high school sophomore, when mental illness nearly ended her life. She was diagnosed with bipolar disorder at 13 years old and, at 14, uveitis -- an eye disease that rendered her blind whenever an episode struck. She survived a suicide attempt after being found by her little brother. Soon, she began her healing journey by writing letters, learning that writing is humanity distilled into ink. She spent half of her time in high school in and out of hospitals and at one point was in a coma with a 43-degree Celsius (110-degree Fahrenheit) fever, believing that she had outlasted her luck. But through it all, writing stayed with her - words, empathy, and the human connection mattered. So she founded Letters to Strangers to live this second chance at life right.

Letters to Strangers, or L2S, began as a student club in her Southern California public high school. Faced with debilitating stigma as a first-generation immigrant, child of working-class parents who didn't speak English, and juggling various jobs to survive beneath the poverty line, Diana first hid her true intention of starting L2S: to help others who suffered like her heal. Horror stories of students who spoke the truths about their mental illness haunted her, so she kept mostly silent about her own diagnosis and branded L2S as simply an education, wellness, and writing-based club. In those years, we worked with food insecurity, physical debilitation, and education by donating \$20,000+ worth of organic food and raising money for disaster relief in Nepal as well as supporting children's education in Niger, Africa. However, after graduating from high school, Diana went public with her own story and regrouped the focus of L2S to prioritize advocacy for mental health, the way she always intended for it to but was too afraid to say until strangers showed her the power of her voice.

## NOTABLE HIGHLIGHTS

- Over half a million youths impacted in 72 countries
- 60,000+ letters exchanged
- Honored by two U.S. presidents at the White House and Princes William and Harry
- Published the world's first Youth-for-Youth Mental Health Guidebook at almost 500 pages, including the first deep dive into race and mental health in the U.S. since the Surgeon-General's report in 2001
- Our hotline is now officially part of the Liberian national budget

## CHALLENGES & SOLUTIONS

- **People may ask you to share things that you haven't quite yet processed, yet you feel compelled to share them as a means of proving yourself.** You do not owe anyone your story: your story is your own, and you can go at it at whatever pace makes most sense to you. Give yourself permission to draw boundaries as you heal so that you do not share things you don't yet think you know yourself. If anyone questions you, let your other accomplishments and knowledge serve as the answer: You do not have to hollow yourself empty just to satisfy others' curiosity.
- **People may think they are doing you a favor and that you owe them greatly for any small amount of help they provide.** Of course, any support is appreciated and meaningful, but that doesn't give people the right to minimize what you do and dismiss it as a "just another kid's project;" know your worth. I don't mean that you need to pick a fight, but rather to not accept that as your ceiling.
- **Activist and empathy burnout are both very, very real, especially in mental health when so much of our heart is at stake.** It's almost a cliché at this point to say take care of yourself first, but I want to emphasize it from yet another angle: Yes, you need to take care of yourself to take care of others, but you also need to take care of yourself to set an example. Your team, your community—you might be among the first in them to really talk about why mental health matters. So your actions will give them permission, too, to take their mental health seriously. Show them what you mean by embodying those protective factors and self-care principles yourself, for your sake, for their sakes, but also for the sake of your cause.
- **One more bonus tip: Keep growing.** I don't necessarily mean growing your organization; sometimes we focus on organizational growth at the expense of longevity and actual meaning. I mean grow yourself. Our lived experiences contain great wisdom and insight, but our education cannot end there. Mental health is such an ever-changing thing and so nuanced from community to community; the least we can do is to continue practicing education on the matter so that we advocate with nuance, modernity, and history in mind.

## **ENVISIONING THE FUTURE**

I think the future of youth mental health is one that recognizes the beautifully complex nuance across all of our backgrounds, cumulating from generations of trauma but also healing that takes forms often undocumented in an English-language scientific journal yet meaningful and effective nonetheless. I hope we can continue to build on recognizing when different parts of our health and identity begin to impact our mental health; to notice when that is the case for others; and to support and elevate healing options that take all these facets into account. That will require us to continue practicing cultural humility and empathetic learning; to recognize that no solution can be found alone; and to lead by example by believing in the importance of our mental wellbeing first and foremost. Not in a way that shuts others out, but in a way that lets others see what our inner sanctuary can look like, so that we can help them discover their own, too, together.

## **STAYING CONNECTED**

- [Website](#)
- Social media: @L2SMentalHealth



## **MAKAILA DAVIS**

**Angels Protection, Inc.**

### **PROGRAM SUMMARY**

My nonprofit, Angels Protection Inc., is a leading national 501(c)(3) organization headquartered in Chester County, Pa. We are dedicated to advancing health equity for mothers and their children, young women, and their families between the ages of 13-20. Our program is committed to assisting young moms and young women, particularly those from underprivileged communities, by addressing important gaps in mental health supports and services. We offer access to necessary public health and educational resources that promote health equity. Our program provides a safe and supportive atmosphere in which young moms and women can seek the assistance they require to develop both mentally and emotionally. We deliver comprehensive public health education that addresses various social determinants of health issues directly to individuals in most need by collaborating with local health providers, nonprofits, and educational institutions. This method helps to overcome hurdles such as a lack of mobility and budgetary constraints. We also focus on creating awareness and reducing the stigma around mental health issues, encouraging open conversations, and fostering a supportive community.

### **GETTING STARTED**

The inspiration to start this organization came from a personal experience during middle school when I witnessed many young girls of color who looked like me becoming pregnant with no assistance or support services. Which inspired me to launch this organization. These girls were often left to fend for themselves which led them to turn towards negative environments that felt like comfort to them but actually hindered their growth and development. Our school district being underfunded worsened the issue, resulting in a lack of resources and quality education. These young women were exposed

to a variety of socioeconomic determinants of health issues, resulting in poor health outcomes such as domestic violence, substance addiction to cope with trauma, and much more. After witnessing these issues personally, I felt compelled to develop a program that would provide the essential assistance and resources to aid these young moms and their children to achieve generational wealth.

## NOTABLE HIGHLIGHTS

- **New Opioid crisis response program:** We partnered with government and local community-based organizations to host outreach days to provide Narcan, wound care kits, sharps containers, and mental health resources to help address the opioid epidemic and support affected individuals.
- **Cribs for Kids program:** Partnering with Cribs for Kids, we offer a certification program for safe sleep ambassadors free of charge, promoting safe sleep practices for infants and reducing the risk of sleep-related deaths.
- **Online safety initiative:** We have partnered with the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children to address online safety for youth, educating both parents and children about the dangers of the internet and how to stay safe online.

## CHALLENGES & SOLUTIONS

**Funding:** Securing funding is a significant challenge. Youth mental health leaders should explore various funding sources, including grants, fundraising events, and partnerships with local businesses and nonprofits. Crowdfunding platforms and social media campaigns can also be effective in raising funds and awareness.

**Organizational Structure and Compliance:** Establishing a solid organizational structure and ensuring compliance with local, state, and federal laws can be daunting. Seeking free guidance from legal and financial experts, attending workshops, and utilizing online resources can help. It's crucial to maintain accurate records and stay informed about regulatory changes.

**Board of Directors and Volunteers:** Recruiting a dedicated board of directors and volunteers is essential for sustainability. Clearly defining roles, responsibilities, and expectations can attract committed individuals. Offering training and recognition can help retain volunteers and ensure their continued engagement.

## ENVISIONING THE FUTURE

Reflecting on both my work and the intergenerational wisdom shared in my interview, I envision a future where mental health is openly discussed and prioritized, particularly among youth. I aim for schools to integrate mental health education into their curriculum and for communities to have effective support systems and accessible mental health resources. To build this movement, continuous education, awareness, advocacy for policy changes, and the creation of inclusive and supportive environments are crucial. Engaging youth in leadership roles within mental health advocacy can ensure their voices are heard and that solutions are relevant to their unique needs. By fostering a culture of understanding, support, and resilience, we can ensure that future generations have the tools and resources they need to thrive mentally and emotionally.

## STAYING CONNECTED

- [Website](#)
- [LinkedIn](#)
- [Instagram](#)
- [News feature](#)





# **CHAYIL BULLOCK-MARISCAL**

The Hadassa Organization

## **PROGRAM SUMMARY**

The Hadassa Organization is a community support program dedicated to addressing the unique challenges faced by students within the HBCU community, including those related to racial and cultural factors, academic pressures, and systemic inequalities. We offer mental health education, community engagement, life coaching, and peer-to-peer leadership. A key aspect of our support is focused on education and awareness. We organize workshops, seminars, and awareness campaigns to provide students with accurate information about mental health conditions, common stressors, and available resources. These initiatives are designed to destigmatize mental health issues, foster open discussions, and encourage students to seek help and support when needed.

## **GETTING STARTED**

The Hadassa Organization was founded during the spring semester of my senior year of college, inspired by my own experiences and challenges as a high school suicide survivor. My sophomore year of college I realized that what I had mistaken for "healing" was actually avoidance of the steps I needed to truly heal. As I connected with fellow students who, while not sharing my exact journey, were struggling with mental health challenges, I recognized a recurring cycle of depression, self-doubt, hopelessness, and the lingering impact of unresolved childhood traumas that my peers faced. Forming sisterlike bonds with roommates who trusted me as a psychology major, I had the opportunity to both test my knowledge and help them in their healing process. This experience revealed a profound need for serious support within the HBCU community. With the support of my family, my uncle/co-founder, and friends, I was able to become a beacon of hope for my community and beyond.

## NOTABLE HIGHLIGHTS

- To announce the founding of the Hadassa Organization, we hosted our first event on the campus of Johnson C. Smith University in Charlotte, N.C., in collaboration with Mellow Minds. Mellow Minds is a student-led mental health organization founded in 2019 by students at JCSU, and I had the honor of serving as its president for the 2023-2024 academic year. The event was an open mic night for Black History Month, where students shared poems, performed, told stories, colored, and drew. It provided a safe space for them to express themselves and release anything that was weighing them down.
- Our second event was a workshop titled "The Balancing Act" at the 22nd Annual HBCU Kings and Queens Conference in Louisiana. Participants from HBCU royal courts were introduced to strategies for maintaining mental well-being while managing leadership roles. They learned practical techniques such as mindfulness, self-care practices, and setting boundaries, along with ways to stay uplifted and empowered during challenging times. The room was set up with painting materials, canvases, and gift bags containing resources, self-care items, pocket-sized anxiety sensors, and worksheets for reflections and future goals.
- We were also scheduled to be vendors at the HBCU Festival, but unfortunately, due to an issue with the hostess's licensing, we, along with several other vendors, were unable to participate.

## CHALLENGES & SOLUTIONS

**Limited Resources and Funding:** One of the most significant challenges students might face is the lack of resources and funding. Starting a new organization often requires financial support for events, materials, promotional efforts, and other logistical needs. Without adequate funding, it can be difficult to maintain momentum and achieve the organization's goals.

To tackle this, students should start by applying for grants, scholarships, and funding opportunities available through their university or external organizations. Crowdfunding platforms can also be an effective way to raise money. Additionally, partnering with existing organizations or departments within the university can provide both financial and in-kind support, such as access to spaces, materials, and promotional channels.

**Gaining Campus Support and Engagement:** Gaining support from both the student body and university administration can be challenging, especially if the initiative is new and not widely recognized. Without sufficient buy-in, it may be difficult to attract participants and volunteers, or to secure the necessary approvals and resources from the administration.

Building a strong presence on campus through consistent and clear communication is key. Start by conducting surveys or focus groups to understand the needs and interests of the student body.

Use social media, flyers, and word-of-mouth to promote events and the organization's mission. Building relationships with key stakeholders, such as faculty members, student leaders, and administrative staff, can also help in gaining institutional support. Hosting collaborative events with well-established organizations can also increase visibility and credibility.

**Sustaining Long-Term Commitment:** Ensuring the long-term sustainability of the organization can be difficult, particularly as founding members graduate or move on to other commitments. There is a risk that the initiative could lose momentum if there isn't a clear plan for leadership succession and member engagement.

To mitigate the challenges of staying committed to funding a business at a young age and without prior knowledge, it's crucial to establish a strong foundation from the outset. Begin by educating yourself on the basics of business finance, including budgeting, fundraising, and financial planning. This can be achieved through online courses, workshops, or mentorship from experienced entrepreneurs. Creating a clear financial plan is essential, outlining both short-term and long-term goals for your business and nonprofit. Regularly assess and adjust your budget to ensure you're staying on track. Building a support network of advisors, mentors, and peers who have experience in both business and nonprofit sectors can provide guidance and help you navigate challenges. Additionally, focus on self-care and balance to avoid burnout, as managing a new business and nonprofit simultaneously can be overwhelming. Set realistic goals, delegate tasks when possible, and maintain a support system that can help you stay grounded while you work towards your vision.

## ENVISIONING THE FUTURE

Reflecting on my work and the wisdom shared in the interviews, I see the future of youth mental health becoming more holistic, inclusive, and proactive. The lessons from older generations highlight the importance of community, resilience, and culturally relevant coping strategies—key elements for supporting young people's mental health.

**Holistic and Inclusive Approaches:** The future should focus on addressing mental health from all angles—psychological, social, cultural, and spiritual. Programs need to be tailored to the unique needs of diverse communities, like those at HBCUs, ensuring everyone feels heard and respected.

**Proactive Support and Early Intervention:** It's essential to shift from reacting to mental health issues to preventing them. By integrating mental health education into school curriculums and offering resources early, we can help young people manage stress and anxiety before they become overwhelmed.

**Community-Driven Resilience:** Building stronger community support networks is key to helping young people stay resilient. Peer support groups, mentorship, and family involvement can make a big difference in helping youth feel supported and empowered to seek help.

**Building the Movement:** Empowering young people to take the lead in mental health initiatives is crucial. Encouraging them to share their stories and lead projects will help reduce the stigma around mental health. Fostering dialogue between generations is also important; combining the wisdom of older generations with the energy of youth can bring about innovative solutions.

## **STAYING CONNECTED**

- [Linktree](#)



# WHITNEY ANDRASTEK

## ADVOCATE SUMMARY

My background is in criminal justice, so I was new to the advocacy of mental health. I graduated college with my bachelors in Democracy and Justice Studies and minors in Criminal Justice and Anthropology/Sociology. Throughout my junior and senior year in college I was a mentor for a group on campus called BIPOC RISE (Black and Indigenous People of Color Reaching Intersectional Strengths through Engagement). We mentored first-generation students and students of color. The focus of the group was on mental health and increasing retention rates of students of color and first generation students. As mentors we did weekly research focused on how to best support students of color in a predominately white institution. We also held monthly events and educational field trips for our mentees.

My advocacy in mental health started when I joined NAMI Manitowoc County. I had received a scholarship in college through an organization that the president of NAMI Manitowoc County, Donna Firman, was on the board for. I had gone to the acceptance meeting of the scholarship and Donna and one of our county judges had followed me out to talk with me about joining NAMI to help with the foundation of a mental health court for the county. After meeting with Donna more, I agreed to join the team and became part of AmeriCorps to serve NAMI Manitowoc County. I held the position as the Program Coordinator/Justice Advocate. I helped bring crisis intervention team (CIT) training to Manitowoc County local police agencies in Manitowoc as a CIT coordinator. CIT training is a 40-hour training curriculum focused on training police officers how to interact with those experiencing a mental health crisis. There was advanced training on excited delirium, hearing voices-schizophrenia, de-escalation, crisis response and referral, and active listening, law enforcement mental health care, along with many other topics. Our first class was completely full and was composed of police officers from three of our main police agencies in Manitowoc County, along with a police chaplain. We were also working

on bringing crisis intervention partners (CIPs) to the community which trains all other personnel who might work with others in a mental health crisis how to de-escalate and work with individuals, as well as training our local dispatch how to recognize these signs over the phone to know to dispatch a CIT officer to calls. We were also working on how to inform the community about the option to ask for a CIT trained officer and when to know they would need one.

Through NAMI I also started the beginning research and foundation for a mental health jail diversion program that would partner with law enforcement to help give additional resources and focus on mental health to those in the criminal justice system instead of going to jail.

I worked with one of my close friends to help create a “learn to breathe” curriculum for youth mental health and safety through her job working with runaway and at-risk youth. As part of the program, guest speakers attended and the youth learned coping skills, learning to say no and setting boundaries, breathing exercises, and increasing self-esteem.

## **ADVICE FOR YOUNG ADVOCATES**

My advice for other youth advocates for mental health or any kind of reform, is to get involved in their local NAMI affiliate. For me, I knew I always wanted to create change in my community, but never knew how or that it would be attainable at a young age since I did not know prominent community leaders. I did not know where to start. Once I was involved in my local NAMI affiliate, I gained so much experience regarding lobbying, professional appearance, networking, and what it takes to run a nonprofit. I was introduced to prominent leaders in my community and was able to work with them closely across numerous organizational fields as well as form lasting relationships with them on both a professional and personal level. So many people focus on the larger change they want to make in the world or state level. Sometimes the best change is what happens right in our community or college campus and it tends to mean more to us because we can see the change around us and sometimes it directly affects us. Working with NAMI I became aware of the exact lack of resources in my community and what we needed most. We were able to work with others in the community as well as network with organizations outside of the state of Wisconsin in regards to jail diversion and mental health court planning. The affiliates are usually open to implementing projects so if there is an interest you have and want to try out, NAMI is a great start when it comes to partnering and trying out something or just want to be introduced to working closely on mental health issues. It gave me experience that I will carry with me to help me attain

other goals of change I hope to make in the future and where to start. Working with NAMI allowed me to combine my interests of criminal justice and mental health. It helped prepare me in hoping to work on larger issues in the criminal justice system I hope to tackle in relation to solitary confinement and mental health.

## **CHALLENGES & SOLUTIONS**

During my time working with NAMI, we encountered a few challenges in regards to our advocacy work. Many of them revolved around the smaller, more conservative, community I live in. We were able to successfully implement CIT training to our local police departments and continue with that training. However, when it came to working on the planning of mental health courts, we received backlash from others in the community. We had support from some community partners such as the police stations, one of the judges, and probation and parole. We had plans to follow the layout of Miami-Dade County's successful and well-known mental health court model and NAMI St. Tammany, La.'s mental health court model. It was going to be fully funded by NAMI Manitowoc County, which would have made it the first alternatively funded mental health court in America. We addressed this by working with our judges, district attorneys and public defenders to shift gears towards a mental health jail diversion to create a program that targeted help before being in the system. This would also have limited clients' interaction with certain organizations that we were receiving backlash from. Clients would have been referred through CIT trained officers, the county public defender's office, or self-referral if they met the criteria. We did additional research on other mental health based jail diversion programs, talked with subject matter experts around the nation to find an appropriate program that fit our community's needs. We continued to educate and hold meetings with those in the community to inform and plan on how this would look in our community. Even with this change in plans, we continued to receive pushback but pushed through. Ultimately, we ended up holding off on this project for the time being because we were having a hard time with buy-in and getting leaders to the table to help make decisions.

Living in a smaller, more conservative community, it can be hard to make changes, especially when it is a change that a lot of people do not see as necessary. Many people struggle to see mental health as an issue because it is more of an internal struggle rather than something you can slap a band-aid on and claim as fixed. Instead of giving people the resources and additional help they need to be productive out in the community and be their best selves, there are those who think it is easier to put them away.



## **ENVISIONING THE FUTURE**

I think so many youth and young adults struggle with different mental health challenges in regards to fitting in, isolation, academics, and feeling like they are lost, especially with just graduating high school or college. I think there needs to be more mental health focused in the elementary, middle, and high schools, to help students that may not have the resources at home or afford to seek help. School should be a safe place for students where they can turn to groups on campus, teachers, or mental health professionals. In college, there needs to continue to be student-led groups with peer support services so students have a safe place to go and vent and relate to other students going through similar struggles. I envision youth mental health continuing to be positive and creating safe places for people to feel heard and welcomed. During my interview, there was a theme of watching out for others, whether you knew them or not. I think we have gotten better with COVID because we were all checking on each other, but we need to continue this and learn to put those phones away and be present with others. Everyone says young people are the future and we need to start leading the way with learning to count on each other and working together to uplift those around us. There are so many things everyone struggles with daily and so many people who feel alone. Checking in and creating safe and welcoming spaces might be the one thing to save someone.



# **RICK YANG**

## **ADVOCATE SUMMARY**

My initiative, "SchoolSight: A Comprehensive Mental Health Vision," sought to identify and implement evidence-based interventions in my county using a youth-centric perspective. Through SchoolSight, I developed dozens of research reports and presented findings at forums for over 1,700 people. Additionally, I testified at various venues for the need for evidence-based wellness interventions and programs in New York state public schools. Leading a district-wide effort with our superintendent, I was able to secure \$125,000 in grant funding up to date for my recommended wellness spaces from local community coalitions and youth-serving organizations.

As the co-founder and CEO of Frontiers of Fulfillment, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, I have led efforts to integrate youth perspectives into mental health policies. I've collaborated with over a dozen senators and U.S. representatives to pass mental health policy bills. These efforts have extended our reach to over 30 states, impacting thousands through advocacy and lobbying workshops by ensuring that youth voices are heard and central in shaping policy. Additionally, we've testified at various mental hygiene hearings in the New York state legislature about the necessity for youth voices in shaping health policies for youth, culturally-sensitive care, and various other public health topics.

As a member of the New York State Parent Teacher Association's Board of Directors, I advocate on behalf of 2.4 million New York public school students for more youth-guided programs and policies, with a specific focus on mental health as my area of interest and expertise. On the New York Public Health Association's Board of Directors, I lead a mental health advisory group to create New York's first comprehensive mental health resource guide for students to get involved in mental health advocacy.

## **ADVICE FOR YOUNG ADVOCATES**

Start not by doing, but by listening. Understanding the specific needs and concerns of your peers is crucial. Organize focus groups or surveys to gather insights and tailor your initiatives accordingly. Listening not only helps you identify the most pressing issues but also builds trust and demonstrates that your advocacy is genuinely rooted in the community's needs.

Building a supportive network is equally important. Reach out to local mental health organizations, counselors, and educators to collaborate and gain mentorship—these connections can provide valuable resources, guidance, and credibility to your efforts. Don't hesitate to join existing mental health advocacy groups where you can learn from more experienced advocates and participate in broader initiatives.

Lastly, be persistent. You *will* encounter resistance and more often than not, bureaucratic obstacles. Stay resilient and keep advocating for your cause. Develop a clear and compelling message about why mental health is important, and use data and personal stories to support your case. Being adaptable is also crucial; if a strategy isn't working, be willing to pivot and try new approaches based on what you've learned.

## **CHALLENGES & SOLUTIONS**

One major challenge I faced was securing funding for our programs. We tackled this by applying for grants from local organizations and conducting fundraising events, such as community runs and art auctions, which also helped raise awareness.

## **ENVISIONING THE FUTURE**

There exists an increasing necessity to bridge the widening chasm between students and the place they spend a large portion of their days in schools. By working to dismantle barriers to care and shattering the silence through honest, open dialogue transcending the all-too-common emotions associated with shame, fear, and secrecy, I hope others seeking to build this movement can help make schools not a place where we grind our academics 24/7, but a place that supports our own journeys of self-discovery as we approach adulthood as a collective, interconnected community. The future of youth mental health is decided by the practices, policies, and measures taken in schools. But more than that, the future of youth mental health is youth-led, youth-driven solutions, especially in these school-based settings.

I hope youth mental health systems shift away from traditional medical models and toward more robust approaches that view recipients of services—in this case, the youth—as equals. Young people shall not just be passive beneficiaries of school mental health services, but active facilitators of change in conversations concerning their wellbeing. More than giving youth a seat at the policy table, I see the future redefining the table itself to properly combat the greatest thief of human potential in the world today.

## **STAYING CONNECTED**

- [LinkedIn](#)



# **ANASTASIA ERLEY**

SelfHealthLine, Speak2Swatties

## **PROGRAM SUMMARY**

**SelfHealthLine:** In today's digital age, adolescents and young adults are increasingly tethered to their electronic devices and social media platforms. While social media can be a valuable tool for connection, it also has the potential to cause harm if used improperly or if the content consumed is detrimental. To address these concerns, I launched the Instagram account SelfHealthLine last year. This platform serves a dual purpose: it showcases my advocacy work while providing a safe and supportive space for individuals seeking guidance on maintaining their mental and overall health. SelfHealthLine encourages users to present their authentic selves online, even when that self is not the polished, idealized version that social media often demands. Through this account, I share insights from my own mental health and wellness journey, offering valuable information for those just beginning their path to better health. This content can be particularly helpful for individuals curious about the next steps in their journey, how to access support, or whom they can reach out to for help.

**Speak2Swatties Peer Support Groups:** Speak2Swatties (S2S) is a student-led mental health club at Swarthmore College that I have been deeply involved with over the past year. S2S has a podcast team, blog team, event planning team, and more. Most recently, Lauren Martindale and I have worked on establishing peer support groups led by students, recognizing that the college's limited Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) staff and other barriers often prevent students from accessing traditional healthcare providers. The impact of COVID-19 has further exacerbated the mental health challenges within our community, as restrictions and social distancing measures have isolated many students and has impacted development of young minds in ways that are still unknown. Speak2Swatties peer support groups aims to bridge the gap between those who are receiving treatment and those who are seeking help but lack someone to talk to.

By providing peer-led support, we foster a sense of community that amplifies vulnerability and acceptance while also offering accessible, relatable resources for students.

## GETTING STARTED

Both SelfHealthLine and the S2S peer support group initiative were born out of a desire to address gaps in mental health support that my peers both I and peers identified through our own experiences.

For SelfHealthLine, I recognized that while social media is an inevitable part of our lives, it often exacerbates mental health struggles rather than alleviates them, especially when children/teens are using social media without given direction, or told ahead of time what to look out for. Observing how others, including myself, faced challenges in navigating their mental health, I felt compelled to create a space that combined my understanding of social media dynamics with my personal health struggles along with information and tips I have learned along the way. This platform is my way of contributing positively to the online world, offering both advocacy and a supportive, inclusive and welcoming community.

## NOTABLE HIGHLIGHTS

**Speak2Swatties Peer Support Groups:** Four students, including myself, completed peer support group facilitator training in the spring. We are excited to launch these groups this fall, offering a new, student-driven resource for mental health support on campus.

**SelfHealthLine:** Through my volunteer work at Mental Health Partnerships, I reached out to BOMA and many companies to support the Light Up Green Philly event once again, raising both awareness and support for mental health.

I partnered with Heart and Soul'd, a local shop in Swarthmore, to host a mental health trivia event during May. Participants who answered correctly could spin a wheel for a discount on a green item, blending education with community engagement. We also printed QR codes with information to more resources and mental health screening.

While I deal with a lot of mental health struggles and discuss them on SelfHealthLine, my conditions were made worse by Lyme Disease/Neurolyme and its associated co-infections. Due to this tie, my account now tries to incorporate a more holistic view of health and wellness.

## CHALLENGES & SOLUTIONS

**Maintaining Consistency on Social Media:** One of the challenges I face with SelfHealthLine is consistently updating the Instagram account amidst the demands of daily life/ maintaining my own mental health. To address this, I am working on creating some goals and a loose schedule about posting to both update my account with new information and overview some of my past experiences.

**Administrative and Funding Challenges for Peer Support Groups:** Establishing the Speak2Swatties peer support groups required navigating administrative hurdles and securing funding. We worked closely with Simone, the CAPS Director at Swarthmore College, who provided invaluable guidance to streamline our process. Additionally, we faced difficulties in obtaining initial funding, but with persistence, we were able to secure additional resources through Swarthmore's Student Government Organization.

## ENVISIONING THE FUTURE

Reflecting on my work and the wisdom shared in the intergenerational interviews, I envision a future where youth mental health is strongly supported by both in-person and online communities. Social media, often seen as a negative influence, has the potential to be a powerful tool for positive change when used intentionally. By promoting authenticity, empathy, and kindness in our online interactions, we can build a movement that continues to grow and support those in need. With the increasing demand for mental health services and the ongoing reduction in stigma surrounding help-seeking, there is a critical need for innovative approaches to mental health support. Peer support, in particular, stands out as a vital resource, bridging the gaps where traditional therapy may not be accessible. I believe that by empowering young people to take active roles in their mental health communities, we can create a future where everyone has access to the support they need, whenever they need it.



# **KAISAR PERRY**

Playing for Change

## **PROGRAM SUMMARY**

In 2021, I created an initiative in my New Hampshire hometown now called Playing for Change. This organization puts on completely student-run theater, taking youth submissions for short plays pertaining to mental health, and turning them into full-fledged productions which people from around the state come and see, raising money for the NH chapter of the National Alliance on Mental Illness. I started this organization because, following the pandemic, I noticed a substantial gap within our community where young people often could not feel heard with their mental health experiences. Sure, there were plenty of people within my community who began speaking about their hardships during the pandemic, but there were disparities between who could share their stories and who couldn't. In order to have a platform upon which to be heard, members of my community often needed to already occupy identities that had the privilege of being respected. Many of my school peers did not occupy these identities, especially when considering the intersectionality between mental health conditions and race, gender, sexuality, socioeconomic status, and disability. Unfortunately in our society, mental health conditions are only accepted when they look a certain way, and that certain way just frankly isn't the experience of most people. Nonetheless, that does not mean that people who do not conform to this narrow vision of mental health are any less deserving of feeling heard. Feeling heard is what I view to be a fundamental human right, and is most certainly a necessary aspect of the healing process when faced with hardship.

## **GETTING STARTED**

I had the privilege of being heard by my peers in 2020, prior to my creation of Playing for Change. In 2020, I wrote my own play based upon the hardships which I had personally experienced. I was terrified to share my play with others; I thought for certain that their opinions of me would change permanently for the worst.



But when I first saw my play read aloud by my friends, I was brought to tears of joy. It felt so good to be seen. It felt so good to know that all that which I had ashamedly kept inside me had a place within the outside world, and that I had people who were willing to create that place. From that point on, I knew that I had to help others feel heard, as I did with my play in 2020. This feeling is what inspired the creation of Playing for Change.

Throughout the beginning of the next school year, I talked to anyone in an administrative role who would listen. I told them about my mission and that feeling which I desperately wanted to share with others. It took a lot of conversations and effort spent wading through logistical dilemmas, but eventually, I got the 'OK' from my school to put on mental health plays in our on-campus theater. The problem at that point, though, was that I had to follow through with what I created, without any help from teachers or staff.

So, I got writing. I created long, detailed instructions of roles I needed to be filled. I talked with my peers, and I advertised all throughout the school so as to eventually find a team of students willing to back me in my mission. What eventually looked like an impossible project, with each person who joined me, gradually appeared to me a more feasible reality. I delegated responsibilities to playwrights, directors, actors, and designers, and crew members, all positions which my peers elected to fill, and eventually, my role became simple: supporting everyone else in the roles I had assigned them with a clear image of a final product in my mind.

The culmination of all that work was so much greater than I anticipated, and because of the trust I gave other people in keeping it alive, the organization continues to this day.

## **NOTABLE HIGHLIGHTS**

- In our three years of operation, we've raised \$4,845 for the NH Chapter of the National Alliance on Mental Illness.
- The organization started because of a short play I wrote over the course of a week in a school class!
- Playing for Change is now a yearly project maintained primarily today by students I have never even met!

## **CHALLENGES & SOLUTIONS**

Whenever students try to create something they are passionate about, they are met with the things others may call "harsh reality." These include monetary concerns, structural limitations, and just a general lack of confidence that any change can occur. The idea of

harsh reality is often perpetuated by adults, or maybe even peers, who themselves feel unconfident in their ability to create change. Those who feel limited by the harshness of reality may even view others as “childish” or “naïve” for maintaining hope that they can make a difference in the face of forces so much bigger than them.

It is this hope, however, which helps to make our reality less harsh.

Regardless of what obstacles may exist, I encourage all students wanting to make a change to push, push, push. Never let the vague concept of limitations stand in the way of what you know needs to be done. You have the willpower and the infinite capacity of learning to surmount any technical challenge in your path. Even if you are certain you don't, I insist that you never know until you try.

Moreover, students wanting to create change themselves may feel discouraged by the pain they themselves have experienced after previous hopes they had were doused. My heart aches for these students; there is nothing more tragic than the pain which results from sincerely believing in the power of goodness. But, nevertheless, I maintain that these students never ever lose faith in their capacity to create change. Yes, it will hurt time and time again. But regardless of the pain, you have the capacity to *choose* to hope.

## **ENVISIONING THE FUTURE**

I envision the future of youth mental health to be centered around finding places where young people, regardless of who they are, can feel completely themselves. I believe that this will require a lot of cultural competence to be disseminated concerning how to not only listen, but to hear others; but I know from experience and hope that this is a skill anyone can learn. I will continue to work towards this future by doing what I can to hear others, and letting those near me know that, regardless of what they may feel, there are people willing to create space for them. I encourage others to do the same. Additionally, I encourage others to identify positions of power, and work to understand how privilege may factor into who gets to be heard and who doesn't. Once this understanding is developed, action can be taken to pass around the mic, making it such that privilege ceases being one of the prime determinants for mental health recovery.