

Open Doors

Season 1 Episode 3: Transforming Teen Mental Health

Shannon Fagan 0:05

Hi. Welcome to open doors. A podcast from the Allegheny intermediate unit that explores the people, programs and partnerships making a difference in students' lives. I'm your host. Shannon Fagan, together, we're opening doors to learning, support and connection so every student can thrive.

Shannon Fagan 0:27

Teen mental health in the US is in crisis, and the time for change is now. On this episode of open doors, we talk with Sarah pezzi, a policy specialist at the Jewish Health Care Foundation. Sarah is helping reimagine mental health support in Pennsylvania by empowering young voices and providing hope for the next generation. Today, she is joined by two youth advocates, joy and Anya to share their experiences. Hi, Sarah, welcome today to open doors. Thanks for having me. Great to have you here. Can you tell us a little bit about the PA Youth Advocacy Network, what you do? What it is.

Sarah Pesi 1:08

So Hi, I'm Sarah pesky. I'm a policy specialist at Jewish Healthcare Foundation. I help support our adolescent behavioral health initiatives. Some of the adolescent behavioral health initiatives of JHF include the teen Mental Health Coalition, which brings community based organizations together to advocate for sustainable funding, and also our teen Mental Health Collaborative, which brings organizations across Allegheny County together for shared learning training, and our organizations that are dedicated to improving teen mental health. And the third initiative that I'll focus on is the PA Youth Advocacy Network. The PA Youth Advocacy Network serves high school students and adult supporters across the state. We have a variety of programs and opportunities for in person and virtual experiences. Some of the opportunities include opportunities in person, like speaking engagements, connections to events, proclamation hearings and Harrisburg days. And then we also have virtual opportunities because we connect teens across the state. So those include our statewide teen advocacy series and a teen committee focused on advancing policy.

Shannon Fagan 2:30

Wow, that's a lot you guys are doing a lot. Can I ask you a little bit about how you got involved and what passion you have for this topic?

Sarah Pesi 2:39

Yeah, I got involved because, I would say, my interest in policy, and particularly working with teens, I as a teenager, wrote a bill, yes, oh, that's so cool as part of, like, a Youth in Government club. And it started off as an imaginary kind of thing, but after, like, I went they do this model day in Harrisburg, after I went to that, I came back, and I was like, this could really help people. I want to take this further. And so that started me on an over four year journey to get the bill passed into a law. And I was kind of a shy kid, and it really helped me come out of my shell, feel empowered, and turned an experience that was kind of an experience where I could have easily, like, closed down and kind of went into myself to then use it for something good, and kind of build like that confidence. So that's I really believe in the power of teens to make a difference, and that they're no matter what age you are, your ideas are important. Wow.

Shannon Fagan 3:48

So you've been doing this work with youth for how long?

Sarah Pesi 3:52

So with the PA Youth Advocacy Network, I've been there almost five years, and then before that, I've been in the teen engagement space as a teen wellness coordinator at the JCC, and I also did AmeriCorps working with young people.

Shannon Fagan 4:10

Wow, I know as a state, and I will just refer to the state for just a moment, we've been working for years on bringing youth voice to the table for mental health. And when I heard of the work that you guys have been doing and promoting it in my role there, seeing it happen, and seeing the policy day for mental health happening in Harrisburg, it has been full circle

for me. And so watching youth voice build, we have a long way to go, but I think you guys have such a key piece to that. So how do you engage youth? How do you inspire youth to become part of this group?

Sarah Pesi 4:47

So we work with organizations that are working with youth advocates, organizations like stand together that are really building up in school advocates, and they often will reform. Or refer us students that are interested in taking on leadership might have, like, an interest in policy, and then they kind of get involved from there. We really aim to create meaningful engagement opportunities. So we don't want it to be like, just like you're on an advisory board, like checking a box, it's, they're working with legislators to craft the language of the legislation. So it's, we look for meaningful engagement opportunities, and then opportunities for them to share their voices and spaces where youth aren't always invited to the table.

Shannon Fagan 5:37

Wow. How do you teach them the skills to do this work.

Sarah Pesi 5:43

I think a lot of it's it's kind of so there's some education about how the legislative process works. But I also try to engage them in the strategy pieces, because oftentimes they'll come up with something creative. So it's kind of like learning by doing, getting involved in the process. There's youth that have been involved longer, youth that are newer, and they kind of help boost each other, and then we kind of provide, like, the support of maybe trying this idea, kind of like coaching them to really be leaders, and that leaders like whatever we really want to meet them where they're at and what their goals are. So it's really tailored to each individual that joins the network.

Shannon Fagan 6:30

So how would a youth find out about the network, and how would a school find out about the network?

Sarah Pesi 6:34

Yeah, so we have a monthly network call that any adult ally that's working with youth who care about mental health can come and be a part of we share opportunities on our monthly network calls and through our email lists. And then we also have a website, www.pa.youthadvocacy.org, and it has all the different ways students can get involved, where you can sign up, that's yeah, that's the start to Okay.

Shannon Fagan 7:07

And so if a school has a student, they could refer them to you,

Sarah Pesi 7:11

yes, yeah, or have them sign up on the website, or even invite what I found when I was in the JCC space before i i worked at the network, if I had a student that was like, interested, but maybe, like, a little nervous, like, I would hop on the network calls with the students in the JCC space. So I think even, like introducing them through like events, the monthly calls, kind of as like an advisor, you can also be supportive and involved in the network's work.

Shannon Fagan 7:43

Wow, I know you guys are working on a policy now for a mental wellness day for schools, just like you're a sick day. Can you tell us just a little bit about how that's going and what that looks like?

Sarah Pesi 7:55

Yeah, it's been doing really well. We worked with students last legislative session to update the legislation, rework the bill, and it actually advanced out of the House Committee, which, like almost, like 75% of bills don't make it past committee. So that was a big, big step, and then they were able to use feedback that we got from legislators to improve the bill for this session. And so over the summer, students have been meeting with different associations, education associations, so like the PA School Business Officials Association, the American Federation for teachers and other organizations to build up that support and get them on board. And there's like a whole process with that where they have to take it back to their membership to get approval, but they've really been building support, and

then also, over the summer, for the first time, we co hosted with the mental health the house mental health caucus a briefing, a student led briefing, where they got to brief legislators on the legislation that is so exciting. Yeah, and we're hoping to embed that more, and hopefully have that be something quarterly around a bunch of different issues teens care about.

Shannon Fagan 9:15

Wow, Sarah, you're doing great work. It's so exciting to hear. It's really exciting.

Sarah Pesi 9:20

I feel lucky to just get to work with the teens. They're all, they all bring incredible energy, experience and like passion to the work of like mental health and what they're doing,

Shannon Fagan 9:30

and you're so knowledgeable and connecting them and helping them build the resources and capacity so they can carry this on. Awesome. Well, we're gonna move into just a meeting with some youth here in a second. But I wanted to ask you, what does a typical Youth Advocacy meeting network that's hard to say. Let me start over. What does a typical pa Youth Advocacy Network meeting look like?

Sarah Pesi 9:54

A typical meeting can look a variety of different ways. So if you're coming to our. Monthly network calls. It'll be introductions, opportunities to hear from other people across the state on what they're working on. Have conversations about mental health topics that are coming up in spaces, and then also hearing about the student project work for the teen led meetings you can expect, like teen leaders to really be taking the lead in planning the agenda and a lot of discussion, a lot of input, and actually like working to move things forward.

Shannon Fagan 10:32

Are you seeing a change in student level confidence after participating in the advocacy network? Yes.

Sarah Pesi 10:38

So we do measure that for like, our advocacy series, and there is more like increased confidence and like being a leader in the community, speaking up so we are seeing it, and then just qualitatively, like watching the students over time, kind of feel more comfortable,

Shannon Fagan 10:55

yeah, building that social, emotional wellness within and then spreading that to their school districts and And and hearing the voices of other students is so important. So I'm really pleased with the work you guys are doing and where you are, and I'd love to bring in joy and Anya to come into the conversation and meet with us. Welcome, ladies. I'm so glad you're here for our podcast. Open Doors. I would just like to take a moment and have you introduce yourselves and what school district you're from.

Aanya Angadi 11:24

Hi, my name is Anya Ngati, and I will be a senior at South Bay High School.

Joy Oranwa 11:29

Hi, my name is Joy iranwa. I'm going to be a junior at Penn Hills High School.

Shannon Fagan 11:33

Okay, thank you. We've asked you here today to help us build a better understanding of the youth aspect of the Youth Advocacy Network. So I'm really curious, and I have a few questions for you about what it's like to be on the Youth Advocacy Network. What do you do? How do you do it? And then some things that you take do for yourselves, to take care of yourselves while you're participating in the activities. So one of the questions I have is just, how did you get involved.

Aanya Angadi 12:02

For me, one of the sponsors at a club at my school sent a lot of people a link to join the PA youth speakers series, and I applied. I got in, and I had a really, really great time. And that really motivated me to join the network itself and get involved. And got me more involved in advocacy itself.

Joy Oranwa 12:22

Awesome, I know I got started, I was looking for leadership opportunities, specifically with mental health and trying to better my community, just because it is a low income community and there aren't a lot of resources available to students. So I found the teen committee a part of PA Youth Advocacy Network, and I had an interview with Sarah, and she talked about, like, the opportunities, like meeting with legislators and things like that. And I thought it was really a way to bring things back to my community and my like, school administrators and really create change at our school.

Shannon Fagan 13:00

Oh, great change. I love that idea. So what is it about mental health that you're curious about? And that is not a question that was shared ahead of time, but what are some things with mental health that you guys are really interested in advocating for? I think

Aanya Angadi 13:14

for me, it's I've experienced stigma around mental health, and I've seen friends experience stigma, and I feel like that prevents us from having the conversations we need to to be able to take care of ourselves, because mental health is a huge part of how we go about our day to day lives, because our mental health can help determine how we feel. It can just determine our overall well being at points,

Joy Oranwa 13:37

I agree with Anya that was really good, but I think for my community, it's mostly around awareness. I think a lot of people don't know where to go when they do need help. So I think if I can, you know, take this experience and bring it back to my school leaders and be like, hey, you know, these are we can try some of these things, you know. Maybe take out, like

words that you know might be like, I don't know, prejudice against someone, and then we can use that and just be more trauma informed and really help people. Awesome.

Shannon Fagan 14:11

That's, it's, it's you guys that are going to make the change, you know. So thank you both. What are some ways that you take care of yourselves while you're advocating? Because advocacy is hard work

Aanya Angadi 14:21

for me. Whenever I get too stressed out, I really go for runs just to get some fresh air, or I really like love art. So I will put in some headphones in the music and just draw. When you're advocating, it can get really stressful at times, especially when you care a lot, so it's important to take that time off and just focus on yourself and make sure that you're okay, too.

Joy Oranwa 14:43

I know for me, I like taking breaks. I know it can be very stressful to like advocate and like super go, like, full throttle on it, but, you know, taking breaks like, you know, taking naps, you know, doing art, listening to music can really help just keep your spirit.

Shannon Fagan 15:00

So awesome. And what would you say as far as advocacy that's helped support your well being? How has doing this work of advocating helped your own well being?

Aanya Angadi 15:11

I think for me, the connections I've gotten, the friends I've built, the resources I've gained, I didn't know there were so many mental health resources out there that you didn't really you don't have to pay for they're just there to be able to help support you. That was really

Joy Oranwa 15:27

helpful for me, for me, I think the impact like student voices can make on their communities and really make students, you know, see that they have their voice and they can use it. And, you know, go up to these big administrators and, you know, speak their piece about the issues that affect them, and maybe it might give them, like, a different perspective that they might have not thought about. So seeing other students go out and, you know, go to school board meetings and things like that is really inspiring and really helps.

Shannon Fagan 15:58

Yeah, and did you have to build up to that, that ability to get out there and do and how did you, how did you do it?

Joy Oranwa 16:05

Um, I think it kind of started like, I'm a very kind of shy person, um, but I know writing, my writing is pretty good, so I like writing emails, and I think that really, you know, makes, helps me know what I want to say before, like, all these meetings, anything like that, so they already have, like, an insight into what I want to talk about and the topics you know that I want to bring up.

Shannon Fagan 16:29

Yeah? Joy, that's a great tip.

Aanya Angadi 16:31

Yeah, for me, I think I got voluntold to do a lot of stuff. It's different than volunteering. Volunteering, you make yourself go do stuff. When you're voluntold, a person who really cares about you tells you to go do stuff. And for me, I needed that to really break out of my shell. I think that got me a lot more involved and helped me a lot.

Shannon Fagan 16:52

I've never heard that definition of voluntold before. I'm going to carry that someone that cared for me kind of pushed me to do it. I love that. Okay, so what is your experience been interacting with legislators and school leaders? So far,

Aanya Angadi 17:06

for me, I've had a really positive experience. I found that a lot of my legislators and the school leaders I've talked to have been really open, and they've really taken into accounts what me and everyone else who's worked with me has said,

Joy Oranwa 17:20

I know speaking with legislator Smith Waddell, he was very informative and very positive about his work with trying to introduce, like, mental health curriculum in schools, and like creating a Student Advisory Council for students all across Pennsylvania. And I thought his story about starting up in special education and having his teachers, you know, believe in him and build him up up to that point, was really inspiring. I wish I could say I had the same experience as Anya with her school leaders, but there was some interesting things that went on. Okay.

Shannon Fagan 18:00

Do you think the impact of the youth voice has made a difference to the adults that are making these decisions? I think

Aanya Angadi 18:11

I think so. I think that when you have a large population of essentially the next generation of adults showing you that they care about something because it's important to them. There's strength in numbers. There's strength in having multiple voices. When a large number of youth comes up and they're saying, we care about this, we need this. We really, really do need this. It does have a tendency to make even it just makes someone look and see, try to hear us out, see what we're asking.

Joy Oranwa 18:39

I actually agree with Anya on this one. I think when we started speaking out, there were administrators who truly listened to us and started implementing change because we spoke out about an issue that directly affected us. And I think that really, like motivated us to keep doing what we were doing, like keep speaking out because they listen, you know, to student voices. How did you

Shannon Fagan 19:05

learn to share your own stories on mental health?

Aanya Angadi 19:08

For me, I found that it was really a lot easier to talk to legislators or just talk to leaders in general by first building a connection or finding a common ground. For me, I've been able to use my personal experiences being a high schooler going through the stress of academic work while balancing curries, which everyone has done. So being able to relate, yeah, this has made me feel really stressed out at times, and it's caused X, X and X or X, yeah, it's caused all this. A lot of lectures can relate to that, and it can really help start a conversation point and just guess and check. I guess I found that. Found that out as I continued on my advocacy journey,

Shannon Fagan 19:53

sharing your own mental health story with legislators. How was that? How was that for you?

Joy Oranwa 19:58

Um, I haven't. Really been able, I guess, to share my experience with, like, my personal experience with legislators, but I know sharing it, you know, with, you know, the superintendent and things like that at my school, I think that really gave him insight. Because I think that sometimes maybe, like school administrators, since they are like, disconnected from the students, they don't usually see students face to face. So I think them hearing our concerns directly from us and meeting with us really helps them understand the struggles that we sometimes go through at our school. So I think that really helps that more, maybe more administrators should have like advisory councils and listen to their students or things like that.

Shannon Fagan 20:37

Yeah, I think it's so hard too for educators right now, I don't know what you guys think, but there's so much stress on a teacher. They've got lots of different students, lots of different things happening for each individual student, so having that mindfulness and awareness, but having you feel comfortable and safe to say I need more support or I need help in this way is so key. So what tips would you guys give to other students that want to think about advocacy?

Aanya Angadi 21:06

I think if you're, especially if you're going to talk to a legislature, legislator, you really need to make sure you know your topic, maybe build some personal connections or why you have to express why you care about it, because at the end, that's why you're doing it. Sometimes doing a little bit of research on your legislature can help, because you can help build that personal connection or that common ground. Sometimes providing faster statistics or taking notes while you're in a meeting can help too.

Joy Oranwa 21:38

Um, for me, I guess specifically in schools, you know, start with, I know our school likes to preach the chain of command. You have to go, you know, from the bottom to the top, like, you know, talk to your teachers about, you know, things that directly affect you or they might refer you to, like the principal or something like that, and just really talk about how you feel, and maybe even like the feelings of your peers as well, you know, issues that affect a vast array of people. I think they should really like hear that

Shannon Fagan 22:12

and joy. I think one of the things you've done in your district is work on grief support. So can you talk a little bit about what that looked like for you?

Joy Oranwa 22:20

Oh, sure. So unfortunately, this past year, we we lost a teacher at our school who made like an impact on 1000s of students. He's incredible. So I know the students, we did a whole lot of work to get supports. I know a lot of students and I, we went to the school board meetings, we emailed, we met, we met with the director of people services and the superintendent, and we, you know, we got individual and group counseling, we got therapy dogs, we got academic support the students at our school. I know, we organized like a lot. We organized like a temporary Memorial, like a tribute basketball game, where we raised money for his family, and then we eventually got like a memorial garden. It was beautiful. It got donated to us by a local contractor. And yeah, so I think the students did a whole lot, but I feel like some administrators, we almost felt dismissed by them and as if they weren't listening to our opinions and they didn't possibly like our critiques of the things we had to say. But overall, I think that's something that's important, because I know, you know, I felt like some of the behaviors was kind of bullying at times. I know sometimes I was called, like, names in front of other people, and it made me feel like almost humiliated, embarrassed for speaking up. And I don't think that should happen to any student, especially while grieving and, you know, dealing with an array of emotions. I feel like empathy is definitely something you can have, especially when the emotions are, like, high and intense and things like that. And I know it really affected, you know, some of my peers to see the things that went on. But I do think there were a lot of positives. Like, you know, I know people when I was a school board meeting, meetings and spoke up, and then afterwards, our school superintendent met with the kids who went and really, like, you know, got their perspectives. So I think something especially with this, you know, I want to make sure that that doesn't happen to any other student, and that it does, you know, that they don't feel like they don't belong anymore. It's just because they speak out. But yeah, yeah.

Shannon Fagan 24:45

So your advocacy, even through the diversity of your advocacy, you still had strength, and you still kept going on and bringing other students with you to share your voice and concern during this grief. So good for you, good for you, and seeing the results. That must feel good and Anya, what about you a shout? What can you tell us what shout is?

Aanya Angadi 25:05

So shout is a social justice and advocacy club at my school. It stands for Social handprints overcoming unjust treatment. Wow, a long name. So let me explain what handprints are.

Hand prints are an intentional positive action that can be used to help a footprint which is intentional or unintentional negative impact. So maybe you walk past them in the hallway and they're really upset. Some of you just checking in on them, that can be a handprint, you're trying to help them out. It's an intentional positive action that makes a positive impact. So our school is really lucky to be so diverse, and because it's so diverse, we get to hear a lot of different perspectives, different backgrounds. We have people from all over the world with all these different experiences that get to come and it's helped me be able to listen to a lot of different perspectives, which is a reason that trying to work on stigma behind mental health is important to me, because different cultures have a lot of stigma around mental health. I'm Indian. I know that before, especially a lot of older parents, they don't really like talking mental health. It's almost like a taboo subject, yeah, so working on at least eradicating that from my own community, my loyal community that can maybe really helpful to having open conversations that are going to support us in the future, unless you shout really works to make our school a better space or a more culturally responsive safe space for everyone, so that students, faculty, staff, everyone involved at the school,

Shannon Fagan 26:37

that's awesome. Do you feel that the work that you've done with the Advocacy Network has helped you both building that skill within your own districts.

Aanya Angadi 26:45

I think so. I think with the advocacy network I it helped me put my skills into more of a way I can articulate them better and reach out to people a lot better.

Joy Oranwa 26:57

Oh yeah. I think for me, with the work we're doing with pa Youth Advocacy Network, really helps bring my voice out there. And, you know, the struggles that our community goes through, and I enjoy it, you know, having, like, all these meetings, you know, with school administrators, and being able to, like, bring different perspective from, you know, from Anya school, you know, how they're doing things there, like, especially with her program with shout like, I think that's something our community could use, because we do have a diverse population. We have, you know, African Americans, Latinos, Asians, you know, all these different people from different cultural backgrounds. And I think that's something that we could bring together to make our community stronger,

Shannon Fagan 27:40

so learning from each other too. Okay, well, let me ask you guys, what is one thing you would like to leave our audience with regarding the importance of social emotional wellness or social emotional learning.

Aanya Angadi 27:57

I think by learning how to take care of yourself and take care of your mental health are really lifelong skills. By caring about our own mental health, we can build stronger teachers with others, and therefore build a better community and a stronger community. It's important that every student feels safe, supported and empowered to achieve their goals, and a huge part of this is them feeling like they're able to take care of their mental health and being able to reach resources to be able to do so this all starts with education and being able to have open conversations. So whether you're a student, a parent, an educator or a legislature, legislator, these conversations really need to be prioritized in these programs that help kids advocate for what they need. Need to be supported, because at the end of the day, they really do matter.

Joy Oranwa 28:47

One thing I would really say about mental health is that it affects everyone, all across the board. Like, you know, children, teens and adults. And I do think that more people should be mental health aware. Like, I think one voice can really make change. I think we need a more informed world, just around the stigma of mental health and like the awareness I feel, like the awareness that we're doing at our school incredible, like we've gotten, you know, a school based therapist at our school without, you know, parents won't have to pay out of pocket for it, so students can start getting help, the help they need, without having to worry about the financial situation. And I think for advocating for mental health, being persistent with their advocacy is crucial, because there are a lot of times, you know, where I was told to, like, move forward and move on like we're, you know, we're trying to move past this, but when you're persistent, they're going to want to do that. But you know, don't be discouraged by it. You know, some person might not listen to you, or might say something, you know that really affects you. I know the way you. Haha, maybe like, the way I felt like I was treated, you know, really affected me, and I don't want any other student to have to go through that. So that's why I speak up, and that's why I advocate. And I think I'm really proud that a lot of my

peers, you know, they see that, and they really appreciate it, like I had one of my friends, he texted me after our school decided to implement like, a policy on, like backpacks and things like that. You wouldn't be able to bring your your backpack into school, and you'd have to carry like a little Chromebook case. And actually, that got repealed, but thankfully. But he was like, Joy work your magic. Like, what are we going to do? So, you know, we started a petition. We got over 800 signatures on it, and then, you know, they repealed it. They met with us, you know, we discussed our concerns with that, and they changed it. Now we're allowed to have our backpacks.

Shannon Fagan 30:55

So, yeah, so you made a difference, yeah. So would your advice be not to give up. Or what would your advice be to a student that's thinking about maybe this advocacy thing is, for me,

Aanya Angadi 31:08

I'd say Your voice matters, and, yeah, you should definitely keep being persistent. Make sure to take care of yourself in the process. But your voice does matter at the end of the day, and you should definitely use it.

Joy Oranwa 31:18

Yeah, just go full force and just, you know, make sure you know your voice is heard, and that if there is some sort of a compromise that you guys can, you know, get implemented, that's better than nothing.

Shannon Fagan 31:32

All right, so I'm going to ask a question. It's a one word question. If you could say, sum up your experience with the youth advocacy network in one word, what would that be? Okay? You can use two. If you have to,

Aanya Angadi 31:48

I'll use one. I'd say impactful, impactful.

Joy Oranwa 31:53

I would say incredible, awesome.

Shannon Fagan 31:56

Well, I encourage other youth to reach out, and if they want to find out more, who should they contact?

Aanya Angadi 32:01

You can contact the UPA network directly by accessing their website. Or, I think you can contact, yeah, social media. Okay, have an Instagram page that you could probably reach out on,

Shannon Fagan 32:13

okay, and we'll add those resources to the end of our thing. Are you both willing to talk to other youth if they're interested? Of course, awesome. Well, thank you both so much for your work, your advocacy, and also just being you and putting yourselves out there to help other students and also teachers understand what's going on. Like I said, they're really, really busy. Everybody is really, really busy, but the more you bring it up, the more awareness you're going to have, and hopefully we'll see change. So thanks for all your work. Thank you. Thank you.

Shannon Fagan 32:55

Open Doors is produced by Emily Wiley at the Allegheny Intermediate Unit. Thank you to the Center for Creativity at the University of Pittsburgh for use of their podcast studio. I'm your host. Shannon Fagan, join us next time when we explore another inspiring program that's helping youth build resilience, empathy and emotional intelligence. Until then, keep the doors open.

Shannon Fagan 33:21

The content shared in this podcast is for informational purposes only. The Allegheny Intermediate Unit does not endorse or promote any specific program or service mentioned in this episode.

Transcribed by <https://otter.ai>