



2021 Storytelling Projects  
University of Pennsylvania

# Table of Contents

3-4 -- Pratyusha Mutyala	56 -- Andrew Bradshaw
5-6 -- Ruby Lu	57-58 -- Veronica Fisher
7-8 -- Shaheen Jaisingh	59-62 -- Kate Lietz
9-10 -- Saryu Sanghani	63-68 -- Maxine Koza
11 -- Michele James	69-72 -- McDonald
12 -- Aaron Bradley	73-78 -- Angela Ding, Brianna Sargent, Samantha Villajin, Hilary Wong
13-14 -- Anahita Sabet-Payman	79-81 -- Julia Flatto
15-16 -- Anabel Kelso	82 -- Brittany Perez
17-18 -- Neelam Vohra	83 -- Kaitlin Murphy
19 -- Gabriella Ciancimino	84-85 -- Tyler Lavender
20 -- Monika Patel	86 -- Victoria Kranz
21-22 -- Julia Minjung Kim	
23-24 -- Sara Banbury	
25-26 -- Chidinma Wilson	
27-30 -- Elena Montag	
31 -- Isabelle Kaneza	
32 -- Ivan Covarrubias	
33 -- Layla Abdulla	
34-35 -- Lydia Lutz	
36-37 -- Mandy Perez	
38-39 -- Olivia Palmer	
40-41 -- Sarah Nessen	
42-47 -- Becca Schapiro	
48 -- Sidney Nunes	
49-50 -- Linda Saikali	
51 -- Daniel Hyunh	
52-53 -- Ella Poole	
54-55 -- Gabrielle Nguyen	

The drawing is a depiction of a student at the HMS school for children with cerebral palsy and his father. The story of this particular student, L, is an inspiring one. Not all children with cerebral palsy are necessarily born with it. In the case of L, it was acquired at the age of 1 due to an enterovirus which first spread to his liver and then later to his brain. Once the infection reached his brain, his parents were told that their child's brain was mostly white matter... and that the best thing for everyone would be to take L off of life support. In a span of 24 hours the lives of Levi and his family changed drastically.

L's family was not going to back down in spite what was being told to them. The expert medical opinion did not matter to them – it was their child after all. According to L's father, there was no way of "being objective" about it. They fought with all they had to keep L alive. The only way L would survive that day was with a liver transplant. However, there was no donor available that was a perfect match for L. It was decided that the surgery would take place anyway, regardless of a perfect match. An hour before L's scheduled surgery, a child had passed away on the helicopter arriving at CHOP. It turned out, that this child was a perfect donor match. That very same liver is what L was given.

Fourteen years later, L is a strong and healthy teenager. His organ transplant was never rejected. Although he is considered clinically brain dead, L is still aware of his surroundings. He expresses emotion. He participates in all of his day to day activities even though some days are better than others. He is accompanied by his dad who is completely devoted to L's well-being and absolutely never regrets the decision he made that day, fourteen years ago, to fight for L's life. To this day, the family believes that L's story is "nothing short of a miracle".





### **1. Briefly describe your experience with MANNA?**

I started with MANNA as an intern with the AmeriCorps VISTA program back in 2015. I was fresh out of college and starting my first job in an unfamiliar city at a non-profit organization that I knew little about. In a short time, I grew to love Philadelphia and MANNA as one in the same. After my first year I was hired full-time, and then grew more involved with MANNA's research and evaluation efforts through the MANNA Institute. Public health was always a passion of mine, and I enjoyed thinking about the ways MANNA could grow to serve more people and meet the challenging and complex needs of the Philadelphia community. My work now enables me to measure and quantify this health impact so we can make the case that *food is medicine* and further integrate nutrition services into the healthcare system.

### **2. From your perspective, how has MANNA changed in the past 6 years?**

When I started at MANNA, we were located on a small side alley in center city Philadelphia. We had a small but mighty staff of about 30 employees and a crew of dedicated volunteers, and together we were making about 800,000 meals per year. About 4 years ago, we moved to a newly renovated facility right off the Ben Franklin parkway that allowed us to expand our services and serve more clients. We also started contracting with local Medicaid managed care organizations which provided us with a reliable revenue stream. We are now serving over 1.5 million meals to more than 5,000 clients per year. We are becoming more recognized within the healthcare system for the health impact of our nutrition services. While we remain a community-based organization, we have evolved into a healthcare organization focused on meeting complex nutritional needs.

### **3. After working at MANNA for 6+ years, how has your perspectives on the Philadelphia community changed?**

When I first moved here, I knew that Philadelphia had the highest rate of poverty out of the 10 largest cities in the US. But as I learned more about the community, I learned so much more about the strengths and assets of the community that paint a much fuller picture. There is a strong non-profit sector that sets out to meet the needs of communities often left behind by city, state, or federal programs. What continues to surprise me is the strength and resilience of communities that face so many challenges – such as food insecurity, low income, chronic disease, police brutality, and systemic racism to name a few. MANNA can play a part in addressing nutrition-related health disparities, but all of these issues require dedicated resources and political will to really make a change. I think the Philadelphia community is well positioned to make progress in these areas.

### **4. What do you want people who don't know about the community you serve to learn?**



I would like people to understand the complex and diverse needs of various communities. Food insecurity may be a common concern among the communities we serve, but it is certainly not the only one or even the most important. All of our clients are also facing serious illnesses with complex medical needs that can complicate many aspects of their lives. They may be facing social isolation, disabilities, treatment side effects, financial distress, or housing insecurity that complicate their food situations even further. Providing comprehensive nutrition services can help our clients meet their dietary needs, but to meet the needs of the whole person requires collaboration and coordination with other organizations and systems.

**5. What is the most difficult aspect of working in a non-profit organization?**

The most difficult aspect of working in the non-profit sector are the resource limitations. Without reliable revenue, we are limited in our scope and depth of services. However, as we improve our ability to quantify our health impact and value, we increase opportunities for reimbursement from healthcare payers. This sustainable revenue is crucial for MANNA's expansion, and I hope that other organizations can follow a similar path to enable their services to be funded and sustained as well.



South Philadelphia was described to be a very culturally diverse and close-knit community. There is a wide range of grocery stores and restaurants selling foods from many different countries in the world. It has a small town feel where everyone is welcoming and is happy to be involved in their community. It is common to run into familiar faces when you step outside your home because of how friendly and warm members of the community are.



JOHN C. ANDERSON  
apartments



The John C. Anderson Apartments are an urban LGBTQIA+ friendly senior apartment community located in the heart of Center City, Philadelphia. The two women drawn here are one of the couples who live at JCAA. They have been together for 27 years! They met at a Lesbian Coming Out Support Group and over the years have participated in gay rights activism, civil rights protests, marches against the war in Vietnam, and more. Between the both of them, they have worked in a variety of professions including writing, singing, musical comedy, massage therapy, and the business of hospitality espionage. Together with a fellow resident they founded the JCAA Newsletter three years ago, which is published monthly and consists of fun and insightful news highlights, articles, bios of residents and friends of JCAA, and reminders about programs and events occurring for the community.

As seniors and as members of the LGBTQIA+ community, they said they only wished that people recognized them as human beings, just as you might anyone else. To treat members of their community with patience, kindness, and compassion is all they ask. They said while chuckling, “Don’t brush us off as doddering old fools. We’re just getting started!”

The ladies also mentioned that among the many places they have lived together as a couple, JCAA has been the first where they have felt at home, where they’ve been able to walk together arms around each other, a place where they aren’t given strange looks for holding hands.

One of the women also mentioned JCAA’s fitting location in the ‘Gayborhood’—near streets named after icons of the LGBTQIA+ civil rights movement like Barbara Gittings and Edith Windsor. It’s a welcoming community both inside the walls of JCAA and in the neighborhood surrounding it.

**S**ummertime. The kids played in the street while families gathered for block parties.  
**O**ccupied with bills and poverty, their focus shifts away from their own health.  
**U**nified neighborhood with close knit families.  
**T**ry to offer more to the community rather than taking. Treat natives better. Less gentrification.  
**H**ouses were almost lost. Family businesses closed. Nowhere for the kids to go. More violence.  
**W**orried about other diseases. People do not take heart disease seriously.  
**E**at a lot of soul food. Eat without thinking. College was when I thought about it.  
**S**ymptom recognition is important. Need to focus on literature, better nutrition and classes.  
**T**he people make the community.



<https://www.senatoranthonyhwilliams.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/SouthwestPhilly-768x695.jpg>

RC

I was born and raised in Frederick Maryland. My family and I came to Philly for better opportunities.

I got drafted into the Army in 1965, I was 19 years old. I had just got a job, but then when I got home, I had draft papers waiting for me at home. So I went to the Army. I got inducted down on Broad Street. Then went to Fort Jackson for basic. Then Fort Pope for jungle training. Then I went to Vietnam. Vietnam was pushing us fast. I didn't have much training. It was just hard being in another country. It was very hot, and seeing trucks blow up just makes it hard to talk about. I served 2 years active, then 4 years inactive. Those years inactive were here in the United States. I was a specialist in Vietnam, then a drill sergeant at Fort Knox.

I was able to get my job back when I got back. The job had to take me back if I got drafted for the war. I worked in a factory for all my years. I had a blueprint to cut out a design for various products. I was able to go to a school for music, that was for four years. My fingers got messed up from playing the guitar all the time. My dad convinced me to do that. Also got into refrigeration. I did multiple side jobs on the side to make extra money. Helping fix refrigerators was actually my favorite. We were able to help people. We saw a lot of houses that we could tell the families weren't doing well. Me and my partner made a pact to not rob people that were doing bad. We would see four or five kids running around and you could just tell they were having a hard time. How could other companies rob them? I never understood that.

I got married in 1972. We had a daughter and a son. She went to college in NC. My wife passed away 25 years ago, she was only 40. I had to take care of the two kids by myself. Both kids ended up doing well in college and finishing. My daughter is now a probation officer, since she studied criminal justice. They are doing well and I'm happy with them. I didn't want to get married again and go through that work again.

My favorite hobbies were bowling. I've bowled 275 many times. I also like to fish with my son. We have gone deep sea fishing many times. Off of coney island, captain Dalton would take us out. The fish were pretty big and awesome that we would get. The rockheads were big! Captain Dalton was always going to find you some fish, so that made me happy.

I wish the community recognized us veterans more. I'm in a club of Vietnam veterans, and we go to lunch or the movies together. I've noticed that we get no respect from some of the places we go to together. The black community doesn't respect us at all. I've been asked why I drive around in my monkey suit by them. But then when we go to other places, the people are very nice to us and thank us for what we've done. Its like were celebrities. Their wives are hugging us and all.



## Storytelling Project

### “Story Time”

Two neighbors gathering in a South Philly neighborhood on a sunny beautiful day as they catch up, share old stories, and new. This is very typical in a neighborhood in south Philly, the neighbors know each other, and many go from acquaintances to “family”. There is a major sense of a community on the South Philly block, on any day you can find multiple people gathered on a front lawn, chatting, gossiping, and reminiscing over old memories.

# ***Smoke-Free Casinos: Is It in the Cards for Me?***

A card dealer's perspective

I deal the next hand as smoke fills the air,  
I know I'm a casino worker, but do patrons think I don't care?

I'm exposed to second-hand smoke whether it's a day shift or a night,  
There has to be a way where we can make this right.

Throughout the pandemic management claimed our health is their "top priority",  
So why do they act as if our opinion is in the minority?

The temporary smoking ban gave me a glimmer of hope,  
But the return of smoking has made it even harder for me to cope.

I'm more than just a casino worker- I'm a human, a partner, a friend.  
It just feels like all my efforts are resulting in a dead end.

Casinos want to stay competitive, so they allow smoking to stay,  
But the return of smoking has already turned some patrons away.

The most likely way things will change is if they ban smoking in the entire state,  
And if I'm being honest, the odds of that happening don't seem too great.

Several of our staff members have already resigned,  
Now I'm wondering if I'll be the next one in line.

I've signed all the petitions, done all that I can do...  
Because don't I deserve to breathe clean indoor air, too?

Storytelling Project  
Anabel Kelso

Author's Note:

My storytelling project was based off of many impressions and interpretations that I gathered throughout my work with the American Heart Association this summer. I had the opportunity to speak with many casino workers and patrons about their opinion on smoking returning to casinos, and many have spoken openly and honestly about how it has negatively affected them. My storytelling poem is not based off of any one individual, rather I have crafted it to capture the culmination of my work and reflect the feelings of many workers and patrons.



Neelam Vohra  
Storytelling Project- July 19, 2021  
Healthy NewsWorks

Healthy NewsWorks (HNW) is an organization striving to engage students in health and literacy. As the HNW mission states, the staff members, volunteers and board members strive to help develop children's power of inquiry and to enable them to share health information with their community.

Drawn here is the growth of a seed into a plant. We can see in each panel that the seed gets larger, grows more leaves, and settles more roots. In speaking with a board member who has worked with Healthy NewsWorks for more than 10 years, I discovered a common theme about growth and development surrounding HNW's efforts over the years.

The board member I spoke to emphasized the ways in which evaluations throughout Healthy NewsWorks programming has brought her an understanding of the impact the organization has. In her enthusiastic description of what HNW offers the community it serves, she summarized it by stating that it was the action of "planting a seed, and seeing it grow"—it provides students with skills that informs how they move through the world. As members of the HNW network, we are able to see the ways in which students grow in confidence and self-esteem, as well gain abilities in relating health topics to themselves and their communities. She described the way in which the HNW mission to impart students with skills of health literacy, research, communication, and writing has an identifiable impact on not only the students themselves, but on the community in which they reside.

# Able.



I told myself not to, but yet I still did it.  
My mother told me to never judge a book by its cover,  
But when I first met my students, the biases seemed to fit.

With a wheelchair in use and communication device on the stand,  
I had placed their label over their able,  
But turns out I just did not understand.

I began to note their struggles and discover their needs.  
It isn't easy living with a neurological disorder,  
But still they take on every day and succeed.

Their world was flipped upside down due to the emergence of COVID-19,  
Where they were expected to learn and do therapeutic activities  
all behind a screen.

Their return to the classroom was nothing short of happy.  
They danced, sang, and painted,  
and proved the competency and resilience that comes with CP.

These students changed my perspective and wiped my biases away.  
I learned all about their **abilities**;  
a precious gift I will carry with me every single day.

A Letter to My Former Self,

You are kind and deserving. You are absolutely capable of managing your health. With the right guidance and with an open mind you can do this. It's time to transform your life. At first it might seem daunting to open up to someone else about your health. But, a day will come when you'll notice a shift. On this day you'll recognize that the change within yourself is something that you want to continue improving upon. Take advantage of this opportunity to speak to the dieticians about your health. They are open-minded and very willing to help. It is not a formal meeting, and the casual nature of it will help you feel less intimidated. Don't be scared, with a little nudge in the right direction you will begin to realize that you can do this.

The next few weeks are going to help open your eyes to a different lifestyle. Food is medicine, and after MANNA you will recognize the importance of providing your body with well-balanced, nutritional meals. Nutritional and healthy food can be exciting, and MANNA will help you realize this. Although this is a part of your treatment plan, you will also start to see this as a transformational time in your life. Beyond just the meals, you will begin to feel motivated to work on your cardiovascular health. Physical activity that at one point felt so impossible will begin to be a little less intimidating. The notion of challenge won't be as scary. Although it is nice to belong to a community of people who are experiencing the same cardiovascular health problems, you are more than just that. You deserve to be recognized as an individual. Your future is filled with excitement and hope, and if you take advantage of this opportunity now you will recognize that you can make the right changes in your life to help move in the right direction. I am so proud of you for being brave, for being vulnerable and for being hopeful.

Sincerely,

Your Future Self



### **Storytelling Project: Julia Minjung Kim (Penn Dental)**

“There is a reason people don’t come back to Philly after they’ve made it.” Most people, if given the chance to overcome poverty, wouldn’t return to where they lived in poverty and on welfare. However, my interviewee has come back to serve the areas of Philadelphia with the main hope to be an advocate for them in face of period poverty. When asked what her hopes are for the people of the communities that she serves, she answered, “for them to live—for them to make it another month and not succumb as victims. I hope for them to live up to their full potential and to live with dignity.” This desire to go back to and serve where she came from mirrored the story of Harriet Tubman, who used her freedom share it with those in need. The railroad tracks on the painting represents the path my interviewee came from but also is choosing to go back to, to help those in need. The progression of the path running parallel to the tracks represents the progress in her community she hopes for.

When asked about her role in the lives of the people of the community, she said, “I give them a sense of life that they don’t get—a friendship, a safety. I show them my vulnerability; I show them who I am.” This demonstrates that the scope of my interviewee’s work is so much greater than just meeting one need of a person. The whole drawing resembles the triangular shape of Maslow’s Hierarchy of needs. Though the organization my interviewee works for focuses specifically on period poverty, I quickly realized the organization deals with almost every level of the hierarchy of needs—physiological, safety, love and belonging, self-esteem, and self-actualization (achieving one’s full potential).

*“He’s Our Son’s Birth Mom”: How a Pandemic Made a Family Break all the Rules, and How it Worked*

By Sara Banbury, Philadelphia Family Pride

Nate and Hank decided well before the pandemic that they wanted to become parents. They had spent time researching adoption, exploring the various options for fatherhood as a gay couple. Expanding your family as an LGBTQ+ comes with a host of decisions that straight couples rarely have to contend with: who will be the biological parent? Will there be a biological parent? Adoption - private or public? Closed or open? Foster to adopt? Surrogacy?

The beauty of these possible complications is opportunity. About a year before the pandemic, Nate and Hank’s good friend Sam, a trans man, unexpectedly offered to carry their child.

“I have a uterus that I’m not using and you guys could use a uterus”

Sam had decided he did not want to be a parent, but also wanted a child in his life. As the birth mom to Nate and Hank’s kid, he now serves as an uncle figure. Uncle Sam, someone involved and present, but not ultimately responsible for raising a child. Sam is disabled in a way that would interfere with raising a child, but not with carrying one.

After the offer, Nate, Hank and Sam had a lot of long, hard, intentional conversations. This unique situation only worked, Nate said, because they are all the type of people to make life decisions through excruciatingly exhaustive, intentional, and vulnerable conversations. They spoke with lawyers, geneticists, all kinds of doctors and ultimately decided to move forward with inseminations.

They thought the complicated part was over. The decision had been made, the many discussions were finished, the path forward seemed clear, even if that path forward involved sending sperm via FedEx across state lines, it was clear.

Then came March of 2020.

Nate has one of those flashbulb memories, the ones where you feel like you relive it when it emerges from the depths of your brain, of walking back to his car with Hank from a closed state park, closed because everything was closed back then, and getting a text from Sam: a photo of a positive pregnancy test. It was official, they were going to be pandemic parents.

Pretty much immediately the pandemic complicated things. Sam was alone in Boston, isolated from the support systems he planned on relying on to get him through the difficult process of pregnancy as a disabled, trans man. Once the morning sickness hit at six weeks, it was clear he needed help he could not get in Boston. So Sam moved in with Hank and Nate in Philadelphia.

This broke the first iron rule of surrogacy. Do not get too involved with your surrogate, but it turned out that the forced roommate situation held unforeseen benefits for all involved.

Nate is a self-identified anxious person. Having the birth mom of his son in his house, where he could take care of them, make sure Sam was doing alright, make sure the fetus was doing alright, in an already extremely high stress time, helped. And it was immediately clear that the situation was good for Sam, he got the care and support he needed, and Nate got to give that care and support.

Of course, there were still the inevitable roommate growing pains. Different schedules, space sharing, the banal adaptations one makes with new roommates. When asked about how the adjustment period was, he smiled and asked if I knew the nursery rhyme the Old Lady Who Swallowed a Fly. Laughing, he assured me it worked out for the best in the end.

While the pandemic caused many problems, it enabled many solutions. They were all home a lot, but Nate and Hank both work in academia. Unfortunately, the busiest time of their semester coincided with the last, and in some ways the most difficult part, of Sam's pregnancy. They were not able to be as present as before. However, another friend had lost their job because of the pandemic and was able to move in to help relieve the executive function burden from Hank and Nate.

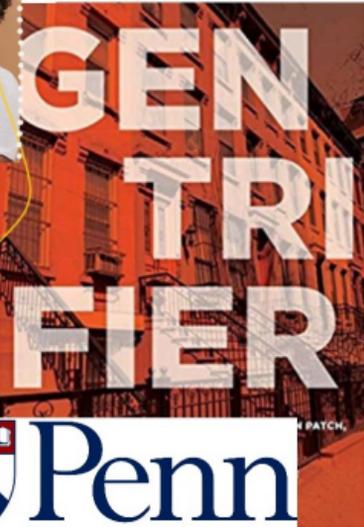
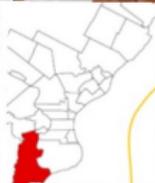
Nate and Hank went from living alone, to living in a loud, rambunctious house of four. Nate took care to point out that the fact they live in a bit of a larger house made this arrangement possible. But there was a warm smile on his face when he thought back to bringing his son home to such a big household.

"Our house was big, beautiful, and vibrant when David came home."

Pandemic parenthood worked out just fine.



BARTRAM'S GARDEN



Penn  
UNIVERSITY of PENNSYLVANIA



Chidinma Wilson  
BTG CHIP 2021  
Sankofa Farms  
July 19, 2021

### A Philly Juxtaposition

My interviewee, a kind spirited chef, and I discussed the meaning of community, importance of the Sankofa Farm's summer program, and fractured relationships in West Philly. The collage serves as a synopsis of our conversation and a representation of the juxtapositions of institution and community.

To the chef, community is sitting on the porch cracking jokes. It is eating water ice with friends at the block party. It is checking in with the elders to see learn the latest news. Community makes her feel safe. It is familiar. It is pleasant.

Gentrification, she notes, has been disrupting the community, especially from surroundings universities. We discussed how neighbors were forced to sell familial homes for low prices, driving property taxes up and rent skyrocketing. She would love to see West Philadelphians wearing university gear proudly but knows there is many years of hurt standing in the way of that vision.

Optimistically, the chef proposed a remedy to this issue. She encouraged universities to return what was taken, giving space for West Philadelphians to take ownership of the space again. While we wait for institutional change, students can take the time to learn their neighbors, ask them about their experience living in the city, and develop a nuanced appreciation for West Philly.

Finally, she highlighted the importance of understanding agriculture and accessing gardening spaces. Students at the Sankofa Farm program have the opportunity to learn more about agriculture, food sovereignty, and self-reliance from an African Diasporic lens. Thus, empowering a new generation to lead a more active and informed role in their nutrition and overall wellness.

Elena Montag  
Bridging the Gaps Storytelling Project

### **Secret “S”**

Marginalized women are superwomen,  
Though no one can see their symbol.  
They know they must always be empowered  
To take care of their problems on their own,  
Or be called lazy, be judged, be blamed  
For the burden society has placed on them.  
“They got their hair done, they have phones,  
Why can’t they get themselves pads?  
You’re making them lazy, reliant.”  
Blamed for what they have,  
Blamed for what they lack.  
To ask for help is to be what they say you are.

### **Distracting**

When she had two slipped discs in her back,  
She went to a doctor she had never met before.  
When you’re on public assistance,  
You never know what you’ll get—  
A good doctor or bad, an ally or enemy.  
This time, when she tried to explain the pain,

The agony and loss of mobility,  
The doctor snapped—  
“Stop talking with your hands like that, it’s distracting.”  
She put her hands down.  
She went quiet.  
The doctor told her  
That she must just be there looking for a note  
So she would not have to work tomorrow.  
What could she say? What could she do?  
So she shut down,  
Tucked away her pain, her vulnerability.  
She felt unsafe, her words discounted,  
And she went home with two slipped discs,  
Unheard and untreated.

## **Hope**

We asked her,  
“What’s your greatest hope for your community?”  
She replied, voice thick and eyes overflowing,  
“For them to live.  
That they make it to the next month.  
That they don’t succumb  
To the conditions they live in every day.

That they reach their full potential  
And realize they deserve to live in dignity.  
That the world finally realizes they exist,  
And that they matter.”

## **Safety**

We asked if she ever feels unsafe,  
And she said, “Of course, all the time.”  
Walking through streets where half the walls  
Have bullet holes, where half the houses  
Are slowly crumbling with desperate people inside.  
She knows that she is a guest,  
Entering a world that is not hers,  
But to which she has devoted her life, nonetheless.  
She knows that there is danger,  
She remembers the times she has prayed with her daughter  
That they will make it home that night.  
But she still goes back almost every day,  
She still says, “Hello, how are you?”  
Engages with the people she passes  
And with all the women she serves.  
“Treating people with dignity,”

She says, "Treating them with respect.

I'm just a visitor in the space they live in,

I get to go home tonight."

They live here, feel this stress and fear

Every moment of every day.

They live their lives on guard against every threat.

Being vulnerable, being open,

It gives them a moment to do the same—

To be vulnerable, to be open, to be safe,

If only for the space of one conversation.



### The Letter That Saved His Life

The veteran I interviewed struggled all his life with substance abuse, from smoking cigarettes at eight years old to experimenting with mescaline and crank after his time in service. This caused a rift in his familial relationships up until the point when his wife requested a divorce and his family admitted him into a rehabilitation center across the country. While packing up his life, he found a letter from a woman with whom he had a baby out of wedlock. The baby was kept in secret for thirty years from his other family. While in rehab, he rekindled that relationship with his long-lost son and worked to rebuild his life with a greater focus on family. He eventually got connected with VA resources and today, his job is to link veterans just like him to resources that will help keep them on a path to a life of fulfillment and productivity.

The aged paper represents the lost letter, the branches represent creating new meaningful connections with his family, and the yellow flower buds represent all the veterans with which he has assisted in creating a better life.



This piece was inspired by my interview with Puentes de Salud Staff member “I”. She described to me what it was like to work for the South Philadelphia Latino community, most of whom are immigrants. Many lives were drastically affected by the COVID-19 pandemic for the worst. Lives and jobs were lost and food insecurity during the time was rampant. I created this piece by collaging multiple images on photoshop. In the background I have two images, a Guatemala neighborhood on the left and a Philadelphia neighborhood on the right. This is supposed to represent how many of our Puentes clients exist in two planes at once. While they may be living and working in Philadelphia, they also have loved ones and lives that exist back in their home countries that many wish to return to, victorious. The maize in the middle ground is supposed to represent the food insecurity that many of our clients faced during the pandemic. Maize is such an essential staple in many Mesoamerican cultures. There is a Mayan story of creation that says humans were made from corn, that corn is the spirit of life itself. On the foreground I have a picture of a masked family walking toward the viewer. This is supposed to represent the uncertainty that the last year showed, and the resilience that arose from it. When all is lost there is always the option to move forward.

Someone new is at lunch today.  
Wavy black hair, caramel skin –  
eating chana masala?  
Maybe she is like me.

I think about telling her who I am.  
We share a culture but  
I am black,  
she is not.

Deep breaths.  
*I am actually part Indian.*  
My body stills –  
will she reject me?

Used to mockery  
and disbelief,  
I am no stranger to  
unbelonging.

She grins!  
We talk about my grandfather,  
his food, his home –  
My culture.

We talk about our heritage.  
Richness of weddings, holi, food –  
can we visit the homeland?  
Maybe she is like me.

I think about my blackness.  
We share a culture but  
she looks desi,  
I do not.

She breathes in.  
*I am actually part Arab.*  
My body stills –  
will she understand me?

Caught between  
worlds.  
We are no strangers to  
unbelonging.

The Indian in me  
smiles and  
comes out of hiding  
slowly.

*Author's note: One day during lunch at my site, Covenant House, I talked to a youth who noticed that I was eating Pakistani food. She revealed to me that she was part Indian but would often not tell people about that part of herself since many would not believe her since she was Black too. We bonded over our shared culture and connected on the struggles we both have faced with our identities. At the end of the conversation, we both admitted to feeling more comfortable with the diverse parts of ourselves. Before leaving, she asked me for advice on how to give back to the Indian community so we were able to sign her up as a volunteer at a local Indian advocacy and community service organization. I felt so inspired by our conversation and shared identity struggles which is why I decided to write a lyrical essay that captured the essence of our conversation based on my understanding of her point of view.*

harm

is

reduction

love



¿Cuánto durará el encierro?

El aire afuera disfruta nuestra ausencia,  
en las calles,  
las plantas trillan, hay música de trenes vacíos.

Se terminó el capitalismo.

Si tienes un rompecabezas, empiézalo  
ante a aprender a tocar un instrumento.

Nadie te está aislando.

Seres solo tú y tu miedo al tiempo.

¿Te das libertad, querías tenerla?

La libertad

hoy respiras!



NA-DIE  
me  
ES-Á  
AIS-LAN-DO



The piece I created is based on the stories shared with me by participants and case workers at Prevention Point, particularly about the magnified and intersecting struggles of poverty, uncertainty, institutional abandonment, and substance use disorders amidst the pandemic. Over the last year and a half, the importance of a harm reduction approach to these issues has only grown. I came to Prevention Point with an incomplete understanding of harm reduction, thinking that it was a sort of tolerance of people's trials or shortcomings. Harm reduction is far more than tolerance; it is a form of unconditional love. Harm reduction embraces people where they are at and refuses to abandon them in the face of profound marginalization and criminalization. It holds hope for another's future, without condemning their present. It keeps people alive.

The image of the woman and child, along with the *poema*, is from a mural at Love Lot, where Prevention Point hosts a meal distribution site. A portion of the Spanish words and my approximate translation (the English portion of the mural was eroded and difficult to read) are below. The author is unknown.

¿Cuánto durará el encierro?  
El aire afuera disfruta nuestra ausencia.  
En las calles,  
Las plantas brillan, hay música de trenes vacíos.  
Se terminó el capitalismo.  
Si tienes un rompecabezas, empiézalo.  
Si no, ponte a aprender a tocar un instrument.  
Nadie te está aislando.  
Eres solo tú y tu miedo al tiempo.  
Querías libertad, querías tiempo...  
¡Hoy respiras!

How long will this confinement last?  
The air out there enjoys our absence.  
On the streets,  
The plants shine, there is music of empty trains.  
This is the end of capitalism.  
If you have a puzzle, start it.  
If you don't, learn to play an instrument.  
No one is isolating you.  
It's just you and your fear of time.  
You wanted liberty, you wanted time...  
Today, you breathe!

Description: I wrote this poem based on my reflections of conversations with a staff member and based on my experiences at PPP. It is written from the point of view of the sidewalks of Kensington, where many of our participants live. It is meant to detail the suffering of our participants experiencing homelessness, while also showing that they matter and have not been forgotten by everyone.

### **The Streets of Kensington**

Every morning the sun shines brightly on me  
Discarded waste surrounds me  
Food, clothes, sharps pile up  
The smell of a city left to its devices  
But I, who traverses all of Kensington, cannot forget

I watch as those who call me home stir awake  
Begin another day of just surviving  
Plagued by an illness that is relentless and uncontrollable  
I pray, I hope that no harm comes to those who call me home

Oh! how I weep  
I feel their desperation, fear, and trauma  
I witness it  
The violence, rape, thefts, deaths, despair  
Wrong time, wrong place  
Work gone very wrong  
Belongings gone when they try to rest  
Broken promises  
A sample gone wrong

They'll do whatever it takes  
It has gripped their brain so tight  
Has made it hard to pull away  
And even just a small misstep  
He's blue in the face, not breathing  
One dose, two, maybe three  
He rouses  
Another life saved  
Another almost statistic

But to me, they are not statistics  
They have stories  
They have strength  
They have family  
They are loved  
In a city oft forgotten  
I watch over those I've been forced to protect

Each night the sun goes down  
They fight to stay awake for danger comes at night  
Exhaustion overcomes them  
But then it's light  
Another day of pushing on  
For it, it who entraps them

And yet there's hope, hope for a better future  
They matter  
They cannot be forgotten  
But until then, I will house them  
I will love them  
Until that better future comes

We can never give up  
For they are us and  
We are them  
They are us and we are them

Olivia Palmer  
American Lung Association  
July 16, 2021

## **One Person's Role in Ending the Youth Vaping Epidemic**

Al has spent 40 years working for the American Lung Association. He started as a volunteer advocating for the clean indoor air act and is now working on the front lines of the youth vaping epidemic. Al's current job at the ALA focuses on youth tobacco prevention by conducting presentations on the harmful effects of vaping at schools throughout the northeastern and north central area of Pennsylvania. He also recruits new schools and school advisors to join the ALA's Tobacco Resistance Unit (TRU) groups, which are school-based student groups that aim to help youth ages 12-18 stay tobacco free.

His audiences range from classrooms of students to auditoriums, and he notes that the diversity of students really enhances his job because he gets great enjoyment out of meeting students where they're at. In fact, Al's favorite part about his job are the strong relationships he has been able to form with advisors and students at schools throughout the years. When asked what his favorite memory of his work was, Al recounted numerous times in which he would sit down with youth tobacco users who responded negatively to his message of the importance of quitting. He spoke with pride, however, as he remembered how many of these students would seek him out later when he returned to school in future years to tell him that they've been tobacco free. His notion that, "I don't give up on anyone" is surely a force of positivity amidst the teen vaping epidemic.

Despite the benefit that Al clearly has had on students throughout the years, he maintains a very powerful perspective on the best way to impact youth. Al communicated that the students themselves are the truly powerful changemakers. He finds it most effective and rewarding when he trains student leaders to conduct the tobacco free programs at their own schools. Al endorsed a grassroots, community-led approach to end the vaping epidemic as he described the positive impact it has for the tobacco-free message to be delivered by youth themselves. He noted, "what better way for students to listen than hearing it from older kids in their school that they look up to. Peer education has a lot more impact (than me doing it) because other students can relate to them." Similarly, Al pushes for a lens of empowerment as he is working with the students themselves. He said, "I like the youth to realize that they don't have to be a standing target... I like to help kids to realize they're not powerless in the face of the tobacco industry's manipulation." After speaking with Al for just a short time, it is abundantly clear that he knows the youth themselves are the key to ending the vaping epidemic, and that he feels privileged to help them find their voices along the way.

As many know, the youth vaping epidemic is a dangerous public health issue. Al would like people to realize that the work he and the ALA do saves lives. He very much sees his work as a long-term commitment to improving the health of our youth and communities – "we might not see it in the work we do every day, but we're planting the seeds." It is uplifting to see the positive work done by such passionate people at the ALA. However, COVID-19 presented serious setbacks and challenges to this work. Al mentioned that many kids started taking up more tobacco products during the pandemic because they were home and had increased access via online shopping. "There will certainly be long term consequences since we weren't able to be as strong with our message as we usually are... there's nothing that beats human contact to get the

message out.” As terrible as it is that the pandemic likely increased the rates of youth using tobacco and vaping products, we can maintain some level of optimism knowing that people like Al are eager to return to their work in person this fall.

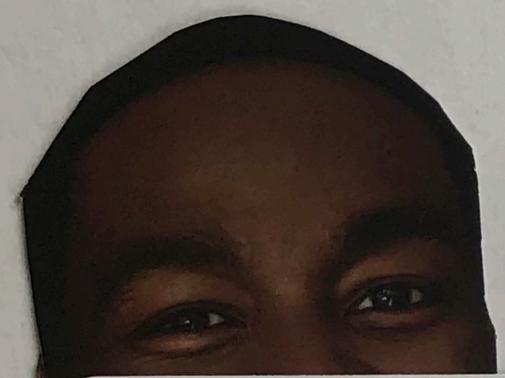
SILENCED BY CASINOS

LOST WITHIN the smoke

BURIED UNDER CARDS

OUR HEALTH IS ON

THE TABLE



Sarah Nessen

Bridging the Gaps 2021

Storytelling Project

For my storytelling project, I decided to make a collage highlighting the common themes I heard from casino workers affected by second-hand smoke. I incorporated a short poem emphasizing that workers feel unable to speak up against their employers. Casinos are stifling because of the second-hand smoke, and because workers cannot voice opinions without risking their jobs. I wanted to show that casino workers often feel invisible to lawmakers and hidden from the general public. As a result, going into work is a gamble for the health of these employees. Instead of hand-writing the poem, I decided to use letters from a magazine. This choice further highlights that casino workers cannot reveal any aspect of their identity when voicing frustrations. Similarly, I covered the faces of the people at the bottom of the collage to show that employees are both silenced and must remain anonymous when speaking about their work conditions.

**\*\*Note:** all photos and letters are from *Vogue* magazine

Becca Schapiro

For my storytelling project, I turned my interview into a longform poem called *I Stay Out the Way*. Every line is a quote from the young man I interviewed.

### **I stay out the way**

I'm a young, young, young man. 21.  
I do music everyday. In the studio, I cut it out.  
Hip hop.  
I speak pain in my music.  
Expressing my feelings, what I've been through.

Covenant House saved me. For real. They have a studio.  
I probably would have been in my hood. In violence.  
I get bored real fast.  
Bored and then into trouble.  
I used to rob people.  
I've changed now.

My character when I'm moody gets bad.  
Around certain people I get panicked and triggered.  
The stuff I did was traumatizing. I won't talk about it.  
It's not pretty.  
Now I stay out the way.  
I try not to talk to people.

I don't condone negativity.  
I'm getting old. Too old for that.

I went to jail. Did three years. Then my support team dropped.  
I came home.  
My family threw a party. Everything went out the window from there.  
My support team dropped low.  
I'm on my own. I gotta try to make a living for myself.

I gotta do anything to get money to eat. Not anything.  
I want to grind to get money.  
I focus on my music. My music can get me there.  
You'll hear my music one day.  
Probably.

You're going to hear the stuff I went through.

The stuff I'm going through.  
The next step.  
That's what I spit in my music.

The real me was going to jail.  
Probably would be doing life right now.  
If I was the old me.  
Jail broke me. Jail breaks anyone.  
I changed.  
You can either learn from it or turn to it.  
I turned to my music. I speak through my music.  
I have a lot of views.

People say, bro, stick to the music.  
Don't be in the streets.  
So I stick to the music. I let it calm me.

I'm humbled now. I wasn't humble back then.  
I played with the music.  
It was hot.  
Now I got serious. It's a whole different ball game.

I'm going to make a hit song.  
Mark my words.  
I'm going to make a song, and it's going to blow up.  
I'm telling you.

Watch how my support team comes back.  
Or wants to.  
Or tries to comes back.  
You'll see what I'm saying.  
You gotta stay down till you come up.

I only got a little bit of people I know are still there for me.  
They move in silence.  
They don't count blessings or favors.  
They don't talk.  
They don't doubt.  
I know if something happens, right then and there they're going to do something.  
My support team is little.

It's not how I wanted it to be.  
I got family.  
I want my support team from them.

The people that are supposed to be doing all that aren't there.  
I understand though.  
They've got their own situations they gotta deal with.  
I understand.  
But not hearing from y'all.  
Y'all not checking in on me.  
Y'all having a cookout and not letting me know.  
It's like a family breaks apart.

People are dying out here these days.  
It's like people love you when you're dead instead of when you're alive.  
Somebody dies right now, I bet their family's gunna post on the 'gram.  
I miss you.  
I wish you were still here.

You should have said that when they were still here.  
A lot of fake lov out there on Instagram.  
You can't just forget about a person until they're dead.  
Don't show no fake love.  
We know who their real support team was.

I look at this place.  
We're all in jeopardy everyday.  
Everyday.

It's stressful.  
We gotta look at the new world coming.  
It's changing.  
The new generation is changing.  
You got kids shooting kids.  
You got grown men shooting kids.  
Nobody is safe out here no more.

There's an article on google.  
Look it up.  
It tells you what the world is coming to.  
It tells you.  
It's only if you're smart enough to understand.  
I read stuff like that because I'm seeing stuff.  
Why is it happening? What's going on?

I lost two homies.  
One of them I was arrested with.  
I came home and saw him.

Two days later I see him on Instagram.

Another one.

I ran into his brother.

Next thing you know, it's the 4<sup>th</sup> of July.

What's going on.

This article, it says we need to get ourselves out the way.

This generation.

The gun violence is outrageous.

I lost homies that I didn't think would be gone right now.

It says, in the article, we are expected to get ourselves out the way.

Nobody is safe.

Philly is bad right now.

The murder rate is up.

It's almost over Chicago.

You can't even have a cookout without nobody shooting it up.

And you're having it for the neighborhood.

My homie had a cookout for the neighborhood.

They killed him.

At his cookout.

At his store.

He was an entrepreneur.

I grew up with him.

He don't bother anyone.

He's an entrepreneur.

He sells clothes.

He just wanted to throw a cookout for the 4<sup>th</sup> of July.

He was doing it for the community.

They just came and ruined his whole party.

I've seen the video.

He was having fun out there.

They just came and ruined that jawn.

One hundred something bullets.

I'm pretty sure you probably heard it on the news.

It broke my heart.

I was supposed to go to his store.

He had a hoodie for me.

He told me to come grab it.

I got my own situations, so I can't really travel like that.

But that's my homie.  
He was blessing me with a hoodie.  
We went to the same school.

It's really hitting.  
I think sometimes it can't be true.  
I'm losing homies like it ain't nothing.

They killed my other homie.  
He was a rapper.  
He made music, expresses his feelings.  
That's what I do.  
I make music, too.  
They just killed him.  
He's only 21.  
That's how old I am.

You see a lot of people dissing in music.  
It's catching up to you.  
It will catch up.  
One way.  
Or another.  
All you can do is stay safe.

I don't do too much.  
I'm prepared.  
I don't do too much.  
I stay out the way.  
All you need is one person to slip up.

I just make music.  
I'm about my music.  
I want to be the next upcoming artist.  
I got something to talk about, express my feelings.

I talk about my homies.  
Me.  
What I've been through.  
Jail.  
Everything.  
Everything I've been through.  
Everything I rap is true.  
It's a true fact.

Sometimes I just sit back.  
I observe so I know what I'm talking about.  
I don't want to be rapping about something I never did, never had.  
I'm going to grind for it.  
You gotta be patient.

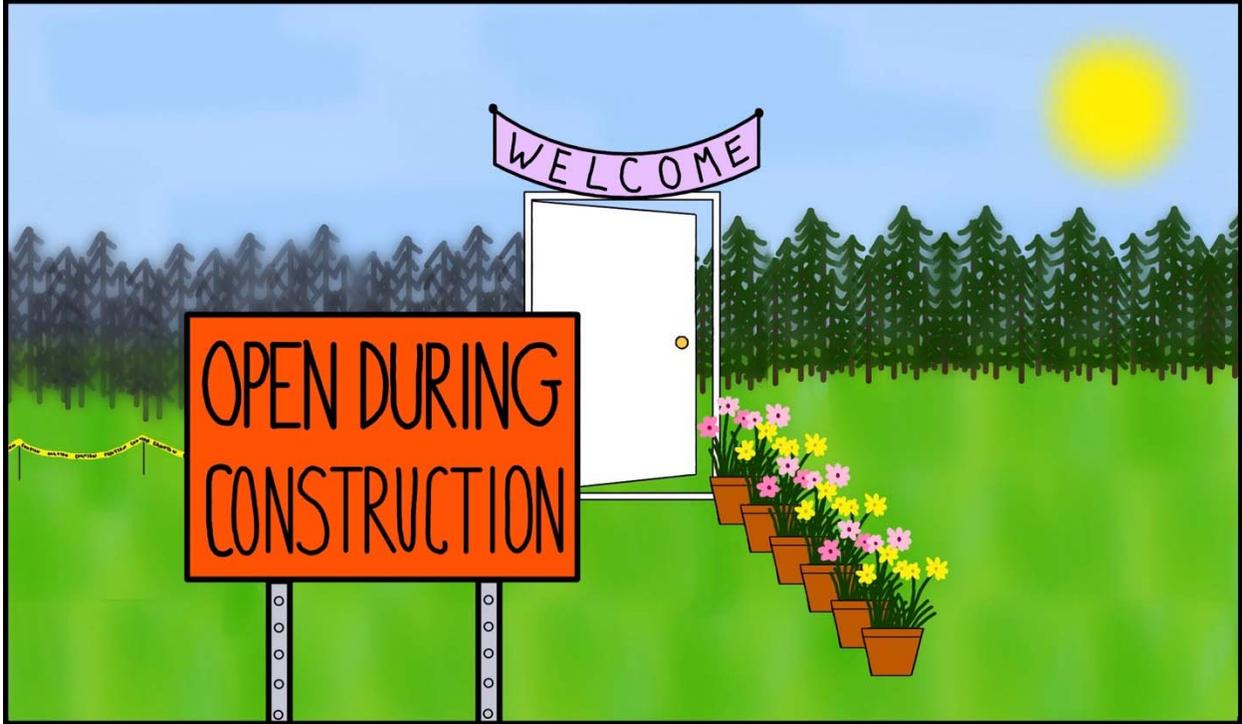
All I do is talk about pain.  
That's all I've been through.  
It's pain.  
It's a pain world.  
Nobody's promised tomorrow.  
Nobody's promised today.

You know what they say.  
Live your best day like it's your last day.  
That's what I'm doing.  
Living like it's my last day.  
I go to the studio to write something.  
I want to make music, so that's what I do.  
I make music.  
I stay out the way now.

I want to travel to do music.  
I'm going to chase my dreams.  
The one thing that can stop me is death.  
Not even that.  
I'm not letting anything stop me.  
You're going to see me on TV one day.

I have to make it out.  
I have something to talk about.  
I didn't ever think I would be in this situation.

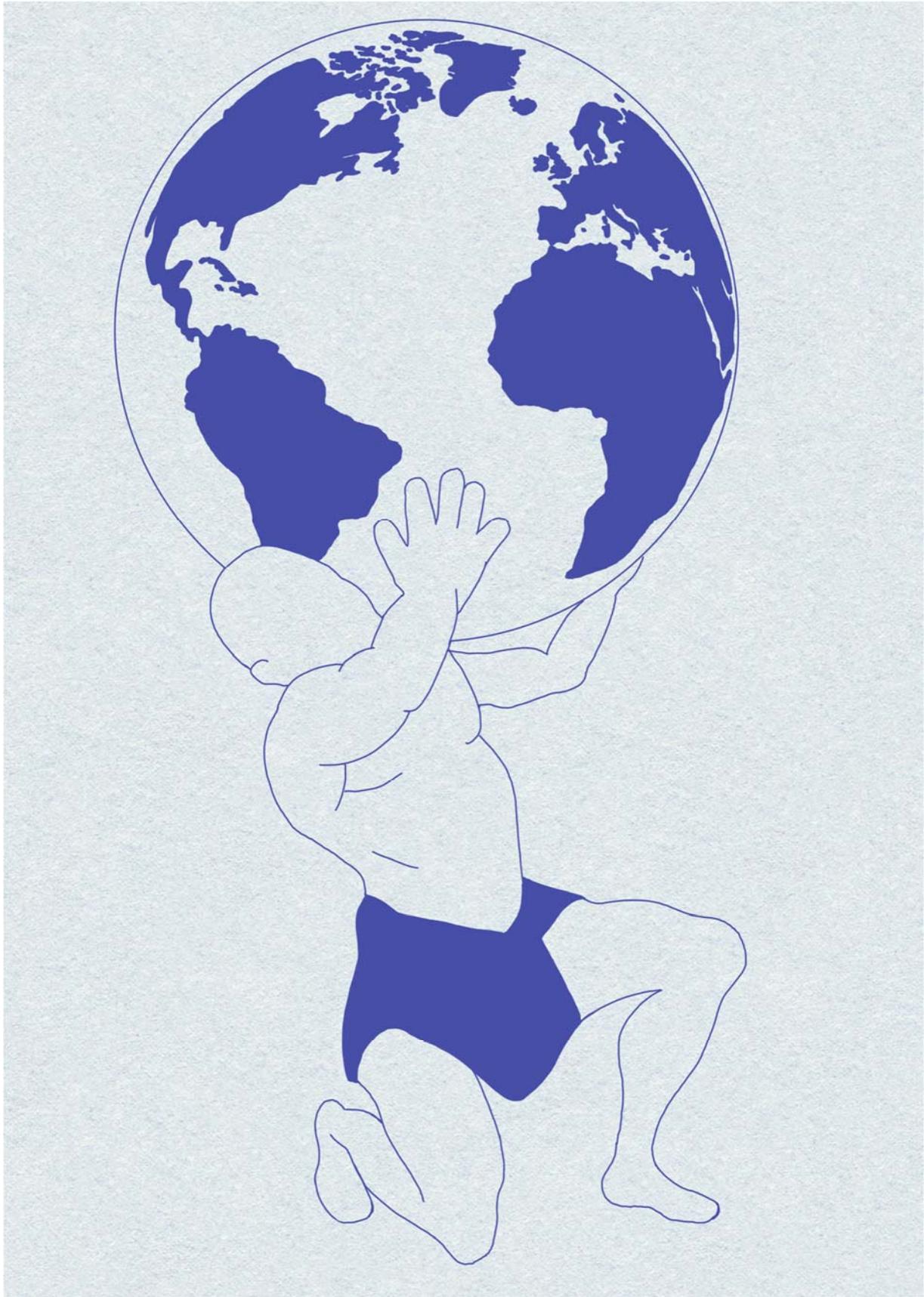
Everything happens for a reason.  
I make music and keep to myself.



Sidney Nunes  
BTG Storytelling Project  
07/19/2021

This piece was inspired by my interview with a staff member (“C”) at my community organization. C works in a relatively new clinic at an FQHC, and one of the main themes of our conversation was about building and rebuilding the clinic in pursuit of better patient care. The COVID-19 pandemic increased staff turnover and accelerated the process of reshaping their practice, but the staff is still fiercely dedicated to providing the best possible care to all their patients.

With this piece I wanted to capture the chaotic process of growth and the challenges of undergoing extensive change while staying open. The burned forest to the left represents COVID-19, staff turnover, and the things we need to leave behind when we are building new things, like forests that need fire to flourish. The door, banner, and flowers represent the clinic’s intense dedication to creating a clean, welcoming, and accommodating environment for all patients. The door opens to the new growth forest to represent both that growth is the way forward and that the challenges and changes are all motivated by the goal of providing better care to every patient who walks through their door.



For my storytelling project, I interviewed two of my supervisors at HIAS PA. When asked what they love about working with the refugee community, both commented on the strength and resilience of their clients. As such, I chose to sketch this drawing as a symbol of strength and the global nature of HIAS PA's work. Additionally, the scar on the abdomen represents one of my supervisor's favorite memories at this organization. One of her young clients came through the resettlement program with end-stage renal disease and was told he would not be able to be placed on the kidney transplant list. After much research and advocacy on her part, he was ultimately able to undergo the transplant last year. I really valued this story because it speaks to how our healthcare system is not designed to work easily with immigrants and refugees and also to the importance of the role of HIAS and similar organizations in advocating for these communities.

# Narratives From the Community



What's great about the community you serve (what do you love about it)?

MANNA serves diverse and vibrant communities across Pennsylvania and southern New Jersey. There are many differences between these communities, however the individuals we serve share similar experiences regarding their severe medical conditions and need for nutrition services. The clients we serve come from all walks of life, and we are proud to be able to meet their nutritional needs at times when it may be very challenging for them to do so themselves – because we all need to take care of each other. I love the way our community shows up for each other. MANNA has over 9,000 volunteers per year who donate their time to make sure that their community is taken care of in times of great need.

Will you share a favorite memory of living in this community?

My favorite memories about serving MANNA's clients are during the Thanksgiving holiday each year. Thanksgiving is a special time at MANNA because we prepare and deliver a full Thanksgiving spread to serve each client's whole family. We have volunteers who fill the kitchen and line the streets waiting to drive meals out to each client on Thanksgiving day. The whole community rallies together to ensure each of our clients can enjoy the holiday with their families. The holidays may be a challenging time for clients who have especially serious medical conditions, but we hope that this helps alleviate the stress of preparing a holiday meal and enables clients to enjoy the day.

What are the resources and strengths of the community you serve?

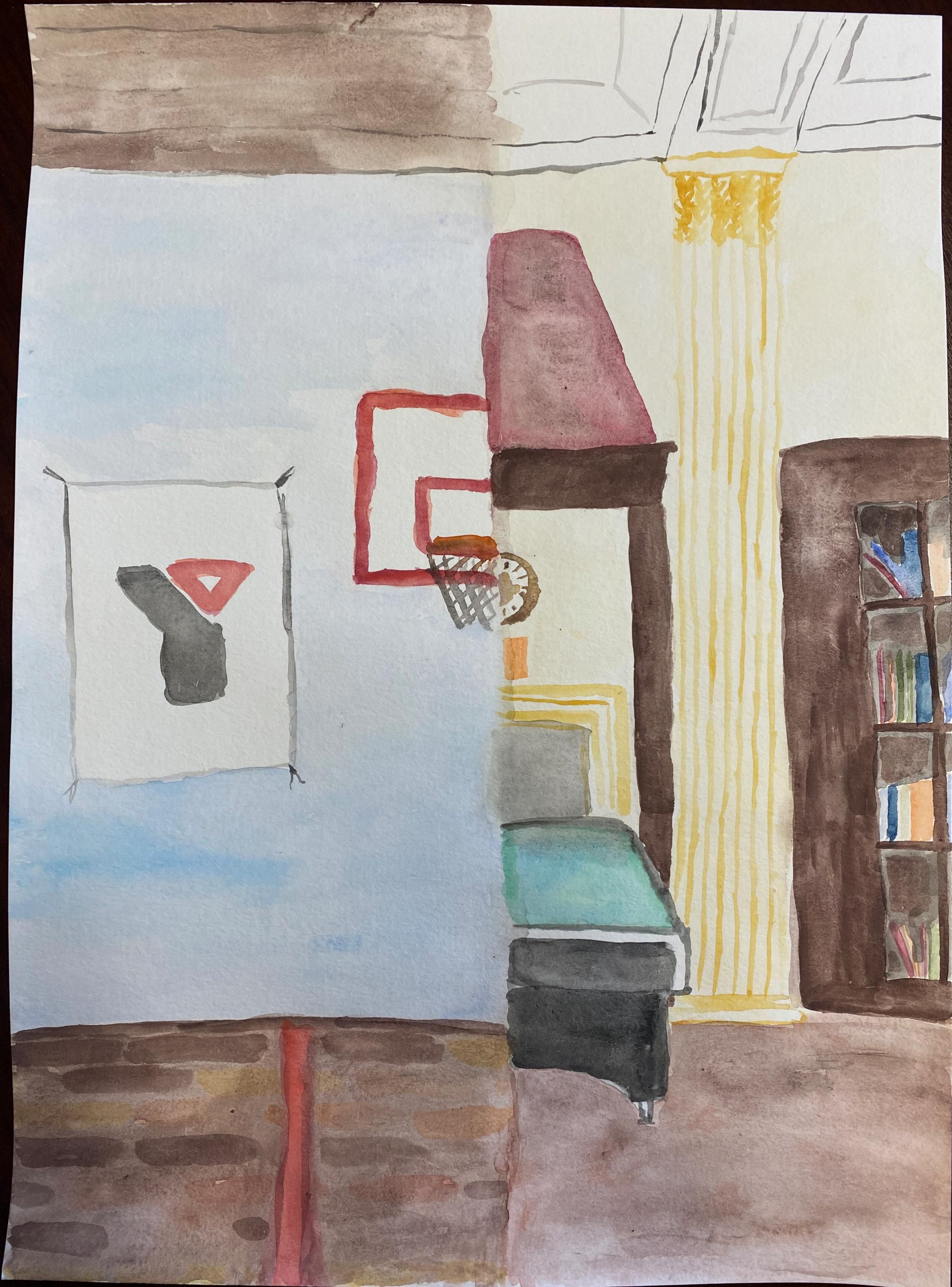
The Philadelphia region is luckily home to a strong non-profit sector focused on addressing the long-standing health disparities and inequities in the region. There are organizations focused on food insecurity, healthcare, violence prevention, community development, mental and behavioral health, and literacy, to name a few. In addition to the many non-profits, other resources include mutual aid groups that pool funds to address micro-level community needs at the neighborhood level. The local community development corporations also have an active presence in neighborhoods across the region as well.

How has covid-19 affected your community?

COVID-19 continues to affect nearly every community across the globe, however the threat that this virus poses to MANNA's communities is especially severe. MANNA's clients all have medical conditions that put them at greater risk for COVID-19 complications. A simple trip to the grocery store at the height of the pandemic became an especially dangerous endeavor, which meant that clients relied on MANNA as their only source of nourishment. More clients were referred to MANNA than ever before, as the healthcare system realized that food access was limiting patients' ability to manage their medical conditions. MANNA increased services to meet the growing need, and has delivered over 2 million meals to clients since the pandemic began in March of 2020. Clients have shared how grateful for they are for MANNA serving them during a time when they could not safely grocery shop for themselves.

What does cardiovascular health mean to you?

Cardiovascular health means nourishing and moving your body in a way to maintain the health of your heart. It means getting enough nutrients to support healthy heart function



*A side by side of the YMCA basketball court of his youth and its present-day appearance as the building atrium.*

Mr. W has been a resident of this veteran housing facility for 11 years and Kensington for his entire life, apart from his 12-year military service. When he was a child, this housing facility was his neighborhood YMCA. The pool in the basement where he learned how to swim is now the building's boiler room. The basketball court has become the building's atrium, a social hub for the residents and the site of Mr. W's beloved morning "coffee club." Mr. W reflected on how Kensington had evolved since his childhood. He described how the busy factories that he walked by when he was young have become houses and empty lots. He lamented the growing issue of substance use disorders within the community. After speaking with us, Mr. W left to help his mother who still lives down the road.



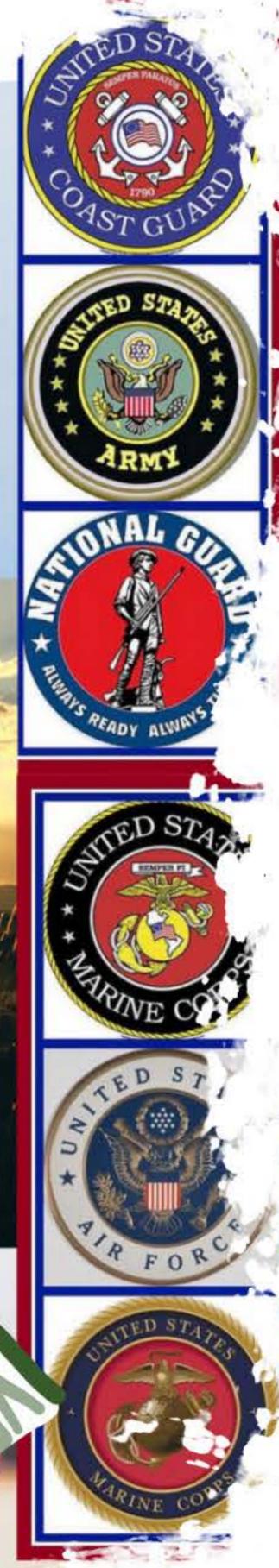
ve... AN

THE MORNING NEWS  
NOVEMBER 12, 2017



# VALUABLE SERVICE

Lehigh Valley Roundtable  
preserves veterans' stories



Gabriella Nguyen  
Bridging the Gaps Storytelling Project

“Look out for you, look out for me”

I had the absolute honor of interviewing a veteran who has an incredible, inspiring story that shows the significance of the veteran community to him. This veteran had a problem with drugs and alcohol, tobacco, and homelessness. But he decided to reach out for help at the Coatesville VA in order to rebuild his life and became an example for his family and others. This included getting a job at the VA to help other veterans with obtaining employment and rebuilding their lives like he did. The art piece that I submitted is called “Look out for you, look out for me” which is a direct quote from him, signifying the support and camaraderie of the veteran community. Whether you see the art piece upside down or right side up, the veteran is holding up the other veteran, just like how the veteran I interviewed is now holding up other veterans. The hands contain words from the interview to generally describe the veterans. The interviewee had talked about how veterans are from different backgrounds and have different identities, but their veteran status is what they all share. They all went through basic training and committed their lives to serving the country. It is admirable and inspiring that this veteran, who had dedicated his life to serving the country and received help, is now dedicated to serving other veterans and helping them live their lives.

see need.

day, the neighborhood felt a  
science to

Don't Judge this book by its cover.

Schools

have

improving

behavior but need

leadership and the local

community to build a more

positive environment

for the children.

Our parks and recreation centers offer a diverse range of activities for all ages.

Police and fire departments are working to improve safety in our neighborhoods.

Parents in these areas can make a difference.

All the parents in these areas can make a difference.

Veronica Fisher  
Storytelling Project Description

For my storytelling project, I interviewed one of the residents of an Impact Services residential unit. Near the end of the interview, after answering questions about his time living in Kensington, the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on his community, and his thoughts on health in general, the resident mentioned that he has to “take care of his girls”. Thinking he was referring to daughters, nieces, or human loved ones, I was about to ask additional questions when he proudly stated he was talking about his two turtles. His eyes lit up when we agreed to meet them, and he eagerly ran to his room to get them for an introduction. To see this man, who had spent the past thirty minutes reflecting on growing up in a neighborhood he now no longer recognizes and telling stories of unfathomable challenges in the military, break out into the biggest smile full of joy and love for these two turtles, was an incredibly profound and pure moment to behold. I had the honor of interviewing this amazing individual, and I thought the best way to capture who he was and the community at large was through the two beings he loved most, “his girls”.



*Social Work in Practice – MileUp*

As a social work student, I have both rejoiced in, and struggled with, the multitude of ways one can practice this profession. For this reason, I have significant interest in exploring the number of ways one can utilize a Masters in Social Work (MSW). This Summer it has been particularly insightful to see how social work skills are mobilized at Students Run Philly Style (SRPS), a Philadelphia non-profit focused on cultivating goal-setting behaviors through distance running and mentorship. Here, social work finds itself at the head of the non-profit's MileUp program. While the non-profit's biggest programming efforts focus on serving Philadelphia youth at large, MileUp is a diversion program that specifically serves youth who have been arrested and face involvement in the juvenile justice system. Students are referred to MileUp by the District Attorney and if they opt in, can participate in 3 months of running and mentorship programming to have their restitution paid and their records expunged.

Selected students work closely with youth advocates, adult volunteers, and peer mentors, who have gone through the program themselves. While it may sound simple, a social worker's perspective illuminates the challenges that come along with overseeing this program. For one, the program began amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. With its launch date in January 2020, MileUp only ran uninterrupted for about two months before transitioning to a virtual model amidst rising public health concerns. Leadership described this transition as challenging, not only because of the pressures it created to constantly reimagine the program as health and safety regulations changed from month-to-month, but also because of the stress participating students faced in all aspects of their lives. As months went on, students became fatigued with just about everything virtual. SRPS leadership was tasked with enforcing strict attendance, as this is a mandated program, while also attempting to show the students grace and compassion during a

period of personal difficulty in the wake of their arrests, but also in a moment where their communities were facing heart-breaking circumstances.

In addition to the increased threat of illness faced by the world at large, students in the MileUp program confronted another rising threat in their city; gun violence. The social work leadership at SRPS lamented the horrific increase in gun violence in Philadelphia communities, noting that it was especially important to make sure MileUp students feel safe not only from physical threats of COVID-19, but from those they face in their communities as well. Therefore, planning this program comes with a particular set of challenges.

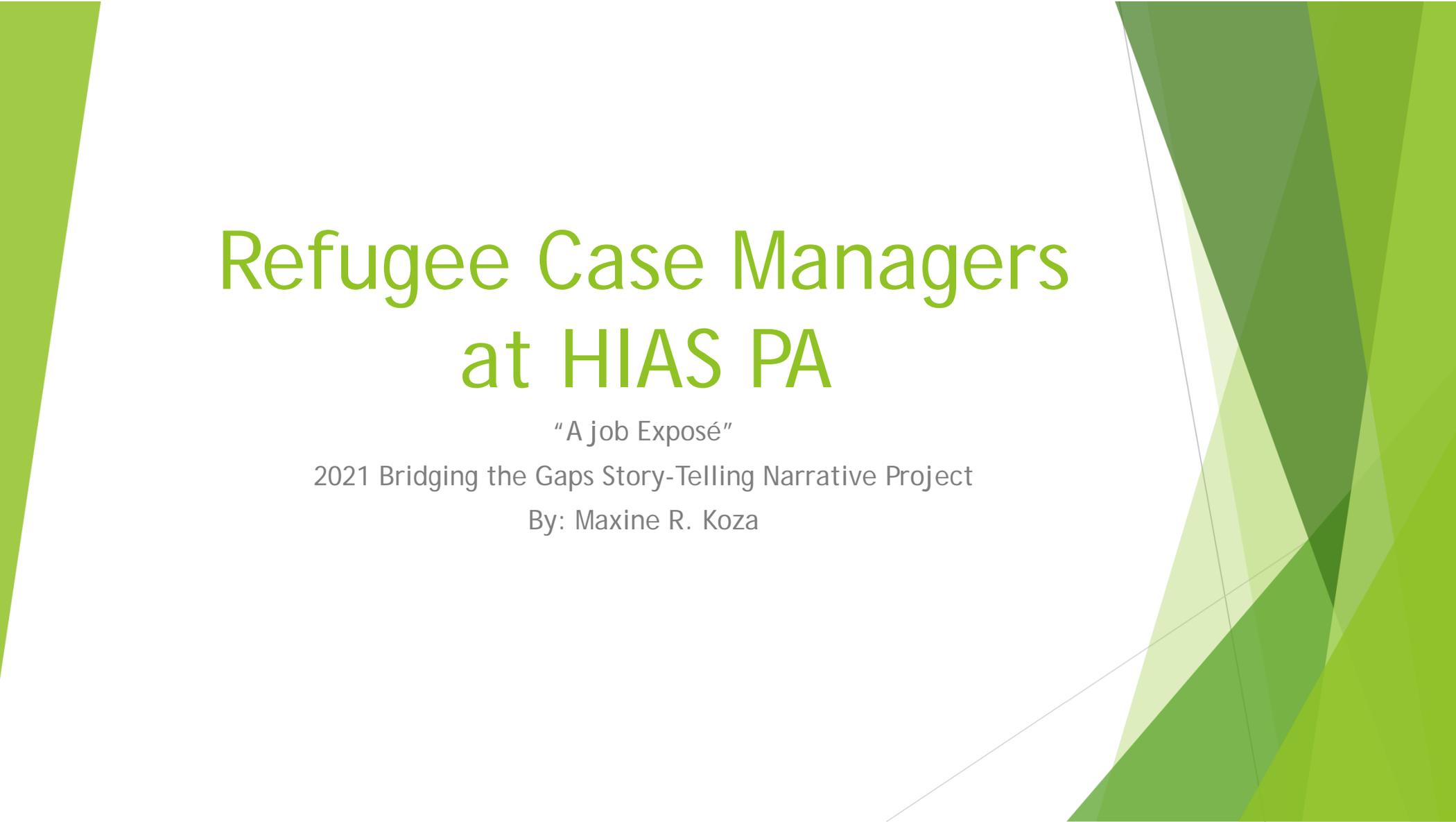
Many of these students do not want to be seen running in their own neighborhoods due to fears that their whereabouts will be known, or because running down the street feels like a dangerous activity rather than a stress-reducing exercise. The simple solution would be to run in neighborhoods other than where participants reside, however, fears and trauma cannot be removed by a few blocks. In a new neighborhood, these young people worry about their unfamiliarity with the area and who might be there. Additionally, the pandemic created new challenges in transporting youth to areas where they feel safe to run. Since SRPS has been unable to offer car rides to students during the pandemic, a small number of students frequently skipped programming, citing their fears of riding SEPTA through neighborhoods they did not know. The paralyzing fears of gun violence, sickness, and the pressures from a system that has done little to help them, has led some students and peer mentors to stop attending the programming altogether.

SRPS leadership agrees that punishing children for feeling scared is not the answer. But how can the non-profit team enforce attendance, ensure young people get the most out of the programming, and prioritize student safety? These are the questions the social work leadership is

currently grappling with. Over the past year, they have attempted to make programming as beneficial as possible for participating youth. The leadership has shown innovation in creating small races for the students, when all larger city runs were cancelled. They stressed the importance of races, as they give students a sense of accomplishment and allow them to feel the satisfaction of completing mentally and physically demanding distance runs. Through the challenges of the program, the leadership also celebrated the successes that not only came in the form of finished races, but the positive development of participants. From a social work perspective, we believe all people are capable of growth and positive change. This is what SRPS chooses to highlight, as they discuss not only the increased physical strength of students who gain a new appreciation for cardiovascular exercise, but also the mental transformation of students who began the program with self-doubt and ended it with a strong sense of accomplishment. Distance running certainly is not an easy feat, but with the social work perspective that believes in folks' inherent strengths, it is possible to encourage a student, even one that has never run before, that such an accomplishment is possible.

The MileUp program is off to a promising start, but is still too new for long-term data to be available. As a social worker, it is important to see not only how students understand the program when they are at practice or crossing the finish line of a race, but how it is impacting their experiences in their everyday lives. While running is great, we must ask if it is sustainable for these youths who experience so many fears just existing in their communities? And subsequently, how can we take the whole person, their environment, and the resources they need into account to make this programming as effective as possible? These are the questions that the profession of social work demands we ask.

It is difficult to tell what the long-term implications of this program will be, and it would be naïve to think that running alone will solve the health, equity, and justice issues that exist within this city. That being said, the MileUp leadership is working to be more involved in creating long-term change by advocating for progress at the systemic levels as well as in their work on an individual scale. After speaking with leadership, I am inspired by the strengths-based approach, and the ways social work values have been incorporated in this one-of-a-kind programming. I look forward to seeing how social work leadership continues to use this program as a catalyst for greater change in our city while working on the individual and systemic levels to create lasting impact in the communities of young people.



# Refugee Case Managers at HIAS PA

“A Job Exposé”

2021 Bridging the Gaps Story-Telling Narrative Project

By: Maxine R. Koza

# Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society-Pennsylvania (HIAS PA)

## Mission:

- ▶ HIAS Pennsylvania supports low-income immigrants of all backgrounds as they build new lives in our community. Through immigration legal services and an array of social services, we work to address their needs, defend their rights, and advocate for their equitable inclusion in American society.

## Values:

- ▶ Our values are based on the core Jewish beliefs of “welcoming the stranger” and tzedakah (generosity, charity and fairness). HIAS Pennsylvania views newcomers as valuable resources, not burdens to the community. We believe in the dignity of the individual. We believe in compassion, empathy, tolerance, and respect. All of this is embodied in our commitment to a multicultural society.

## The Program:

- ▶ From their first steps on American soil to the oath of citizenship, HIAS Pennsylvania helps immigrants navigate the complexities of American society and its legal system. Our work across spans legal, social support, and citizenship services. We also advocate for immigrant issues and rights and educate the community about immigration.

## Why is a Refugee Case Manager Important?

“The overall goal of a Refugee Case manager is to help vulnerable clients become self sufficient in their new communities” (Personal Communication, July 10, 2021)

- ▶ The case Manager is an integral part of the Resettlement and Placement (R&P) program. By providing basic needs and a core group of services for a refugee’s first three months in the United States, the Case Manager takes on the role of “general contractor” trying to fit the pieces of the complex refugee resettlement program together for the client
- ▶ A case manager will assist client families with a variety of basic need services like housing, public benefits, ESL classes and school enrollment to name a few. In addition, they will advocate for client needs and help them understand both their rights and obligations in the United States.

“I am hands-on, detailed, and \*usually on time. This position is responsible for so much, people do not realize all it encompasses” (Personal Communication, July 10, 2021)

# A Day in the Life of A Refugee Case Manager

Adapted from a personal Interview conducted on July 10<sup>th</sup>, 2021

- ▶ **7:30am:** I wake up, make a cup a coffee and open my emails. I usually receive about 20-25 emails daily that I need to catch up on. The morning is a time for me to gather my thoughts and come up with my “day plan” .
- ▶ **8:15am:** When we were still remote, I could get up much later and still have time to do all my work- Now I am out the door by 8:15 and on the 21 Bus Line, on my way to work!
- ▶ **9:00am:** I walk into work and gather the things that I will need for the day. Sometimes I need to grab a set of keys for a locker storage unit or sign out a rental car if I am moving clients into a home. I will also socialize a little bit, if I have time.
- ▶ **9:45am:** No time to sit down, I am usually on my way to meet a client at a medical appointment or helping them enroll for benefits at the Social Security office. Most of the time I will meet them using public transportation but sometimes I will call a lyft.
- ▶ **1:00pm:** I try to eat before 1pm but most of the time I never get to. I mostly eat on the bus going from one client to another. There are days when I just don't have the time & will have to wait until dinner.
- ▶ **3:00pm:** By this time, I am usually done with client tasks (unless there is an airport pick-up/house move-in/emergency) Sometimes I will go back into the office to drop off items, other times I will go home to work on my administrative tasks.
- ▶ **5:45pm:** I would like to say that I get done work at 5pm but I rarely do. I will usually work until about 5:45pm. I am exhausted at the end of the day & rarely want to go out after.

## Analysis & Processing

- ▶ The position of case manager is extremely difficult and time consuming. While always trying to maintain a health equity and access stance, it is not always easy to balance the clients needs and the organization's constraints. The case manager that I spoke with goes above and beyond for her clients. It is easy to think of basic care that people may need when arriving in the United States, it is another thing to think of all the other small details that someone who doesn't speak English may need to know.
- ▶ For example, the case manager will demonstrate how to call emergency services like 911, provide a culturally appropriate hot meal on the day of arrival, and even show the clients how to lock doors, open windows, turn on a stove, etc., These are just some of the things that the case manager must remember to do when a client arrives in addition to coordinating travel
- ▶ Juggling these different facets of refugee resettlement is complex & challenging!

# Moving Forward: How to Prevent & Reduce Burn-out

- ▶ Have realistic expectations
  - ▶ No one can be perfect! Many case managers will have more cases than they can handle- Slow down & realize that you cannot achieve everything
- ▶ Appreciate & Integrate
  - ▶ Try to find a good group of coworkers and come up with ways to vent in healthy manner. One idea could be doing a group movie outing!
- ▶ “No” is Not a Bad Word
  - ▶ Set up a time schedule and stick to it. It is important to maintain healthy boundaries.
- ▶ Find mentorship
  - ▶ Having a solid mentor can be helpful in identifying/preventing burn-out before it even occurs. Mentors provide insight on challenging situations & can help alleviate stress

# HMS SCHOOL

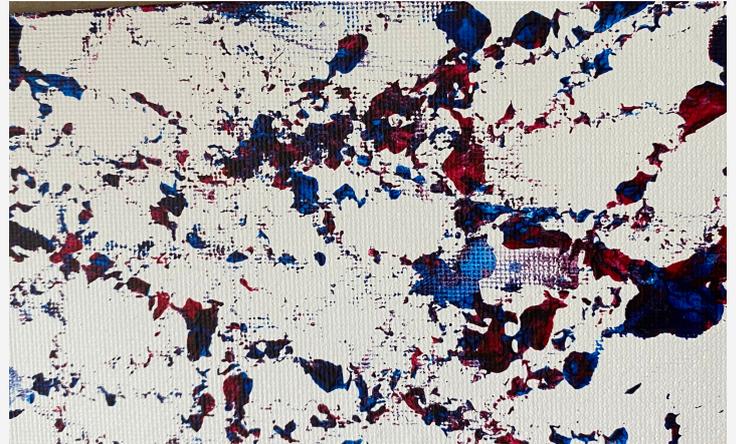
for Children with Cerebral Palsy



An interview  
with a  
community  
member  
from  
HMS School  
displayed  
alongside  
artwork  
completed by  
students

What do you want people who don't know about your community to learn about it?

I want people to better understand how much individuals with disabilities can do, especially around communicating their wants and needs. Everyone expresses themselves differently, however, with interest and patience, we can hear what each person is telling us. It makes such a difference to recognize and respect the individuality of each person. Our students interface with so many professionals in the medical and community services worlds. It is critical that we all tune into what our students are communicating so that we make sure we're getting our work right.



”

THE PEOPLE THIS SCHOOL BRINGS TOGETHER ... ARE INSPIRATIONAL AND A CONSTANT REMINDER ABOUT WHAT'S GOOD AND JUST.

“

## What do you love about HMS School?

The people this school brings together—students, families, and staff—are inspirational and a constant reminder about what's good and just. The constant practice of looking at what a person can do and how to best support them with that action or goal is a reminder about how good people can be. I also love how much I learn here. My coworkers, our students and their families have so much to teach about their professional disciplines and human experience.

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## Will you share a favorite memory from your time at HMS School?

There are many moving moments throughout each school year, however, the first thing that comes to mind is how much fun we have here. If I need to smile, I think about our annual lip sync battle where students and staff compete with all of their might and talent dancing, singing, and having fun. Many people bravely put themselves out there and we cheer each other on. We are a school first and a place where you come when your body is working in the way it needs to for you to attend—in body, mind, and spirit.



”

WE ARE A SCHOOL FIRST AND A PLACE WHERE YOU COME WHEN YOUR BODY IS WORKING IN THE WAY IT NEEDS TO FOR YOU TO ATTEND - IN BODY, MIND, AND SPIRIT.

“

## What are the resources and strengths of your community?

Our resources and strengths are vast knowledge and the interest and ability to learn and do more. Our strengths are the determination of our students and commitment of our staff members. We are fierce advocates for our students' and families' needs. My colleagues have dedicated their life's work to providing services to children with special needs. I learn something new in every meeting I attend with them. The team based approach means we are never focusing only on one aspect of the student, but on the whole person. The holistic approach capitalizes on how we help a child function in their specific environment meaning in their family system, community, and with their friends.

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## How has COVID-19 affected your community?

Children with disabilities and their families were disproportionately impacted by the pandemic closures because they could not access vital resources such as hands-on therapies and home nursing on which they depend for safety and function. It was an anxiety provoking time to receive services and in many cases the services didn't exist due to Covid precautions. Resources were often scarce and complicated. Covid-19 further isolated families who are already isolated because so few people are able to help them with the care of their children due to the level of training required to do so.

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COVID-19 FURTHER ISOLATED  
FAMILIES WHO ARE ALREADY  
ISOLATED BECAUSE SO FEW PEOPLE  
ARE ABLE TO HELP THEM WITH THE  
CARE OF THEIR CHILDREN.

“



Narrative Story-Telling Project

Bridging the Gaps 2021

Angela Ding UPENN Nursing C/O 2023

Brianna Sargent MSW Candidate C/O 2022

Samantha Villajin UPENN Nursing C/O 2023

Hilary Wong D.M.D. Candidate C/O 2024

## INTERVIEW

Goal: For students to hear the perspective of the community from someone in the community.

*\*The answers in **black** are from an older adult. The answers in **blue** were gathered from an adolescent to compare perspectives.*

- **Where did you grow up? Give me a snapshot of the neighborhood.**
  - I grew up in the inner-city of Philadelphia- Germantown to be exact. Close knit neighborhood, row homes. Corner stores everywhere. A lot of noise, but it's just kids having fun- didn't happen all night.
  - Afracircle Philadelphia (Northeast Philadelphia)
  - City - corner stores
- **How was it growing up in (such and such) neighborhood? Was it racially diverse?**
  - Demographics- Race Black Ethnicity : African American. Other races and ethnicities were more than welcomed, but we would usually go to each other's neighborhood. Everybody went to the same schools in my specific neighborhood, so you know everyone from kindergarten to twelfth grade- unless they were no longer there for whatever reason.
  - Everyone looked out for one another, especially for those who lost loved ones.
  - Overall, Philadelphia is a melting pot
  - More foreign (immigrants) - asians, europeans
- **When you think about Philadelphia, is there anything you want to change?**
  - Where do I start? School system. An environment conducive for children to feel safe and be active outside. Gun violence has really increased over the past few decades, it is out of control it seems lately, it's so many things, I can't just pick one. This city needs to be put in a washing machine- go through small holes, and be dried anew.
  - Stop hating; stop violence
- **What's great about your community (what do you love about it)?**
  - I love how we can all relish in our love for sports. Philadelphia is a die hard sports town. Philadelphia has a rich history both negative and positive, but it should not be dismissed. We have great shows and events- Welcome to America, Greek Picnic, etc. Because Philadelphia is made up of rowhomes, you really have no choice but to be close with your neighbors and bond.
  - Hard working people around here; a lot of people who want to do good
- **What are the resources and strengths of your community?**
  - A major strength of my community is that we do not allow anyone to talk down on us as a city. Yes, Philadelphia has been probed with issues over the years- but what inner city hasn't. It comes with the territory and we show a lot of pride in the beautiful mess that Philadelphia is.

- I don't know
- **How have the events of the past month affected your community?**
  - I do not watch the news on a regular basis, but I feel like the youth and elderly are suffering the most. Youth are having trouble maximizing their time. Boys and Girls Clubs and other camps are not opening up at full capacity, which leaves them to explore in sometimes negative activities.
  - Doesn't watch the news
- **How has COVID-19 affected your community?**
  - COVID-19 has shown how the school system has failed us when it comes to financial literacy. A lot of residents lost their homes, their employment. It was a disaster. If you were never taught how to invest or were living paycheck to paycheck from the beginning, they really have nothing to show for their stimulus checks or pandemic unemployment assistance money. It is really sad, honestly,
  - I felt like it lasted way too long and we could have gone past it
  - People just rejected that it was real for a long time
  - Virtual school - it was hard, it was new, frustrating
  - Did not get to hang out or connect with friends
  - Towards the end of COVID, started hanging out with people I knew
- **Do you like being at school?**
  - It's fun, it's school
  - Feel supported at school with teachers and classmates
- **What does cardiovascular health mean to you?**
  - As a black man, cardiovascular health is very important to me. We are underrepresented in the population, but overrepresented in the statistics of heart disease. I do what I can to keep my heart rate up and stay active. During hot days like this, I tend to override when my body is telling me to relax, but I am working on it.
  - Smoking - inhaling smoking
    - Not the best for you
    - If you do it, try to do things like working out and eating right
    - Some ppl need it I guess but it's not "good for you"
    - It can be moderated I guess
- **What resources in your community promote heart health/stress?**
  - This might sound crazy, but Philadelphia officials renovating recreation centers and playgrounds is a direct correlation for children to be healthy and feel good with their environment. In West Philly, they have been planting more trees and stuff. Green spaces remove the bad stuff in the air which we know philly has a lot of and replace it with fresh air.
  - I don't know
    - Parks, school ordering

- Recess, gym, and school, after school programs
  - Basketball, after care where kids can meet other kids
- **What do you want people who don't know about your community to learn about?**
  - I want people to know that great things and people can and still are birthed from this city. We know how to come together when it is time; however, that does not always make national headlines.
  - It's not all bad and i feel like it could be better if people just work together more
    - To be more successful
    - A lot of ppl don't have goals, it just becomes a large group of ppl with no goals
- **Do you have goals/dreams?**
  - Pursuing real estate
  - Can see self leaving philly to live in other parts of the US
  - No favorite part in Philly

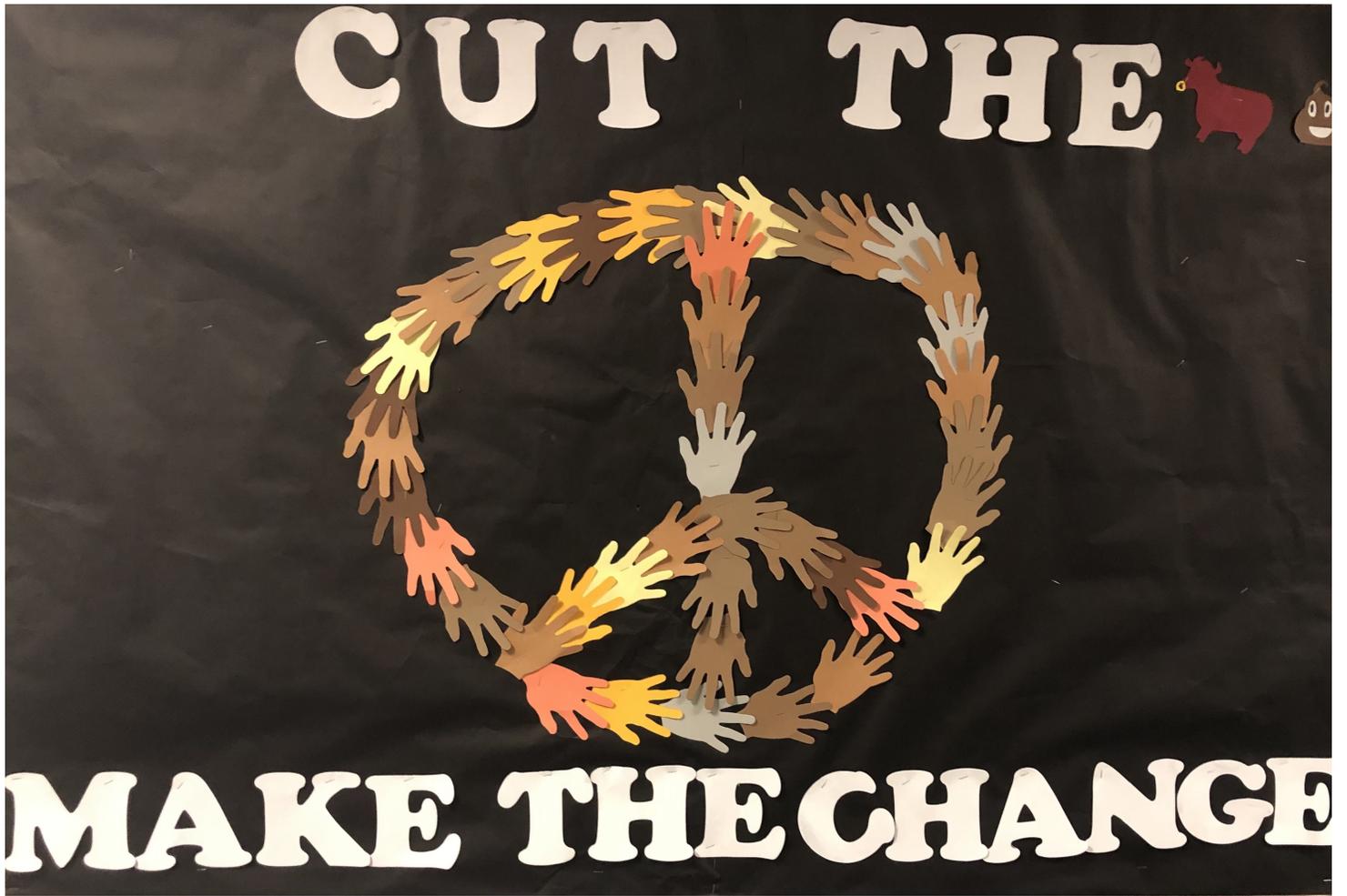
## DESCRIPTION

Over the past five weeks, the BTG interns developed authentic relationships with young black men ages 14-17 via the Community Intervention Center Program. We were tasked with curating a syllabus and facilitating workshops that include but are not limited to professional development, healthcare, and safety. Throughout these several weeks, we have navigated the barriers of virtual learning. We needed to continue to acknowledge the importance of and go beyond cultural awareness and cultural competence into cultural hunger, as Dr. Mario Cruz exceptionally phrased it. We interviewed two individuals- a young black man from the program and an older black man, both Philadelphia residents. Despite the generations between them, their answers were quite similar- a change needs to be manifested. With understanding this, we decided to create a minimalistic poster board. Nevertheless, a powerful meaning underlines its surface.

The poster's background represents black as a race, but the color black also represents solidarity- the most powerful action to save us all.

The white letters over the black also convey race. While it is ideal that we desire to live in an equitable and equal society, it would be colonizing to refuse that a hierarchy exists within those who do not identify within the BIPOC umbrella.

The peace sign composed of many different shades of hands conveys the diversity in its myriad of forms, outside of the black and white binary that both interviewees illustrated for us. The different hands also address those who claim not to see color or race. Working with a group of young black men and learning to know their intersections would be colonizing for us to disregard the race-based inequalities that run rampant outside of our Zoom Space.



## Storytelling Narrative

Hall Mercer Learning Center Interview with supervisor

### ***1. How did you get involved with the program?***

I've been working in case management working with clients with learning disabilities. The program I was at taught clients how to live on their own. Then, Hall Mercer asked me to come help them.

### ***2. Could you give me some further background on the learning center at Hall Mercer?***

I've been working here for 3 years. The Center has been around for 20 years. Most clients come straight from high school and from the same high school. Now, the program is more developed as we do more specific teaching activities, social and life skills. Before it was not catered to each client's need, it was a sort of general group program. We also have a program with high school student interns, the clients like being with them in person. The interns we work with year round allow the clients to be exposed to different people. It's wonderful for the clients to see different parts of their community through the interactions with the interns.

### ***3. What attracted you to working at the Learning Center?***

I worked with clients that were higher functioning but with similar disabilities. I had a context of what kind of life skills these clients would need to help each of them on a personal level.

### ***4. What are the greatest difficulties with the program?***

One of the most difficult problems we have is that since we have had to run the groups virtually during the pandemic. Not all the clients are interested in the same activities and we are unable to keep their attention. When that happens we try to help each client individually. It would be helpful for those clients to have more specifically tailored programs. If we were in person this would be easier to do. This specifically doesn't require extra funding, we just need to return to conducting the program in person.

### ***5. What are the best parts about the program?***

This program positively impacts the clients because they are able to be individual adults and have autonomy. We take them out in the community to go shopping, watch movies and plays and eat at restaurants. Most of them have everything done for them and are stuck with parents at home with no ability to discover, enjoy their life and make choices.

**6. What do you think is important to understand about the Learning Center client population (adults with intellectual disabilities)?**

Each parent/family member supervises them all the time. It seems the clients are more like children because of this, however they relish taking opportunities and making choices. They like making decisions on their own ranging from food, activities etc. The clients have more skills than people recognize and give credit for. They are able to have opinions, dreams, desires and hope. You can see this especially through their level of memory as it pertains to music and art. One of our clients is able to identify any song and remembers details and memories about people's lives. These people have an awareness though it is not manifested in a traditional way through extensive verbal communication.

**7. What best helps the participants and what doesn't?** What best helps them is when we let them make choices and decisions on their own. What is unique about the program is that we listen to them. We answer and ask questions and have full conversations as well as respecting and encouraging their ability to do so. We integrate them as normal members of the community and they appreciate when they are treated no differently than anyone else. What doesn't help them is when they are overprotected, when people don't let them make decisions or choices. People should ideally not tell them what they should want or like to do.

**8. How can people with intellectual disabilities live social and work filled lives? There seems to be a threshold at which certain work/learning opportunities are reached?**

Some clients have job coaches in the program. One of our client works at a restaurant helping stock and supply and helping the waiters. Our clients love working and getting a paycheck. For those that can't work they would need more opportunities, programs and funding to teach them as I think they do have the potential to do it. It's more up to the training, for example in their school or hospital to equip them for certain careers. I think there is too much of an assumption that the clients can't do certain things while if you show them and let them they can.

**9. What was/will be the impact of the pandemic on this population?**

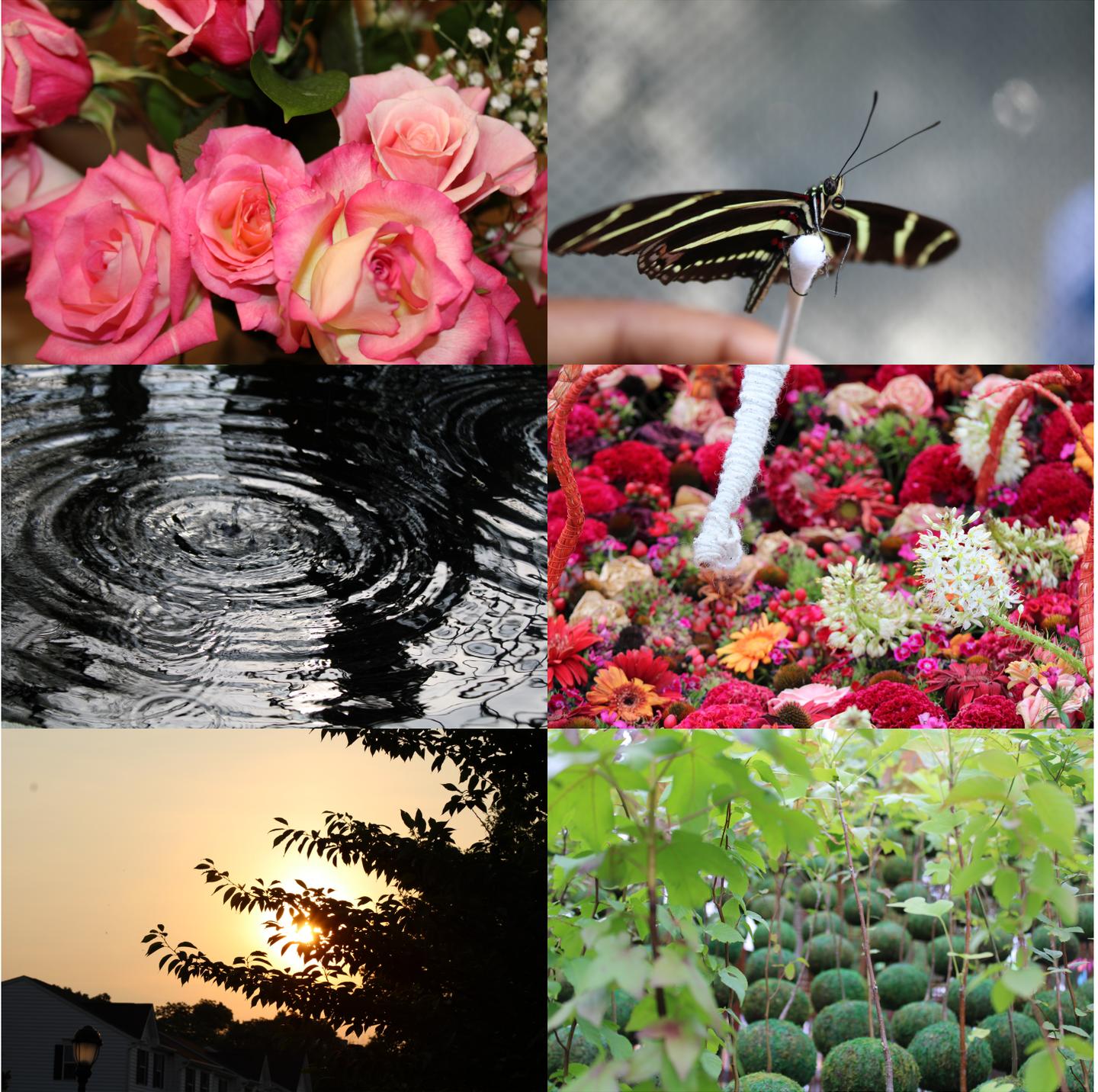
The impact is the isolation, the clients miss people and some are uncomfortable getting on the screen and interacting virtually. They prefer being one on one and talking to people in person. Clients generally do better with face to face interaction, when virtual they stay more to themselves and alone in their room. They want to be around their friends and in the program, for example eating lunch with others and engaging in activities. Since we went virtual we have half the amount of clients we usually have in person.

***10. You've mentioned that there are problems with being able to help clients due to funding, what issues are there with this system that need to be changed?***

We would need funding to hire more staff members as a priority. More staff could work with the clients individually and allow clients to be more engaged with a tailored program. Groups only work to a certain extent. I would also love to have our clients interact with individuals from another program called Social Rehab that is a step up for higher functioning clients. I'd like to organize mixed groups with this program to foster skillsets and promote independence of our clients. Our clients generally go straight into our program after high school. Once they complete graduation from high school there are frankly limited opportunities for people with intellectual disabilities. There needs to be more programs to cover more people with intellectual disabilities graduating from high school.

***11. What are your current sources of funding?***

The program is funded by City Health fund. The clients don't have to pay. We select the clients through case managers who are assigned to the clients and refer them to the program. The clients are then interviewed to see if they are a good fit. Before the pandemic there was a waiting list, now we are limited in how many people we can take.



Southwest Philadelphia fosters a tight-knit community, filled with residents who constantly look after one another and treat those as family. The artist began her photography journey as a child, particularly enjoying taking photos during the fall. This self-taught photographer spent her childhood at community summer camps within multiple recreation centers in Southwest Philly, participating in arts & craft activities, swimming and field trips. One of her fondest memories was “Southwest Day” on Woodland Avenue, where the local police station sponsored activities for the community such as providing food, music and a parade. Although the Covid 19 Pandemic did not allow this event to occur last year, she is hopeful that this tradition can continue. This young professional has created her own photography business, showcasing her interest in the beautiful nature that surrounds her community. @tunnelvisionpix



There's something  
wrong with poor,  
marginalized  
women.



They exist, and  
they matter.



You have to see how  
people live. You  
have to see their  
reality.

## BTG – Storytelling Project – Students Run Philly Style

“Students Run Philly Style transforms students’ lives through running and mentorship. [They] pair volunteer Running Leaders with teams of students to inspire them to push themselves further than they ever imagined. Their goal: the completion of a full or a half marathon.”

Students Run Philly Style (SRPS) consists of several branches of programming, a marathon and school year model which follow their more traditional model of youth mentoring and training for races; OUTpace, which focuses more on improving health outcomes and increasing protective factors for LGBTQ+ youth in the programs; and MileUp, which serves as a formal youth diversion program. The organization has a wide reach, consisting of 1,500 students from 60 schools in 48 zip codes, and with the support of 300 mentors. For an organization with such breadth, depth, and a focus on mentorship and student support, their impact on the community is profound. I had the privilege of interviewing staff on their perceptions of the organization and the community, and how COVID-19 impacted it all. The following will be a summary of our conversations and their views:

SRPS focuses on “prevention versus treatment.” The organization works within the community on many levels despite being a single entity. It works to support students and their communities by addressing systemic issues and disparities, building relationships within the community, offering students mentorship and access to after school activities, and looping in families as well. It is apparent to the staff that young people growing up in the city are much tougher and more resilient than given credit for. They have many more life skills and capabilities than most people get to (or choose to) see. The students, mentors, and volunteers demonstrate so much strength, and the investment of older individuals in the lives of youth shows a genuine love for the community. These adults take time out of their personal lives, and outside of their daily jobs to spend sometimes 10 hours a week with these kids, seeking nothing in return but the satisfaction of supporting youth in their community who might lack support elsewhere. As a staff member, getting to see the community building that happens at practices and races, getting to cheer on students as they do things they never thought they could, and watch the growth that happens as they go through the program is a most cherished set of memories.

The organization recognizes the day-to-day struggles of the population they are serving. The students are much more capable than you’d imagine because of the day-to-day things they must deal with. Living in the city, and not always the safest parts, and going to schools outside their neighborhoods, which can require testing just to attend the “good ones,” adds a lot of pressure on a kid. The testing and access to schools often is biased against those lacking resources for early childhood education and development, furthering the disparities between privileged and marginalized groups. And outside of education, students may face food insecurity, family issues, etc. yet despite it all, those in the program still choose to show up and run.

Covid-19, as it has most if not all communities, has also impacted the students involved in SRPS. Some were able to participate still, but overall maintaining after school programs during a pandemic proved challenging. With the transition from in person to online, and with so many adults now left with young kids at home all day, it was hard for volunteers to carve out the same amount of time towards SRPS. Many students struggled with the transition as schools were not equipped with the resources to transition online. With lack of access to technology and virtual programming, students were dependent on worksheets and paper packets for self-teaching

## BTG – Storytelling Project – Students Run Philly Style

during earlier parts of the pandemic. For many of these students, COVID-19 will have lasting impacts. With family members sick or laid off, and unable to make an income, already vulnerable populations have become even more susceptible to food insecurity and risks of poverty increased. For staff, these same struggles weren't necessarily present during the pandemic. With a steady income, safe home, food security, and easier transition to online learning for their kids, the staff could more readily adapt to the changing mandates. This disconnect presents its own problems though, as a privileged individual tasked with writing grants about events and challenges not personally experienced, it can be hard to truly understand the perspectives and experiences of the students being written about.

Pivoting away from COVID and the community, I also asked about cardiovascular health in the context of the organization. As a running organization, they have a very generalized focus on heart and overall health benefits of exercise. They acknowledge and promote that running improves cardiovascular health, mental health, and stress management, promoting students to develop positive long-term habits. Through training, students feel stronger and are excited to have the endurance to run long distances. For students struggling with weight management, running has proven especially helpful in promoting weight loss and weight management and boosting confidence.

SRPS is devoted to its students and their communities, and the staff are personally invested in their positions within the organization. They are devoted to students' success and empathize with the challenges they face, constantly finding new ways to support them.

I am a Black veteran. I want people to know there was no integration in war. Freedom means separate according to the Declaration of Independence. My favorite memory of my service is unquestionably the camaraderie. It is built upon the same foundation as the Philadelphia village I grew up in, like the boy scouts I was a part of. But military service was also filled with cognitive dissonance among people like myself suffering from Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome (described by Dr. Joy DeGruy). I'm a separatist not an assimilator, and that has made things hard for me, especially in the military.

To me, cardiovascular health means engagement with children, helping them understand good food, teaching them why the Dominican corner stores sell only processed foods, taking them to Reading Terminal and the Italian Markets, making them aware of the exploitation they unknowingly experience. When I became a leader at the recreation center, I looked up the history of the facilities to encourage a return to hosting daily activities. They hadn't been offering enough activities to keep kids engaged.

The VA has resources, but apathy and myopic leadership keep them from helping vets. I've learned to pick my battles. There is nowhere to vent, but to be silent is to be complicit. I use the patient advocates to submit complaints, and it's gotten me a reputation with the employees here at the VA. You can't access resources for cardiovascular health and stress without jumping through hoops like taking psychotropic drugs to treat suicidal tendencies. I've got three rotting teeth I can't get pulled because they aren't a service-related injury. I have dietary restrictions and they keep sending me the wrong food, no matter how many doctors I talk to. I am a smoker and there's no smoking on campus but there is a parking garage full of cars that idle under the canopy emitting carbon monoxide. It just doesn't make sense to me. Why do we have to jump through hoops when we're clearly veterans?

The last year and a half hurt. It's made me more despondent about the lack of help for veterans. Money is not being lent in resources. The emergency room was a positive experience for me because it got me into the hospital for this admission. I was a combat medic and worked extensively in healthcare, but I try not to include my medical background in the conversation when I'm admitted.

I overstand that COVID-19 was manufactured in Kentucky decades ago and shipped to the CDC for packaging. It got to China through American outsourcing of manufactured goods, but how did it get to Italy next without affecting India and Pakistan first? It just doesn't make sense. Why didn't the homeless get sick? And Kensington and Allegheny, those drug infested communities should've been a hotspot and they're not.

Most culturally conscious African Americans are not taking the COVID-19 vaccine because of Tuskegee syphilis experiment, the Black human radiation experiments, the epidemic of fibrotumors in Black women brought on by the pap smear. Veterans – especially multicultural veterans – don't trust the government.