
Project Tribe: Improving Mental Health Awareness through the Arts and Community

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Abstract

The purpose behind Project Tribe is to raise mental health awareness within the LaGrange community, both on the Hill and within the LaGrange community. The need to raise awareness was prevalent because of previous events and the existing stigma the cohort hoped to eliminate. The cohort incorporated various events into the project which had an art component to it so we could accomplish our goal. Our project entails the following: the Heartwork Gala, Cultural Enrichment (CE) events, surveys, the Calumet community art project, and the Our Daily Bread (ODB) soup kitchen.

Introduction

In March of 2017, the twelve members of our cohort met for the first time as a group. Within the first five minutes, Dr. Slay said, "There are 12 strong personalities in this group." Little did he know how strong our personalities were. We have spent the last two years living, laughing, crying, studying, stressing, and serving together. We have gotten angry and frustrated with one another and we have shared ice cream. Most importantly, we each found a tribe that we fit into. In February of 2018, our campus lost a student to suicide. In addition to this loss, we were left reeling from the idea of not knowing that a fellow student was struggling so hard. It did not take long for us to decide that we wanted to devote our senior project to improving the mental health climate on our campus and in our community. It has been discovered that "Fifty percent of mental illness begins by age 14, and three-quarters begins by age 24" (Parekh). This statistic demonstrates that our campus, falling into that age range, is likely to experience these symptoms. This increase in mental illness is an added stressor on top of the growing pressure to do well in school, while also participating in numerous school activities. In addition, social media causes a disconnect between reality and our created virtual worlds. As a cohort, we needed to be aware of these various issues. One challenge we had to account for when implementing our plan was the fact that we are all undergraduate students and not trained mental health professionals. Therefore, we would need to approach the issue of mental health in such a way that we could be effective with our limited training. Peer support is a growing trend in the mental health world, and is something that does not require certification to do. We capitalized on this by focusing on the idea of a "tribe," essentially a group of people who fulfil the needs of support for the other members of their group, giving them a place to belong. A "tribe" can be cultivated in multiple ways, by applying various strategies. The various aspects of our project focus on building this tribe.

Literature Review

In the pursuit of Project Tribe, the members of our cohort each found a work of literature to contribute to the body of knowledge we had on hand. We looked especially for information and commentary on mental health, its relation to art, charity, service, leadership, and community. Exemplified in the graphic novel, *Beginner's Guide to Community-Based Arts*, the road to fully realizing the complex and diverse needs of communities is a long one, and we should expect to be learning as leaders for as long as we are engaged in this sort of work. In *Beginner's Guide*, we are shown a personal story of success in an art-making program in a women's prison, where the servant in question became more fully aware of the dynamic that can transcend the giver and receiver. This dynamic can be thought of as the extension of a community, something we sought to enrich and promote throughout Project Tribe.

During the process of planning for and carrying out the stair mural in Calumet, we kept in mind lessons learned from works like Juno Dawson's *Mind Your Head* and Johann Hari's *Lost Connections*. Both these works stressed a renewed reliance on one's community. *Mind Your Head* is presented almost like a survival guide for the thickets of mental

health. Each chapter speaks to a different set of difficulties one could face, from depression to psychosis. The common connection is an emphasis on relying on a support group in order to keep afloat among the challenges one may face. *Lost Connections* spoke to the idea that humanity has grown more separate and atomized as time has marched on, taking us further from how humans were originally grouped in tribal communities. In fact, this is the origin of the name Project Tribe. Specifically, Hari recommends finding a common goal with one's neighbors (one's "tribe") to find a renewed sense of purpose and a perspective beyond the self. This came into effect with the Calumet neighborhood as we made certain that not only would the mural be a unifying task for the residents, but also for the Servant Scholar Program to the neighborhood. We took great care at every step to ensure that our actions were not short-sighted or self-serving, but entirely in the interest of and in the convenience of those who we wished to serve. We established genuine relationships with residents of the neighborhood, acting on their needs and requests.

This sort of project development is in line with the lessons that Robert Lupton's *Toxic Charity* seeks to impress. *Toxic Charity* is a work centered on identifying and addressing the unintentional drawbacks to service work. Oftentimes, Lupton says, a lack of communication and development of relationship between volunteers and the beneficiaries of volunteer work results in lopsided, ineffective, or simply harmful changes to a situation. The reason our work is centered on art and art-making is that evidence suggests making art is beneficial to fostering community and better mental health. The article "Art Making as a Mental Health Recovery Tool for Change and Coping" in the journal *Art Therapy* shows that studies have verified the capacity for art making to enhance our compassion, ability to work with others, feeling of self-expression, motivation with respect to progress, finding a sense of sanctuary and immersion, along with reduced feelings of a stigma about one's mental health. In Bertell Ollman's *Alienation*, a parallel to this study is drawn; work that is done in the service of others without input from the worker can be seen to further separate people from a feeling of impact and importance in the world. This alienation, Ollman writes, is a symptom of a society that has valued profit over the human condition, and that human nature is that of community, togetherness, self-expression, and mutual aid.

Survey/Research

Seven years ago, Penn State started coordinating a nation-wide college mental health survey with over 500 colleges and universities participating. They release a free report every year showing the data gathered. They also highlight the trends from previous years. In this spirit, our cohort decided to create and disseminate a mental health climate survey for LaGrange College. We had the survey reviewed by Dr. Brenda Callahan, professor for the LaGrange College Clinical Mental Health Counseling program, to make sure the questions were appropriate. Once the survey was approved, it was sent via email to the undergraduate student body once in the fall and once in the spring. By asking students to participate in the survey before and after we began implementing our strategies, we were able to gauge the climate of our campus and the subsequent effects, or lack thereof, of our project in regard to mental health awareness. The fall survey was administered between October 3 and October 17, 2018. We had 140 respondents. 68% of them responded that they felt they were dealing with anxiety. 50% felt like they were dealing with depression. 30% felt that they did not know what mental health services are available for them at LC. Half of our respondents have had bad experiences with mental health services in the past, and half also believed that they should be able to handle their problems on their own. The spring survey was administered between April 15 and April 22, 2019, and showed no change in the percent who deal with anxiety. However, students who expressed feelings of depression decreased to 44%. We do not claim to be the cause of that decrease, but it is a heartening sign. Even better, only 12% felt they were unaware of what mental health services were available for students. Sadly, 27% reported they still believed they needed to handle mental health issues on their own. Ultimately, there was some improvement in the mental health climate at the end of the year. We cannot claim that it is all our doing, but hope that our efforts contributed in some way.

Heartwork Gala

As our cohort prepared for Project Tribe, we looked for a fundraising event that could kick off the awareness campaign of the project. Through research of mental health, one thing that a majority of sources agreed upon was that mental health is negatively impacted by the loss of connection to a community. The cohort set out to build a community that has a deeper understanding of mental wellness and the effect it can have on their everyday lives. Due to the success of the Olive Branch Gala, an event we hosted during the previous year, we chose to host another gala having learned through that first event what improvements could be made. This event would be the easiest way to reach members of the community and start a conversation regarding the "tribe" we hoped to build throughout the project. While the gala

presented an idea that was fun, it was also practical, necessary, and the most effective option to raise the amount of money needed to fund additional outreach projects. The event featured a silent auction, entertainment, conversations on mental health, and a chance for fellowship and fun.

By reaching out to various business groups, we were able to compile a silent auction featuring over 35 items from all around the state of Georgia. Donors were specifically chosen that offered goods or services that would directly benefit the recipients' mental health in some form: the arts (art pieces, theatres, galleries, music venues), relationship building (vacation packages, group activities), and confidence boosters (jewelry, nice clothing). It was important for them to deliberately highlight the theme of mental health awareness since this was the kick-off event for Project Tribe.

In addition to the silent auction, our cohort also hosted entertainment provided by various musical theatre students from the Music Department. Scholars Eli Grant and Leigh Anne Hamlin were part of the entertainment as Musical Theatre majors. The musical entertainment was a showcase of Gershwin music that focused on positive uplifting music. Aramark was kind enough to donate desserts and punch.

The Gala was well attended by over 50 members of the college and LaGrange communities. Members of the cohort gave several speeches accentuating the goal, vision, and plans for Project Tribe. We were able to speak on the "why" of Project Tribe, and were also able to share the story of Aston, a fellow student, peer, and friend who was lost in Spring 2018 to suicide. This loss was a driving force behind Project Tribe. It was a massive eye-opener to the cohort, illuminating just how imperative it was that the mental health of this campus and community be addressed and provided with ways to improve. Due to the high attendance at the event, the cohort was able to make connections with the community and built a "tribe" for the night that shared experiences with each other and built each other up. The event raised \$3,800, which the cohort split between Project Tribe and IAMHOLDENON, a non-profit organization focused on promoting mental wellness and ending the stigma associated with mental illness and suicide. These funds allowed us to fully impact the LaGrange community through the events that followed. Additionally, the cohort poured resources into an organization that would sustainably promote mental wellness in the community after Project Tribe was completed. The Heartwork Gala was immensely successful as it accomplished our three main objectives: (1) Raise funds for Project Tribe and IAMHOLDENON; (2) Raise awareness for mental wellness and the efforts of Project Tribe to positively impact mental wellness; and (3) Start the conversation and build a "Tribe" of support around the project.

CE Events

Over the course of spring semester, we presented three Cultural Enrichment (CE) events to the campus. CE events allowed us to raise awareness for our project and its mission. We wanted students to know what we are doing and why we were doing it. All three events and our Colloquium were well attended, and we were able to spread the word about mental wellness across campus.

In conjunction with IAMHOLDENON, we hosted Tamlin Hall, writer, director, and producer of the film *Holden On*, which is about a former member of the LaGrange community who took his own life, and tied his speech back into better mental wellness practices. As the figurehead for IAMHOLDENON, Mr. Hall was a wonderful source of insight and was the perfect candidate for our first CE event. Hall also shared information on the Hope Givers Mental Wellness & Music Festival. This event allowed our cohort to formally present \$1,320 we raised at the Heartwork Gala. This event is one of the biggest to come to LaGrange and the senior cohort is buying a bulk amount of tickets to pass give to students because the festival also aligns with Project Tribe's mission on mental health awareness.

The second CE event was hosted on March 27 and focused on self-care. Beforehand, we did significant research on self-care tips that we presented to students in attendance. There were five different stations that helped students learn about better self-care practices:

1. Self-care assessment station: students were given a survey that allowed them to reflect on their own self-care practices;
2. Addressing the stress: students were invited to write their stressors on a piece of paper, crumple it up, and throw it away;
3. Journal: students were encouraged to take a journal to keep their thoughts in;
4. Breathing exercises/meditation: students were invited to learn about breathing and meditation exercises that help people relax;

5. Affirmation station: students were asked to write an affirmation and leave it on the table for someone else, as well as pick up an affirmation for themselves.

A Servant Scholar greeted them at the door to let them know how the event would proceed and students chose which station to begin at. Students had the ability to move freely throughout the event, but they had to go to 4 out of the 5 stations to get CE credit. We served water and healthy snacks at the event. Each table had a print out of an explanation of what the station is there for, and what they could do at the station. Servant Scholars participated in the activities as well. The event was well attended and well received.

The third and final CE event of the semester was the showing of the *Hope Givers* TV show during stress-less week events. *Hope Givers* showcases people around the country who have been affected by mental illness, substance abuse, and/or suicide ideation. The episode we chose showcased Kris Brooks, a yoga instructor who once tried to take her own life. Our hope was that students would see how people can overcome the darkest parts in their lives. The students also enjoyed snacks and a raffle for tickets to the Hope Givers Mental Wellness & Music Festival.

Calumet Community

In our research regarding practices that promote mental wellness, we found several studies that support the idea that there is a positive correlation between art making and mental wellness. In her article, "Art Making as a Mental Health Recovery Tool for Change and Coping," Theresa Van Lith explains the benefits of art making for various subjects participating in the study who were struggling with ongoing mental health issues. In her study, Van Lith found that by making art, participants were able to connect with their inner self, feel a sense of achievement, have a source of motivation when they felt unwell, and find a safe space through their art (Van Lith 7.) Additionally, art making helped to strengthen the group of participants as they were able to share in each other's experiences. Van Lith details such a moment saying, "Another resident interpreted the depiction of depression in Sean's artwork and related it to his own experience, which in turn helped him to understand Sean" (Van Lith 10.) Therefore, we thought it essential that we include community-based art as an aspect of Project Tribe.

At the beginning of the 2018-2019 school year, Dr. Kelly Veal, a professor of Clinical and Mental Health Counseling at LaGrange College, reached out to Dr. Slay, having heard of our interest in a community art project. She informed us that she served on the Calumet Board, which was leading the charge for a neighborhood revitalization project. She proposed that we partner with the Calumet Park Neighborhood to bring some artwork into their community and work together to revitalize the area.

In 2017, the Georgia Conservancy created a report and blueprint detailing their recommendations for the Calumet Park neighborhood. The Georgia Conservancy surveyed community members, looking for what improvements they would like to see within the neighborhood. From this research, they created a plan to revitalize the neighborhood through branding, housing and community improvements. Nine tactics were suggested, ranging from general housing maintenance to community beautification projects. In their research, the Georgia Conservancy found that the stairs located on Addie Street were unkempt, and in turn were not "friendly or accessible to all users" (Calumet Re-envisioned, 53.) Therefore, one tactic suggested painting the stairs to encourage their use. This tactic tied in very closely to Project Tribe's focus on community art. After speaking with the Calumet Board of directors, it was decided that Tactic 9, a stair mural project, would be the perfect way for us to collaborate with the Calumet Park community. Additionally, this would offer a long-lasting, easily sustainable way for us to leave our mark within the community.

In regard to design, initially the board suggested a tree as imagery for the mural. The idea of a tree helps to represent an established neighborhood, while also suggesting new growth. The ultimate goal with images selected for Calumet Park project was to develop a brand standard that could be used for additional projects in the future. While the suggestion of a tree did seem fitting, there were concerns that a tree would not translate well given the scale of the stair project. (The space where the design could be painted was long and narrow, 5' wide by 25' tall.) Additionally, other neighborhood revitalization projects in the area use a tree in their logo and we thought it wise to differentiate the Calumet Park community from these other groups. Having assessed these potential problems, it was suggested that we instead use indigenous leaves as the main design element in the stair project and other subsequent branding projects. In this way we remained true to the imagery associated with a tree, while also reflecting the importance of this space within the region.

We approached painting the stairs by placing our design on the sides of the steps rather than the top of the step, which may have caused the steps to be slippery during rain, and would also have minimized the community's use of the steps while they were being painted. The design was broken up into 43 parts, one for each step, so that when viewed from

the bottom, one cohesive image appears. We wanted the design to be something that was easily accessible for community members with little experience to work on. To achieve this, one section contained a more complex design with large oak leaves. These shapes were transferred onto the steps using a grid method, allowing community and college members to fill in the lines with blues and greens. This section did require a higher level of skill, but engaged painters at a higher level. A second section was painted around the larger leaf design using small stencils. These stencils featured various other leaf shapes (Sweetgum, Poplar, Dogwood, Maple, Birch etc.), which were painted using bright colors, creating a stained glass or mosaic effect. The stenciled sections allowed young children from the community to paint, sometimes with guidance from a Servant Scholar, as they did not require much skill in painting to complete.

It was through these children that we had the most community interaction. On March 9, 2019, we hosted our first paint day and cookout, inviting community members to stop by for lunch and paint a little if they could. While most adults who came by only participated in the meal, painting the stairs offered a new, exciting play area for the children in attendance. This dynamic really allowed each Scholar's skills to be put to use. Those who love children played games, drew with chalk and helped them to paint. They came up with jokes and nicknames for each other in the process. Our more charismatic members were able to interact with parents and board members, sharing the vision and impact we hope to have through this project. Lastly, those with skill in cooking and painting saw that the job went along smoothly and were able to engage community members through that service. In retrospect, these interactions really appear to be how we were able to fulfill the needs of the community. We offered a meal, and a moment for parents to breathe as their children were engaged in a fun, safe environment, while also giving them a space within their community to be proud and excited about.

Upon the completion of the painting, the stairs were coated with a clear acrylic to protect them and keep them from chipping. On March 30, 2019, the Scholars hosted a second cookout, this time unveiling the finished project. Dr. Robert Tucker and other board members were invited to cut a ribbon, symbolizing that this was a new community space. Reverend Travis Hart, a Calumet resident, provided a moving invocation, praying that whoever might walk the steps would receive God's blessing. This prompted several community members and children to walk up and down the steps, exploring the design as they went. Once again this offered Scholars the opportunity to grow in fellowship with community members and children, building relationships that will hopefully be just as impactful as the mural itself.

After the celebration was over, Dr. Tucker shared some of his story with the Scholars. He was born and raised in the Calumet Community. He went off to Morehouse College, and pursued a career in education. Upon his retirement, Dr. Tucker moved back to Calumet. He found the neighborhood in much disrepair, with little sense of community, and lots of senseless violence. It was his dream that one day he would see the Calumet that he grew up loving.

As he was concluding his life memoir, he mentioned that that morning's gathering was the most people he had ever seen come out for anything in the Calumet community. He truly believed that Project Tribe helped to build community in Calumet Park. On May 2, 2019, many weeks after the stairs had been painted, Servant Scholar CJ Lord had the opportunity to call Dr. Tucker. Without bringing it up, Dr. Tucker mentioned that he was just at the stairs the other day and that the community is taking care of that area. He was still full of gratitude nearly a month after the painting. He specifically said, "I will never forget what the Scholars did."

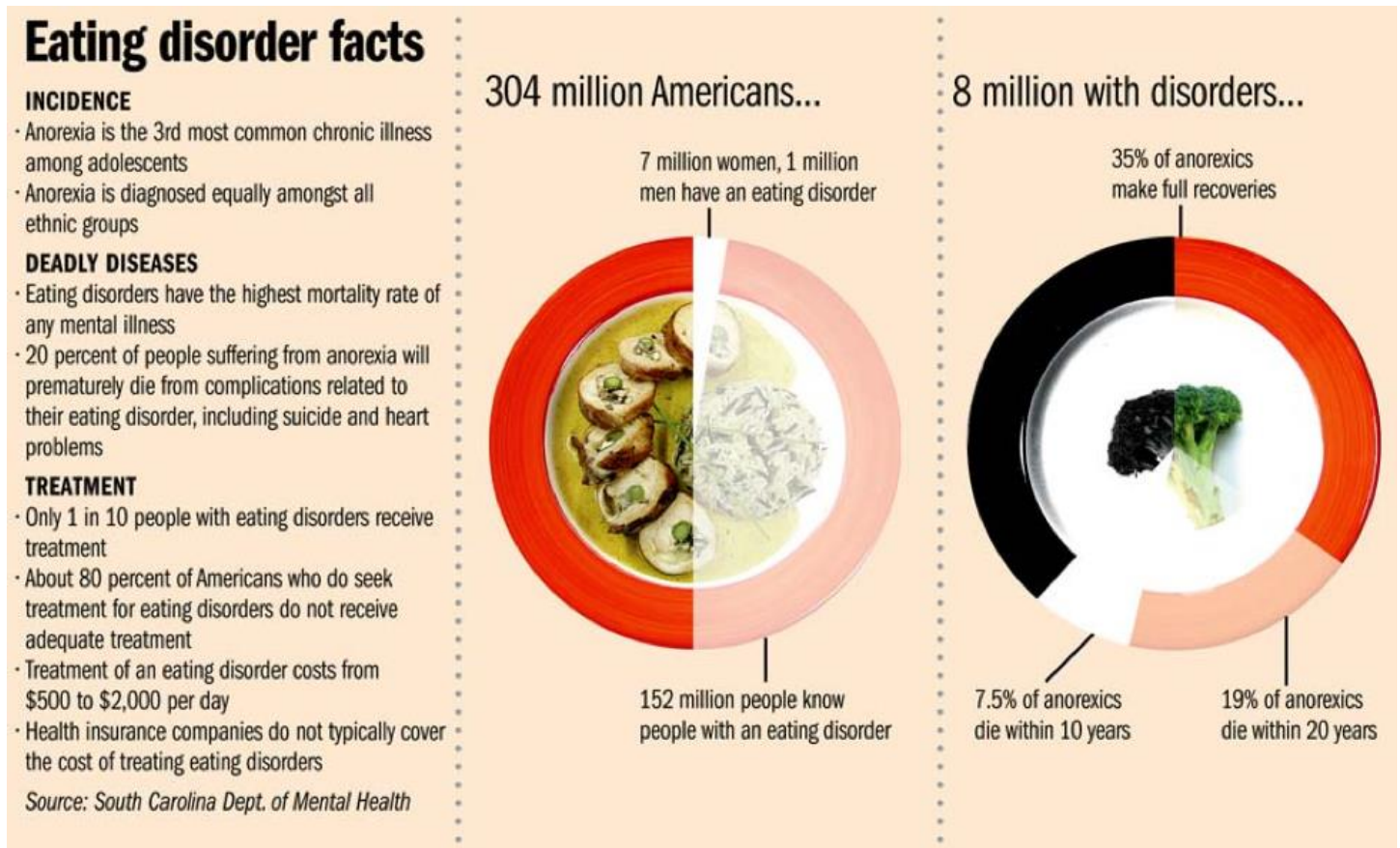
Our Daily Bread

Our Daily Bread was started six years ago, February 1, 2013, when the inaugural Servant Scholars cohort realized that in the LaGrange community there was a soup kitchen for each weekday except Friday. They took the initiative to create a solution, and that is when Our Daily Bread was formed. For Project Tribe, Our Daily Bread was in a sense a blueprint for what we wanted to accomplish. Our goal was to instill an awareness in the community of the importance of investing in one's mental wellness, as well as those they choose to surround themselves with. While serving at Our Daily Bread, we hope to give the guests more than just a meal. We hope to form friendships and to create a safe space for those who join us each Friday. There is even research showing a correlation between eating and mental health [js 29]. The highest mortality rate among any mental illness involves eating disorders. Anorexia, bulimia, and binge eating are some of these disorders. They all affect the body in different ways, unhealthy ones (Andrews). Therefore, when we take the culinary arts and incorporate them into the community aspect of the soup kitchen, we ultimately have a simplified version of Project Tribe within Our Daily Bread.

Our guests do more than they would at your typical soup kitchen; they offer help with setting up, cooking, saying the blessing, and cleaning up. They truly take initiative to lend a helping hand, because over the years we have created a place for them to feel appreciated for what they do. Over time, this has resulted in more and more people offering help

when they can or even taking it upon themselves get the job done before we can. What could be a more important aspect of a tribe than mutual love and respect for one another?

In 2018, the Servant Scholars were informed that the Charter Foundation had a grant that might benefit Our Daily Bread. Lucky for us, one of the members on the board had connections with the college, and encouraged the Scholars to apply. Caitlyn Deal and C.J. Lord, co-directors of ODB for 2018, worked on a grant package, both never having written a grant and entering blindly. To our delight, the Charter Foundation awarded a \$5,000 grant to Our Daily Bread in April 2018. Through the generosity of the Charter Foundation we will be able to provide meals to the LaGrange community for many years to come. With the grant, we are now able to serve more food, healthier food, and provide more options for the guests that join together each week.



Solutions and Recommendations

Moving forward, our cohort suggests that after Project Tribe there should be a continued relationship with the Calumet Park Community, continued education for mental health services on LaGrange College campus, and peer-led support programs for students. Our relationship with Calumet Park was supportive in the sense that they needed volunteers, and the Servant Scholars Program had the right tools and resources to help. We would love to see this kind of partnership continue in the Servant Scholars Program and with LaGrange College through such service venues as Service Saturday. With the Calumet Community looking to do more work in the tutoring and education track, this could become a great service site for future junior cohorts.

Through Project Tribe’s research in surveying the student body, we have witnessed that students became more aware of the mental health services that are provided on our campus. We suggest that this type of frequent education of the services available continue. We feel that peer to peer support is helpful in trying to get students to seek out resources

on campus. We have also witnessed a recurring trend in depression and anxiety among students and suggest specific college programming on this subject.

When working with students, our cohort has found that more students feel comfortable communicating about the subject through peer-to-peer conversation. This can help students become more comfortable discussing the things they may be struggling with. Moving forward the Senior Class of the Servant Scholars Program suggests this kind of structure in campus programming for students.

Conclusion

Project Tribe has proven that mental wellness and stability is not limited to one generic group. Mental health is applicable to all people and should be addressed accordingly. Through our project we wanted to increase this awareness and offer different measures to improve one's mental status. With Our Daily Bread, we introduced the concept of how diet plays a role toward someone's emotional state. When receiving sufficient nutrients, a person is able to further improve their status. Regarding the Heartwork Gala, we were able to increase awareness to community members, while also raising funds for our project. With the momentum from the Gala, we introduced Cultural Enrichment events to our student body. These events helped solidify the importance of mental health, ground in research and outside knowledge. We intended for our speakers and cultural enrichment projects to leave a lasting impact on those in attendance. Our hopes were for the audience members to take the presented information and spark discussion to positively transform the stigma associated with mental health. Lastly, partnering with Calumet Park allowed for the culmination of art, community, and mental wellness. This is the portion of Project Tribe that will have the longest effect as it is our mark in the community and a symbol of our Tribe coming together. When considering Robert Greenleaf's test of servant leadership – "The best test, and difficult to administer, is: do those served grow as persons; do they, *while being served*, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?" (15) – we believe that our impact overall has left something for thought in those who were reached. While we cannot know definitively until later in time, we have done the work to make the change the best we can.

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