

The Wayne RESA Roundtable Podcast

S2.E10: Students Leading the Way: Mental Health, Hope, and Advocacy

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SPEAKERS

Matt Swartz, Josh Patterson, Victoria Murch, Beth Santer, Allison Shamus

Beth Santer 00:15

Welcome to the Wayne RESA Roundtable Podcast, a space dedicated to sharing valuable resources and insights with our educators and families. I'm Beth Santer, one of the Wayne RESA facilitators who will be joining you for this conversation. Joining us today are three outstanding student leaders and their adult facilitator of Students Versus Stigma, a student-led coalition helping change the conversation around mental health in our Wayne County schools, first we're excited to welcome our students. We have Josh Patterson from Plymouth Canton Community Schools, along with Allison Shamus and Victoria Murch from Northville High School. Now I mentioned there was an adult facilitator, and we're also joined by Matt Schwartz. Matt is a licensed therapist and co-founder of Evolving Lives and the facilitator of Students Versus Stigma, where he helps empower youth voices and foster meaningful change in schools and communities. Now, before we go any further, I want to mention that all of our guests were recognized with the 2026 NAMI Michigan Advocacy Award for their exceptional leadership and commitment to advancing mental health awareness and reducing stigma. Thank you all for joining us today.

Matt Swartz 01:24

Glad to be here.

Allison Shamus 01:25

Hello.

Beth Santer 01:27

So let's start with a little bit more about who you guys are. So why don't you tell us a little bit about yourself, your role in Students versus Stigma, and what led you to become involved in this work? And why don't we start? Let's start with Josh.

Josh Patterson 01:42

Hi, I'm Josh Patterson. You know, I really got into this work because I, from a young age, really was interested in just making change. So it started working with the PCCS Board of Education to bring student voice into what they do. And when I heard about this opportunity to make change, I had to jump aboard, and we all are... I would say we all take on our own role in Students versus Stigma, and we all work together. So there's no one leader. We all kind of just do it together so.

Victoria Murch 02:14

I'm Victoria Murch. I got involved in this work after my school sent out like an email, and at the and I was, I've been really... mental health has been a really big important part of my life and something that I've struggled with for my entire life. So when I was given the opportunity to come in and discuss this new like initiative work coalition thing that was being started, I thought it was really cool, and I was really happy that I got this opportunity to come and work with all these people and talk to everyone and share my ideas about what needs to be improved with mental health. For as for my roles in the student versus stigma, like Josh said, we all kind of have our own like roles that we participate in and do. I personally kind of act as like a creative director of sorts. I'm I made the logo and I collaborate with teammates on the agenda of the meetings, and I try to find ways that we can connect with people, and get them hyped to participate in Students Versus Stigma.

Beth Santer 02:15

That's awesome. What about you, Allison?

Allison Shamus 02:15

Hi, my name is Allison Shamus. I am kind of like the social media director here, but I also work with Josh and Victoria on a lot of other stuff. I kind of got into this work first because I've also had my share of mental health struggles, and I also have a mom who works in the count... in a counseling office at my school, and I've kind of always like learned from her about the importance of like maintaining a good mental health, I've kind of just seen the effects of like certain issues on people, and I really just want to do whatever I can to help people get better, grow as people, and that sort of thing.

Beth Santer 02:15

That's awesome. And Matt, what about you?

Matt Swartz 02:59

Hi, everybody. I'm Matt Swartz. As Beth mentioned, I have been a private practice clinician in the area for the past 12 years. I grew up in Northville, and my own mental health struggles, with which led me to move into clinical social work and becoming a therapist. And actually, the reason I'm here is because Beth connected me with somebody... with Brian Galdes, and we were able to partner. And I serve as a container for facilitating the students. I can definitely identify with you know that passion for creating change, and you know I think where they're at both, you know, personally as well, because most people that are involved in this work are involved because it connects with them personally, and it's just been an amazing experience over the past almost two years to watch each of them take on different roles and find themselves and make a positive impact.

Beth Santer 05:16

Yeah, it's being part of their journey.

Matt Swartz 05:18

Yeah.

Beth Santer 05:19

So Matt, why don't we stick with you, and can you share the history of students versus stigma when it was created, and what need or gap was it designed to address?

Matt Swartz 05:30

Yeah, so I think the the origin story is best stated as you know Brian has been you know working for a long time, as you well know, and has have been involved in Beth on the adult what is now called Hope and Empowerment Coalition, formerly the Suicide Prevention Coalition of Western Wayne County, and

I think the work with the adults has been so impactful that it was clear that you know the work with students was going to be a really important key in the puzzle for eliminating suicide and improving mental health in Western Wayne County schools, and while you know the initiative to install peer support programs in the school has been a key central focus, the idea was that bringing students together across the county to make some impact would have been really helpful. So Brian and I sat down over a number of meetings and kind of conceived what this would look like, and you know we just tried to begin finding students that would be interested in collaborating and creating something meaningful together.

Beth Santer 06:31

Yeah, I appreciate that. And before we go any further, I just want to make sure that we mention who Brian is because you've mentioned him a few times, so we've actually had Brian Galdis on our podcast at an earlier date, and he is the lead of what used to be the Suicide Prevention Coalition. And like you mentioned, Matt, it's now the Hope Empowerment Coalition. And Brian used to be a superintendent of South Redford Schools, so he has that Wayne County connection. And then, in his retirement, now works for Growth Works, who sponsors that adult coalition. And so, students versus stigma-it sounds like it's kind of the student version of that adult coalition. Is that fair to say?

Matt Swartz 07:12

I think that's exactly the point that the positive work the adult coalition has been able to accomplish in collaborating between these different school districts and local healthcare resources has made really positive impact, but we know that the missing ingredient is student-driven impact because at the end of the day, that's what's going to really move the needle.

Beth Santer 07:37

Yeah, because we know kids talk to kids, right? So going with that. So each of you talked about how you have slightly different roles, but all lead together. So let's get into what are some of the goals and priorities of students versus stigma, and how have they evolved over time? Because whenever you are starting something, it can start with an idea, and then it kind of evolves, and it can either stay with that idea or it can morph and change. So that's really for anybody who wants to take that first, and then others can jump in.

Victoria Murch 08:12

One of our goals, our like core goal of Students versus Stigma, is probably to educate people on you know different mental health disorders and how those affect people, and most importantly, fight stigma. Wow, it's almost like it's in the name.

Beth Santer 08:28

Yeah.

Victoria Murch 08:29

So I mean, that's that's pretty much it. We want to like facilitate discussions between people, make sure everyone feels safe, blah blah blah, all that stuff.

Allison Shamus 08:41

One thing I'd also like to say is like with the like evolving goals, I think like like with what Victoria said, like we did have those goals at the beginning, and we still have most of those goals as well. But it's been nice to when we work with other people and meet with like bigger groups, we always have like our mission and vision statement that they change, and we work on it together. So I really like that. A lot of our goals are like a group effort.

Josh Patterson 09:10

And to expand upon that even further, I think one of the cool things about our group again is that we're multi district. So we work across schools. I never would have worked with Tori or Allison, or even gotten to know them without this group. So whether it's bringing different clubs from different districts and different high schools together, or collaborating on events, that sort of thing is a goal that we want to continue moving towards. Even though I would say we've already made that first step, since we're all here together, working as kind of one group, as a culmination of other groups.

Beth Santer 09:44

Yeah, I'm glad you mentioned that because you are from different school districts, and like the adult coalition, there's representatives from I want to say it's nine or 10 different districts, and the goal is to grow the youth coalition. So that it includes students from all over the county. So that's a great point. Victoria mentioned stigma being in the name, and so I guess that brought up a curiosity for me. How did you guys pick the name for this coalition, and why is stigma in the name?

Josh Patterson 10:19

We went through a whiteboard process is the best way to put it. We wrote down, I don't know, probably 10 different names, and we workshoped it together. So if anyone wants to expand on why stigma was chosen, but I will say it was a very constructive thing. It was very visual. We were fighting on whether it was tackle or verses that sort of thing.

Victoria Murch 10:39

We went through a lot of different, you know, names. We wanted like students versus like suicide, students versus struggles, students versus struggles, stigma and suicide. But eventually, we decided on students versus stigma because we thought that was the most all-encompassing issue that we could like that just covered all of the bases that we wanted covered.

Allison Shamus 11:09

Yeah, I think that's kind of a really good point. The point of like stigma kind of encompassing everything, I think, is really good because like stigma is kind of like like the negative, like bias beliefs and attitudes towards a specific group of people, and stigma almost can help like cause or not cause but like make problems worse for some people, and it makes people afraid to get help. And we realize, like especially as a teen, like getting help is really important. So I like what you said about that.

Beth Santer 11:40

So I'm glad you brought that up, Allison, because we've done other podcasts with other guests that that deal with either providing mental health services or are part of groups that support that work, and I guess this will go to you, Matt. It seems like that discussions around mental health have evolved to where those discussions are happening more, but yet there still seems to be that stigma. Everybody seems to reference that. So, is that something that you have found in your work?

Matt Swartz 12:15

So it's interesting. When I moved back to town from New York, I was in New York a while getting my grad degree. It was very normal in New York to talk about going to therapy. We'd go to brunch on Saturday and talk about what we talked about with our therapists. Like that was normal. And then I got back to Michigan and I started doing business networking. And I would get up in rooms talking about anxiety, and there is like people were very unsure about what was happening. And I would say in the past couple of years, I stand up in those rooms, and people's reaction is more like, yeah, yeah, yeah. So I've seen, I think, a tremendous change in, you know, sort of like attitudes. But what I find is there

are definitely different groups of people that still are very constrained by that stigma, and I think that in the education space, I would say that's less, you know, a factor per se than most educators that I meet and interact with tend to be in general pretty open and engaged with the reality of mental health, and of course there are exceptions. But I think that even in that, there are invisible cultural paradigms that that make assumptions about how we behave and interact with the world that suggests that if you're not performing at a particular level, it's your fault or something's wrong with you. And I think that's that's much deeper than just mental health. That's like a very sort of like Western Protestant sort of view that's very ingrained in American culture, and so when I think about stigma, it's not just like oh you have anxiety or you have depression, like that's definitely an issue. But I think the deeper issue is this notion that I think it affects students that if they're not performing how they're supposed to perform, something's wrong with them, and that's where I see a lot of the stigma I think that we're tackling likely.

Beth Santer 14:22

I'm curious. I'd like to hear from our three students on that issue of stigma from your perspective, because I I do know that kids talk to kids, and it is more common to hear kids talking about mental health. But is there a stigma between students? Is there a stigma between students and adults? Is there a stigma like Matt was talking about? Maybe not in the educational world, but in the outside world. What's your... what's your view on all that?

Victoria Murch 14:55

I would say that there's definitely a stigma between you know students and adults. I think a lot of students have moved towards a attitude of rather than like apprehension towards mental health, exhaustion, maybe because they think they're hearing about it too much and like they're just like okay blah blah blah we get it, but there is still a fundamental misunderstanding about what mental health is and what mental health advocacy is supposed to be-that I think, you know, there's still so much like that-is the stigma that a lot of students are tackling, a lot of students are dealing with because they just, you know, they keep hearing the same things over and over again, and they they might not relate to it, but and they might not realize that they do in fact relate to it, and it's just the way that it's being discussed and portrayed.

Beth Santer 15:57

Interesting. Any other comments on that?

Allison Shamus 16:01

Yeah, I've noticed like in schools, like it's definitely like very person to person. I talk to some people about like my experiences with therapy or whatever, and they're super receptive and like, oh, that's like I didn't know therapists like could be just for like anxiety or whatever. And but then some people I talk to and they're like, oh, like they create more stigma. They're kind of like, oh, you go to therapy, like you're crazy or whatever. And I think also to Matt's point, the societal like beliefs-they're really the-I struggle with those a lot because they're really hard to undo, especially with like the older generations. Like, because a lot of people just don't understand stuff. I think a lot of people just don't like are not in the know. So I think that's where a lot of problems come from.

Josh Patterson 16:47

I think it's just a lack of understanding and education around the subject, and I think people get their own view of what mental health is, and then they stick to it. And everyone's mental health experience is different, and trying to put yourself in someone else's shoes can be a real struggle for people. And I think, especially at the student-to-student basis, some people really are open about their struggles. Some people are receptive, and then there's people that aren't receptive or very cagey, that sort of thing. And it's hard to know what you're getting into if you're talking to somebody, and I think that is

where the norms come into play. Is the student who is struggling, then they've had a negative experience. They don't want to reach out to somebody for the fear that they're going to shut them down or they're going to be like, "Oh my God, you see a therapist", like that sort of thing. And it's hard to overcome that feeling of what happens if, and then fill in the blank... they berate me, or they're whatever, and you don't see that it could be beneficial to talk. And that's, I think, the importance of creating a space like Students Versus Stigma is. We're like obviously open towards whatever anyone's facing, and we want to help them, and we all want to help others. And like I mean, everyone in our group probably has faced some mental health challenge or knows someone who has some mental health struggles. So we're all pretty open and receptive and a good environment to do that in. And I think our goal is again to facilitate that so.

Allison Shamus 18:16

I like that you mentioned like the idea of like fear, like kind of that, like a lot of people have like a fear of rejection, maybe from society or whatever. But yeah, I just want to say that.

Matt Swartz 18:27

If I can jump in real quick, I think it's what's interesting, right, is the student facilitation piece of all of this. That if I had been in charge or whatever, like the name would not have been Students versus Stigma. That wasn't my approach or my thought, but you know, my role was to kind of come in and, as they say, the whiteboard, right? Provide a space where they were able to identify their vision, their mission, you know, create the title. And I think what's important is that this is what the students have said is the most important. And so what that leads me to believe is this is what they're dealing with on a daily basis—that those of them who have had mental health challenges or do want to communicate around mental health are facing the initial barrier of that stigma. And while there may be maybe bigger issues or maybe you know other challenges that they want to face, the the thing that comes first is being able to break through that stigma. Because if we can't be authentic and we can't connect through our experience, then we can't make the change. And so I think that is really important that the work that they've decided to do is to have those conversations through education and connection that allow that stigma to break down over time. And so that's just their lived experience is telling us where we need to go. And that's the whole point of this: like, what if students lead? Where would we end up going?

Beth Santer 19:43

Yeah. So, can you share an example of a project or a campaign or something that students versus stigma has led that you felt made a meaningful impact on your school or community, or maybe even the reverse, where you thought you were going in one direction and you thought there was going to be something that was impactful, and then you had to kind of step back and shift directions, and that's for anybody?

Allison Shamus 20:08

I think we've definitely had some good like events and meetings. I think one thing we had it was the Plymouth. What was it? The one that I was sick for.

Beth Santer 20:19

The Plymouth Mental Health,

Allison Shamus 20:20

yeah, the

Beth Santer 20:21

art fair, no, mental health fair.

Allison Shamus 20:23

the Plymouth Mental Health Fair. I thought that went pretty good, but I think the thing, like that, like the second part of Beth's question, where she was asking, like, oh, like what about things that maybe haven't gone as well? I think like one thing about starting a group up, because this group is still very new, is that like it's hard to pinpoint progress, and I think that's like just a struggle that any group would face, and a struggle that we are definitely facing because it's a little hard to show like the actual growth. But I do think that a lot of things we're doing at least have impacted me, and I know impacted a few other people who keep showing up to the meetings and whatnot.

Beth Santer 21:02

That's a good point, Allison.

Josh Patterson 21:05

Kind of building off of that, you know, it's hard to to do this work and to maintain that energy. But I always go back to the saying, "Every little thing changes everything." So, you know, we do a lot of work and we've had a lot of meetings, and I think we've made an impact that that we can see, and we think it's small. But that just because there we can't see the wave growing into tsunami doesn't mean that it's not there. So I think we're all just very focused on the work, and we don't necessarily see the outcome or what the outcome will be. And we've all kind of started that wave, I would say, to hopefully create a group that will be making all sorts of projects and working with schools. I think we just have to get there, and we're getting there. I don't, Tori. If you want to talk about the boxes, I think that can be the...

Victoria Murch 21:56

The boxes. Originally, we had tried to do a sort of like anonymous tip box that we were going to craft, we made all of these boxes, and we were going to put them in schools. That idea eventually fell through because we discovered that it was actually very hard to implement getting a bunch of boxes, and how would the school administration actually deal with these boxes, and how would they, you know, address these concerns that were put into the boxes, and how how do we deal with people just trolling and putting random stuff that is not even like whatever.

Beth Santer 22:46

And how do you follow up if it's anonymous, right?

Victoria Murch 22:48

Yeah, exactly.

Beth Santer 22:49

Yeah.

Victoria Murch 22:49

So we, you know, we faced a... like we had an initial kickoff event that was pretty successful, and then following that, you know, we really struggled to maintain a consistent amount of people showing up.

Allison Shamus 23:06

Yeah, we went from like like 50 people to like 12.

Victoria Murch 23:10

Yeah, and then along with just the boxes not getting a lot of momentum, a lot of people dropped off. But so we have you know, this has inspired us to reinvestigate our approach and how we're going to do it,

you know. And we've concluded that we're going to start focusing more on building the internal systems within schools, building their own, letting them build their own students versus stigma club, to then meeting like once a month to discuss what everyone else is doing within their schools, and then hopefully inspire people to bring back those initiatives to their student body to encourage you know talking about mental health, talking about stigma, with all of these different approaches that others have tried, and we've had some some success with that. You know, with Josh is involved with a plethora of student mental health clubs, and his experience has really helped us and give us given us a lot of inspiration that we've been able to take back to our schools, at least Northville High School, since both Allison, I... Allison and I go there, and we hope that we can inspire other schools to do that.

Beth Santer 23:33

Yeah, so it's almost like changing that approach from instead of being the outside in, the inside out, right? Yeah. So I'm curious, Matt. I mean, you're the facilitator, and I know just from being a parent and then also trying to implement processes in local districts, how do you kind of hang back? Or facilitate a process when students are going in a direction, and maybe you have a concern. Do you voice the concern? Do you not voice the concern? Do you kind of let it play out? And all lessons are life lessons, or how how do you do that facilitation?

Matt Swartz 25:20

And the approach in the beginning for me, I I have an interesting background because I'm both a therapist and I've also done a lot of business consulting and coaching. So my approach initially was I walked in like I was doing a business consulting gig and I did vision, mission, values, and you know explored these things. And my I've done a lot of facilitation, and my goal is to be a smaller voice, to be a container, to implement processes, to serve as a co-creator, but not as a director. And I think that benefited them because I think if I had done that differently, they might not be sitting here today, and that their ownership of the process is what allowed sustained energy past a point of frustration. That would be my hope, and that point of frustration is always going to come when we're creating something new. You know what is working, what isn't working, how do we test? You know, what are the A/B tests? I think that I'm very thankful for the input of educators like yourself and other adult collaborators on this project, like Lynn at Redford Union and Diana at Northville, Kathy at Plymouth Canton, Marcia at Taylor Schools, and and all the other adults that have been involved, because I'm not an educator, so I don't know what it's like to be inside the building and navigate those operational challenges. So that's been very useful, but I think that ultimately, you know, my my kind of my job is to take in all of that data from the students, from the educators, and then to come back to the table like I did recently and say, okay, based on what we've done, what you guys wanted to do with the educators, here's the middle ground, here's the synthesized information. At this point, I'm gonna you know step up a little bit, but again, I I think that you know my goal ultimately is to give as much ownership to the students as possible because this is their this is their experience, and I want them to feel empowered throughout.

Beth Santer 27:39

Yeah, yeah, excellent points, and you know I do think we almost need to go back a little bit because you were mentioning some other adult leaders of different school districts, and I'm glad you did because we've mentioned that the coalition isn't just a few schools; it's it's schools across Wayne County. So at the very beginning, I think this is a question for Matt. How did you decide where the meetings are going to be held at? I mean, if people are coming from all over Wayne County, how do you do the nuts and bolts planning of that? And how did adults and the school districts even know about it?

Matt Swartz 28:17

Yeah. So I mean, you know, after a series of meetings with just myself and Brian, we said, "Okay, well, we need to engage the adult coalition", and we formed a planning committee with a series of adults, including yourself, Beth, and you know Tamaron from Redford Union, and Kathy from Plymouth Canton, and of course Alice from GrowthWorks, operating in the background the whole time, and you know several others, and we we engaged in that initial planning with, by the way, input from you know Trinity Health as well was at the table in some of those early planning meetings, and you know the took a lot of collaboration and a lot of building together to kind of figure out an approach, and then you know what we settled on was we wanted the meetings to rotate, and if we had you know if we tried to spread them out and have them in a different district every every month, then that would you know hopefully create more community. And I think I think it was interesting, and I think it was a positive experience. But ultimately, what we you know have kind of found is that the not having a safe, stable base might have played a role in some of the attrition. So the question now is how can we you know implement technology in terms of utilizing a hybrid approach? How can we, as the students were mentioning, begin to explore sort of doing more grassroots inside each school to create more energy and momentum, and we're not, you know, we're we're not throwing off. You know, again, we we're very much interested in continuing some kind of monthly meeting that allows everybody to collaborate together. But ultimately, yeah, it was I think really cool to travel from school to school. And I love the idea, and I wish it was as easy to implement as how cool the idea was.

Beth Santer 30:08

Yeah, it always things always sound good until you you actually implement it, and a lot of the pieces that you talked about are kind of those growing pains of when you're a pioneer and you're doing something new. So back to the our students, what advice would you give to schools or students who want to start conversations about mental health but aren't sure where to begin?

Victoria Murch 30:33

I would say just connect with others, talk to your counselors. A lot of the times, you might not feel like anyone wants to really hear what you have to say, or really feels the same way that you do about these discussions. But if you, you know, if you just go out there and you start it, you'll probably be surprised how many people actually want to be invested in these types of things. So, you know, if you want to start these things within your school, I would say talk to your administration, talk to your counselors, talk to like figure out what they're already doing and how you can add student input to that, and like just add on to the feedback of what's already going on, so that you can improve the systems that are already in place and maybe start some new ones.

Beth Santer 31:26

Yeah.

Allison Shamus 31:26

Yeah I.. kind of the last part of what you said with like, like starting off with what we already have. I was just kind of thinking like the whole time about how like sometimes it's hard to start something new. It can feel really scary because it's like, oh my gosh, like what if no one shows up? What if, blank, blank? But I think that most schools have some sort of like common group for mental health, and so like just joining one of those might help you get inspiration. You can try to talk with people there, so just like give yourself a little bit of a head start. Don't think you have to do it all alone either. Like if you have a friend or something that you know is like really interested in the same thing as you, can feel a lot better trying to get your goals accomplished.

Beth Santer 32:17

Yeah, great points.

Josh Patterson 32:20

But don't do it all on your own. It's a really important aspect. Yeah. As someone who's tried and failed, it's not not worth trying to do everything yourself. Finding a team that will do it with you, finding people who will back you up, finding your community is very important. And I think on top of that, just saying yes, you're not being afraid to just put yourself forward. Talk to adults. Talk to your fellow students, and just have those conversations. I think that's really the first step, and you'll find the direction that you need to go in, even if it's not the one you see in your head before you have those conversations. You'll you'll eventually end up where you not necessarily wanted to be, but where you need to be.

Beth Santer 33:02

Yeah, great point.

Matt Swartz 33:05

What we've really taken away from the past almost two years is, you know, I think there's two core pieces of the mission going forward. The first is to build connection and community, and that you know we, as we often do, put the cart before the horse in terms of let's do these projects and let's make this change. And the reality is, those things happen because of shared connection and collaboration. So we're we're taking that step back, and we're really focusing on collect... connection and community first and foremost. And then the second piece is that the students keep coming back to is the education, partly for them, but I think a lot we keep coming back to like staff, you know, parent right education around mental health. You know, how can we help people get an understanding of mental health and the challenges the students are facing? And so that some of that is about student voice and you know sharing their experiences and finding ways to do that effectively, and other pieces of that are empowering the students to, you know, do research and you know build presentations and think about how they want to convey these ideas more effectively. And both of those things, to me, it's like, oh yeah, I mean, those those are the things that I've been doing for a very long time. So I get very excited about if we spend another year working on building community and building education. I think that's going to move the needle forward, and I'm very inspired by the students in their ability to identify those focuses.

Beth Santer 34:31

Yeah, and their passion about the topic. So we're last... we're down to our last couple of questions, and so the first of our last questions I want to hear from all of you. Is when you look at... you mentioned the challenges and some of the successes of starting students versus stigma, but when you think back to the beginning up till now, because you guys have been the student leaders for those first few years. What are you the most proud of, or what was the biggest lesson you learned?

Victoria Murch 35:11

I mean, I've learned so much with my time with working with Students Versus Stigma. You know, like as everyone's been saying this entire podcast, we can't just give up when things get hard, especially when we're starting something new. You know, as I've learned how to be a leader, and I'm really proud of myself for that. You know, I've learned to like remain strong and put the work in so that we can inspire others to follow along in our lead. And it's it's really hard, really really hard starting something new. Yeah, but as long as you keep showing up and you keep, you know, saying this is what we're we're gonna do, eventually people will come along and people will follow what you're doing because, they I mean they probably want to be a part of it too. They just don't know how to start, so.

Beth Santer 36:03

it's almost that exercise in resilience.

Victoria Murch 36:05

Mhm.

Josh Patterson 36:07

I would say I'm most proud of the people that we that have all come together to do this. I think we've all grown, especially like us students through this work, and just together, how far we've come. I think it's impressive that we didn't just die out within the first year, and I think that's a crazy achievement in itself. And just our dedication to this work, and the persistence, and our motivation to to just keep pushing. I think it's very important. And going back to the goal that you asked, like what was one hope? I would say initially I was very excited to hopefully make this like a like a across Michigan sort of thing, and I think that would be something in the future, whether it's creating a a a format that other districts can take on and shape to themselves, or expanding ourselves slowly. I I think this work is very important. So getting it out there, not just to our nine districts, but even nationally, is very important. And that's something that I've I've wanted since the beginning. But I think to do that, we have to do this hard work, and the hard work is hard.

Beth Santer 37:19

Yeah, absolutely. And and to make it sustainable because students don't stay in high school forever. We want you to, but you won't. So, it has to be sustainable. So, new student leaders and new students can be part of it too. What about you, Allison?

Allison Shamus 37:33

I would definitely agree with all of that. I would say I'm kind of like... it kind of takes both of your ideas. I'm definitely like very proud of our ideas and the way we've like grown and adapted to new ideas or change. I I just I love how all of us are very open-minded to thinking about different solutions to problems. I think every like everyone in the group has always had like really good ideas about how we can tackle stigma and mental health struggles. So I'm just kind of proud of that. I'm proud of like how like when we were deciding on attendance, like if we had a problem like attendance, it would just be like, okay, well, what if we made like a virtual option? And it's just like that stuff. So I'm really proud of how far we've come and what we've done.

Beth Santer 38:20

Yeah, absolutely. And you know, Josh, you talked about that dream of making it across Michigan. I mean, you have gotten some attention through all those bumps. You guys were recipients of the 2026 Youth Advocate NAMI Awards, so you have gotten some attention at the state level. So your dream might come true. It could happen. So last question: If you could leave listeners with one message about mental health stigma or the power of student leadership, what would it be?

Victoria Murch 38:50

Just talk to people. It's, I mean, it's honestly, you know, it sounds really simple, but it's, it honestly, it's really hard to, you know, starts again, start something new, but just being out there and you know asking the questions that you feel need to be asked, and just starting conversations. Go to your counselors, talk to them about what's going on in schools. Maybe do a survey with your peers, connect with them. You know, start like a do like a little mental health discussion club where you have like hot chocolate and cocoa or something, and you all sit around like a fire and you just talk about what's been bothering you. Even that is, you know, starting these conversations with mental health, and they're really important. So I would say just, just get out there and go get them, champ.

Beth Santer 39:56

Yeah, just do it.

Victoria Murch 39:57

Yeah.

Allison Shamus 39:58

Yeah I guess just like don't like fear failure because I feel like that always sets you back. I always think of this one quote from Benjamin Franklin actually, it says, "Do not fear mistakes; you will know failure. Continue to reach out." And I think that kind of like encompasses what Tori said as well. But just like get involved, like don't be afraid to put yourself out there. The fear I know, I always think about this as well. Of like, the feeling of embarrassment will always like be less intense than the feeling of regret. So, like just and just the other thing I'd say is, you don't have to be like the group leader. You don't have to be like this person at the top who's in charge of everything and has a giant thing going on. You can just do your part by just talking to people and having an open mind. I think so, I think that's important to recognize.

Victoria Murch 40:57

Or even just joining already existing initiatives and just doing your part because one person is better than none.

Josh Patterson 41:06

And I think the other thing that we I haven't really touched on is if you go to an adult and are like, "Hey, I want to do this" as a kid, they're most likely going to empower you to do that. And I think that's something that we can take advantage of more is an adult is way less likely to shut you down as a kid if you're like, hey, I want to start this mental health group or hey, I want to do this. A lot of adults, especially like school administrators, board members, people in in power, I guess in your district, are are very receptive if you're wanting to start something, and we'll oftentimes give you resources or connections to build off of, so don't underestimate the power of connections, especially with the adults around you.

Beth Santer 41:50

Yeah. So, Matt, I'm gonna I'm gonna give you the last word. Co-leader of these three amazing youth advocates, but also the whole group. What's the one thing that you want to leave listeners with in terms of mental health stigma or the power of student leadership?

Matt Swartz 42:10

So I know I'm not the most grizzled veteran, but I've been doing 15 years of individual therapy and group therapy with people, and what has emerged at this moment for me is that while I absolutely believe in the importance and power of individual therapy as a process for healing and growth in mental health, I believe the necessary step to make mental health a community activity, right? That that throughout human history, what differentiates humans is our our social fabric and connection and collaboration, and that if we are going to make the world a better place, if we're going to improve mental health, that's going to be done in connection and community and collaboration, and not alone in an office. And that, for me, is where my journey brought me to help empower these students. And I think we all need to find the place where we fit in those conversations. We're not all the same person, and we don't all have the same skill sets. But we do need to work together and collaborate. And I think it's very easy to get discouraged, whether it's about your own mental health or the state of the world or how much you're being supported in your challenges. And in order to take the next step on improving those things, getting into connection, building community, and collaborating together to make change, I think that's where where we have to go. That's where I'm proud to be being led by these students.

Beth Santer 43:49

Great message. And with that, we want to thank Josh Patterson, Allison Shamus, Victoria Murch, and Matt Schwartz for sharing their experiences, insights, and passion for mental health advocacy, your work through Students vs. Stigma demonstrates the incredible impact that can happen when young people are empowered to lead, speak openly, and support one another. Thanks to all our listeners, we hope you join us again for the Wayne RESA Roundtable Podcast. Thanks for being here, guys.

Josh Patterson 44:18

Thank you.

Allison Shamus 44:18

Thank you.

Victoria Murch 44:19

Thank you.