

RESILIENCE ON THE BRAIN

Words by MacKennea Broyles | Photo courtesy of Western Colorado Community Foundation

Content warning: The following article mentions depression and suicide.



Anne Wenzel, President and CEO of WCCF, with members of the Mike and Kay Ferris Family Fund presents \$100,000 to the Lighthouse Project, located on the CMU Campus. CMU President John Marshall, Juvenile Justice Coordinator Jacque Berry and Mesa County District Attorney Dan Rubenstein spoke about the innovative partnership that works to keep youth out of the justice system.

There's no doubt that Mesa County is full of tough people. Determination, perseverance and grit are multitools in the pocket of every resident. But it would be a lie to say that these last few years haven't been hard or that Mesa County is unaffected by the (often hidden) issues that come with challenging times — ones that may manifest in more formal ways like

anxiety and depression or that just make life less enjoyable.

To add to the stress, some of the more harrowing statistics from the past few years involve some of our most precious community members: youth and adolescents.

Thankfully, programs like Shelledy Elementary's Mindfulness Room, CyberStrong

and the Western Colorado Community Foundation's YouthStrong Initiatives are taking on these challenges and setting out to turn the tide.

"The mental health needs of our youth have only continued to increase, unfortunately," says Tedi Gillespie, the director of grants and community outreach at the Western Colorado Community Foundation (WCCF) in Grand Junction. WCCF is celebrating 25 years this year and is home to initiatives like YouthStrong, designed to combat issues faced by at-risk youth and provide Mesa County youth with opportunities they might not otherwise have access to.

Gillespie gingerly points out that Mesa County has long had a disproportionately high rate of teen suicide when compared to both state and national averages. Although there often isn't one specific cause, it can be attributed to an intersection of factors such as geographic and social isolation, lack of acceptance for belonging to the LGBTQ+ community and lack of access to adequate mental health resources.

However, this is not an issue faced exclusively by Mesa County. As of 2019, more than one in six Colorado high school students reported they had seriously considered suicide in the past year, according to the 2021 Kids Count Colorado report.

Even when services are provided and made available, there has long been a stigma attached to seeking them. In close-knit communities, this feeling can be heightened. Gillespie puts it this way: "People used to taking care of their own don't usually seek out help."

This is especially applicable to mental health services, where nationwide, 25% of those not seeking help for mental health-related symptoms cite stigma or not wanting others to know as a reason.

According to Elizabeth Clark, a mental health therapist based in Grand Junction, another important consideration is the rise of technology and its ever-increasing presence in our lives. Youth are especially susceptible to this and tend to see greater consequences in areas such as resolve and emotional regulation.

In addition to her other work, Clark facilitates a program called CyberStrong, a partnership between Hilltop Community Resources, Mesa County Valley School District 51, the Mesa County Libraries and the Western Colorado Community Foundation that aims to increase responsible technology use, especially among Mesa County youth and teens.

"There are entry points in our community," Gillespie says. "If the organizations are working with and talking to each other, there's a much better chance of meeting our community's needs."

Of these entry points, one of the most promising is schools, and one of the potential solutions lies in the Mindfulness Room at Shelledy Elementary School.

RESILIENCE IS ELEMENTARY

"It used to be one or two students who were highly impacted and required additional support," says Cami Kidd, principal at Shelledy. "Now, it's entire classes of students who are struggling with dysregulation. If kids are dysregulated, they aren't in a place for learning, and other kids



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in the room sense that, and it becomes a chain reaction.”

The Mindfulness Room was born out of necessity. “We had kids who needed IEP [Individualized Education Plans, a written education plan designed to meet specific student needs] level support with no IEP,” Kidd explains. “We had done some social-emotional learning curriculums before, but we needed something more, so we took this idea and ran with it.”

Students are trained to utilize the room when they’re “regulated,” meaning emotions are in check and their body is not in fight-or-flight mode. The room includes a multitude of tools to meet a variety of needs, from kinetic sand to a small trampoline, and a trained staff member who is “always finding great ways to encourage the kids who visit to be their best,” says Kidd.

“Ultimately, we want the student to understand what’s happening before they are completely dysregulated. We want to empower them to identify how they can come down from that fight-or-flight mode before it goes too far,” explains Clark.

“There’s a misconception that this approach is us being soft on kids, that we’re absolving them and they aren’t facing consequences, when in reality, it’s just us wanting everyone to be able to perform at their highest capacity,” Vikie Fay-Cooper, assistant principal at Shelledy, explains. “This is not us being soft; it’s us doing what works.”

One of the greatest hurdles to providing youth mental health support is funding.

In Colorado, the per pupil funding is \$2,000 less than the national average, and Mesa County School District 51 has the sixth lowest per pupil funding in the state. Per pupil funding dictates not only books and materials, but staffing. This includes personnel like the educator in charge of the Mindfulness Room or behavior interventionists.

When asked if Shelledy felt it had adequate resources to expand the program and meet the need, Fay-Cooper put it bluntly: “No, we really don’t. We’re working with what we have, but there’s so much more that we could do if we had the resources we need.”

However, Clark points out that the current strategy being implemented at Shelledy is “the cheapest and most cost-effective thing we could do. It’s not a million kids in therapy. This is what we need for good, high-functioning humans.”

High-functioning humans doesn’t just mean students. Kidd notes that this is why it’s especially important to give caregivers the tools and resources to practice regulation, as well. “What we’re hearing is that what the students are learning transfers over into adult lives. We want to bring families in, too, so that we’re all truly a unit and a team. It’s good all the way around.”

“A big part of this is that this desire and the collaboration needs funding,” says Gillespie. “It needs a tremendous amount of funding and a much bigger lens.”

THINGS ARE LOOKING UP

Western Colorado Community Foundation aims to continue to fund and support groundbreaking initiatives that boldly face these challenges. “We really like to have a handle on the opportunities to change the trajectory,” says Gillespie.

The staff at Shelledy has plans to provide all staff members “from principals to janitors” with professional training on emotional regulation and increase the number of mindfulness spaces throughout the school with the eventual goal of having a version of one in each classroom.

Ultimately, today’s youth are tomorrow’s leaders. They’re everyone’s future doctors, bankers, teachers and co-workers, and their mental health is worth investing in. Fay-Cooper points out that this isn’t just an issue for schools and caregivers, “There’s a saying in this work that ‘It’s not your fault but it is your problem,’” she laughs.

Despite a raging tide and an uncertain future, Gillespie is optimistic. “There’s a lot of people rowing together in the same direction,” she believes.

If you or someone you know is struggling with a mental health crisis, please contact the National Suicide Hotline at 800.273.8255 or the Colorado Crisis Text Line by texting CO to 741741. +