



Hogg Foundation
for Mental Health



Episode 136: Diverse Works, A New Art Experience (Transcript)

Ike Evans:

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Hi, welcome to "Into the Fold," the mental health podcast. I am your host, Ike Evans, and today, we're delighted to bring you episode 136, "Diverse Works, A New Art Experience." But, first, some mental health headlines. The Hogg Foundation has released a policy brief titled "Meeting the Mental Health Needs of Individuals With Intellectual and Other Disabilities." The Hogg Foundation advocates for treatment that considers the potential for underlying mental health conditions, trauma, or unseen medical conditions in persons with intellectual and other developmental disabilities. In this policy brief, you will find a great introduction to the topic as well as recommendations for policymakers. You can find the brief on the homepage of our website, hogg.utexas.edu.

In Texas news, Dell Medical Center and Austin Community College are launching a mental health pilot program. The two-year program will focus its first year on providing mental health services to students at the ACC Eastview campus, located in a medically underserved part of Travis County. And, in national news, the 9-8-8 mental health hotline is expanding, but rural areas still face critical care shortages. This is according to a recent article by "Kaiser Health News." To quote the article, "The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline's 9-8-8 phone number, which launched July 16, was designed as a universal mental health support tool for callers at any time, anywhere. But the U.S. is a patchwork of resources for crisis assistance, so what comes next isn't universal. The level of support that 9-8-8 callers receive depends on their zip code.

"In particular, rural Americans, who die by suicide at a far higher rate than residents of urban areas, often have trouble accessing mental health services. While 9-8-8 can connect them to a call center close to home, they could end up being directed to faraway resources. The new system is supposed to give people an alternative to 9-1-1, yet callers from rural areas who are experiencing a mental health crisis may still be met by law enforcement personnel rather than mental health specialists."

And that does it for mental health headlines. Don't be left out of the loop. Subscribe to mental health headlines on the Hogg Foundation website. Get the latest mental health news right in your inbox.

We're at the end of July, which is Minority Mental Health Awareness Month. Spreading awareness through art is something that we do from time to time because the arts present a great opportunity to highlight both the creativity and resilience of people with lived experience.

Velta Brenya is a recent graduate from the University of Texas at Austin, having recently earned her BA in health and society. She is the creator of the Double Diversity Digital Art Gallery, created to give voice to the experiences of neurodiverse students of color like herself. And, before beginning this conversation, I just want to thank Vicky Coffee, our wonderful director of programs, for introducing me to Velta. Velta, welcome to the podcast.

Velta Brenya:

Thank you for having me.

Ike Evans:

So my first question is, what was the origin of this project, and what things did you need to figure out in order to make it happen?

Velta Brenya:

So the origin of this project, it really traces back to when COVID hit. So, whenever COVID hit, I was still taking classes, and I found it difficult to focus and be on top of my work. Plus, since we're in quarantine, it was very isolating. And, because of this, I felt very down, so I sought help. I sought professional help, and they told me that they believed that I had ADHD. And, from that, I went to go discover, what is ADHD, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder. ADHD is a diagnosis where people with this condition, they have issues with regulating their attention. And, oftentimes, it's hard for them to manage their time and plan for things. They have, sometimes, issues with executive functioning. And so I wanted to look more into this and find resources so that I can get the help that I need.

But I found navigating this was really, really hard. It was a struggle just trying to figure out if I should see a nurse practitioner, if I should see a psychiatrist, if I should see a psychologist, learning about insurance, deductibles, premiums. All of these things that were foreign to me were just now presented to me, and I had to figure these things out just to figure out what was going on. And, because of this, whenever I was doing this, and then I also did more research into ADHD, and ADHD is also considered -- is a condition considered under the umbrella term of just neurodiversity, so when you just have neurological differences from those who are considered neurotypical. And, whenever I was doing this research, I saw that there was a lack of presence of Black neurodiverse individuals.

And, even whenever I was doing research in the literature or just seeing online, YouTube, I wouldn't see a huge Black presence. And then, whenever I would talk to my peers about, "Oh, what is neurodiversity? What is ADHD?" Oftentimes, they didn't know. And so, I found that this lack of knowledge and lack of awareness in the Black community, it's paramount. And it's because we don't have -- There's a lack of education and lack of access to resources. And so, in this process, whenever I was discovering this, it just gave me the idea of how I can bring resources and bring awareness about neurodiversity to the Black community. And so, I was gifted the opportunity to be a part of the Engaged Scholars Initiative at UT, where we were given we an opportunity to do a community-based research project, and we can choose whatever methodology we wanted.

And, with that, I wanted to use this thing that I'm passionate about, neurodiversity and bringing awareness to the Black community, and also another passion of mine, art. I've always been in love with art since I was a kid, always drawing. In high school, I was in AP art. I got awards in high school. And, even in college, I continued here and there to work on some art pieces and photography pieces whenever I'm not dealing with school, in my free time. And so, I wanted to combine those passions. And so, what I did for my project was create a digital art gallery where I spoke to students at UT, Black students at UT, who identify as being neurodiverse. And then, with those stories, I created them into art pieces. So the participants were co-authors with me with these art pieces because it's their stories that I put into an art form.

And the reason why I really wanted to focus on doing it this way, because I wanted to highlight, again, the importance of awareness about neurodiversity and how this is still a community that often goes unnoticed because the conditions that they have are invisible to the human eye. But, if I brought

their invisibility into light and see the beauty of it through their support systems and bringing awareness of this, people can now see it not as a deficit but actually a unique ability that these students have.

Ike Evans:

What would you consider the central message that you're trying to communicate with this project?

Velta Brenya:

So, with this project, the central message I'm trying to communicate is the need for support and allowing yourself to be vulnerable and seek the support that you need. I feel like, oftentimes, in the Black community, we would try to brush things under the rug. And, if we try to confront things, people will say, "Oh, there's something wrong with you. You just need to pray," and all this stuff, and they'll just discount it. But I feel like seeking support, confiding in those who you trust and who actually takes you seriously, is very crucial in just helping you deal with your mental health. I also -- With my project, I'm educating them about these different neurological differences.

And so, because of this, if people are reading these definitions and looking at the statistics, if they see that they can potentially have this, they can also, like, open the door for more Black individuals because I'm bringing them awareness. They can actually -- Impediments. But actually a part of who they are. And that they're just neurologically different. And I find that, just in general, the main premise of my project is mostly about just support and awareness.

Ike Evans:

Okay. So, let's discuss a couple of the art pieces. I'm going to share my screen with you, just so you know what it is that I am interested in talking to you about. Just one second. So, let's start with this one. I don't know that it has a name, but I'm just wanting your sense, just in looking at it. What is going on here and what a viewer, in your opinion, should take from it?

Velta Brenya:

So, for this piece, I genuinely did love and enjoy creating this piece. I found it very sentimental because I really connect with the idea of just defying the odds like the flower growing from concrete is doing just in general. With these students here at UT, I was able to graduate UT perfectly fine. This student was able to graduate as well, is excelling in life, and that's what I want to drive with my project, to really destigmatize this lens that people have with -- destigmatize this view people have with just neurodiversity. Oftentimes, people think that, oh, we're impaired, or we're, like, limited, that we can't defy the odds, we're not smart, but then you see us graduating from one of the -- the best public institution in Texas with much success. And so, this piece is just a beautiful, vibrant piece really showcasing our capabilities and how we're just so powerful, creative, and vibrant.

Ike Evans:

I just thought of a question, not one of the ones I sent to you beforehand, but I sure do want your opinion. Have there been any recent moments that led you to think that other people were really doubting your capacity? Without calling anyone out, have there been any moments that really kind of drove home that there were other people out in the world who really weren't getting it about what it is that you were capable of? I'm just curious.

Velta Brenya:

Oh, just capable of in general or capable of finishing this project?

Ike Evans:

In general or pertaining to this project. Whatever felt most real to you.

Velta Brenya:

Yeah. That is a completely valid question. Yes. I've experienced -- With me, I've experienced a lot of imposter syndrome, especially being a pre-med student here at UT. Oftentimes, I would be scared to ask a question because I didn't want to appear dumb. And, also, it's just like being here at an institution where it's just like we're 4%, it's hard. You always feel the need to prove yourself, to prove your worth, to prove that you're deserving to be here. And, on top of having ADHD, it's just like, oh -- It is just like, there's this extra pressure to prove that you're going to -- like you're deserving to be here because, oftentimes, people will see -- Oftentimes, people will just look down on you because of your Blackness, but also, if you have ADHD, there's also another -- Also, people will look down at you just based off of how you act or behave just because you're not typical or you're not neurotypical.

So, oftentimes, I do -- Sometimes, I do feel doubt in myself because of the encounters that I'll have in class. Sometimes, in class -- Sometimes, I've experienced just being ignored whenever I ask a question in class or just -- I was even told by, like, a TA thinking -- that he was thinking that I wasn't capable enough of doing basically doing well in the class, and then I got an A. There's been many times in my life where I have to battle feeling that doubt and seeing people, even how they -- If I forget something -- Because, oftentimes, with ADHD, you can be kind of forgetful and kind of zone out. And people would think that, "Oh, you're just -- You're not paying attention." No, it's just, like, sometimes, I zone out. I do care.

And some people, whenever they see that, they'll question your intelligence, but it's not a testament to your intelligence. It's just your brain just -- Your brain is just wired differently. And it is just like, you have to use certain techniques and strategies in order to really gauge your focus. And so, yes, there's been times where people have questioned me, but then I continue to be more -- I have to be self-compassionate towards myself and continue to defy the odds and be the best that I can and still go after the things that I want because ADHD doesn't limit me at all. No, because it's just like, with me, if I'm really into something, I can hyperfocus on something and work 10 hours straight and get things done all at once. And so, that's just how I see it. And I just don't let those people who question me or those who doubt me just ruin my life.

Ike Evans:

Yeah. Okay. So, this next image -- And I'm going to try to describe it for our listeners -- it sort of has a reddish-purple tint. There's an image of, I guess, what is the Texas State Capitol in the background and then -- overlaid by what looks to be a veiled woman a lot more in the foreground. So if you can sort of imagine all of those different elements together, and so, Velta, what do you take from this image?

Velta Brenya:

So, basically from this image, the city of Austin is basically overtaking the participant where it's just like, in Austin, she felt very isolated and how she had to navigate her diagnosis and transitioning into college. And, although this participant had a support system with her, she was able to -- a support system with her, they never really understood particularly her individualized experience, being Black and being neurodiverse and being in a new city, trying to navigate college. And so, the model is trying to -- Or she's trying to reach out for a certain level of understanding from her support system, saying, "Hey, I'm in this

city. I'm trying to navigate, and I want you guys to see me because, often, I feel lost." So she's under the veil because it's just like she's trying to navigate her way through because she feels like nobody sees her.

Ike Evans:

Okay, Velta, my last question, what does the future hold for you? And is this something -- And by this, I mean, just the particular issue of neurodiversity and being a member of a minority group as expressed through art, is that something you'll revisit, or will you move onto other creative endeavors?

Velta Brenya:

I definitely want to go back and do something more with this project or create another project. But, at this time, I don't have a clear definitive answer. Right now, I'm working on my career endeavors. I've been focusing on that right after graduation, but this is something that I'm not just going to leave. I am going to come back, but at this time, I don't have a definitive answer for what I'm going to do. Maybe I'll try to figure out -- Maybe I'll do more informational interviews, interviewing more neurodiverse students from possibly other universities, maybe other PWIs, and hearing their experiences, hearing their stories and transforming it into art and creating more and adding to my gallery.

That is a potential idea. And maybe also gathering more mental health resources tailored towards Black people in Austin and nationally. That is something I do envision, but I can't definitively say, "Oh, I'm working on that right now." That is something that I envision for this project. And it is going to be like a work in progress once I get to it and once I create an idea of what specifically I want to do.

Ike Evans:

Okay. Well, wonderful. And so, regarding your career endeavors, do you have a sense that there's any particular kind of professional field or niche that you would like to find yourself in over the next few years?

Velta Brenya:

Medicine.

Ike Evans:

Medicine, yeah.

Velta Brenya:

Definitely medicine.

Ike Evans:

Okay. Well, Velta. So, July, and we're about at the end, is Minority Mental Health Awareness Month. One of the things that we try to get across is that people of color are not just victims, but they are very much agents when it comes to talking back to the circumstances in which they find themselves. And that includes through art. And so, this is very much a conversation or a kind of conversation that I've been wanting to have for our podcast and for our listeners. And so we very much appreciate you finding the time to talk about your work. And we wish you the best of luck with whatever it is that you do, wherever your artistic and intellectual ventures might take you. People who are concerned about mental health will have something to learn from it, so thank you so much.

Velta Brenya:

Thanks for having me.

Ike Evans:

You can check out the Double Diversity Digital Art Gallery yourself by visiting doublediversityart.wixsite.com. Wixsite is spelled W-I-X-S-I-T-E. So that's [doublediversityart](http://doublediversityart.wixsite.com), all one word, .wixsite.com. And I have also included links to the two art pieces we discussed in the description for today's episode if you'd like to check those out. For today's mental health and you, I thought I'd share something with you that will also serve as a bridge to our next episode, which will be about the history of the Hogg Foundation. Adrian Fowler was the first Black program officer to work at the Hogg Foundation. She is now retired and lives in Austin, Texas, but she was kind enough to allow us to visit with her to get her reflections on the past and present of mental health. And here she is.

Adrian Fowler:

And I asked him for the job description. They didn't have one. And I asked him, then he said, "Well, write your own. Do your own work plan. You decide what you want that job to be. You build that job." And he says, "Pay attention. Don't talk right now. Just pay attention. Think about what I've just said." And, by the time I woke up the next morning, I had a purpose. Because I mean, I felt like I'd been kicked in my gut. And I had told him, I'd give him 12 months. I said, "I really don't know. This is not -- I'm not sure that this is something I want to do for a long period of time, so I'll give you 12 months, and at the end of 12 months, let's talk." And so, 12 months came and went, and Wayne sent for me and wanted to know, he said, "Well, what are you going to do?"

And I said, "About what?" And he said, "You said you'd only give us 12 months, so what are you going to do?" I said, "Oh, I'm having way too much fun. I'm learning way too much. I'm here for the time being. I'm here for the time being. So don't worry about how long I'm going to be here. Just give me what I need to do what I'm doing." And that's all I said and said, "Thanks for asking." And I left the office and went home back to my office, but that's what I did. I built that position. I defined it. I organized it. I put people in place that could teach me what I needed to know.

Ike Evans:

You'll hear more of this interview in our next episode, which I have tentatively titled "Talking Mental Health History." If you have a testimonial that you would like to share, please shoot me an email at intothefold@austin.utexas.edu, and I'll be happy to help you get it out there. Before we close, I just want to congratulate our newest Ima Hogg scholarship recipients. They've accepted their grant awards and will now begin their journeys toward transforming the mental health workforce as newly minted masters in social work. You can find the full announcement on our blog at hogg.utexas.edu. If it's not there, just check back in a few days, and there it'll be.

And now some closing thoughts, awareness months or awareness days or awareness weeks can be a bit of a mixed blessing. There's nothing special about the month of July, other than it being the month that was chosen for Minority Mental Health Awareness Month by the U.S. House of Representatives in 2008. Last month, our channels were lit up by Pride Month, and I sure hope that we did it justice. On a few occasions, we've had to respond to some rather unkind comments on our Facebook page about our focus on historically excluded groups. After all, doesn't everyone struggle with mental health? Indeed, they do.

But our focus on historically excluded groups goes hand in hand with our deep interest in the upstream causes of poor mental health, among them being the systemic racism and other forms of

exclusion that still shape people's destinies and, hence, their mental health. It's as simple as that. That being said, I want to wish everyone good mental health and a wonderful month of August to come.

For our next episode, we'll be taking another look at the history of mental health in Texas and where the Hogg Foundation's history fits into that, and we'll be dropping in on Adrian Fowler once again. So, please check back in a couple of weeks. And that does it for this episode. We're glad you could join us. If you have comments on anything, feel free to reach out to us at intothefold.austin.utexas.edu. Thoughtful comments will be acknowledged during a future episode. Production assistance by Anna Harris, Darrell Wiggins, and Kate Rooney. And please leave us a review and subscribe to us on the podcast app of your choice. You can find us on iTunes, Apple Podcast, Google Podcast, Spotify, Stitcher, or TuneIn. Thanks for joining us.