



Hogg Foundation
for Mental Health



Episode 156: Transforming Young Minds Collectively (Transcript)

Ike Evans: Into the Fold is part of the Texas Podcast Network. The conversations changing the world, brought to you by the University of Texas at Austin. The opinions expressed in this podcast represent the views of the hosts and guests and not of the University of Texas at Austin. Hi, welcome to Into the Fold, the Mental Health podcast. I'm your host, Ike Evans. Today we are delighted to bring you episode 156, Transforming Young Minds Collectively.

Ike Evans: But first, today's mental health headline. The Hogg Foundation is excited to announce the reliable, flexible funding for mental health and wellbeing initiative. Through this grant initiative, the foundation intends to invest \$5 million over five years, awarding \$1 million per year. Grant partners will receive varying award amounts ranging from 25,000 to \$250,000 distributed equally over five years.

Ike Evans: This funding opportunity aims to provide financial support to nonprofit organizations, particularly those led by and serving members of historically excluded groups. I'll be saying more about this exciting opportunity later on in the episode. For now, we move to our main story. We are two weeks out from Young Minds Matter 2023. The theme for this year is transforming our communities collectively.

Alexander Lopez: For me, success isn't necessarily measured on your GPA or if you're going to college. For me, success really comes down to just doing something that you like to do or that you love to do. So, whether that be going to trade school or whether that be starting your own business, just trying to find that path for every young person in our community is what really defines success for me.

Ike Evans: A defining element of Young Minds Matter is its intense focus on the capacities of young people and youthful voices to drive change. So for this episode, we hear from two young people who are making change in their community of Gulfton a culturally diverse community in Houston, Texas. Alexander Lopez and Erica No are both involved with Connect Community, a grant partner of the Hogg Foundation through its Communities of Care initiative. They will also be presenting at Young Minds Matter in two weeks. Alexander and Erica, so glad to have you here with us today.

Alexander Lopez: Thank you for having us.

Erica No: Yeah, thank you so much for having us.

Ike Evans: Okay, so first I was thinking perhaps you could just introduce yourselves to our listeners and just give us a sense of your personal journeys, where you're at right now, and just a sense of what fuels your worlds.

Alexander Lopez: That's a great question. I was born and raised in Houston, Texas. I am first gen, I am Mexican and Honduran and I currently attend the University of St. Thomas. Much of the work I do to this day or that I am doing right now, is part of, is because of my journey.

Alexander Lopez: I was raised around Gulfton, which is the community I'm working for and in for right now. Being a son of a single parent, it really taught me a lot. Just being able to not only navigate through a world, but just being able to be there not only for my mom, but just for myself as well. And as you grow up and get older, you start to realize that all that work you put in, even at the young age of what is it, 12, it's worth it. And yeah, that's a little bit about myself.

Erica No: Okay. My name is Erica. I was born and raised in Houston, Texas. I grew up in the Gulfton-Sharpstown area with my mom. It was only her really raising us, but I often went back and forth my grandparents' house along with my two siblings. I currently go to the University of St. Thomas as a first generation student. One of the scholarships I have is the core thing that they support is first generational students and really having the opportunity to have the scholarship and go to a school where I don't have to worry about paying for tuition or anything is really relieving.

Erica No: But since I did grow up in Gulfton in the Sharpstown area in general, I went to KIPP Connect and I just saw how much the community has grown and through my experiences with my teachers who I actually currently work with now I am taking it upon myself where my motivation, where I want my heart to be, to give back to my community and really connect with others who are in the same situations as me, where they don't have a full family or they're also first generation. And I really want to push my work to motivate others and just to work with other people to connect and grow with them and grow as a community.

Ike Evans: Okay, wonderful. And so the name for this episode is Transforming Young Minds Collectively, which it sort of borrows from the theme of the Young Minds Matter conference. So when you hear that phrase and transforming young minds collectively, what are either some opportunities for doing that or just maybe even examples of that that you have seen or experienced in your lives? Alexander, why don't we start with you again.

Alexander Lopez: For myself, I definitely believe that we should focus on the young people in our community, especially because they are our future. And currently I've seen a lot of opportunity just around me, if I'm being honest, not necessarily around my community, but people who are willing to help young people not only overcome their obstacles but really succeed.

Alexander Lopez: Going back to what Erica said, I know one of the teachers or one of her teachers who is Ryan Biarell and who is someone we're really close with, has really given us the opportunity to not only work alongside himself, to really just be like a sponge and grasp all the little bells and whistles of what a leader looks like and what it is to be successful. But not only that, give us a platform and give us the voice to really do it.

Erica No: Like Alex said, with the unique opportunities that Alex and I have been given with working alongside Ryan in our work now, one of the opportunities that we really are really havening down and really working on to really transform young minds is our youth board. So because in the Gulfton Sharpstown area we are starting, we building from the ground up a youth building for the Gulfton-Sharpstown area, Alex and I really believed that it was essential for youth to have the space and the opportunity to take ownership of the building.

Erica No: And so through our youth board, which we established, we gathered people from our neighborhood, from our different partners and things like that who really come with diverse backgrounds, mindsets, school ages, to really come together to really make that possible.

Erica No: So through our youth board, we really believe that it was important for us to be able to make and contribute to our building, to take ownership of that and to really nurture this unique opportunity of having a youth building in our community up and being led by young people. And one of the mission or a mission statement that we created with the youth board, is it okay if I read it to y'all?

Ike Evans: Sure, yeah, absolutely.

Erica No: So this was something we worked all together on. We adjusted it, it took many tries, but for our youth board, we really wanted to make a statement for what the youth board stands for. And so our mission statement is "We believe that young people in the Gulf and Sharpstown community need a third space to develop mentally, physically, and emotionally with the unique space like the garden, it is essential to have the youth perspective at the table and fully partake in the decision-making process for our building.

Erica No: "Through voices and experiences the youth board was created in order to generate impact, influence and empower youth in our community. Our youth board's leadership will be critical to fulfilling the needs and wants of this third space, determining policies, programming, and among other these through

stories, connections and high quality engagements." So that was our mission statement and it just really grounds us, grounds our work and what we believe in.

Ike Evans: Okay. Okay. Thank you for sharing that, Erica. So this question, I guess, is for both of you. About the community of Gulfton, if you could give our listeners a sense of just what makes this community unique, some of the particular challenges that it has, but also all the different ways that -- the opportunities that there are to empower the community. So kind of both the challenges piece, but also the opportunities piece. Whoever wants to take a stab at that first,

Alexander Lopez: I can go.

Ike Evans: Yeah.

Alexander Lopez: So, Gulfton, I feel, is a great place. I definitely feel that one of its highlighting factors is that it is the most diverse community in Houston. And with that also means a lot of different issues and problems that may arise. For example, one of the biggest issues is that a lot of our community is, or our immigrants, they either come from other countries looking for opportunities or flee from their homes or cities just to find a better life.

Alexander Lopez: But among all of that there is opportunity and there is things that not only the city, but people in our community are doing, such as the garden, which is really focused on developing the youth, really being that third space for them, the third space being somewhere where they can come and feel as if they belong, somewhere where they can develop, as Erica said, both mentally, physically, and emotionally.

Alexander Lopez: Another great thing going on in Gulfton right now is they're currently working on an apartment complex, but it's not just an ordinary apartment complex. Right underneath, they're going to build a textile workshop or just textile workshop where a lot of these women from our community can learn and create their own brands. And I know there's going to be classes in that textile workshop and yeah, that's some of the great things going on in Gulfton. Erica, if you have something else to add.

Erica No: Yeah, of course. Just to piggyback off of you, diversity is just something that is at our core and people come from different places, different experiences and things like that. And sometimes one thing that we notice in our community is that because people are constantly adjusting and worrying about different things, going to school or having to worry about financial issues or if a single mom is constantly working, sometimes people don't have the opportunity to focus and develop themselves and just as a person.

Erica No: We say third space a lot, but just to really break that down, that usually our first place that we really see that ourselves being at is either at home or the second

place would be at school. But oftentimes, or an issue that we have in our community is that oftentimes young people or people in general have expectations they have to fulfill.

Erica No: For example, I'm expected or because I have a single mom or well, actually my mom passed away, but because I am someone who doesn't have parents and needs to guide themselves throughout their own life, sometimes being at school and at home isn't the best place for me to really focus on myself and develop. And so having a third space where I don't have to worry about bills or what am I going to eat tonight or school, where am I doing these assignments on time, am I leading my clubs correctly?

Erica No: And having this third space is really essential for the people in our community to really not be flooded by those expectations and have a place to empower themselves, to share their stories and to lead with their stories because their stories are really what makes our community really unique.

Ike Evans: Okay. So you mentioned people's stories. I would like to give our listeners a taste of what it is that you're referring to in the form of this snippet of bonus audio that you were kind enough to share with me beforehand. Okay. So sidebar y'all. I'm going to try to share my audio so that y'all are hearing it as well. I've only done this with video before, so we'll see if this works or not. So hold on a sec.

Amy Diaz: My name is Amy Diaz.

Erica No: My name is Erica No.

Alexander Lopez: My name is Alexander Lopez.

Lander Charabri...: My name is Lander Charabriatta.

Erica No: One of the main things that I truly stand by is having compassion for others because you don't know what everyone goes through every day. And it's kind of, if you bring that outside tension, it would disrupt someone else's. And I don't want to be that outstanding factor,

Amy Diaz: Being the first-generation college student in the family. So for me, I've always felt that pressure that, oh, I need to do my best to be successful for them. That was my mindset in the beginning. It was like, okay, I'm going to, in a sense, achieve their failed dreams.

Lander Charabri...: I'm a very loving and giving person. All I want to do is just spread love around the world, just be nice and treat everyone nicely and not have any, just no problems with anyone. I just wish everyone was happy and everyone could work together, if that makes sense. If there was any way that I could, if you're alone or you feel like you could have no one to talk to, I wish I could be that person for

them, that I would hear them out and I would listen in. I would try my best to just comfort them and be there.

Alexander Lopez: I definitely believe society gets many things wrong about young people. The main thing is the impact that we can have. They believe that just because we're young, we might not be able to have the right tools or might not be able to navigate through the world as they do. But sometimes we do it better than they do and we cause more impact. I think another thing is definitely how we view the world. They might think we're naive or just here for a good time, but there is a lot of us which have lived almost full lives of the things we've gone through and they might not even know it.

Erica No: I want the world to know that I'm just here to help, just want to be someone who can give a hand or an action or just someone people can look up to or lean on for support.

Ike Evans: So very poignant, a lot of sentiments expressed. So just for both of you, what comes to mind as you're listening to that? And first of all, what was the context in which all of that testimony was gathered?

Erica No: I can go for this. Well, the bit that you just heard was just a little teaser. So that project that we were working on, we called it digital stories. And so the idea behind digital stories is to capture a moment in someone's life and record it and hear about where they're coming from and just to be dropped in someone's life. So that was a collection of 'em. They were just pieced together, but every person has an individual story.

Erica No: So we interviewed or we had a conversation with each young person, and then at the end of our time together or during this project, we cut up different parts of the interview and then place it into create one story. So in each digital story, everyone talks about a moment in their life or what they were going or what was happening in their life.

Erica No: Currently, I think it is just really powerful to hear someone's story. Right off the bat, whenever you first meet someone, you'll never know who they are or what their story is until you really listen. And these are people from the Gulfton-Sharpstown community and they carry their stories with them. Do you want to piggyback off of me Alex?

Alexander Lopez: Yeah, just to cap off or, yeah, the digital stories in general, that's incredible to see how diverse each story is and no two stories are the same and we can definitely connect with the stories, but it just comes to show how every young person goes through a lot and has a lot to say. That's it for me for that question.

Amy Diaz: Lemme see. What else can we say about that? With the digital stories, it was honestly really, well, for me personally, it was a really emotional recording, but there are some heavy ones. There are some more lighthearted ones, but some

feedback that we got from the people that we recorded was actually, they listened back to it after a year and they're like, can I rerecord this? I don't really agree with this anymore.

Amy Diaz: And one thing we have to remind them is that the purpose of that story was to capture who they were at that one time. So someone might be talking about one thing and then later on whenever they re-listen to it, they might absolutely not agree or identify with that anymore. But the purpose of the digital story was just to capture them at that moment, who they are, what they believed in and everything, and just their story in general right at that moment, which is super powerful.

Ike Evans: Okay, wonderful. So you are going to be presenting at the Young Minds Matter conference happening on November 7th in Houston. I have been saying a lot about it over these last few podcast episodes, not just this one. And so I'd love to get a sense of how you'll be participating, what your session is going to be about and how it's structured.

Alexander Lopez: I've definitely heard a lot of promo for the Young Lives Matter conference this November and I'm also excited to be there. But yeah, we'll have a workshop there. And our workshop will consist of us really trying to bring the Gulfton-Sharpstown community to the workshop itself, or its essence at least. And our workshop will really be compartmentalized of three main sections or three main sectors.

Alexander Lopez: And that's going to be the data, stories, and activity slash experience. Our main focus is mostly stories, but we definitely have data to share just to shine the light on our community, but not really focusing on data, but just on the stories and just to bring life to our workshop, we will let people there or people in the audience scan our stories. So our idea is to have a lot of our stories around the room. So there's going to be a portrait of us and a QR code at the bottom that people will be able to listen to live.

Alexander Lopez: So while they're there, they'll be able to listen to me and Erica's story as well as other people from our community. And then after that, our hope is to create mini digital stories. What does that mean? It's basically them asking each other questions and really having this conversation, almost trying to recreate what digital stories are or how we did them, which is a one-on-one. You're asking each other questions and just responding just honestly and just it's questions about yourself. So that's the best way to put it, and that's what our workshop is going to consist of. You have anything to add?

Erica No: Yeah. Well, whenever we're thinking of how we could bring the Gulfton community to our workshop, we really thought about what makes us unique and the people behind it. And so yes, we're presenting data about our community, but the whole purpose of why we're presenting our data is to really ground and share the story behind those numbers.

Erica No: Because even though you're hearing statistics about how many kids go to these schools, how Gulfton is the highest part of Houston and things like that, we wanted to connect that and share that with the stories that come from Houston, people who live in Houston, people who are experiencing these things, just in a way to connect them with other young people to show them that we're just people too.

Erica No: But yeah, another thing to add is that we wanted to recreate the digital stories with the young people. But another thing that we heavily advocate for where Alex and I do a lot of work in is really creating the basis. So oftentimes young people don't have the opportunity to ask each other hard questions, whether it's money or how are things at home, or just difficult questions that you don't usually ask someone, especially someone you don't know.

Erica No: We really emphasize on creating those spaces where people can ask those hard questions and we really wanted to use the opportunity of the workshop to really record it and capture what young people are really thinking about whenever they are asked these questions.

Ike Evans: Okay. So one question that I like to ask is what you want the world to look like after you have been at this for a while and succeeded? So envisioning success, what will your community look like if you are successful?

Alexander Lopez: I can go, that's a good question. For me, a successful community will definitely look like a community that's tight knit, safe. And for me it's being able to understand the youth and understand where they are currently and where they want to go. So for me, success isn't necessarily measured on your GPA or if you're going to college.

Alexander Lopez: For me, success really comes down to just doing something that you like to do or that you love to do. So whether that be going to trade school or whether that be starting your own business, just trying to find that path for every young person in our community is what really defines success for me.

Erica No: For me, I think success in the community is, yes, you can see it, but I also think it's something that happens in our mindset. Like Alex said, we want our community to engage with us, to feel well, especially with the building. We hope for them for there to be a lot of traffic, like walking traffic for people, going out and doing different things and new things. But most importantly, I think success looks like whenever we push each other just to develop, to try new things.

Erica No: One of the things Alex and I are actually doing is, well, for me, well, yeah. So one of the things we're doing is I'm taking, or I want to take a couple of other girl or other young people. I think I'm aiming for a small group of girls to take them to a yoga class. Growing up, I never saw myself fitting into an environment like that, and I'm pretty sure not a lot of people our age have that kind of exposure

and with a unique opportunity to push our community to succeed, I want people, the people of our community to know that they belong, to know that their community, the buildings that we're building for them are places that they belong and feel welcomed and to engage with us and to want to push themselves and to feel safe.

Ike Evans: Okay, great. So I would love to know a little bit about how the two of you, what personal wellness habits, it's never too young to start cultivating those. You both sound very busy and you don't want to get burned out, and that's to say nothing of the rigmarole of being in school. So Erica, why don't we start with you for that?

Erica No: Yeah, I am a very busy person, but I think being exposed to mental health and being aware that it is real allowed me to really prioritize that. So outside busy schedule, I like to watch shows, movies, I like to push myself to do things just for fun. One of those things that I'm actually doing is learning violin. Since it was offered at school, it is not like a class, like I'm taking towards my degree, but I took a class for fun, 'cause I wanted to, it's something I'm interested in, something I enjoy, things like that.

Erica No: And for the first time, I tried yoga. Yoga was very different than what I've ever experienced before. Just the experience of focusing and being present in that moment was really helpful and a lot of habits that I've took from that helped me a lot. But yeah, I like to try new things, like to just relax and watch shows, but I also like to do new things. And yeah.

Alexander Lopez: For me, I feel like one of the best ways for myself to really just stay healthy physically, but most importantly mentally would be working out or just doing an activity which really allows me to not only de-stress, but just let all of those emotions that someone might keep bottled up. Whether that be because of stress or home life, just being able to be active I feel like is not only healthy for you physically in the long run, but mentally, just going on a walk goes a long way for me.

Alexander Lopez: And another thing would definitely be being with my family and friends and people I love and care for. Just knowing that they're there for me and knowing that I have somewhere to call home or just go to if I feel sad or I just want to share something with really means a lot to me. So I definitely feel like working out home or family or actually also food. So food is one of the things that I really enjoy. So family home, I mean working out family and food. Top three things for me.

Ike Evans: Yeah, underline the food.

Alexander Lopez: Yep.

Ike Evans: Yeah.

Alexander Lopez: I get hangry sometimes. So there you go.

Ike Evans: Yeah. Hangry. Yeah.

Alexander Lopez: The real thing.

Ike Evans: Alright, so one final question. Where can people go who want to support the work that you're doing in Gulfton, and what resources can you guide people to?

Erica No: I can take this. So actually where the youth board is launching their Instagram today, later today, we're going to have that out. You can follow us on Instagram. We are also going to have programming as well. So to engage with us, we welcome everyone to come engage with us, to join us programming, join us at the building.

Erica No: And I feel like the best way to connect with other people would be just to experience what we're doing as well. I think we're working more or we're doing more work on our marketing or just ways to promote it. But what we have for right now is our Instagram. Alex, do you have that handle?

Alexander Lopez: Yes, I do. So the handle for Instagram is GYC_Houston. I'll say it one more time. GYC_Houston, H-O-U-S-T-O-N. But if you want to learn more about the building and what it has to offer, I definitely suggest any listener who is curious to visit Community Impact, which is a news article which covers just different things from resources to developing news in the Houston area and in different communities. So definitely visit Community Impact. And in the little search bar, you can search St. Luke's Church breaks ground on new community center servicing Gulfton-Sharpstown area.

Ike Evans: Okay. Well, Alexander Lopez, Erica, no, thank you so much for taking the time. We really do appreciate the work that you're doing. I look forward to seeing you in Houston in a couple of weeks and good luck with it all.

Alexander Lopez: Thank you for having us. See you soon.

Ike Evans: As I said at the top, we're excited to announce the reliable, flexible funding for mental health and wellbeing initiative. The goal is to assist organizations in addressing disparities in mental health outcomes and philanthropic funding within marginalized communities. So this is a funding opportunity with relatively few strings for those organizations who are eligible. There is no requirement for a special project or new initiative. These funds can be used toward general operations. Flexible funding is meant to strengthen organizations as they sustain, deepen, or expand their operations.

Ike Evans: Nonprofit organizations, government entities, and institutions of higher education in Texas with operational budgets ranging from 15,000 to \$250,000 a year are eligible to apply. The application deadline is Friday, January 24th. So if

you think you may be eligible and want to know more, please visit our website at hogg.utexas.edu. So now for some final thoughts, this episode serves a couple of purposes.

Ike Evans: First, it is one way that we are helping to get the word out about Young Minds Matter, but I think an equally important purpose is to give y'all just a taste of the youthful brilliance that is on offer throughout communities in our state and the country, and especially how mental health lends itself to being guided, shaped, and transformed by this brilliance.

Ike Evans: So my advice to anyone wanting to make a change in mental health is to have a look around and really key in on what young people are doing, what they're concerned about, what they notice, and what motivates them. It's a good way to suddenly find yourself in the middle of some exciting doings as well as a few problems that need fixing.

Ike Evans: And that does it for this episode. We're glad that you could join us. Production Assistance by Kate Rooni, Darrell Wiggins, and Anna Harris. Music provided courtesy of Anna Harris and Steven Seabert. Just as taking care of ourselves, enhances our ability to help others. So it is as well that by helping others, we enhance our own resilience. Thanks as always to my friends at the Hogg Foundation for their support, please leave us a review and subscribe to us on Apple Podcasts, Google Play Music, Tunein, Spotify, or wherever you get your podcasts. And taking us out now is "Anna's Good Vibes" by our friend Anna Harris. Thanks for joining us.