

FEATURES

Program gives high school students insight into mental health, incarceration, homelessness

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Jeremy Gonzalez, 17, a recent graduate of Worcester Technical High School, has a new perspective on the homeless shelter in his neighborhood.

At the beginning of August, Gonzalez visited a homeless encampment in Main South with the Dynamic Futures program, which educates Worcester youth about mental and behavioral health issues, and came away with his eyes opened.

“I always walk by (the shelter) with my little brother like, 'No, don't go in that direction, let's walk here instead.' I saw (at the encampment) they're people just like us,” Gonzalez said. “The way they talked to us, the way they tried to live their lives and do what they can because they're being put into positions because of their mental health. It all relates back to that.”

Closing a healthcare gap

For three weeks, 25 high school students from across Worcester have been learning about mental health issues and treatment in the Dynamic Futures program. The program is part of UMass Chan Medical School's efforts to connect medical services with community members who have historically been underrepresented, or who haven't had an adequate level of access.

The program is only in its second year, but is already popular. According to Che Anderson, assistant vice chancellor of city and community relations at the medical school, more than 70 Worcester teens applied for the program's 25 spots.

A desire to help others

On a sunny afternoon, students and staff walked through airy hallways on the UMass Chan campus, talking about the day's subject: grief and loss. After a guest presentation from therapist Liz Beecroft, the Dynamic Futures students had much to think about, and a few of them sat down to talk about their experiences in the program.

Gonzalez said he applied to Dynamic Futures because he has always wanted to save lives. Ashley Flores, a 17-year-old student at Doherty Memorial High School, said she has participated in both years of the program and originally applied because she has known since childhood that she wants to be a social worker.

Aylana Majeed, a 17-year-old student at Worcester Technical High School, said her therapist recommended she apply to the program.

"I've experienced mental health issues, and having those experiences has led me to want to help other people like me because there are a lot of us that need help. To have someone that's had the same experiences could be really helpful," Majeed said.

Two days earlier, the program had visited the Worcester County Jail and House of Correction in West Boylston, then stopped for a meal at Café Reyes on Shrewsbury Street, where a few employees who had spent time incarcerated shared their stories. Both Flores and Majeed said the experience had affected them strongly.

Overcoming stigma

Flores observed, "There's stigma around people that are incarcerated or people that were addicted to drugs and are now incarcerated because of it." Flores added, "It really changed my outlook in a positive way, but I also know there are negatives that I'm glad I learned about."

“That really stood out to me because it's such a different experience to see how people live and how they're treated,” Majeed said. “After we went there, we went to Café Reyes, and it was really interesting to hear their point of view after they got out of prison.”

Program director Rashida Tatum, a counselor and social-emotional coach in the Worcester public school system, said her summer students in Dynamic Pathways were giving her a little more hope for the future.

“It's really exciting to have so many young people really invested in coming into the social work field, whatever path they decide to take,” Tatum said. “I had one student that said she was going to take a gap year because she didn't know what she wanted to do, and going through this program, she said, 'I know exactly what I'm supposed to do.' ”

According to Tatum, the heightened interest in social work and mental health comes at the right time.

She said the students she works with in Worcester's elementary schools missed out on important years of socialization during the COVID-19 pandemic. Where one or two children in each class may have struggled with mental or behavioral health before the pandemic, she now sees classrooms where half the class needs her help.

“They don't know how to solve differences, they don't know how to provide feedback and have back-and-forth conversations, so a lot of my work has been teaching kids how to keep a conversation going or read a situation,” Tatum said. “The relationships you make with your friends and your teachers are so important, because if that is missing, you're not going to be at your best to learn.”

A path to mental health field

Many of the Dynamic Pathways students have internships lined up in the mental health profession, including Flores, who will spend a week learning and working at the Seven Hills Foundation.

According to Anderson, each of this year's 25 students has been matched with a local mentor in the field, and will meet with them once a month for the next year. The students will also have opportunities for mental and behavioral health certifications, and Anderson is discussing the possibility of the program counting toward college credits.

Majeed said Dynamic Pathways has led her to consider a career in mental health, while Gonzalez said he now wants to become a crisis worker after his experiences in the program.

Battling 'misconceptions'

All three students who spoke with Worcester Magazine said although they felt awareness had increased in recent years, Worcester and society in general still have work to do.

“I feel like it's not spoken on enough, especially at school, and I think a lot of youth and men don't think they can express themselves,” Flores said.

“(Mental health education is) something that everyone has to put an effort towards to keep it going, because it's something that can be misunderstood, something that should be taught more to both younger and older generations,” Gonzalez said.

“There are a lot of misconceptions,” Majeed said. “We're slowly getting rid of those misconceptions, slowly getting it out into the open to where people know that it's not something to be ashamed of and it's just something that you may have that can be treated, that you can get help with.”