

Ryan Bartel Foundation: Setting Teens up for a Lifetime of Positive Mental Health

Jen McFarland - Marketing Manager, Ryan Bartel Foundation

Connectedness, acceptance, positivity, and hope. Teenagers today are in dire need of these basic elements for good mental health. The Ryan Bartel Foundation, a Loudoun County nonprofit, delivers what they need to achieve positive mental health and wellness. While the Ryan Bartel Foundation's mission is suicide prevention, its programs are designed to build resilience in all youth, to help them cope with the ups and downs of being a teenager.

Upon losing her son to suicide in 2014, Suzie Bartel knew that something must be done to help teens, long before they lose hope, so she launched the Ryan Bartel Foundation. "So many programs focus on intervention at the time of crisis. That's too late," Bartel said. "If we develop in them the skills to get through the hard times, we're not going to need intervention."

In the last two years, kids have suffered more than ever. Ryan Bartel Foundation's Executive Director Val Walters knew that kids needed additional support. "Social connection plays a key role in suicide prevention, which is why we quickly developed virtual programs to ensure teens and families could stay connected while receiving tips and tools for practicing resilience skills," said Walters.

The Ryan Bartel Foundation partnered with Brambleton's own psychologist and "teen whisperer" Dr. Cam Caswell (Dr. Cam) and Ofosu Jones-Quartey, a mindfulness professional, to create a 12-week series of workshops uniquely for teens to help them cope with depression, anxiety, loneliness, and low self-worth.

"The pandemic has been tough on all of us, but especially on our teens. This period is a critical time to explore who they are and learn how to engage with the world. They do this through their social interactions with their peers, friends, teachers, even the barista at the local coffee shop. Because their opportunities to connect with others have been limited, they haven't had enough time to develop these skills yet, and many are feeling anxious and ill-equipped for living in the 'real world'.

I've seen a growing sense of hopelessness among our teens. We must remember that they don't have the same life experience and perspective adults do. We've been through hard times and made it through. They haven't. To them, this pandemic has lasted an enormous percentage of their life and they can't even imagine it ever getting better. It makes it difficult for them to get up in the morning." - Dr. Cam.

Using evidence-led best practices in mindfulness and positive psychology, the workshops address many of the struggles teens face, empower them with a positive acceptance of self, and equip them with coping strategies.

"We designed three workshops: I Am Enough, I Am Powerful, and I Am Valuable, to empower teenagers with the knowledge, tools, and self-awareness to manage their big emotions, anxieties, and fears. They also develop insight into why they see the world as they do and learn to accept themselves as they are. It's incredibly rewarding to witness that lightbulb go off in a student's head when they realize they are not alone and that it's okay not to be okay. Just knowing that makes them feel more hopeful," said Dr. Cam.

In 2021, Dr. Cam facilitated the workshops via Zoom. As schools opened, the workshops went live, launching the first in-person series at the Brambleton Library in October 2021.



Header Photo: Suzie Bartel & Dr. Cam Caswell
Article Photo: Lahari Kunapaneni

"Brambleton Library is proud to be a host site for the Fortitude workshops. We know that some young adults in our community lost access to their social and support networks during virtual learning. The library is always a safe and welcoming place for teens, but the workshops are a focused opportunity to build deeper connections with peers and develop a positive sense of self," said Christine Thompson, Brambleton Library Branch Manager.

Brambleton resident and Independence High School student Lahari Kunapaneni offered, "FORTitude workshops help me stay grounded when I feel anxious or overwhelmed." Lahari, also a member of the Ryan Bartel Foundation's Student Advisory Board, advocates for teen suicide prevention through her school's Sources of Strength Club, a suicide prevention program originally introduced to Loudoun County Public Schools by the Ryan Bartel Foundation.

In addition to the teen workshops, the Ryan Bartel Foundation hosts a monthly program called the FORT, an inclusive space for teens to connect with their peers and participate in hands-on workshops that provide them with skills they can use when times are tough. And FORTitude for Parents, a monthly online discussion series for parents and caregivers, offers resources and guidance to help parents better communicate and support their kids, especially with challenging issues.

Throughout the past six years and during such an unprecedented last two years, the Ryan Bartel Foundation has continued to support all teens and their families because every life matters and, as Suzie Bartel will always remind us, "In the end, we're all human." ♦

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