

30 April 2019

Adobe Spark Page:<https://spark.adobe.com/page/S8lpUfelC2C7Q/>

Rhyming Through the Storm: Poetry as a Mental Health Intervention

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research study is to explore the effectiveness of self-expression-based programming, specifically poetry programs, in regards to combatting the current mental health crisis plaguing the United States. The first phase of the research involves reviewing several external sources in order to gain knowledge on current poetry therapy practices, structured writing programs and youth intervention methods. The second phase of the project explains the parameters of the study, including program partners, and focuses on the collection of primary data such as photos of poems and observations. The third phase focuses on the analysis of the primary data collect while connecting the observations and findings to the prior studies used in the first phase of the project. The final phase implements the research and analysis from all phases and discusses recommendations for future programming endeavors, along with future research needs regarding mental health issues. By identifying programming that is adaptable, effective and inexpensive, society will have a better understanding of how to create programs that engage children and youth in a positive conversation around mental health and serve as an intervention method for children and youth struggling with mental illness.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, mental health issues have become a major public health concern in the United States. Currently, suicide is the second leading cause of death among people ages 10-34 in the United States (Suicide). However, symptoms of suicidal behavior and mental illness such as

reckless behavior, depression and anxiety are even more common struggles people face on a daily basis. Despite the fact many people believe mental illness is an individual problem and the effects are isolated to that individual, the emotional and economic cost mental illness has on society is an increasingly large problem (Suicide Prevention: A Public Health Issue). In fact, the total cost of suicide in 2013 was 58.4 billion dollar due to lost productivity and medical cost (Shepard 352).

As a result, there is a dire need for prevention and intervention methods everywhere, and though many individuals and organizations have tried to fill this void, almost all have failed.

Current and previous mental health intervention methods are ineffective partially because they aim to appeal to the masses. This is because professionals creating mental health services are focused on adapting old public health approaches to new societal issues. When in reality, to effectively deal with the mental health issue at hand, society needs to look for new and innovative approaches that recognizes the large and diverse population it affects while also acknowledging the varied and individualized nature of the issue. In other words, the approach must be easily adaptable across all geographic locations, inexpensive because the issue affected people of all different economic classes and effective in regards to education and prevention.

A possible approach to fill this societal gap is positive self-expression programming. Implementing programs targeted towards children and youth that focuses on self-expression could be an effective prevention and intervention method. More often than not, children and youth dealing with mental and emotional health issues have trouble expressing themselves because of the societal stigma around mental health. The self-expression programs would work to encourage expression and in the process work to change how self expression is viewed among

younger generations. In addition, programming geared towards self-expression, while offering a general framework, has the ability to be individualized to fit the needs of any community and can be done inexpensively. A prime example of a self-expression based program that works to give children and youth the tools to cope with mental and emotional issues is the University of Miami service organization, Written In My Soul.

Written In My Soul is a service organization that teaches children and youth from underserved backgrounds how to write poetry and use it as positive outlet for expression. The program is divided into six planning sessions, six interactive sessions working directly with the participants and a poetry slam where participants are able to share their work with the community (Written In My Soul). During each session, volunteers teach participants about different elements of poetry such as literary techniques, etiquette and performance skills. However, this organization strives to accomplish much more than teaching kids similes and metaphors, the larger mission of the program is to show participants how to use poetry as a positive form of self-expression to cope with emotional issues they face daily(Ross). A need for this type of program in underserved communities was discovered by founder, Brenna Ross. Ross openly discusses how she grew up working in homeless shelters with her mother and how her many experiences inspired the creation of program. Ross was able to use her personal experience to not only recognize a community need but also create an effective approach to the problem and as a result, provide improvements to countless communities similar to the ones she grew up immersed in.

In conjunction with participation in Written In My Soul, additional secondary research will focus around the use of poetry as an intervention method. In particular, focusing on two

aspects of poetry: the effectiveness of poetry as a form of therapy in a clinical environment and the use of poetry in more informal settings such as after school programs. As for the effectiveness of poetry in professional environments, research will be focused around the use of poetry as the sole form of treatment and effectiveness based on quantitative data. On the other hand, research regarding the use of poetry in informal programming will focus on questions around group dynamics and the construction of effective programming for children and youth.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Poetry Effective Way to Release Emotional Burden. It has become the general consensus among industry professionals that poetry is an extremely effective way to release emotional burdens or experiences (Chandler 77; Dellasega 14; Forrest-Bank 431; Mcardle 522; Raingruber 19). Poetry is an especially effective tool because of its reflective nature and the thought process that occurs while writing (Forrest-Bank 432). Poetry forces people to construct a reflective story out of their experiences and pushes them to dig deep into the emotions behind the experiences (Chandler 77; Forrest-Bank 431-2). This is one of the most effective aspects of poetry in regards to release mechanisms because it allows the person to process and organize their emotions internally, discover unknown feelings and then offers them a tangible release by physically writing these thoughts on paper, which alone can be very therapeutic (Chandler 77; Dellasega 16; Raingruber 19). After continuous writing experiences, participants experienced increased coping and stress relief (Dellasega 16; Mcardle 521-2). In addition, poetry is also an effective release mechanism because it allows participants to once remove themselves from their struggles (Raingruber 17). It is common for mental health patients to become isolated causing them to be harsher on themselves in regards to performance, struggles and treatment processes. By having the ability to

once remove themselves from their issues, they are able to view and understand their own struggles from an objective and kinder standpoint (19). This allows participants to let go of prior feelings or thoughts which in turn contributes to increased coping, mood and stress relief (18).

Poetry Therapy as Sole Treatment. The growing interest in mental health treatments have spurred a great deal of conversation around the effectiveness of poetry therapy. Specifically, the ability of poetry therapy to be used as the sole form of treatment. Many believe that poetry therapy alone is not sufficient to treat mental health disorders (Mcardle 521; Dellasega 21). In fact, using poetry therapy as a sole form of treatment can result in negative effects on mental health such as decreased mood and feeling alone (Mcardle 520). In addition, when used alone, poetry therapy often leaves clients desiring more clinical resources. Poetry is an extremely reflective and individualized form of expression; however it does not offer guidance to those struggling to cope with mental disorders. As a result, patients crave additional professional support and techniques to cope (Raingruber 19). Although, when used in conjunction with traditional therapeutic methods, poetry therapy can act as an extremely useful tool. Many have noted its effectiveness as a way to process undiscovered emotions related to experiences and situations (19). This, in turn, allows patients to be more aware of their feelings and gives professionals a substantial starting point for traditional therapy such as counseling.

Group Bond. The majority of poetry therapy used in professional settings is in support or therapy groups as a structured activity led by a licensed professional. The structured time not only allows individuals to process and sort through their emotions on paper, but it also creates a strong supportive bond between individuals in the group (Chandler 77; Dellasega 18; Mcardle 518). Sharing the poems within the group is what creates the strong supportive bond among group

members along with increases participants' self-esteem (Chandler 71; Mcardle 518). Many times participants feel alone in their struggles and lack the support needed to complete treatments; through sharing their poems, participants are able to receive support and affirmation from their group (Chandler 77; Mcardle 518). In addition, the process of exchange sparks conversation around shared experiences and issues which in turn empowers the writer to openly discuss struggles and creates a sense of unity within the group (Chandler 71; Mcardle 519). Though this activity is used extensively in clinical settings, it has also proven to be just as effective in more informal settings such as after-school programs. Students who participated in programs that use group writing exercises, specifically in low-income communities, benefited from sharing experiences with their peers and bonded over shared experiences and struggles (Dellasega 18). As a result the students experienced, increased self-esteem and self-efficacy after the program (18). Though there is no follow up with professionals in more informal settings, poetry therapy still effectively creates a therapeutic support system for participants and leaves them feeling empowered which is extremely important in any form of treatment.

Engaging Programming. Though poetry therapy has proven to be effective in many situations, it is essential that programmers and clinical facilitators make an involved effort to make poetry sessions or programs relevant and engaging to participants. If engagement is not a component in the program planning process, the positive attributes of poetry therapy are rendered completely useless. There is a specific need to involve participants who would typically not engage in these sort of activities (Forrest-Bank 431). People enjoy engaging in these types of programs are usually more socially oriented and in turn, do not have the same need for the program as the more closed off participants (431). Unfortunately, because of this, the people who need these

programs the most often shy away from participating in them (431). However, part of this problem can be alleviated if programmers and leaders put the effort into engaging all participants through several different activities and techniques (Chandler 77). For instance, using activities based on relevant pop culture references is a great way to engage participants. In addition, another way to engage participants is through staff enthusiasm (77). People tend to mimic their surroundings, consequently, when participants see staff excited about the program, they are more likely to engage and participate in individual and group activities (77).

Gaps and Limitations. The positive effects of poetry therapy offer a promising outlook in regards to the future of mental health intervention. However, there are many gaps and limitations within current research that need to be acknowledged. Clinical effectiveness is one factor yet to be addressed in current studies (Mcardle 517). Mental health studies focusing on patient experience or effects tend to be extremely subjective and qualitative. This is because the feelings and thoughts that mental health patients experience are extremely varied and individualized (517). As a result, it is extremely hard to objectively measure a patient's reaction to treatment and most studies use data based on patient response. Hence, there is a lack of measurable evidence that proves the effectiveness of poetry therapy (517). In addition, patient responses are very contingent on certain uncontrollable factors such as timing and past-experience (Raingruber 17). This makes controlling experimental factors extremely difficult and can affect the accuracy of the study. Mental health treatment has no one size fits all approach, meaning the effects of one poem at a certain time could affect one patient more or less than another, even if they have similar disorders and experiences (17). Furthermore, it is also important to note the gaps in research regarding demographic differences such as race and ethnicities (Forrest-Bank 437).

Studies have found evidence suggesting a difference in responses between certain races and ethnicities (437). However, this study, along with many others, tend to overlook demographic factors in their findings as a result of failure to designate race as an independent variable at the start of the experiment (437).

PURPOSE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the effects of poetry as a mental health intervention for children and youth in low socioeconomic communities.

METHODS

Partners. This study was conducted in collaboration with two partners. The first partner, Touching Miami with Love, is a faith-based organization that offers various opportunities, resources and support to families or individuals in need. The organization serves a large age range spanning from young children to adults. The organization is known best for serving children and youth in the Overtown and Homestead communities. Touching Miami with Love achieves this goal through providing a wide range of engaging and educational programming during evenings and summers (Welcome to Touching Miami With Love). The second partner, Written In My Soul, is a University of Miami organization that creates programming aimed at teaching and empowering children and youth to use poetry as a positive form of self-expression. The organization is composed of 10 to 12 university student volunteers that create and implement programming each semester at different locations (Written In My Soul). This semester Written In My Soul has created and implemented weekly programming for the youth at Touching Miami with Love.

Study Features. The observational study was conducted in two settings: a volunteer-based planning session and a hands on session where volunteers implemented programming. The planning sessions took place once a week for six weeks. The planning sessions consisted of Written In My Soul volunteers creating an outline for the upcoming hands on session. Planning sessions were a collaborative process that encouraged all program volunteers to create engaging activities and share feedback about the positives and negatives of prior sessions. In addition, during each session, volunteers work to reach curricular goals such as teaching forms of figurative language and performance skills. The hands on aspect of the program took place weekly for six weeks and consisted of volunteers implementing the weekly curriculum and engaging with program participants (Written In My Soul). The volunteers rotate leading the activities and working one on one with the participants. The duration of each session was an hour.

Site. The interactive part of the study, where participants and volunteers engaged with each other, was conducted at Touching Miami with Love's Overtown location. The planning part of the study was conducted at the University of Miami in a classroom.

Participants. The study participants were students in enrolled in after-school programs through Touching Miami with Love. The number of participants involved in each session varied based on attendance, however there was an average of 20-25 students present at each session. As for demographics, the group was extremely diverse. There was a balanced mix of male and female participants. The students' ages ranged from middle school to high school. Neither age group was more dominant than the other. The participants attended a mix of different private and public schools and as a result, had been exposed to different levels and curriculums regarding poetry.

All participants come from low socioeconomic backgrounds and were either African-American or Latinx.

Data Sources and Collection. The data in this study is largely-based on personal observations as a program volunteer. After each session, observations and findings were recorded weekly through a journaling exercise. Each journal describes and reflects on a meaningful moment or experience that took place during a session. Observations were made while working with participants, based on the participants' attitudes and acceptance towards the current activity and volunteers. In addition, photos of participants' poems were collected weekly as another form of data used to show the first-hand experiences of the participants. The participants names and any identifying factors have been removed from the poems and photos. These journals and photos will be used as the primary source of research in connection with several external secondary sources.

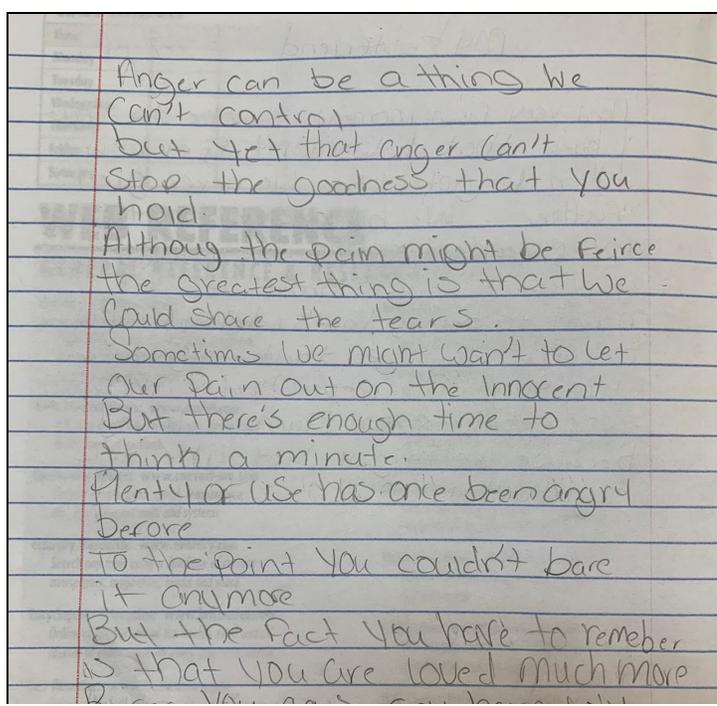
DISCUSSION

Poetry as an Effective Intervention Tool. In order to motivate the students to write, the volunteers planned an activity called the "emotions box" to give them inspiration. The emotions box, consisted of several emotions written on small pieces of paper that students would randomly choose from to write about. The emotions ranged anywhere from anxiety and anger to happiness. Once the students got their emotion, the room became quieter and all the kids started writing. They exhibited an intense focus and vulnerability that I had not witnessed from this group before. After 15 minutes of writing, we asked if anyone would like to share their poem. The products were astounding, and though some were hesitant, many students were eager to share their poem. The poems shared by the students were moving and filled with emotion. For

example, one student share an extremely personally poem about finding love after heartbreak, another student shared a poem about feeling unwell on the inside and another student shared a poem about his anxieties. However, there was one poem in particular written around the emotion “anger” that evoked the most emotion not only from the student, but also the audience. The entire poem was incredibly powerful, however the most notable part reads “Anger can be a thing we can’t control, but that anger can’t stop the goodness that you hold.” After she finished reading, she physically sighed with relief and the class erupted with snaps and praise. Immediately afterwards, more students lined up for the chance to share their poems with the group. The student’s full poem can be seen below in Figure 1.

As seen in this example, poetry proved an effective release for students dealing with a variety of emotional issues. Research conducted by multiple sources such as Dellasega, Mcardle and Raingruber affirms this same finding in a multitude of different studies. But the majority of these research studies are focused on the use of poetry in a formal clinical setting. However, after observing first hand the emotional relief the students experience through writing poetry, I believe structured poetry programs have the potential to be a powerful intervention tool that can be used in informal settings. The various student experiences described above demonstrates the adaptability of the program by

allowing students to individualize their message and therefore use the exercise the way they believe best fits their needs. This, in turn, appeals to the masses without putting everyone’s



struggles into a generalized box. In addition, the positive reactions generated through the performances of poems have the potential to be a powerful tool in regards to educating and shifting the conversation around mental health, emotional struggles and self-expression issues. Once the students above saw the outpour of support and positivity the performer received from peers, more students were interested in sharing and the exchange process became much more accepted among the group. I believe

this same reaction and group dynamic

Figure 1: Photo of poem written by a study participant on anger.

can be replicated in communities across the U.S, especially in informal settings such as schools where the students already have established connections. If replicated, this type of program has the ability to act as an intervention tool and change the stigma around mental health and self-expression.

Benefits of Group Bond. One week during *Written In My Soul*, the entire session was dedicated to teaching kids about group poetry and allowing them to practice this technique with the group of their choosing. Three of the younger students in the program, who usually have a difficult time writing, got together and decided to write a poem. They decided to write about struggles, one decided to write about his dad going to prison, the other about feeling “fat” and the other about struggling with math. As they were writing their parts separately, the students would constantly bounce ideas off each other and reaffirm each other’s experiences. They all continued to give each other encouragement to keep writing and showed genuine excitement about the chance to perform their poem, which only one of the students had ever done before.

This experience shows first hand the group bond poetry can create between people. All three of these students were hesitant to participant in poetry individually, however they

flourished in a group setting. The way the students constantly reassured together through kind words like “you got bars mans!” or “that’s hot” transformed the group dynamic. As highlighted by research done by Chandler and Mcardle, the positive feedback from peers, transformed the group into a place where the students felt they could share about their personal problems and feel heard and respected. I believe the positive group dynamic created through the group poetry exercises was an extremely effective tool for curbing a variety of mental stresses in students who were not as comfortable sharing and expressing themselves individually.

This tool was especially effective among young men enrolled in the program. A pattern I observed throughout the program was the general hesitation among the boys to share, discuss or write about their thoughts or feelings. In fact, most of the boys avoided writing about personal experiences by focusing their poetry on surface level subjects like sports or pop culture. This method of avoidance is highlighted in research done by Dellasega. Dellasega also adds that by avoiding confronting feelings the exercises become ineffective. I believe this reaction to the activities is the result of toxic masculinity that plagues many men today. Specifically the idea that a real man is not supposed to express his true feelings and remain closed off in order to maintain this unrealistic image of masculinity. This concept is very harmful because it encourages boys and men to not disclose feelings and traumas. As a result, many boys and men turn to violence and self-medicating through drugs to deal with unresolved feelings. However, the experiences in *Written In My Soul* have shown that writing and other artistic programming has the power to change how society views masculinity. An essential part of this is creating a new social norm by encouraging boys from a young age to express themselves through positive outlets such as poetry. Instead of allowing boys to confine themselves subjects such as sports and

music, push them to dig deeper and explore a more vulnerable side of themselves. The group setting works extremely well for this because it facilitates sharing and allows the boys to create a strong community to handle emotional issues instead of dealing with them in isolation where they become dangerous and potentially harmful.

Engaging Program. During a Written In My Soul planning session, a volunteer brought up that the weekly curriculum seemed childish for the middle and high schoolers that we were currently working with. Once the topic of engagement was brought up, many volunteers noted that some of the activities in prior weeks seemed to lose the students' attention. This became a clear flaw in the program because if the students were not motivated to participate, they would not receive the full benefits of the exercises and program as a whole. As a result, volunteers decided to scrap the entire session outline and create a new one that had activities that were both challenging and relevant to the students. For example, volunteers switched all the example video poems with new relevant music videos that included elements of poetry techniques and performance in addition to creating an activity based on Wild N' Out, a popular TV show. The students really enjoyed the new activities and showed more engagement than previous activities. As a result, more students wanted to participate in program exercises and were excited for the next session.

This experience highlights the difference in involvement when the time is taken to make engagement a priority. Though many programs reuse session outlines and curriculums for the sake of time and efficiency, there is no one size fits all regarding community engagement. Research conducted by Forrest-Bank speaks to this exact finding while also noting that lack of participation and engagement renders these well intentioned organizations useless. As a result, it is important to reevaluate core activities and messages at least once when working with a

different community or group of students. However, it is essential that the reevaluation process is done in collaboration with community leaders and program participants. As volunteers, we need to stop the process of assuming what certain communities need based on our own biases and preconceived notions. Not only is this process an ineffective way to approach engagement, but it also works to deepen harmful stereotypes while encouraging deficit based service learning and the creation of a savior complex among volunteers (Bauer). There are several helpful and impactful ways to include leaders and participants in the planning process. Written In My Soul used a variety of methods to encourage collaboration. I observed the most effective way to be through direct conversation with participants. Though this may seem overly simple, it is truly the best way to get to know your students on a personal level. In addition, by having these conversations volunteers are simultaneously building a rapport with participants and showing them they care about their community.

CONCLUSION

Recommendations. The current mental health epidemic among children and youth can be curbed. It will be no easy task; however, it can be done with the proper tools and programs for intervention and education. Based on my work with Written In My Soul, I believe organized self-expression programs that encourages participants to be comfortable with expressing their feelings offer an optimal base to approach the growing mental health crisis surrounding American children and youth. However, if Written In My Soul were to function as a true mental health intervention program, there are a number of factors that would need to be added. For instance, adding a mental health education component to each session would be crucial. This could be incorporated in multiple ways such as planned activities, pamphlets or discussion

groups. This component of the program would be very informal and aim to talk about topics such as self-care, positive self-image and common mental health issues. The goal of this component would be, not only to create awareness about mental health issues, but also aim to give children and youth the resources they need to deal with struggles. In addition, I believe it is important that the program have strong role models that the children and youth already have a relationship with such as a guidance counselor, program leader or coordinator. This semester, the program was extremely lucky to have a TML leader named Mr. Gary who felt passionate about the program and that the participants trusted and respected. As a result of his enthusiasm, the participants felt more comfortable participating and sharing. Having someone like Mr. Gary involved in every program would be vital to creating an atmosphere of safety and comfort for participants and would help to make the program as effective as it could be.

Future Research. In conjunction with the added factors to *Written In My Soul*, future quantitative research needs to be conducted to test the effects of intervention programs. For instance, pre and post surveys that ask children and youth questions about their general knowledge on mental health, their daily mood etc. I believe the quantitative data would help in constructing an even more effective intervention program. The direct feedback from the surveys would help programmers see where changes can be made after each session so that programmers could immediately adapt activities in the following planning session. In addition, there is a need for more research about what goes on after the intervention process such as after there is an issue identified how does the program work to make services accessible to children and youth. It is important to note that these programs should not act as a replacement for professional therapy and guidance. Figuring out how to link these programs with institutes that could offer

professional help that is easily accessible and affordable for everyone, would be the biggest hurdle. More specifically, this task would include extensive research on the ever-changing U.S healthcare system and research on the issue of access to service in rural and urban communities. However, by finding a way to create this link, it would create an extremely strong program to combat the U.S mental health crisis.

Works Cited

- Bauer, Tamara, et al. "The Future of Service-Learning and Community Engagement: Asset-Based Approaches and Student Learning in First-Year Courses." *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, vol. 22, no. 1, 2015, pp. 89–92.
- Chandler, Genevieve E. "A Creative Writing Program to Enhance Self-Esteem and Self-Efficacy in Adolescents." *Journal of Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Nursing*, vol. 12, no. 2, 1999, pp. 70–78.
- Dellasega, Cheryl. "Using Structured Writing Experiences to Promote Mental Health." *Journal of Psychosocial Nursing & Mental Health Services*, vol. 39, no. 2, 2001, pp. 14–23.
- Finley, Ashley. "A Brief Review of the Evidence on Civic Learning in Higher Education." *A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy's Future*, 2012, pp. 1-3.
- Forrest-Bank, Shandra S., et al. "Effects of an Expressive Art Intervention with Urban Youth in Low-Income Neighborhoods." *Child & Adolescent Social Work Journal*, vol. 33, no. 5, 2016, pp. 429–441.
- Mcardle, S., and R. Byrt. "Fiction, Poetry and Mental Health: Expressive and Therapeutic Uses of Literature." *Journal of Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing*, vol. 8, no. 6, 2001, pp. 517–524.
- Raingruber, Bonnie. "Using Poetry to Discover and Share Significant Meanings in Child and Adolescent Mental Health Nursing." *Journal of Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Nursing*, vol. 17, no. 1, 2004, pp. 13–20.
- Ross, Breana. Personal Interview. 28 Jan 2019.

Shepard, Donald S., Deborah Gurewich, Aung K. Lwin, Gerald A. Reed, and Morton M.

Silverman. "Suicide and Suicidal Attempts in the United States: Costs and Policy Implications." *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior* 46.3 (2016): 352-62. Web.

"Suicide." *National Institute of Mental Health. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services*, May 2018, https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/suicide.shtml#part_154972, Accessed 9 April 2019.

"Suicide Prevention: A Public Health Issue." *Applying Science. Advancing Practice*, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/ASAP_Suicide_Issue2-a.pdf. Accessed 10 April 2019.

Welcome to Touching Miami With Love. Touching Miami With Love, 2017, <https://touchingmiamiwithlove.org>. Accessed April 2 2019.

"Written In My Soul." *Student Activities*, University of Miami, <https://orgsync.com/159266/chapter>. Accessed 10 April 2019.