

Interview With Leah

Tell me your name again. My name is Leah Rayford. Leah Rayford? Okay, and so I understand that you worked with children in schools, teens, and counseling and training and that one of the areas was in suicide prevention.

Is that true? Tell me a little about that. Yes, I worked for several years doing state and federally funded grants that offered suicide prevention and substance use prevention to youth and teens around the state. Okay, but it was all around Georgia? Yes, I was in several different areas of Georgia, not all over the state in its entirety, but several different counties across different amounts of time.

Junior high school, high school, or both? Yes, both. Both, okay, okay, and then tell me, I imagine that there were a lot of changes when the pandemic came along. Yes, it seemed that the pandemic made things worse for a lot of people, kind of increased isolation and loneliness that a lot of our teens, they didn't have a lot of the social part of life that they had before.

They didn't get to see their friends and be in school and they spent a lot of time at home. So, you know, we did see mental health issues, substance use, suicidal thoughts, and things like that going up. That all increased, but I imagine it also maybe had a negative impact on your operation and your ability to be face-to-face as well.

Yes, because a lot of our work that we were doing was school-based or community-based. When the school systems went to virtual, that was definitely an issue because they weren't meeting in person, and even after that, it became tougher and tougher to get into the schools just because of the health and safety concerns of letting in outside people and all those things to come in and do programs and have groups of kids doing different things. So, it's definitely a learning curve with the pandemic.

Were you able to do some of your operation and prevention and training and stuff virtually as well? Yes, we did actually offer classes virtually for youth and doing different things and just teaching them. We did some fun, like we did some town halls that were virtual and different things like that during that time just to keep, continue providing education for the community. We brought in some speakers to different communities virtually because that was the best way to offer during the pandemic.

Well, I don't know, but I'd imagine that maybe it was a little bit, as the need was increasing during the pandemic, I would imagine that having to switch your operation to Zoom and remote that maybe it wasn't as effective. So, it's kind of a double whammy on the children, right? Right, definitely. So, okay.

Give me a summation maybe of the principles that you tried to convey about suicide prevention when you were trying to get the teens to be prepared to handle those issues. The biggest thing we're trying to do with teens is build up the positive assets they have in their lives, the way that they feel about themselves, the way that they think others feel about them, how connected they are with their peers, with their school teachers, family, and try to also develop some good activities for them to get involved in that would be

positive activities and help encourage them to find their strengths in life as to where when things get hard, they know how to turn to, things to turn to and how to cope without turning to things like drugs and alcohol, suicide, different things that can be detrimental to them. So, I guess the way you're describing it, your program was more oriented towards helping them prepare to prevent those issues and be positive as opposed to like a crisis center that's handling people that are dealing with suicidal thoughts at the moment.

Yes, so definitely the work that we were doing is in primary prevention. So, before trying to prevent problems before they ever came about for our young people. Yeah, I think everybody agrees on just about any kind of problem, prevention is always the best.

Okay, can you think of any myths about suicide that maybe you tried to dispel when you were training them? I can think of one that there a lot of people think that if you talk about suicide or if you ask somebody are they thinking of committing suicide that you're planting the idea in their head, but truly that's that's not true. That's a myth that if they're feeling that way, they probably were already feeling that way before you ever asked them that and you asking them that is not going to make them feel that way. So, you can feel comfortable asking that question to know where somebody's at, like if it actually is something they're considering and so that way you find out if they are you can find the resources needed to assist them best.

Yeah, I would say that's one of the biggest problems with with people being willing not only just to take steps to try to prevent a suicide but to even take steps to learn about it because there's a fear there that you know that's so I've never had to deal with that I'm not sure I want to because I might I might make it worse and and in general being prepared is a way to ensure that you're not gonna make it worse you're gonna be able to help somebody. Absolutely. Okay, well another myth that I don't know if you know who Luke Kuhn is.

Okay, so I'm working with him and you know one of the myths that surprises a lot of people that he shares with people is that when people are talking about or thinking about suicide or planning suicide they don't really want to die. Really what they want to do is end the pain, the hopelessness, the loneliness. That's really what the what the goal is.

Not necessarily to actually end their life. They just don't see another way out and so I think I think if people are aware of that myth as well it helps dispel the fear and and let people be willing to become prepared to step in and to ask questions. Yes, I agree completely.

Okay, well that's that's that's the goal of what I'm trying to do is get the word out there and so people will be prepared to save a life so I appreciate you sharing. Well, very important work that you're doing. Thank you.

Thank you.