

Beyond the Test: Connecting Communities Through Pathology

Bonus Episode: Mindful Minutes – Why Helping Others Helps You

Joanna Cermak

Hey guys, it's Joanna from Beyond the Task, connecting communities through pathology. Please enjoy the next episode on our Mindful Minutes mini-series, hosted by Elsa. Today she's talking about service, what it means, how it shapes the work we do, how even small acts can make a meaningful impact. If you're looking for a quick moment to reconnect with your purpose, this one's for you.

Elsa Ziegler

Hello everyone. And welcome back to Mindful Minutes, a podcast miniseries dedicated to educating youth on the effects and causes of mental health issues, both in our communities and around the world. Today's episode is centered around the effects of service, particularly how it shapes who we become. Other than simply building up resumes, service engagement encourages empathy, resilience, and overall self-improvement. The guest on today's episode that will help us further understand this is Magdalena, a first-year medical student who has developed a strong commitment to community-centered care and currently works with the College of American Pathologists Foundation. From working in sexual assault response programs to advocating for sexual assault survivors in emergency departments, Magdalena's service journey has played a major role in her growth as a young adult.

Before we begin, here are some important facts to consider. Research shows that nearly one in 10 US adults have dealt with a mental health crisis in the last year with higher rates among lower income individuals. More specifically, young adults are reporting significantly higher levels of anxiety and depression, with 36% reporting struggles with anxiety and 29% reporting struggles with depression.

Another pattern that's important to consider is the fewer number of young people volunteering and engaging in community service now compared to 15 years ago. Moreover, 61% of young people who do not vote report rare or zero interactions with their community compared to 47% of those that tend to vote. This leads to the conclusion that lower in-person community connection is linked with lower civic participation overall. So what happens when someone takes up that opportunity to participate in service early on? How does that shape their mental health and identity? These questions are what we'll be exploring in our conversation with Magdalena.

Magdalena:

Perfect. Hi, just to introduce myself, my name is Elsa Ziegler and I am a high school volunteer that is passionate about mental health. So when given the opportunity to work with the College of American Pathologists, I decided that I wanted to work with the podcast in order to spread awareness and educate youth on mental health issues. And my last episode, in this mini-series was about me interviewing a couple high school seniors who went on these missions trips and I used their experience working abroad and locally to mention just the importance of youth going out of their way into service because it doesn't only have benefits for others, but it also has

benefits for mental health for all. Yeah, that's just about me in the last episode. Could you possibly introduce yourself?

Elsa:

Yeah, for sure. Hi, everyone. My name is Magdalena Alejo-Grace. I'm a first-year medical student at Loyola Strike School of Medicine. I graduated from Georgetown two years ago and took two gap years before starting medical school. And I would say service has always been a really big part of who I am and kind of what's driven my career into becoming hopefully a physician. And I think your project sounds really interesting and I'm excited to talk more about service and how wellness is integrated not only into the community, but also like every individual who partakes. Thank you.

So you briefly mentioned this, but how did your early experiences with service, especially your work with the sexual assault and violence intervention program shape your values as an adult?

Magdalena:

Yeah, I think I was really fortunate that in college I was able to get involved with SARP, which is the Sexual Assault Response and Prevention Team through Georgetown's Health Education Services. I kind of got randomly involved through actually a class project. And I think transitioning from a class project to kind of a concrete team and actually like volunteering my time and energy towards a program that was really connecting with students was really beneficial to see at that moment, not only that my education was impactful for myself, but that it really had profound effects on other people. So I think being able to in a school setting apply what I've learned and really actively give back on the things that I was taught in class and the ways that I was going about doing research on certain things. I think was really encouraging in a sense to kind of continue on and continue the path looking into women's health and looking into advocacy work. And I think service really drove me to want to become a physician. And I think it also gave me a really strong connection to the community that I was in at the time.

I took the class, I think, during COVID. So it was all online. And I was actually able to get special permission in that spring to go back on campus and start working at Health Ed. And I think that finding that connection and working with the staff and team members there really grounded me and really gave me kind of more of a purpose than just online school did. So I think I was really grateful for that at the time. And I think I've kind of carried that through and just being able to dedicate my time to applying the things that I'm learning. You know, I'm still a student, so I'm still learning all the time in a classroom. And I think service is just a great way to connect to other people and give back and really learn more about what you're learning if that makes sense.

Elsa:

Yeah, of course. It sounds like it played a huge role in helping you solidify your own identity, even growing up. If you don't mind me asking, particularly, what did your role look like in the team and the program?

Magdalena:

Yeah. So for SARB, I was a program assistant. So I worked with two clinicians and my main role wasn't very clinical, but it was more advocacy and outreach. So I actually redid the entire website for the health education department. I connected with students through different like staffing events. So we would like a table out in our main square and just talk to students and be like, hey, we have X, Y, Z resources. One, do you know about them? Two, do you feel comfortable reaching out to them? And then three, like, there anything else you would like to see from health education? So I think working with students and then bringing that feedback back to the team and implementing it through website, through social media outreach, and then through specific programs was great. So from that, we were able to kind of alter the bystander training program that all first-year students take, first year and transfer students take. Yeah, so my role was kind of just working on outreach, advocacy, connecting with other community partners as well. And just kind of maintaining a relationship and being like, hey, we have students of this identity who want to reach out to you. Are you still open for students? Or if students had a question, they're like, hey, like, I'm not sure I thought we wanted to reach out or maybe I even wanted to volunteer with this organization. What do you guys know about them? It'd be my job to reach out to those community partners.

Elsa:

Thank you so much for dedicating your work to your community. That's, I think, really admirable, especially as a young adult. So what would you say were maybe some mental challenges that you faced while working in the emergency departments that helped you grow personally and how exactly did you grow?

Magdalena:

Yeah, for sure. So after graduating college, I transitioned from SART to SAVI and SAVI is Mount Sinai Sexual Assault and Violence Intervention Team. And so in that role, I was specifically working in the ERs and I was working with survivors and their healthcare teams. And I think that that was a lot harsher of a volunteer role. It was really, it was immediate gratification being able to be there for a survivor, but then also it was very cumbersome seeing the things that people have to go through. And I think seeing these very traumatic events play out in someone's experience and, you know, they're in the ER. So that's like the first line of response. People are just grappling with what happened to them. And then working with the healthcare team and getting a forensic exam, talking to social workers, talking to police, it's so much. And being able to be there for someone and kind of take some of that burden off someone's shoulders is very rewarding, but it's definitely very heavy. And I think that that was a hard challenge and it was hard to grapple with going back every week being like, wow, this is really heavy work that I'm doing. So yeah, I think that was one of the biggest challenges that I had in the ER specifically.

Elsa:

A lot of people think that, especially when you're encountering such heavy situations like you did, that maybe it's a reason why young adults shouldn't go out of their way to participate in such initiatives. How would you use your work to maybe describe your opinion on that very matter?

Magdalena:

Yeah, think, so for Savi specifically, there was a pretty intense application process. And then we had a 40-hour mandated training through this department, through the state department of New York. And I think through that training, you really were able to assess whether you were in a space to do that. Like I met, and it was an in-person training. So I met a lot of other volunteers and one of them actually halfway through was like, you know what? Like, I just don't think that this program is right for me. And I think she branched off and found something else. And I think that that's super okay. And that's healthy to do is to take the time and make sure that this is something you can do because if you're going in to something like this with your tank already half empty, you're not necessarily going to be making the situation better. And it's also just going to be harmful to yourself.

So I think that introspection is really important to have, but I will say the community I found within Savvy, like it really carried me through. You know, like I had a pretty tough case and I just reached out to the director of Savvy who runs like coordinates all the volunteers. And she connected me with another volunteer and just being able to talk to one another, not even about the case, but about how we felt and like what we took away from them, what we still kind of carry from that case, I think was so important. And I think having people to lean on is crucial. So while I do think it definitely takes a specific type of mentality and space to be in that maybe not everyone is in it at every moment and that's okay. Knowing that you have a support system who's really there all the time, I think makes it very, very doable, and very rewarding.

Elsa:

Yeah, I totally agree. I think that it's important for people to be able to use that discernment as to whether they should participate in certain service initiatives or others, but it shouldn't, you know, stop them from trying to pursue service as a whole. With your background centered towards advocacy, how would you say that it will determine your career as a physician?

Magdalena:

Yeah, I think advocacy is so important in becoming a physician, just talking to the faculty at Strich and just hearing how they've really used advocacy in their everyday lives, even just like vaccine advocacy work is so important. And I think it's really driven me to a sense of service as well. So while I'm not currently working with sexual assault survivors, I've kind of transitioned my advocacy and service into more cancer screenings. And that's actually how I got involved with the cap foundation is I work with them on see test and treat, which is an amazing initiative that offers free breasts and cervical and more cancer screenings now to women without insurance. And I think that advocating for people who wouldn't otherwise have those resources is just so fundamental in being a physician and I guess in who I am. And so I think I'm taking those previous experiences working one-on-one in the ERs and on college campuses and just noticing what resources people use, when they use them, how they use them and the accessibility of them and kind of implementing that into who I want to become as a physician. And yeah, most currently I guess just in cancer screenings and cancer prevention.

Elsa:

I mean, obviously you still have some room to grow in becoming a physician, but how would you say at this point, using your unique experiences and how they've shaped your character, if you

were given the opportunity to meet your younger self today, would you be proud of the way that your service involvement has guided you and the person you've become?

Magdalena:

Yeah, for sure. You know, it's funny, I have two younger sisters and I think part of the reason I got involved in the sexual assault work was because I just knew that I would want someone to be there for them or anyone else I loved if they ever or if they had to go through an experience like that. And I think that really drove me to do it. But it's funny because growing up, I think as the older sister, I definitely lacked patience. I was definitely a bit more like, okay, we're doing this, we're doing this. Like you're going to do this. And I think taking a second and being able to work through service really practice, I really practice my patience. I can meet someone where they're at, not where I think that they're at or not where I expect them to be at, just like taking that space and making sure that I'm on the same page as someone I'm interacting with, I think is something that I'm very proud of and I think it's something that I really just practice through service and through having those really unique experiences.

So yeah, definitely say I grown a lot from that and I'm proud of that. I think I'm more of a patient person now and I think that that will definitely serve me in the long run. And I think that's something that I probably wouldn't have been able to practice as much just in a regular school setting.

Yeah, just grateful for that.

Elsa:

I'm glad to hear that. Clearly you were able to apply some of your interests into what you were doing in service and dedicating yourself to it. So maybe some younger people who are struggling with making their vision for service into a reality, what advice would you give to them?

Magdalena:

Yeah, I would say just try everything. Give everything your all and you'll figure out what works best for you and what you want to do. I think that there's so many avenues into service and you'll try like 10 different things. And then maybe one or two of them are like, yes, I really like this. Or you'll be like, oh, while I was volunteering with this or while I was working with this organization, I saw that they partner with this organization. I'm curious in that too. And you can make those connections so much more easily and they're very accessible once you've already established that you're wanting and willing to work. So yeah, I would really just say give everything your all, try everything, things you wouldn't expect you want to do. You can do it with other people too, like classmates or anything like that. I think just get as involved as you can and then you'll be able to figure out kind of where to go from there. And I think the more experiences that you have, the better you understand yourself and what you want to do and the ways that you are like most equipped to kind of give back.

Elsa:

Yeah, I think even just for young people getting started, no matter how small they might believe their dedication might be even just getting started that can lead them down a path that they aren't aware of, that will help tons of people in their community. So thank you for helping us go over your experiences and how that helped you grow as an adult. I'm sure that a lot of youth will be able to use these experiences and their interpretations to find the courage maybe to, you know, participate in that one service initiative that they're thinking about, but might not yet. So thank you.

The reason that most youth report for not participating in service-related activities outside of school is because they feel pressured to choose between academics and volunteering with a limited amount of time after school every day. Furthermore, service-related activities often come across as demanding and work-intensive. This combination of stressors can make additional commitments like volunteering or community engagement feel overwhelming rather than accessible. Despite this, young people like Magdalena who choose to participate in service have demonstrated how consistent community engagement often fosters emotional endurance and builds empathy.

Service and mental health are more connected than we often realize. In a time when many young people experience high levels of stress and pressure, it can be difficult to offer anything more of yourself. Yet, being disconnected from your community can deepen that sense of isolation and make it harder to find meaning in everyday experiences. Stepping into service, even in smaller ways, can improve mental health in youth by creating those moments of meaning and connection. For more information, links, and resources, please visit this episode's show notes.

Thank you to Magdalena for sharing the details of your experience advocating for sexual assault survivors and staying involved in service. For more information about the CAP Foundation, visit foundation.cap.org. Don't forget to follow us on social media and like and subscribe wherever you get your podcasts. I hope that this series has given you a clearer understanding of mental health in general, including what's most important, staying mindful.