

Be the Change: Mental Health Awareness for Young People

Denise Fase is the CEO of the Grand Rapids Initiative for Leaders. It's a faith based nonprofit organization focused on investing in emerging teenage-aged leaders by providing training over a nine-month period. The training focuses on helping leaders plan and implement personal, professional, and spiritual growth more effectively in the workplace.

This year says Denise has been a difficult one for many in the community and the need for mental health support is great.

"This past year, it was very clear that the teens were very concerned about the mental health status of not only themselves, but also their peers they saw in school, and so forth," she says.

The concerns of the teens ignited a spark in Denise. A spark to connect and to train further.

"And so we began, then a journey with them to work in partnership with mental health therapists," she said.

The therapists explained that Denise have helped the teens identify within themselves some of the emotional issues they are struggling with.

"To notice some of those triggers and signs within themselves while also learning how to recognize that within their peers," she adds.

She says that as the young people learned further about mental health, they expressed a need to do something about it.

"And they were making it clear, we need to do something, and we want to do something with what we've been learning," Denise said.

She says the program gives youth the opportunity to understand that they have the skills to create something to help their community and peers. To be able to position youth across the city to be equipped to watch out for mental health concerns among their peers can be a part of providing support and resources sooner to those struggling.

"The feedback that I'm hearing is those who have been on the receiving end, especially they're hearing their peers talk about mental health, and that's been powerful for young people to know that they're not alone," Denise says.

With the learning the youth have been doing they have developed several programs to impart the teaching to others. One of these says Denise involves a five-part podcast series. The series will involve interviews with different types of mental health professionals. She says they want to make the knowledge more accessible to others. Another one involves a summer camp where the youth will be presenting on what they've learned about mental health to children attending the camp.

Ultimately Denise says she's hoping the program allows young people to recognize that they have a voice and that they too can be a leader.

“That they don’t have to wait until they have their degrees or diplomas or when they become adults...they can lead today,” she explained.

The Grand Rapids Neighborhood Match Fund contract allowed Denise and her team to provide long term training and support around mental health for a cohort of young people in the City of Grand Rapids – something she says she wouldn't have been able to accomplish without the Neighborhood Match Fund support.