Ghana Youth Movement for Mental Health Program

**Location:** Ghana  **Sponsoring College:** Williams College

**Project Leader:** Papa Fredua Anderson, Williams College (Home country: Ghana)

**Student Team Participants/Co-leaders:** Augustine Bannerman, Harvard College (Home country: Ghana), Margaret Joy Maison, Cornell University (Home country: Ghana)

**Date Range of Project Execution:** 2nd July 2021 - 3rd August

Instagram: gym_mental_health

Section I: Narrative

**A two-sentence summary of the goals of your project**

The overarching long-term goal of this project is to attain a Ghanaian society that has a young adult population that is well educated about mental health and is free of stigma against individuals with mental health conditions. To get to this point, this project for peace served as a foundation that aimed to spread information on mental health and mental health support lines through the dissemination of flyers on Instagram and Twitter and also aimed to train mental health advocates who will be charged with carrying out mental health awareness projects to educate their peers and local community on the topic.

**Why do you think the issue your project is responding to exists?**

Ghana has no extensive program in place to sensitize the general public on issues concerning mental health and its related conditions. Most Ghanaians relate mental health conditions to psychosis; hence, they may not seek treatment for other mental health conditions such as depression, schizophrenia, and bipolar disorder. This neglect of such mental illnesses can be traced to inadequate health care services available to treat or diagnose these conditions. According to the World Health Organization, only 2% of the Ghanaian population is receiving the mental health treatment it needs and as of 2017, there were only 18 psychiatrists (up from 11 in 2011) serving a population of about 28 million. This in effect makes communication surrounding mental health in the country difficult and brings about societal stigmas towards mental health conditions.

**How did you come up with the idea for your project?**

We decided to spark conversations around mental health through a mental awareness campaign. As US college students, we’ve had the first-hand experience on the benefits of the free flow of mental health information among students on our college campuses. Students are able to identify mental health conditions and employ coping strategies or seek out the right support. As a team, we envisioned a Ghanaian society where there will be free information on mental health and an awareness campaign was a primary way to do that. Based on our high school experience, where we observed the lack of mental health education in our curriculum and the stigmatization of individuals with mental health conditions, we decided to focus on the Ghanaian youth as our primary target group for the awareness campaign. By educating the youth, we not only secure a future generation of Ghanaian adults well educated on mental health but also, we equip young adults with the knowledge to educate their peers and community. To ensure the latter point was fulfilled, we decided to train a group of mental health advocates as part of our project.

**How do you define peace? How does or will your project contribute to peace? Short-term? Long-term?**

We define peace as a state where an individual has a sound mental state and is able to cope with all their societal demands and pressures. Through this project, we anticipate that intraspecific tensions that arise when individuals are unable to perform their responsibilities due to their poor mental health will be reduced. This would give individuals some form of inner peace and a sense of belonging. Interspecific conflicts that arise between individuals with mental illnesses and their peers, teachers, or parents will be reduced since these people will now be more aware of their condition and have more effective ways of communicating with those around them. In the long term, we envision a Ghanaian society that is fully educated about mental health such that there is reduced stigma against individuals suffering from mental health conditions and this project is contributing to this effect through the mental health awareness program that we carried out this summer.
Why did you choose your host site to work in?
We elected to do the project in our host country, Ghana, due to our close ties to the place and the desire to change the negative observations (such as high rates of stigma) we had made about mental health. For example, in high school, we had peers who had to drop out because they did not receive the appropriate support they needed for their mental health. Though Ghana is rapidly developing, mental health education is consistently relegated to the background and current efforts are not enough to educate the public. We saw our peace project as a great addition to the mental health education efforts in the country.

Instagram and Twitter were selected as the primary social media platforms for our project because they are the two of the most commonly used platforms by the Ghanaian youth, our target group. Also, these two platforms have widespread engagement across the country such that individuals are able to easily reshare any information that we post across their personal platforms. Notwithstanding, our information was also shared through other social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Snapchat, and Facebook.

For our advocacy training program, Accra was selected as the host site because it had all the resources needed for the camp. Accra, being the capital of Ghana, is a hub for most professionals and this enabled us to obtain several individuals with broad expertise to lead the training workshops. In order not to localize the selection of our advocates from Accra only, we provided accommodation to individuals coming from other regions in Ghana. We had five regions represented at the training camp.

What was it like to work at your host site?
The team reached out to NGOs and individuals who have done some work in the mental health space with the intention to have them on board as community partners. The NGOs were always eager to meet with us and assist us in any way possible to ensure the success of our project. There were also individuals who were willing to help us connect to the right resources within the country. This reassured the team that there was a population more than ready to accept our initiative and goals. As an indication of our wide acceptance, we were featured in a newspaper article and invited to a national TV station, TV3, for an interview on our project.

We had more engagement for our materials from our Instagram page than any other social media platform. Just like we envisioned, we had several individuals share their thoughts on the different mental health topics we had on our flyers and then reshare our information on their own personal platforms. The whole project ran smoothly with the only challenge being fewer people than expected commenting on our Instagram campaign posts. According to Instagram insights, we reached 14.5K accounts with 1,996 content interactions, which is a big step considering that a percentage of Ghanaians are still trying to come to understand the need to not stigmatize mental disorders. Indeed, these stats also show that we have to work harder to achieve our goals as an initiative.

Although working in Accra had its benefits, it was extremely costly to run the program. Most of our expenses were spent on logistics as our workshop leaders were willing to lead their sessions for free.

Please describe changes created by the project during the summer? Please describe anticipated changes that will continue in the future as a result of the project.
Through social media campaigns, we educated more than 300 individuals daily. As of 24th August 2021, we had 282 followers on our Instagram page. We anticipate that our flyers will continue to enable individuals to become conscious of their mental wellbeing as we encourage discussions around mental health and its related conditions via our social media pages.

Additionally, the GYM for mental health project successfully trained 12 advocates through a one-week workshop-oriented training camp. Aside from general mental health education training, they were taken through some courses such as Psychological and Emotional First Aid, Effective Public Speaking and Giving Presentations, Advocacy Tools and Strategies, and the Importance of Volunteering and Social Impact. These advocates were then charged to continue to create awareness about mental health within their local communities and to work on individual projects towards this end with guidance from us. While some projects are yet to materialize, others are in advanced stages of planning or have already been carried out. For instance, after their training, six GYM advocates reached out to 107 teenagers at Emmanuel Presby Church at Dansoman in Ghana for a mental health talk session. Through this talk, they educated the church youth on the importance of understanding mental health and some strategies for
dealing with their mental health issues. They also shared mental health support lines with this group. We anticipate that such advocacy works will help to reduce the stigma associated with mental disorders.

Has your project changed the way you think about the world? How has it changed you? Was your project impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic?

The project changed the way we as a team view leadership, in terms of how to manage a group of people and still ensure all goals are met in the end. We also realized that in order to create effective change after creating awareness, we need ways to make up for the inadequate mental health education resources while advocating for changes in governmental policies.

The project was carried out with the observation of all COVID protocols. In terms of budgeting, a higher fee than usual was used in paying for the location of the training. We needed a space large enough to house the participants with additional space for social distancing. Luckily this was accounted for in the initial budget made for venue and logistics. In addition, we had difficulties housing all advocates due to changed academic schedules which were mainly influenced by the pandemic. The project lead and team members had to take an executive decision to house participants from outside the region and provide participants within the region with transportation fares.

After careful consideration, we concluded that making the training remote would decrease the chances of participants mastering all the necessary skills to be advocates and narrow the selection of cohorts to a specific financial limit. In a country like Ghana, some students might not have a laptop and those who do might not have stable internet access. We will advise future PfP grantees to weigh all the possible challenges the pandemic might present and create alternative program outlines to navigate these challenges.

Looking Ahead
With the help of our newly trained GYM advocates, we hope to extend our advocacy efforts to a wider Ghanaian population, especially since the advocates were drawn from different parts of the country. Of note, some projects have been launched by our advocates while others are expected to be launched by the beginning of 2022. With the help of the right sponsors, we aim to sensitize at least 11,000 people by the end of 2022 and promote the resources made available by other NGOs in the process. Also, we plan on holding annual advocacy training camps which would enable us to enlist more passionate individuals to join our advocacy team. The Davis project for peace project has provided a solid foundation for the Ghana Youth Movement for Mental Health as an initiative and we see ourselves registering as an NGO in the near future.

Did other fund-raising efforts contribute to your project? What were they?
No outside funds contributed to this project. Nonetheless, special thanks to the Williams College Office of Financial Aid for paying for my two-way transportation to and from Ghana.

Quote: “As long as you are determined to make a positive change in society, there are forces, some known and others unknown, that come together spontaneously to help you achieve your goals.” Through this project, I learned that achieving the Ghanaian society that is fully aware of their mental health is a gradual process but there are forces (individuals, institutions, etc) that are willing to contribute to the process to make it possible. The Davis Grant has been a welcome contribution to the process. Papa Fredueh Anderson, Project Leader, Williams College ’21

Section II: Photographs