

Partners for Community and Character Essay: Perseverance

by Andrea Nadolny

I knew exactly the painting she was talking about. I've looked at the big white horse in the middle of *The Founding of Worthington* every time I've visited the library. The artwork portrays white settlers as brave heroes venturing out to tame the wilderness. The Black Lives Matter protests caused the library board to remove the painting as the first step of their Anti-Racist Organization Resolution.

The library director heard about my suicide education project and asked me to paint a duplicate of my community center mural for the empty space. I was torn. I wanted to create a mural for the library, but I didn't want to paint the same design twice. And if I was going to make the replacement for a controversial painting, I knew it had to be bigger than me. I proposed a new design incorporating resident handprints, and more than 300 people from Worthington came out to participate. Many shared their connection to suicide with me. A mother. A daughter. A veteran. A survivor. And more.

Their stories are too personal for me to share, but I can tell you mine. When I was 14, I lost someone to suicide. He was one of 48,344 Americans who died by suicide in 2018. After learning to live with my loss, I decided to create the resources that would have helped me when I was grieving. I developed a series of infographics to break the stigmas surrounding suicide. Suicide affects everyone, everywhere. Suicide does not discriminate – it affects all ages, all genders, and all races. Three mental health professionals reviewed my work, and I had to revise it. And revise it. Surprisingly, that was the easy part.

The next step was distribution. I contacted every Ohio mental health organization I could find. From there, I went on to email every public health agency in the United States. I received dozens of flat-out nos. Even more people never responded. I persevered until I got my first yes from the Alabama Department of Mental Health. They believed in not only my project but in me! From there, my partnerships grew to 11 organizations in three states, which is how the library found me.

As the replacement for *The Founding of Worthington* painting, my library mural may be best described by what it's not. It's not racist. It's not sexist. It's not biased. Visitors can scan a QR code next to the mural to access my infographics. The mural embraces the diversity of my community through the variety of colors and handprints of all shapes and sizes. It invited everyone in my city to be a part of the

change for inclusivity and proudly represents who the people of Worthington are today. While promoting my project, I connected with Dr. Darcy Haag Granello of The Ohio State University Suicide Prevention Program. Dr. Haag Granello featured my infographics as a model student project in her keynote speech at an international psychiatry conference in Guilin, China. My perseverance opened up opportunities for me to become a spokesperson for mental health. During the pandemic, I wrote an article on student mental health for the Ohio PTA and spoke at their statewide town hall meeting. Girl Scouts of the USA invited me to be a panelist for a global webinar event with Johnson & Johnson. This virtual event, *Awesome Girls: Tackling Global Public Health Challenges*, had attendees from across the USA and around the globe. The mental health panel featured Dr. Ginger Smith-Swintosky, a neuroscientist with Johnson & Johnson, and myself. We discussed why mental health is a global public health issue and the devastating effect of Covid-19 on mental health. After the event, Dr. Smith-Swintosky asked to use my infographics for her mental health work in Africa! Through my project, I have created suicide education resources shared worldwide, but I'm still not done. I'm working with my high school administration this year to provide suicide awareness training for teachers and staff. Being vigilant for the signs of suicide is especially important during the ongoing pressures caused by Covid-19. My project earned the Gold Award, the highest honor in Girl Scouting, a Gold President's Volunteer Service Award, a ServeOhio Award, and recognition as a 2021 Worthington Good Neighbor. More importantly, my project shows other students that they, too, can make the world a better place.

In the fall, I will pursue my bachelor's degree in International Relations because I am passionate about serving others and bringing people together to promote understanding and empathy. At The Ohio State University, I will continue to persevere as an advocate for the importance of mental health. I want to become a leader with the Buckeye Campaign Against

Suicide to encourage conversations about mental health beyond RUOK? Day. My career goal is to become a Foreign Service Officer to represent the United States worldwide. As the PCC Character Award winner, I will continue to drive positive change for mental health on my college campus, in my career, and everywhere I go.

Learn more about my project at www.AndreasGold.weebly.com