

Bright Futures

The Impact of Mentorship and Volunteerism Within Marginalized Youth Groups

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Abstract

This project explores the role of mentorship and volunteerism in addressing challenges faced by underserved youth communities, specifically in the Northern Mariana Islands (islands of Saipan, Tinian, and Rota), a U.S. territory located in the western Pacific Ocean. Through personal experience, the project highlights how youth development organizations like 4-H Marianas empower youth by providing leadership and career opportunities. By documenting a total of ninety hours of service during the 2024, 2025, and 2026 National 4-H Conferences (approximately thirty hours per year), this project aims to analyze how experiential learning connects local needs with national-level work.

In this project, the specific experiential learning aspect is that youth will come together from different communities and share their knowledge and experiences while also conducting research. It also looks at the broader concerns of youth development opportunities in marginalized regions, showcasing how transformative volunteer work impacts the barriers within these communities. This experiential learning in Washington, D.C. includes personal experiences and reflections, collegiate-level facilitation roles with federal agencies, and a focus on educational justice issues that are in the form of a challenge question from a specific federal agency. I will also include other experiences throughout the entirety of my college career where I have been involved in other organizations that have allowed me to dig deeper into the world of youth development.

Interest

My love and passion for youth development began during my sophomore year of high school. I realized how a small decision can change a person's life and turn into a huge impact. I joined 4-H Marianas in high school and fell in love with the organization's mission and vision; however, there were only about six people in the club. Realistically, that number of people would not do much to accomplish the goals we had, so I reached out to the higher-ups of the organization and spent almost a year working my way up to turn the tiny club into a community organization where I could expand it, not only on my island but on the other inhabited neighboring islands. After two to three years of doing that, I wanted to take my story to the national level.

It had always been my dream to visit the U.S. or "make it," as some might say. I applied to go to the National 4-H Conference in 2022, where I received a scholarship from New Mexico State University to fly to Washington, D.C., and share my story with one of the twenty federal agencies that the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) gathered. In my case, I shared my story with the U.S. House of Representatives as a youth delegate and worked my way up to the Collegiate Facilitator role with the White House CEQ and NASA. My application for these roles consisted mainly of expanding opportunities for the youth in the Northern Mariana Islands and a baby organization I established called Clover Designs. Clover Designs' mission was to spread environmental awareness and give adolescents in the community the opportunity to discover their passions to be successful in their own ways.

Because opportunities in the Northern Mariana Islands are limited in terms of receiving higher education, having a well-structured career path, and wanting to

contribute to good changes within my community, led to my decision to travel to the mainland. I was only 17 years old at the time, when all I wanted was to accomplish my dreams and goals – there was only so much a girl with many goals could do on a 12-mile-long island. In August of 2023, I submitted my application to become a collegiate facilitator for the 2024 National 4-H Conference. At this conference, I led a group of youth delegates who contributed their time, experiences, and knowledge based on research towards the daily issues these federal agencies face each day.

Through trial and error, I finally decided on the career path I wanted. Aside from wanting to make use of my experiences over the years, I want to be able to gain knowledge here in the U.S. and bring it back to the Northern Mariana Islands. I now want to continue working with youth, specifically those who have Severe Mental Illnesses (SMI). The career path I want to pursue is to become a Child Clinical Psychologist and be involved in research that explores prevention strategies and the development of interventions for adolescents. By bringing back the skills and knowledge I will continue to attain, I hope to contribute to the long-term development of mental healthcare and opportunities for the youth in my community.

Introduction

The trajectory of human development, particularly during the period of adolescence, is fundamentally shaped by their interpersonal relationships and deep involvement in programs that consist of quality mentors and volunteers. While academic achievement is often prioritized and is an important factor in the development of an adolescent's success, there are reviews and research that affirm that positive youth development is also dependent on meaningful relationships and support, and prosocial behavior. The acts of mentorship and volunteerism serve as crucial interventions that promote self-efficacy, resilience, identity development, social competence, emotional regulation, and more.

Mentorships and quality volunteerism from trained leaders, professionals, and/or young adults in youth development organizations provide a developmental relationship for adolescents. This facilitates internal values that are positive for a child's growth and resilience, as well as their identity formation. This allows adolescents to shift their focus from self to purpose, their futures, goals, achievements, and the importance of a supportive system. Simultaneously, both mentorship and volunteerism are crucial for an adolescent's executive functioning skills, reduction of depression and anxiety symptoms, encouragement for healthy living, and for navigating challenges.

There is literature that emphasizes how mentorship and volunteerism focus on the risk reduction of Severe Mental Illnesses (SMI) in adolescents, such as schizophrenia and mood disorders. Alongside risk reduction is the emphasis on how these development experiences can also contribute to the research of coming up with prevention strategies against the onset of SMI. The psychological assets include coping

skills, having a support system, and self-advocacy, which are some of the values that many mental health facilities for adolescents establish.

I will dive into more literature reviews that will look at these topics beyond surface level, such as the psychological factors and the positive impacts of mentorship and volunteerism through a myriad of youth development organizations. Additionally, as my career path is moving forward concerning my experiences and growth, I have not only been involved in youth development organizations, but I also currently serve as a mental health technician/skills trainer in Trillium Family Services. This is Oregon's highest level of secure inpatient care for adolescents with severe mental health needs. I learn about the developmental trajectory of adolescents with mental health concerns. As a mental health technician and skills trainer at Trillium Family Services, I have observed the developmental trajectories of positive emotion processing to observe resilience factors in the adolescents who are at high risk for SMI. This position exposed me to new terminology, database skills, research methodologies, medications, and the implementation of support plans for children in our Secure Inpatient Program (SIP). Carrying the position of a mental health technician in this organization has allowed me to build meaningful relationships with the populations I serve, which will guide me in establishing a foundation for trust, effective communication, and practical skills necessary for successful intervention development. My role as a mental health technician allows me to observe the influence of structural factors on transition-age individuals.

Finally, the goals of this thesis are to explore the positive impacts of youth communities that have had mentors/volunteers lead them to a successful path in life as they get older. Second, to delve into publications that look at the role healthy

mentorship, positive experiences, and opportunities play in shaping adolescents' goals, career paths, relationships, and academics. Third, to highlight the importance of volunteerism and mentorship in youth groups that specifically do not have enough resources to lead them into a successful path regarding their academics, careers, and the real world. I want to explore other studies that showcase the positive impacts within youth groups that were positively influenced by their mentors and volunteers. Additionally, prevention and intervention strategies are used by mental health professionals. I want to explore theories that heavily connect and contribute to this project. Lastly, to deepen the understanding of mechanisms, I want to go beyond simply stating that mentorship and volunteerism are good for youth development. I want to delve deeper into uncovering why and how these interventions impact the youth, especially in underserved communities.

Terms and Theories

There are many interconnected terms and theories, including psychological theories, used throughout this thesis. Many of these theories and definitions fall under umbrella terms, concepts, and models; however, they each serve unique perspectives that describe the development of an adolescent and how every individual's experiences differ from one another. Additionally, these theories and definitions will connect to my own work, jobs, experiences, roles, and future goals.

There is a huge focus on proactive interventions that are directed to *Underserved Communities* that the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) describes as groups that have limited or no access to resources, including socioeconomically disadvantaged people, have limited English proficiency, geographically isolated people, people of color, etc (United States, FEMA). When focusing on underserved communities, the following theories provide not just academic lenses but practical tools for understanding challenges and designing effective interventions. Volunteerism and mentorship in these contexts become critical pathways for youth to build assets, access opportunities, develop resilience, and become agents of positive change in their own lives and communities. The mental well-being challenges that youth in underprivileged communities go through are amplified by systemic barriers and limited resources, which include culturally competent mental health providers, inadequate funding for low-income families and youth organizations, and more. Therefore, when looking at a mentorship and volunteerism lens, they are crucial to bridging the gap between a lack of resources and opportunities for children, especially those who fall under this category.

These roles become a pathway to adolescents navigating through adversity and gaining resilience through the mental, environmental, and physical challenges they might face.

One of the key psychological assets for adolescents that is cultivated through interventions is *Self-Efficacy*. Self-efficacy refers to a person's belief in his or her capacity to execute behaviors that are necessary to produce specific performance attainments (Bandura). When youth receive mentorship from volunteers or participate in volunteering, they gain opportunities to navigate challenges, solve problems, and achieve their goals; they essentially "choose their own hard" and learn how to work around that. This means that they choose to deal with difficult situations that are manageable to them and actively work to solve problems, which builds competency, resilience, and mastery, ultimately building self-efficacy over time. When adolescents are faced with this, they begin to realize how successful they can be as they overcome obstacles that may or may not be beyond their control, especially in academic and/or clinical settings. Knowing their capabilities and internalizing this belief may be a protective factor against mental health challenges in the face of distress.

Engaging in volunteerism and youth development work that aligns with an individual's values allows them to explore different aspects of their identities, leading to more discoveries and potential. *Identity Development Theory* is a well-developed identity that contains goals, beliefs, and values to which a person is committed; it is the awareness of consistency in themselves over time and a recognition of that consistency by others (Erikson). Testing new roles, such as a mentor, volunteer, or advocate, adolescents gain a sense of identity and what meaningful relationships look like. This leads to a sense of self-awareness, confidence, and self-discovery. Many programs

involving these types of roles not only focus on doing good, but also on guiding the psychological process of adolescents pursuing their potential.

Youth who prioritize making connections and networking at such a young age have goals to become successful, specifically in their careers. Youth often volunteer within existing social groups. For example, school clubs, religious organizations, or form strong bonds with fellow volunteers. This bonding capital provides emotional support, a sense of belonging, and collective action within the group. Building *Social Capital*, especially at a young age, helps a person build networking skills and connections, therefore opening doors to many more opportunities and goals (Mask). When adolescents begin to build social capital, it provides them with emotional support, confidence, inspiration, increased educational attainment, and career success. This could play a role in being a protective factor for youth in underserved communities, where there are a lot of restrictions regarding career and networking opportunities.

Experiential Learning Theory describes the ideal process of learning, and it invites an individual to understand themselves as a learner and empowers them to take charge of their own learning and development (Kolb). Regarding relevance in volunteerism, Volunteer activities are concrete experiences. Youth are directly engaged in helping others, solving community problems, or contributing to a cause. For example, serving meals, cleaning a park, tutoring a younger student, and organizing an event. Now, in mentorships, mentees gain concrete experiences through the activities they undertake with their mentors or as a result of their mentor's guidance. This could be working on a project, navigating a social situation, practicing a new skill, or even observing the mentor in their work environment.

A theory called the *Theory of Planned Behavior* proposes that an individual's decision to engage in a specific behavior (like gambling or stopping themselves from gambling) can be predicted by their intention to engage in that behavior (Ajzen). This can help explain *why* individuals choose to be a mentor, engage in volunteerism, and how that leads to positive developmental outcomes. For example, if adolescents observe their family, friends, and community highly valuing volunteerism and mentorship, they are more likely to participate in that realm as well. There are three components to this theory, which include the individual's attitude, the subjective norm, and their perceived behavioral control.

A strategy and conceptual framework that many youth development programs use is called the *Positive Youth Development (PYD) Framework*, which is a research-based framework and approach that guides communities in the way where they support the opportunities of youth/young people to know and realize their potential (Act For Youth). However, the positive youth development framework is not just about one program and getting young people to necessarily change, but rather, it sets the stage for the youth to be in an environment where they can thrive. This often requires the guidance that comes from adults (mentorship aspect). The communities work together to build relationships and work through challenges to make meaningful connections and changes. While the Theory of Planned Behavior and Social Learning Theory explain how behavior is formed and learned, PYD provides the overarching philosophical and conceptual lens through which to understand what 'positive development' means and how various experiences contribute to it. According to Act For Youth, it uses a strength-based approach, where it helps young people identify their internal and external strengths, and creates opportunities for them to build on their

strengths. It nurtures developmental relationships and environments in and beyond our programs and organizations.

Another theory that represents a broader framework that includes the study of human motivation and personality is called the *Self-Determination Theory*. It also articulates a formal theory defining intrinsic and extrinsic sources of motivation. According to the Center for Self-Determination Theory, it is a description of the respective roles of intrinsic and types of extrinsic motivation in cognitive and social development and individual differences. Perhaps more importantly, SDT propositions also focus on how social and cultural factors facilitate or undermine people's sense of volition and initiative, in addition to their well-being and the quality of their performance." Youth are more likely to engage in and benefit from volunteerism if they feel a sense of choice over their participation, the type of activity, or how they contribute. If volunteer opportunities are forced or feel like an obligation, intrinsic motivation and positive outcomes will be diminished.

Lastly, instead of just listing outcomes, the *Social Ecological Model* explains how multiple layers contribute to positive development and resilience (Bronfenbrenner). Volunteerism and mentorship do not happen just in one place or setting; their impact is mediated by family support, school environment, community resources, and broader societal values. "Social-ecological resilience is a complex concept that considers the interdependence of social and ecological systems, recognizing that human activities and ecological processes are interconnected and mutually dependent" (Bronfenbrenner). Levels to this model include individual experiences, interpersonal relationships, community, organizational, and policies. These levels suggest that interventions are

most effective when operated across multiple levels simultaneously, as changes are being supported throughout.

**Youth Development Through Mentorships:
A Los-Angeles School-Based Mentorship Program Among Latino Children**

Underserved communities like low-income Latino children are at higher risk of underachievement. “Thus far, very little mentoring work has focused specifically on low-income Latino children, while this population is at very high risk of underachievement and dropout” (Coller and Kuo). The mention of “very high risk of underachievement and dropout” adds a sense of urgency. It immediately frames my research within a critical social issue, emphasizing the potential real-world benefits of your findings. It also provides specific demographic and risk factors that this thesis can delve into. The unique challenges faced by low-income Latino youth (e.g., language barriers, cultural assimilation stress, economic hardship, systemic discrimination, etc.) and how volunteerism/mentorship might uniquely address these can be discussed. “After only 5 years, this program has established a reliable presence at its partner elementary school, producing longer than usual relationship lengths, and evidence of high relationship quality” (Coller and Kuo). Longer than usual relationship lengths and “high relationship quality” directly speak to the establishment of strong bonding social capital between mentors and mentees, as well as within the program structure. This fulfills the relatedness need of Self-Determination Theory. It shows that the program is successfully building the crucial, supportive ties that underpin many positive outcomes.

The design of this study, also known as the Youth Empowerment Program (YEP), used a program evaluation and quality assessment tool that focuses on the development of the intervention over five years. Participants included mentees (youth) and mentors/volunteers. The mentees were fourth-grade Latino students who were

considered to be “at risk” for academic failure and were likely to benefit from mentorship. The mentors included UCLA graduates and volunteers in SCOPE, and were paired with mentees based on shared interests, language, and gender, if it was possible. This partnership between a Title 1 school in Los Angeles and a university allowed accessibility and smooth integration for the children within this study (Coller and Kuo).

The YEP structure involves one-to-one mentoring between the mentee and the mentor, also known as School-Based Mentoring (SBM), where they meet at the school during school hours. The focus of this study was to establish long-term relationships, with an average of 1.5 years, as over 95% of them lasted for at least a year, and 47% lasted for two or more years. This demonstrated that the program emphasized ongoing mentor support and training for high-quality relationships. The assessment tool used displayed that these relationships were youth-centered, had strong emotional engagement, and improved attitudes (Coller and Kuo).

Exploring How Naturally Occurring Mentorships Emerge Within a Mexican Cultural Context

Many adults who are a part of formal programs aim to “save” the youth by having an expected outcome after following through their objectives; however, the concept of “readiness” has outcomes with long-term benefits for the youth. This is because it emphasizes that when it comes to marginalized youth groups, the positive impact of a mentor is dependent on a child’s developmental readiness. This means that “saving the youth” is a collaborative process where the youth must not only be physically present but also cognitively and emotionally ready to be engaged and ready to receive the opportunities presented to them. This leads to empowering the youth to have autonomy over what they want for their future, displaying the readiness to have a relationship-based mentorship, and feeling safe and secure with the mentorship they are striving to build trust with (Cervantes and Jimenez).

A study based on a partnership with a school in rural Mexico unpacks these questions by utilizing grounded theory. “Findings indicate that despite adults’ interest to create mentorships, adolescents and emerging adults will likely not be receptive until they are cognitively and emotionally ready” (Cervantes and Jimenez). The factors of readiness include inhibitors, promoters, and activators, which heighten an adult-youth mentorship to reach a natural mentorship level. Because mentoring has been one of the most effective prevention and intervention strategies for the positive impacts within youth development, the outcomes of mentoring still depend on the structure of the relationship, culture, location, and resources that are provided for adolescents and emerging adults. In a Mexican cultural context, mentorship mirrors the structure and

importance of family and other extended networks, which include educators and/or “natural mentors.” By working within a youth’s cultural background and framework, mentors can help to reduce the culture “collision” that youth in marginalized youth groups experience and feel in formal institutions and organizations. This will lead to increased levels of trust, not only in the youth towards their mentor, but in themselves as well. Additionally, it will add to a profound sense of community and belonging. Because these natural mentors are likely to be local teachers and/or leaders within a youth’s community, they are seen as a navigational capital for these adolescents. This is because they not only offer advice, but also help bridge the gap between their transition to bigger life events, such as going into high school, college, or a professional workplace. In addition, these natural mentors understand the systemic barriers and challenges that the youth face.

In this study, inhibitors included “no motivation to connect” and “anxious to engage.” Next, some of the categories that fell under promoters included “life transition,” “openness to learn more,” “proximity and access,” and “opportunities to grow and develop.” Lastly, activators covered “academic issues,” “seeks advice/approval/role model,” and “mental and emotional health.” This process model showcases what needs to be minimized within mentorship and youth development, what must be presented to provide security, comfort, and trust, and what needs to occur to truly solidify a bond between a mentor and a youth they are paired with (Cervantes and Jimenez).

**Volunteerism in Adolescence:
Volunteering, Health, and Well-Being of Children and
Adolescents in the United States**

Whether people pour in volunteer hours to “feel good” or help others and engage in community service, there are benefits either way. Volunteering is statistically linked to better physical health. A sample of over 51,000 adolescents who were a part of volunteerism in the past year of this study 34% higher odds of having good and/or excellent health than those who were not. This suggests that this type of engagement, whether it is in the community or other institutions, encourages an active lifestyle, which can lead to a decrease in behaviors that promote more sitting and lying around; active lifestyles for children are critical to have within their developmental windows (Lanza et al., 2023).

Next, there is a reduction in the odds of anxiety within children who participate in community service. Youth who come from marginalized backgrounds and constantly deal with high-stress situations have a sense of belonging and feel like they matter when they are a part of volunteering within their community. This is because when they see the perspectives of other youth, they gain a better sense of their lives, situations, and the way they live. Gaining this healthy view of themselves reduces internal feelings of social withdrawal and anxiousness.

When youth feel “bored,” it can lead to a lack of sense of purpose, which tends to promote negative behavioral issues, such as drinking alcohol, participating in drug use, and “skipping” school. This study showcases the correlation between volunteering and how it decreases those behavioral issues. The findings indicate that children who

participated in volunteer work were less likely to exhibit conduct problems, which were reported by parents. Conduct problems are patterns that children go through where they break laws, rules, and regulations. Therefore, volunteering is a form of prosocial training because children are placed in environments that teach them to have empathy, patience, and what it means to be cooperative. It also reinforces positive social norms that are a replacement for risky behavior and delinquency (Lanza et al., 2023).

This study emphasizes shifting its conversation of prevention to promotion. This is due to the link between volunteering and how there are positive impacts because of that regarding a child's curiosity, resilience, and emotional regulation. The findings included that youth engaging in community service had higher chances of "flourishing" in the future. To flourish means to also carry emotional maturity, develop a growth mindset, and executive functions that allow a child to feel like they are capable of flourishing and making good decisions for themselves and others around them. This is an intervention where having negative outcomes is avoided by being more rooted in community and service learning, as it encourages youth to build a strong-minded generation by taking on important roles and responsibilities (Lanza et al., 2023).

**LET's CONNECT Community Mentorship Program for
Youths with Peer Social Problems:
Preliminary Findings from a Randomized Effectiveness Trial**

The “LET’S CONNECT” community mentorship program is an initiative designed to help youths experiencing peer social problems. It presents the preliminary findings from a randomized effectiveness trial, suggesting the program’s potential benefits for this specific population. “Peer relationships are critically important to adolescent development and well-being (King et al., 2017). In fact, studies incorporating a variety of guides of the quality of peer relationships converge in demonstrating concurrent and prospective associations between the quality of peer relationships and youth outcomes. It demonstrates that positive peer relationships are a vital form of connection, and their absence or poor quality can have significant negative consequences on youth outcomes. It is not just about discussing youth development broadly, but also about how mentorship addresses specific social challenges that severely impact well-being and contribute to underachievement.

A group of 218 adolescents, aged 12-15 years old, were recruited from emergency departments and tested for interpersonal stress. This stress includes problems like bullying and isolation. A key finding in this is that community mentors created activities that presented a significant increase in social connectedness and a decrease in intense loneliness and social exclusion. This emphasizes the importance of healthy mentorship in youth development, especially for adolescents who are at risk for “clinical levels” of risk, and that this can be considered a type of intervention within the psychology field as well (King et al., 2017).

The main goal of the LET's CONNECT" program was to have the ability to create a sense of belonging in a group setting with people who usually feel isolated. They had follow-ups that occurred after six months, and it showed a significant effect size (0.4) for social connectedness. A key finding in this was that although it did not "cure" internalizing feelings of suicidal ideation, it still successfully shifted a child's perspective of their social environment. Additionally, the program used strategies that involved intentional time that youths spent with their mentor and following through the program appropriately and exactly; however, these were noted as challenges in urban settings. This is due to the stressors of factors like transportation and family stress, which affected the strength of the mentorship and intervention. Although this was a challenge, the reduction of anxiety and an increase in positive self-esteem remained the same. This emphasizes the importance of youth having a caring, supportive adult in their life because this presence is more significant than just the model of the program itself (King et al., 2017).

The Functions and Longitudinal Outcomes of Adolescents' Naturally Occurring Mentorships

Adolescence is the most prominent stage where they are influential in development, which makes positive adults and caregivers help lead them to encouraging outcomes in their adulthood, according to research that has been expanding within this discussion. The study by Miranda-Chan et al. (2016) provided long-term evidence that naturally occurring mentorships, such as educators, neighbors, and coaches, have many benefits for adolescents and their development. Their study took participants from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health (Add Health), which was an extensive dataset on American youth and adolescents. Participants were examined during their teenage years and were followed into their young adulthood years, at about the ages of 18 to 26 years old. Amongst these participants, researchers separated another group that reported having a non-parental mentor during their adolescent years (Miranda-Chan et al., 2016).

Researchers demonstrated that having a natural mentor led to youth having lower rates of criminal activity, receiving higher education, and an overall improvement in their well-being. This improvement of their well-being indicated lower depressive symptoms and a positive growth mindset. The study also displayed “taxonomy of mentoring functions,” which showcased that having these mentors for youth positively impacted their socioemotional growth, cognitive development, and self-identity. This shifts the focus from having youth set up with formal mentors to focusing on building life and networking skills with existing relationships that are already embedded in their everyday routines and environments (Miranda-Chan et al., 2016); this way, there is a

lasting power and impact on the futures of these adolescents. Ultimately, Miranda-Chan et al. (2016) presented that having naturally occurring mentors and leaders accompanying youth throughout their development is not merely just nice to have; it is a crucial aspect that leads to a healthier adulthood, as it is a complex process that is different for every child when transitioning from adolescence to adulthood.

Psychological Factors

Aside from mentorship and volunteerism as crucial pillars in an adolescent's development by helping them build meaningful relationships and helping them become successful in many ways concerning adulthood, it also facilitates emotional intelligence, problem-solving, cognitive growth, and a reduction in risky behaviors, which leads to long-term resilience. These experiences that youth have with mentors and leaders from volunteer organizations activate their reward pathways in the brain that cultivates self-efficacy and teach them emotional regulation skills.

Conducted over two years, the researchers of Bello et al. (2024) utilized a longitudinal study that examined the “validity of a set of social and emotional functioning constructs derived from PYD-SF (Positive Youth Development) short form.” This study involved 369 students who are a part of a special education program and are experiencing mental health diagnoses that are connected to emotional, social, and/or behavioral struggles. By managing the PYD-SF and the social-emotional assets and resilience scale, the researchers used a two-level confirmatory factor analysis to split the within-person variance and between-person differences (Bello et al., 2024). Using this data, an analysis allowed them to track how one child's mental health and coping mechanisms can change over time, rather than comparing these differences to other adolescents; this successfully looked at individual differences and growth from the overall group differences.

Overall, by observing youth development from a PYD perspective and away from traditional medical models, it could reshape the path of vulnerable youth populations by reinforcing protective factors. This can include developing confidence within

themselves, building competency and character, compassion, and communication skills, which all fall under the Positive Youth Development model and framework (Lerner et al., 2005). When both clinical and educational mental health interventions follow this type of model and framework, it can help an adolescent's psychological factors over time. This can allow mental health professionals to design specific interventions around this model that can actively lessen stressors and distress that youth experience to be able to healthily regulate their emotions.

4-H Marianas in the Northern Mariana Islands

4-H Marianas is a youth development program in the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI) designed for ages 5-19, focusing on experiential learning in leadership, agriculture, and civic engagement. Operated through Northern Marianas College, it features “learning by doing” youth development projects and summer camps (e.g., Camp Maga’lahi) aimed at building life skills and community leadership. Their focus areas include 4-H Camp Maga’lahi every summer, leadership development, youth research, CNMI history and culture, and special activities.

4-H Camp Maga’lahi engages youth in promoting environmental awareness and communication through 4-H Marianas, an organization that offers team-building and leadership opportunities to the youth. I reached a point in my life where I realized that creating bonds with people was important because of the support system I wanted to build around me, which led me to start as a member and meet more people. This made me gain confidence to come out of my shell, so I accepted the role of an Overall Lead Counselor for Camp Maga’lahi on Saipan. In this camp, it was a goal of mine to work towards receiving the “Maga’lahi Award,” given to one person who exemplifies outstanding leadership across Saipan, Tinian, and Rota. The meaning behind ‘Maga’lahi’ is the highest chief in the islands’ history, making this award the most prestigious one. I had no experience managing a camp filled with over a hundred children. No one is just born with those skills, so I was thankful for the advisors and counselors I had to help me develop them to fulfill my role. After some time partaking in my position, I understood the beauty of this organization and why I wanted to be a part of it: to show how much of an impact 4-H Marianas could make on the community, and I wanted people to

understand it just as much as I did. I saw the potential every child carried, making me want to shape them into future leaders. With that, I became more ambitious and flew to the islands of Tinian and Rota (also in the Northern Mariana Islands) to develop their youth by facilitating training activities just like I did in Saipan. We sailed with canoes and sang camp songs. Every kid grew excited as the days went by, making each day a bit more emotional because of the happiness it brought them. When I arrived back home, I announced survey results based on the camp we conducted on all three islands, revealing that one hundred percent of campers are willing to come back and contribute to our organization. It was made evident through results that this is because of the interaction with their counselors, who served as role models, their newly established friendships made through activities, and learning that they can make a positive impact within their community. They are now confident in being leaders, showing progress from before and after the camp. During the celebration ceremony of one of the island's most successful camps, it was time for counselors to be awarded for their efforts. We were eager to know who would receive the Maga'lahi Award—"Can I get a drum roll, please?" Everyone was silent from the anticipation. Then, I heard my name. It took me a moment to realize that I was chosen. I was recognized for the impact I made on others, but the real award was the process of it all. From joining a school club to witnessing the outcome of more than a hundred children knowing their potential in impelling a change is my greatest accomplishment. With the contributions of our growing leaders, the world can become a better place under their leadership, guided by my efforts.

After fully understanding the logistical process of youth development organizations, I expanded my efforts into creating a sub-organization called Clover Designs. This program actively encouraged youth to experience unique career paths that

related to business management and ownership, civic engagement, and upcycling fabric and clothing material. The leadership team and I networked with several business companies on the island of Saipan to find sponsorships and raise funds to create even more opportunities for the youth. We were then able to gather several sewing machines and a space for youth to learn new skills and discover passions regarding their career paths.

In 2022, I applied for a full-ride scholarship given by Eastern New Mexico State University to fully fund my travel and lodging expenses at the National 4-H Conference. During that time, I was eligible to be a youth delegate and choose a federal agency roundtable group that matched my passions and interests. The National 4-H Conference is “the flagship youth development opportunity of USDA, hosted by the National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA). By providing opportunities for young people between the ages of 15 and 19 to share their voices with the federal government, this nationally recognized event is developing the next generation of leaders” (National Institute of Food and Agriculture [NIFA], 2026). I was matched to create a presentation with other youth leaders from all over the United States; this was a youth-perspective briefing that we had the honor to present in front of employees and congressional representatives at the United States House of Representatives. This was a life-changing moment for me, as it has set me up for success due to having mentorship and volunteers guide me through the entire process. Being able to contribute any amount of my service and time to create good change for the communities around me has inspired me to become a facilitator for as many roundtable groups as I was able to be a part of every year since then.

Collegiate Facilitator Role:**The White House Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ)**

In 2024, I was inspired to apply for a leadership role in the National 4-H Conference as a collegiate facilitator. Every year, only 18 to 20 college students from all over the country are selected to carry leadership roles to lead a federal agency roundtable group, which also includes youth delegates. During this time, I was selected to lead the White House Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) roundtable. We focused on this discussion question:

“Whether you are growing up in a rural, suburban, or urban community, what idea or ideas do you have to address environmental injustice in your community, and how can the Council on Environmental Quality and the federal government support you in implementing this idea or ideas?”

This question enabled our team to create a meaningful presentation that we would later present at their headquarters in Washington, D.C.

Between October and April, the entire leadership team, including advisors, mentors, state program leaders, and officials of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), collaborated and worked together every week to ensure that the youth would be given the best opportunities and experiences. I poured in over thirty hours of volunteer time and service dedicated to youth from all over the country. They were able to learn about professional development, get connected to other federal agencies for career opportunities, and share their voices with the goal of impacting change in America.

Collegiate Facilitator Role:**National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA)**

In 2025, I was inspired to reapply for a leadership role in the National 4-H Conference as a collegiate facilitator. During this time, I was selected to lead the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) roundtable. We focused on this discussion question:

“Since its inception, NASA has been charged with studying our home planet. The agency’s Earth Science Division has more than two dozen satellites and instruments observing different parts of the Earth system, including land cover, rainfall, air pollution, agriculture, and more. The goal of NASA’s Earth Science to Action strategy is to deliver trusted data, analyses, and tools that inform people’s decisions as they work to address environmental challenges faced by their communities.

A short definition of applied research is the “investigation or experimentation aimed at the discovery and interpretation, along with practical application of new or revised theories or laws.”

Young people are the future decision-makers and beneficiaries of innovations outlined in the first paragraph. What concerns do young people have about our planet, and how do you perceive your relationship with it? How might you conduct an investigation or research plan involving an important aspect of interest to you?

Moreover, how can NASA engage today’s young people in the effort to

study Earth and the effort to involve communities in using Earth science data in their daily lives and decision-making? How do you envision a growing relationship between NASA and your generation?”

This question enabled our team to create a meaningful presentation that we would later present at their headquarters in Washington, D.C.

Between October and April, the entire leadership team, including advisors, mentors, state program leaders, and officials of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), collaborated and worked together every week to ensure that the youth would be given the best opportunities and experiences. I poured in over thirty hours of volunteer time and service dedicated to youth from all over the country. They were able to learn about professional development, get connected to other federal agencies for career opportunities, and share their voices with the goal of impacting change in America. I shared a myriad of testimonies from youth that expressed how this life-changing moment has truly set their futures and career paths up for success, specifically because they were able to realize how impactful and valuable their voices are, especially when there are mentors and volunteer leaders that pave the way for them.

Lead Collegiate Facilitator Role: 20 Federal Agencies

For the 2026 National 4-H Conference, I gained the ambition to apply for the lead role that oversees every collegiate facilitator and roundtable group. I was selected for this role and worked with the entire leadership team, including advisors, mentors, state program leaders, and officials of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) for approximately seven months alongside a partner. Every week, we met virtually to plan out the entire conference that was held in Washington, D.C. in April of 2026. I was able to enhance my leadership, communication, and logistical skills, that has tremendously impacted my growth as a college student and an individual.

Cultivating these groups has showcased that when our society invests funds, resources, and time into programs that are based on a Positive Youth Development framework, it creates profound experiential learning for the youth that unlocks internal self-efficacy, resilience, and the refinement of their social competence, which will then greatly impact future generations to come.

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