

SPRING 2021

SidebySideYouth.org



The mission of Side by Side is to walk with youth impacted by adversity toward a future with connection and meaning.



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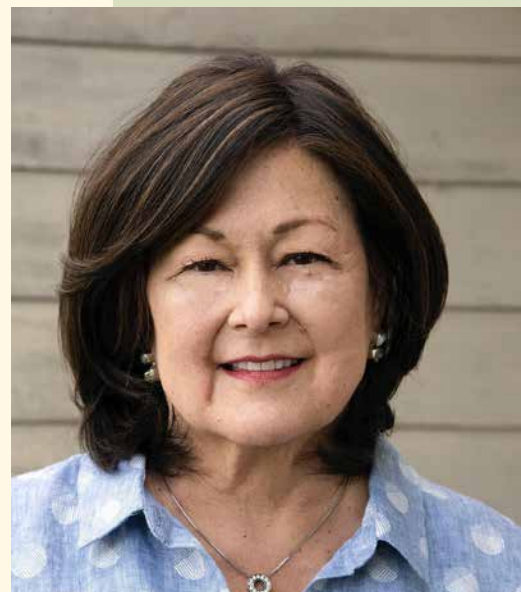
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*On the cover: Community Counseling's
Denisse Mendoza and Hilda Leon with
YouThrive's Vernon Pope-Banks*



LETTER FROM MARY

Dear Friends,

As you may have already heard, on March 9, I announced that I will be retiring as Side by Side's Chief Executive Officer, effective September 1, 2021. It has been such an honor to serve our community. However, after more than 20 years with this organization and 10 years as CEO, it's time to focus more on family and personal interests.

Side by Side's Board of Directors has convened a CEO Succession committee and is putting together a thoughtful, values-based process for selecting Side by Side's next leader. In order to facilitate a smooth transition to new leadership, as you'll note on the facing page, I have appointed Larry Woodland to serve as Chief Program Officer. He will assume responsibility for all program operations of Side by Side, effective immediately. Larry co-chaired our recently-completed strategic planning process and brings an insightful energy to everything he does.

During my tenure, I saw the agency through significant program expansion and a deepening of services for clients and their families across the Bay Area—following a major reconfiguration of services away from residential treatment to community-based service and a merger with Bay Area Youth Centers—and spearheaded a successful rebranding in 2018. Our organization has grown from serving 1,000 youth and their families annually to nearly 2,000 clients a year and revenues have almost doubled. I am proud to say that Side by Side has never been stronger as an organization.

None of the work that our agency does would be possible without the dedication, passion, and resilience that our staff bring each day and this past year has truly brought us closer together. I am so proud of how we rose to the challenges of the pandemic, coming together as an agency, going above and beyond to serve our youth. Our partnerships in the community have strengthened as well (as you'll see on pages 4 and 5) and there is no doubt in my mind that this level of service and dedication will continue throughout this transition process.

I will be working closely with the board to ensure a smooth transition and welcome your calls or emails with any questions you might have. I will miss all of you deeply, but I won't be far! Side by Side will always be in my heart, and an important part of my life.

With my ongoing thanks,

Mary Denton, CEO

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PROGRAM LEADERSHIP CHANGES

LARRY WOODLAND has assumed the role of Chief Program Officer at Side by Side and will oversee all programs for the organization, as well as clinical compliance, program development, and clinical outcomes. Formerly Side by Side's Director of Clinical Practice and North Bay Regional Director, Larry has been responsible for clinical and data outcomes and quality assurance/improvement for the entire agency since 2017, as well as overseeing Community Counseling and YouThrive in Sonoma/Marin and the TAY Space program in Marin. In his over 20 years of practice, he has worked as a therapist, program director, and clinical director in a variety of settings including psychiatric emergency services, HIV/AIDS organizations, and substance abuse programs.

VERNON POPE-BANKS has stepped up to the Program Supervisor role for YouThrive. Through his work in youth development, youth employment, and education, as well as residential treatment facility fields for the past 11 years, Vernon has extensive tools and experiences that have supported his work with YouThrive over the past two years.

Side by Side's Real Alternatives transitional housing program welcomes **AHNJOLIQUE HASKINS** as Program Director. Most recently a Site Manager at West Coast Children's Clinic, Ahnjolique previously managed Side by Side's group home, Esser House, from 2017 to 2019 and began her career as a Youth Specialist in the Real Alternatives program. Her wealth of experience with transition-aged youth and deep knowledge of the foster care system will be assets in her new role.

DENISSE MENDOZA, formerly Program Manager for Side by Side's North Bay Community Counseling program, has been promoted to Program Director, Sonoma/Napa and will oversee North Bay Community Counseling and YouThrive. A Side by Side employee since 2013, Denisse has significantly deepened the impact of our Community Counseling program in Sonoma over the past two years and co-led the creation of SBS's *Raíces Unidas* initiative for Latinx immigrant families.



LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

As previously reported, Side by Side staff and board members have been engaged over the past year in an intensive strategic planning process to identify agency initiatives and areas of focus for 2021 through 2023.

Both internal and external scans of the organization, conversations with supporters and agency partners, and trends facing social welfare organizations in the Bay Area were evaluated. Side by Side's high-quality staff and services, as well as the agency's collaborative nature were identified as significant strengths for the organization. The increasing acuity of youth mental health needs, substance use issues, and need for bilingual services were seen as top concerns for the future and that feedback was incorporated into our planning. Staff from all levels of Side by Side participated in the process at every step, marking the most inclusive planning process ever undertaken by the organization.

After months of consideration and discussion, we were excited to launch our efforts last month. Of particular note, over the next few years, Side by Side will be:

- **Strengthening our continuum of clinical services** by identifying staff and resources that can be shared across regions and programs to help bridge gaps and share knowledge across the agency; laying the groundwork for potential program expansion into other regions; and thoughtfully adding community support services including parent/caregiver related services and community behavioral health education.
- **Continuing our efforts to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion at all levels of the organization**, including the recruitment of new board members who represent the diversity of our client base and regions in which we work, as well as have a passion for the work we do and/or lived experience that mirrors that of our clients.

As our initiatives develop and concrete next steps are taken, we will keep you abreast through our print and electronic communications. Despite all the uncertainties of the past year, Side by Side is looking towards the future with renewed optimism and energy, ready to take on the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead.

THE POWER OF SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS



Above: Jasmine Cervantes, Educational Youth Advocate, Our Space

Many Side by Side programs are intimately engaged with schools. This past year, the power of these vital school partnerships to propel positive change came into sharp focus. Even in normal times, public school counselors are stretched incredibly thin trying to cover their entire student body, and Side by Side provides that extra support.

With 17 Marin and Sonoma schools on its current roster, **COMMUNITY COUNSELING** plays a vital role easing guidance counselors' caseloads and offering bilingual therapists which many schools lack internally. According to Side by Side's Director for Sonoma/Napa, Denisse Mendoza, "The pandemic exacerbated depression and anxiety for our youth, with a higher frequency of suicidal ideation." Community Counseling staff has also stepped up to help schools in new ways during the pandemic, assisting with Medi-Cal billing, taking on case management for parents, and connecting families with financial resources.

YOUTHRIVE supports high-risk students through school-based group sessions and therapeutic outdoor activities. During normal times, YouThrive staff and school therapists work together to refer students to the groups, but with the pandemic, YouThrive Supervisor Vernon Pope-Banks has loosened the referral requirement and expanded his outreach, "I've dropped into health classes to make sure that kids know about our services." In an effort to more fully support schools, YouThrive staff, while preserving client confidentiality, shares with school counselors any themes and trends they see in groups.

Working with the school administration to increase student engagement overall, YouThrive has expanded parent outreach to Spanish-speaking communities at the 9 schools it currently serves. "It's been a great opportunity to work even more closely with our schools," says Pope-Banks.

While **REAL ALTERNATIVES** in the East Bay doesn't formally work with a school district, youth in the program are able to access educational support through Side by Side's relationship with Five Keys Charter School. "Many Real Alternatives youth, by the time

they get to us at age 17 or 18, are behind on their credits and overwhelmed at the prospect of finishing high school," says Rebecca Hathorn, East Bay Regional Director. "Five Keys provides youth an opportunity through independent study to finish school who otherwise might not have."

The focus of **OUR SPACE**, also in Hayward, remains the same as always—to ensure LGBTQIA+ youth feel safe at school. "That focus will never change," says Program Manager Diego Basdeo Fitzgerald. "But what has changed is a lot more engagement from schools. The schools' increased intensity of need invited more collaboration." In addition to offering virtual weekly support groups for LGBTQIA+ students, Our Space's Educational Youth Advocate, Jasmine Cervantes, has been helping school partners create best practices for school communications to ensure they are inclusive and conducting staff trainings around LGBTQIA+ issues. "Anyone from custodians to office administrators, teachers, and counselors can attend," Cervantes says.

According to **IRENE M. HUNT SCHOOL** Director Jolene Yee, the biggest benefit Hunt School has offered schools and school districts during the pandemic is simply to be open. "When school closures first hit, I knew our students would be more challenged than most with distance learning and that we needed to reopen as soon as possible. We welcomed a small cohort of the most impacted students in the summer and opened for all our students in the fall, thanks to a waiver from the county."

Pandemic or not, Hunt School offers an essential service to its 18 school district partners, providing an alternative environment for students with social/emotional challenges who are struggling in their traditional schools. All incoming students are referred to the Hunt School with an Individualized Education Program (IEP) plan that contains specific academic and behavioral goals. Yee says, "We identify what's not allowing the student to be successful in a traditional setting and bring that to our work with each student." Yee says that although Hunt's census has not changed, the number of IEP meetings and amendments to those plans has quadrupled during COVID because the pandemic revealed so many concerns for families.

"For many students, school has been a respite from tumultuous home lives. Now, with the pandemic and school closures, the country is facing a mental health crisis with record rates of anxiety, depression, and suicide among children. Young people are anxious about their families losing jobs and facing health problems. Side by Side provides invaluable tools and coping mechanisms to help these vulnerable youth face unknown futures."

— Yali Lincroft, Walter S. Johnson Foundation

At the end of a student's Hunt journey, staff meet with the student's caregivers, teachers, specialists, and therapists from the school district to put together an exit plan. "It's a very collaborative meeting, and a team decision as to whether the student is ready to re-enter public school," says Assistant Director of Hunt's Behavior Program, Kevin Abaya. Assistant Director of Academics Anne-Marie Jess adds, "We articulate specific recommendations to ease the transition, and we're always available to our school partners for consultations as needed. We consider ourselves part of their team."

Echoing sentiments shared by his Side by Side colleagues, Our Space's Basdeo Fitzgerald says he is inspired by the openness schools bring to the table, in addition to their clear dedication to students. "Our partners keep their obligation to the young person at the center of their work and are committed to providing whatever is needed to remove barriers. That's how we do things at Side by Side, and that's why we work so well together."

"We feel very lucky to partner with Our Space! Their peer support groups and educator trainings build our capacity to support our queer and trans youth. We appreciate their expertise in helping us grow deeper shared understandings as we build our best practices toolkit to support our LGBTQIA+ youth and families."

— **Hidie Reed**, Hayward Unified School District



Above: Petaluma City School District's Nikki Jackson with Petaluma High Assistant Principals Erin Dinday and Giovanni Napoli

PETALUMA CITY SCHOOLS: PARTNERING FOR MEANINGFUL IMPACT

With roughly 50% of students in Petaluma City School District's 15 schools using mental health services, Side by Side's YouThrive and Community Counseling programs play a critical role for the district.

While Nikki Jackson, District Guidance Coordinator, raves about the YouThrive group curriculum, she says the greatest impact YouThrive brings to her schools is the staff's ability to connect with students. Petaluma High School Assistant Principals Erin Dinday and Giovanni Napoli agree. "YouThrive staff bring real life experience and connect with students in a way that our teachers and administrators can't," Napoli says. "What's more," add Jackson, "they have a way of holding students accountable, calling them out on their behavior, and inspiring change."

Dinday also appreciates the passion Side by Side staff has for helping youth. "They do whatever is needed, and do it willingly and enthusiastically," she says. "Watching them go the extra mile helps me know how authentic the programs are."

At Petaluma High School, YouThrive helped to educate and engage Spanish-speaking parents, first presenting in Spanish about various school services and programs to the school's ELAC (English Learner Advisory Committee) group, then leading a parent workshop with Community Counseling focused on communicating with teenagers. "To be able to foster such open discussions in their native language was truly a gift," says Dinday. The partnership with YouThrive and Petaluma-based gym CrossFit Sav-Up is also appreciated. "Parents were so excited to have an opportunity for their kids to get some physical activity during a year when sports and fitness programs shut down due to COVID-19," Jackson says.

At the district level, Jackson has relied on Side by Side more than ever this past year. In addition to helping with caseloads, Community Counseling staff assisted with billing challenges that were preventing some students from receiving Medi-Cal-covered mental health services. "Our bandwidth is so stretched," she says, "but families needed help with the complicated paperwork. Now these students are now getting the services they so desperately need."

YouThrive also helps school staff better understand their students. "We were having an issue with gangs at one of our high schools," Jackson explains. "It was disruptive to campus life, but we did not understand gang culture or know how to deal with it. YouThrive taught us what to watch for."

Dinday, Napoli and Jackson all agree that the excellent communication from YouThrive and Community Counseling staff, combined with mutual trust built over the years and a student-first approach has created a collaborative and successful partnership. "We come together as a team and figure out how best to help each individual student," says Dinday. "It takes more time and dedication, but the impact is more meaningful."



CLIENT & PROVIDER PROFILE

YouThrive Supervisor Vernon Pope-Banks met Petaluma High School 10th grader Chris in December 2020 after a presentation at the school. Chris connected with Vernon the very next day and has been attending both YouThrive group sessions and weekly workouts with YouThrive partner CrossFit Sav-Up ever since.

With Chris

Side by Side: What do you get out of being a YouThrive member?

Chris: I relocated to Petaluma from Mexico only a week before online school started in the fall, so I didn't have an opportunity to meet other students. When I heard about the free CrossFit Sav-Up program YouThrive offers, it sounded like a great opportunity to get outside and get fit, while being around other kids my age. The workouts are what got me interested in YouThrive, but I have also been attending the groups, and I really enjoy them.

SBS: What have you learned from Vernon?

Chris: Vernon teaches us being accountable, and how to be more involved in our own lives. I'm more responsible with my homework and chores, and it helps me want to get more things done during the day and plan out my goals. It's motivating!

SBS: What has been most challenging about this year?

Chris: The most challenging things have been spending so much time in the house and not having a chance to meet other kids. I am really looking forward to when I can go on campus and make friends in person.

SBS: What are your dreams for the future?

Chris: When I turn 18, I want to get my contractor's license so I can go into business with my dad. I really enjoy working with him, being outside, and using my hands.

With Vernon

Side by Side: How would you describe Chris?

Vernon: Chris is unassuming but also has a quiet confidence about him. He does not miss a beat – he asks questions and soaks in all of the information being offered to him. He is a doer. Chris is motivated by the opportunities available to him.

SBS: What have you learned from Chris?

Vernon: Chris modeled the power of showing up for me. The Petaluma High School group has "veterans" who have been with me for up to four semesters. Chris just got here, but he is already leading that pack! He comes, he participates, he contributes. He is extremely dedicated.

SBS: How do you feel YouThrive has helped Chris?

Vernon: The Sav-Up workouts get Chris out of the house! I think knowing he is taking charge of his life makes him feel just as invigorated as the physical exercise. The group sessions give him an opportunity and outlet to open up his mind to new ideas. My hope for Chris is that he gets everything he desires in life, including his contracting dream!

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DONOR PROFILE: JESSAMY BARKER

Tell me about how you first learned of Side by Side and the Our Space program?

I heard about your work when your Program Manager Diego shared a link in an LGBTQIA+ Facebook group I'm a member of. I'm a bisexual, genderqueer person from England, who moved to Mountain View five years ago. I grew up reading about the Bay Area in *Tales of the City* by Armistead Maupin, but never expected to live here. I'm always looking for community and that's why I joined the Facebook group. When I saw the reference to Side by Side's work with Our Space, it jumped out as an opportunity to help less fortunate members of a community I love.

What resonates with you about the organization and/or our LGBTQIA+ services for youth?

I was a vulnerable kid. Growing up in the North of England in the '80s and '90s, school was a very unsafe place where it was illegal for teachers to 'promote homosexuality' in schools. This bigotry meant sexuality beyond heterosexual couldn't be included in the curriculum. I was struggling with mental illness and self-harm long before I came out at 14 as bisexual. My parents cared deeply, but were unequipped emotionally to help due to their own traumatic lives. We had money and socialized health care though. It's very clear to me now that my problems would have been compounded by poverty and inaccessible private health insurance, or by not being white in a world where white supremacy is built into systems. This knowledge motivates me to reach out to support kids experiencing what I went through or worse.

In addition to supporting Side by Side, are there other ways that you find yourself giving back to the community you live in?

I have Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, also known as ME. Over the last decade, this invisible illness has limited me in various ways, and I'm currently house bound and seriously disabled. However, I was able to attend SF - East Bay Bicon last year before the pandemic, and hope to continue to be able to support the creation of bisexual spaces in the

future. I first attended a bisexual specific event in my early 20s and found it enormously validating - it changed my life. Bisexuals face ignorance from within the LGBTQIA+ community, and despite queer content in the media being at an amazing all-time high, bisexual erasure remains significant.

What do you see as some of the biggest challenges facing young people today? And especially those in the LGBTQIA+ community?

The most basic needs of many young people are not met, and a lot of that can't be fixed without huge societal change. However, I inevitably focus on what I needed most when young, which was emotionally safe space. I didn't have that and twenty years later the mental and physical scars remain. Safe means that your feelings are validated and you're not told you're wrong to have them. If you're a young person who doesn't fit 'the norm' then the world consistently informs you of this fact. For me, this bred shame. For others, it's anger or sadness. There's a reason our community has significantly more members with depression and anxiety disorders. Forty percent of transgender people have attempted suicide in their lifetime - nearly 9 times the overall rate in the United States. This is the reality for LGBTQIA+ young people. Giving them support in accessing services and safe spaces is essential.

What prompted you to become a monthly supporter?

One reason: 'Approximately 75% of Our Space members are youth of color.' It seems like every LGBTQIA+ space I've ever been in, whether in London or the Bay Area, has been majority white. I want that to change.

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