STAY Tuned Podcast Episode 13 - Salsa Dancing, a Youth Advisory Board and Peer Support for Mental Health

This episode was developed by our new Center for Community Inclusion and Reflective Collaborative (The CIRC Center).

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**Emily:** Welcome back to Stay Tuned, Supporting Transition Age Youth. This podcast is brought to you by the Transitions to Adulthood Center for Research at UMass Chan Medical School, Department of Psychiatry, and in partnership with our research sponsor, the National Institute for Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research.

I'm your co-host, Emily, and Mei isn't here today, but we're joined by our lovely guest, Josh. Um, Josh, I don't know if you want to introduce yourself really quick?

**Josh:** Absolutely. Hello, everyone. My name is Joshua Calerino, and I use he, him pronouns, and I am from Miami, Florida.

**Emily:** Great. Thank you, Josh. So, we can just jump right into it, I guess.

Um, you're kind of an exciting guest for us because you're also part of our, youth advisory board, and so I guess [00:01:00] first we kind of wanted to just touch on, like, your own lived mental health experience. Can you talk about how you've used your lived mental health experience to advocate for others and help give them a voice?

**Josh:** I absolutely can. So, I guess to begin, it was during high school. So, the way that I would describe it is, uh, before high school, I was going through life and I was, doing well, so to speak.

Uh, but once I got to high school, it was almost like something dawned on me. As if all the traumas that I had experienced had all come crashing down simultaneously, all at once. And that sort of sent me into a spiral. Going out of control, doing behaviors that I did not want to be doing.

Just not being the person that I really wanted to be, and I felt like I needed a semblance of control. And to that end, I started to seek out services, and I started to seek out what could help, what could make me better, what would do me [00:02:00] good, things like that. And I just wasn't able to find that within my community up and until I found, uh, what was a local Youth Move Chapter back then, which would have been Youth MOVE Miami.

And there I found a semblance of a voice within myself. And there I learned that our voices, the voices of individuals who are receiving services, the voices of youth, Specifically, we're voices that could be informed and be empowered to advocate not only for ourselves as youth, but also for the youth around us for our community and to make the system of care better, more effective and more helpful.

And starting then what I recall is, I remember initially I was a bit confused about it. I didn't fully understand the system of care, and I didn't fully understand what I was being asked, but I was asked to go to evaluation and program [00:03:00] subcommittee meetings for a local System of Care grant.

Within that local System of Care grant, um, I didn't understand What was going on, but luckily for me, there was a youth coordinator there, and the youth coordinator, she was really able to sort of sit me down, explain to me what was being asked, work with me. And slowly but surely going over, all of these things continuously, uh, attending the events that were happening at this agency.

And then by extension going to those meetings, I was able to build that understanding and then craft a voice around my experience with the system of care, my experience with receiving services. And from there, I was able to go to those tables and say, you're doing this, this, this, this, and this, and all of these things are either not effective,

could be better, or just straight up bad. And from there, I had grown into doing that more and more. Advocating at other agencies, going to events, [00:04:00] speaking, becoming a part of the board of directors for Youth MOVE National, becoming the board president, speaking at conferences, providing insights into the work that I was doing in Miami, changing the system of care.

So, all of these things are little experiences that I've used to help advocate and provide voice. And one of the things that I try and do very much is not only to use my voice to share, but also to promote other youth, to promote other consumers, so to speak, to also share their voices, because my experience is just one. And one of the things that I have learned, and this is actually, uh, something that was told to me once by Gary Blau, if anyone recognizes that name from SAMHSA, (www.Samshsa. gov) but I, I had gone up and I remember I had asked, I said, hey, I have all of these great ideas. I want to do this, that, and the other. And I was told that that's amazing. Uh, and I love the work that you're doing, but can you get more than just you to say that? [00:05:00] Can you get your community to say that?

Can you get some more youth to say that? So, it's very much about offering them my voice and my lived experience, but it's also about empowering the voices of the people in my community as well.

**Emily:** That's great. That's yeah, that's amazing that you were able to like, you know, take something that was helpful for you, but you didn't fully understand it and then get that knowledge about it and understand it yourself and then also go and help other people understand that these services are out there and like, you know, helping your community, um, find that voice. I think that's really admirable. And it's great that you've been able to, you know, move up in that field and have such an impact.

**Josh:** Thank you. I appreciate it.

**Emily:** Yeah, so I know that you're also part of our YAB, and that you've done other peer work and been involved with other ways to engage your community. So, can you tell us a little bit more about that and what it's been like engaging with your community in that way?

**Josh:** Yeah, absolutely. And I just want to take, uh, almost a [00:06:00] quick sort of tangent to the side there about being on the YAB. But one of the ways that I advocate as well is being part of the YAB. For those who don't know, that's the Youth Advisory Board. Um, and being a part of the YAB is really great. One of the things that I very much appreciate is that I guess the most frank way to say this is that they allow us to be honest.

And what I mean to say is there have been some experiences I've had where you may be bringing some youth to advocate, and that's great, we love that. But then you actually get there and you start advocating, and then it dawns on you midway through, it's like, they don't care at all about what I'm saying.

They just want me to be here so that they could say that I was here, right? So, on Roger Hart's ladder of youth involvement, right, that'd be like tokenism or even manipulation. But at the Youth Advisory Board, they really want our feedback. They really take it into account. And that is something that I think is exceedingly valuable.[00:07:00]

And to answer the question, how has being a part of the YAB helped me engage in my community, is that they bring research to us. Or they bring ideas to us. Or they bring things to the table that are currently being potentially implemented into the community. Plans to be implemented to shape and change and affect people's lives and we're able to sit down and say, 'Um, I think this is amazing.'

Or, if it's not amazing, we could say 'this isn't great.' And these are all the adjustments that you can make to ideally make it better, make it more effective. Or you know I don't I don't believe this has happened at least not when I’ve been around, we could potentially say something like, 'you have to scrap this whole idea.' Not that it's occurred, but the point here is that we're able to say that and being part of the YAB and being able to see this sort of up-and-coming work.

The [00:08:00] cutting edge, essentially, of the things that they're bringing up to us are things that allow me to go into my own work, go into my own community, into my system of care, and I can pitch these things. I can bring up these ideas. I can develop new thoughts and ideas around the ideas of mental health,

around the ideas of peer support. And that level of engagement is not something that I think I would be able to do otherwise, because I wouldn't have these things brought to me, right? Um, the work oftentimes can be very siloed. The work that's happening in Florida is very different than the work that's happening in New York or very different than what's happening in California.

So being able to, uh, have this research, these ideas, these, whatever it might be brought to us from all these different places, or rather from more specifically from all these different people can be really helpful to that end. So that's how it's helped me engage in my community.

**Emily:** Yeah, thank you for that input. Cause I know like, for [00:09:00] me too, kind of on the opposite side of it working at UMass Chan, I am on a lot of projects where we have brought stuff to the YAB to, like, get your feedback, um, and that's always something that's, highly influential

to us and all our projects, at least the projects that I've been on, thankfully. I can see that we really do value the YAB's input, which is great. Because, honestly, I remember when I first started working here and I heard about the YAB I was kind of having a little bit of those doubts too where I was like

is this kind of just like a tokenism thing, you know? And then seeing that it actually has been helpful. Hearing your input saying that it's helpful in your end, too. I think that's really amazing. And I think it can be easy for organizations to just kind of fall back on that where it's like, yes, we have a Youth Advisory Board, but it's kind of more for show in a way.

Um, so yeah, I'm, I'm glad that, you know, you also feel that this is impactful for our work because on my end, I feel like I've seen a [00:10:00] lot of that. I feel like there have been lots of times where we've brought something to the YAB, and we get all this great input where it's like, oh, we didn't even think about any of this stuff, and now we feel much better about the project moving forward.

So that's been really great.

**Josh:** I, yeah, I agree wholeheartedly. And I would also add something that I was, I was thinking about as you were speaking was also the YAB brings in youth from a lot of different places and a lot of different backgrounds. So, it's not just the content that's being brought to us, but it's also the rapport and camaraderie that we build up with our fellow YAB members.

Some of which I knew before, uh, from the YAB, and some of which are brand new that I only met because they've joined the YAB. And being able to, again, have keen insights, not just from myself, but from other youth, uh, really just, I think, elevates the, the entire work that we're doing. The ideas that I have can then be compounded by the ideas that [00:11:00] one of the other members had, which can then grow into something larger from there as well.

So, there's a lot going on.

**Emily:** Yeah, yeah, and that's a great way to like build that sense of community too and like, you know, be involved with something that matters to you and you know that it also matters to the other people involved. I think that's really great. So, going off of that, um, I was wondering, do you participate in your community in other ways? I know you sort of, you've mentioned like Youth MOVE, and how has that impacted your own mental health? And also, is there anything about your work that has surprised you in any way?

**Josh:** Yeah, so to answer the question, do I participate in my community in other ways? Yes, I absolutely do. As you mentioned, Youth MOVE is a big part and has been a big part of my life. From the local chapter level to the board level, to the staff level. Um, all of those things. And I would say, other ways that I participate in my communities is that I am a certified recovery peer [00:12:00] specialist.

So, there are times where I'm able to go and offer peer services where they may be needed within my community. And, uh, this is going to seem, I guess maybe the best word would be, a little weird, maybe a little obtuse, but other ways that I participate in my community is through dance.

So, a little bit of backstory on me, the reason why I actually joined a local Youth MOVE chapter, being Youth MOVE Miami, was that this was back in high school. I was at lunch, and I was sitting there, and I was talking to a friend of mine, her name is Anna, Anna's very nice, and I was I was mentioning how I wanted to get back into dance again to find that, just find something to find that semblance of control or just like an outlet or somewhere to vent.

And she just so happened to be going to a salsa class that was hosted and done by Youth MOVE Miami. And it was the combination of, yes, uh, you [00:13:00] know, being that advocate and getting empowered and all that. But when it first started, it was just 'I want to go dance right now.' Like dancing would really help me out.

So, one of the ways that I participate in my community is sometimes I'll do like a little, a little dance class to get people out of their heads or get them into their bodies or just have a place to go where it will be safe, and it will be nice to be. And for how that has impacted my mental health is that one of my wellness tools, so to speak, can be to go out

and dance. Go out and be in the community, go out to a random event that might be happening to dance with others. And that sense of community, I mean that true sense of community, not just in the word, but having somewhere to go, having a group of people that you know and recognize you can say hello to, all of that can really have an effect on your mental health.

And one way that I do that is through [00:14:00] dance, but there are tons of ways to do that. Just having a support group to go to, having a network of supports, of friends, of family members, of places to go, things like that. All the little things that we do in our community, I think oftentimes by many people, Sort of go on unnoticed, but ways that we participate in our community can also just be supporting a local business, going out to like a restaurant to eat, that Starbucks barista, who's really cool.

Uh, all of those little things are ways that we participate in my community. And I think sometimes it's about enjoying the little things. And I think that's what has surprised me and impacted my mental health is that oftentimes I always had these grandiose ideas of 'I gotta change the system of care,' 'I gotta tear it all down and build it back up again,' but sometimes just having a really solid conversation with a friend of yours

can go a long, a long way. Um, providing peer support has [00:15:00] allowed me to become a really good listener. Providing peer support has made me what I mean, I like to think I don't want to toot my own horn or anything here, but I believe, uh, and have been told by some people that it's made me a good conversationalist and it's those small things, those small conversations, those little moments, those

Jokes that get said when we're in the YAB, uh, all of those things I think are what have really built my mental health and made me do better and be better and participate in my community in all the ways that I participate. Whether that's dancing salsa and having a good time or going out and volunteering my time to provide peer support to others who might need it.

**Emily:** I think that's amazing. And yeah, I feel like you hit on some really important points there. Um, one being that, you know, doing something like dance or something more creative and more holistic. I feel like, so [00:16:00] often when we do think about mental health, we think about just therapy or like, you know, the more sort of clinical side of things, but it is important to remember that there are other ways that you can take care of your mental health. And some of them, like dance, it's like you're also taking care of your physical health at the same time. And building that sense of community in that way is also really important.

So, I'm glad that you brought that up, too, because dance is a great way to have that sort of outlet and find that sort of community and also that self-expression. Um, and, like, there are even, forms of therapy that implement things like dance and art and, like, the more expressive therapies.

So that's very real. Like, you're touching on a really good point there where it is very impactful on mental health and also community building. And like you said too, sometimes it is just the small things, you know? Like having a conversation with a friend or, visiting a coffee shop, or a restaurant, or a [00:17:00] small business. And just doing things to put yourself out there and see what else is out in the world and it's not just like you feeling, trapped in your mind or whatever it is, you know? I feel like those are really important things to note as well, with this conversation, because it's not just like, oh you have to join a youth advisory board, or you have to be a peer supporter or whatever.

Like those things are amazing too, but not everyone is interested in that or not everyone can do that. But there are other ways that people can still take care of themselves, and take care of the other people around them that aren't strictly like what you would think of as mental health

related. So, I think it's great that you brought that up.

**Josh:** Yeah, I, I absolutely agree. And one thing that I do is the salsa dancing. Um, and one thing that I do is providing the peer support. But it can be anything. It can be you go to the gym. It can be you like to go on walks. It could be gardening.

Uh, there's no end to, to what that thing or things, because it could be more than [00:18:00] one, can be. And I think that's almost a revelation that I had. Clinical work, going to therapy, seeing a psychiatrist, right, getting peer support, all of those things are amazing. No reason why we can't do those things.

But there's also no reason why we can't use these wellness tools or use these activities, whatever you might want to call them, to provide enhancement to that. I don't just need to go to therapy, maybe I can also go dancing, or also go gardening, or also go to the gym. Or we can potentially, right, because we're so flexible and this looks so different for many people, it can also just be that maybe I don't need the therapy right now, I could go to it later, and I can just go to the gym, right?

It's about this mixing and matching that I think people, people view mental health in a very sort of linear way. It's like this is how you get better. Like, you have to do exactly these things. But truly, when we explore ourselves and we explore our own minds, [00:19:00] that's where those surprises happen, right?

When we do that work.

**Emily:** Yeah, you use the word 'enhancement,' which I really liked. It's like, yeah, we can go to therapy, and therapy is so important and amazing. But then there are also other ways that you can do that sort of introspection. And I think, you know, like hobbies and having things that

bring you that sort of joy and like make you feel fulfilled. That's just as important if not more important in some ways than going to your psychiatrist or whatever it is. You need that balance, you know, and it's important to explore those different things in order to also find yourself and then If you're doing things that make you happier, then you'll feel happier. And you know, I mean, of course not just as simple as that but like that is definitely a really important piece of the puzzle that I feel like we don't always put as much value on those types of things as we probably should, you know?

**Josh:** Yeah, absolutely. It, uh, reminds me a bit of, it's a quote from, a sci fi podcast, I believe. I might be wrong; I think it was Marsfall. I listen to that podcast, so it's cool to be here at this [00:20:00] podcast. I forgot what podcast it was, but the, the point of it is that there was an argument happening in this story between like a brother and a sister, and the sister is a stand-up comic, and the brother said to her, 'you gotta stop doing this.' And she says, 'I do this for a living,' and his response is, 'oh, I didn't know you were making any money off of this.' And her response is, 'no, I don't make money off of this, I do this to live.'

**Emily:** Yeah, that's great. Right, it's like what types of things are making your life worthwhile? Like what makes you feel excited to, to be alive really is what is at the heart of it.

**Josh:** Absolutely.

**Emily:** So, yeah, that's kind of a good segue into our last question, honestly. Because I was wondering, since you are in this field and you've seen so many different sides of it,

in your opinion, what areas of community participation have you noticed are missing or need more growth in order to better be able to support the mental health of young [00:21:00] adults, especially young adults from disadvantaged backgrounds?

**Josh:** This is a great question. And frankly, up until maybe this exact moment, I didn't know that I had an answer to it.

So, for what areas of community participation I think I've noticed are missing is, in a lot of ways, I think it is, research involved with the community. So, to provide some perspective on what I mean by that, a good example would be like, the YAB, right? Oftentimes we're brought, you know, maybe some questions that a researcher is going to use to ask you to get some information. And what's really important, I think oftentimes something's overlooked, uh, in research, and again, just, just for sake of conversation, I'm not a researcher, I didn't go to school for research, but I've been a part of research a number of times. And something that I have found is that it's not just about asking questions,

it is about asking the right question. And not just from the [00:22:00] perspective of the researcher, but if I'm being asked a question, I need to understand what answer the researcher is looking for. Like, me as a youth, if you're asking me a question, I need to understand that question and I need to be given the context and the understanding and the ability to answer the question properly to make sure that the research that's being, you know, gathered from my answer is of value and, and makes sense.

And oftentimes I feel like we don't include youth voice in a lot of these questions. In the crafting of the question. There have been times on the YAB where a researcher will bring us a question. It's like the question is good, but I think if we phrase it in this way instead, it would make more sense not to me as a researcher, but if I were the youth receiving the question, this would make more sense.

So, something that I think is missing in the community participation is the community being involved in the [00:23:00] research that is being brought out. I've done some research around what's called, uh, mad people's history.

Um, and essentially, the bare bones for it is, in history, when it comes to things like the behavioral health system, specifically mental health, um, the perspective has always come from the psychologists, right? The scientists, the psychiatrists, things like that.

But it has never really come from the people who have the diagnoses. Or the people who are going through the struggles and that perspective, that context is oftentimes missing, right? We're being inspected, but we're not providing perspective. And I think that specifically affects those from historically marginalized and historically disadvantaged backgrounds. That goes double for someone who might be African American or Black, or double for [00:24:00] someone who might be Asian or You know, insert disadvantaged background here, LGBT QIA plus like there, I mean, there's so, so many. And I think that is a huge thing that we're just missing because it can be difficult to approach those groups because of that history, right?

Historically, disadvantaged groups have had awful, awful things happen to them. A prime example could be the Tuskegee syphilis experiments, right? It's hard to say, 'hey, come and be a part of this research, we're not gonna do anything bad to you,' when there's a prime example of one of the most awful things happening to this particular group.

So, I think in the areas of what can be done is, you know, for anyone who might be listening, might be doing some research it can be good to include those disadvantaged backgrounds in that research. In the work that you are doing. Or even in the [00:25:00] researchers themselves, right? It can be important for people who are being asked questions, or as a youth, it can be important to me to have someone who looks like me, who has a similar background to me, maybe similar diagnosis, who sounds like me, right?

All of these things can be important. Representation matters. And we want to get representations from those who actually represent, you know, what is being discussed.

**Emily:** I completely agree. Thank you for saying all that. And I think it is important too that you touched on, you know, historically like especially in this field, in psychology, historically, we have not been very inclusive.

I read a book last semester for one of my classes that was sort of touching on it was kind of going into, like, the history of psychology research. And I think it was in, like, the 1800s, I believe, um, with, like, women who were, you know, [00:26:00] diagnosed with quote unquote hysteria. And then also combat veterans like from World War one who were diagnosed with quote unquote shell shock, you know? The research that's done on these diagnoses and mental health in general how it's been like really severely impacted by the people doing the research, you know? Like, it was all these rich, well educated,

white men, you know, and it's like, of course, if they're asking questions through their lens, through like their own experience, it's not actually going to encompass the people, like, the people's experience that they're trying to convey. Um, and then, like, it was talking about how, this is like kind of a tangent but like not really but like he was talking about how like for Freud, for example, like how earlier in his career he was very into trying to like do this research for women. And trying to better understand what they were calling hysteria, and, like, getting their actual perspective. [00:27:00] And then he took his research to the board, which was other, you know, rich white men, and they were kind of just saying, like, no. It was kind of, like, if we put out this research, then we're sort of, um, signaling that there's a more societal, deep-rooted problem that's making us realize that women are being treated unfairly and like, you know, all that type of stuff.

And so, then Freud kind of just did like a whole 180 in his research. And his whole field sort of like switched because of that. And then he started discounting all these women's stories. And we see this in so many other areas too, with other marginalized groups.

And then especially like for researchers, it's important to tailor those questions and the topics to the people that you're asking them. Otherwise, you're just kind of confirming what you already know or what you're trying to, to get from that conversation and not actually something authentic.

**Josh:** Yeah. Part of what I was saying, uh, you, you touched upon, right? It's like, you know, old, rich white [00:28:00] guy. And there's nothing wrong with being old or rich or nothing wrong with being white, but historically speaking that has, you know, for those disadvantaged backgrounds cause issues. I think a prime example, to provide a name to it, was

Drapedomania, right? That supposed mental illness that was essentially just hypothesized to cause enslaved African Americans to flee captivity. So, essentially, the perspective there was, 'man, we don't like that all these slaves don't like being slaves. There's gotta be a reason why they're leaving.

It can't be that they're slaves. It's gotta be that there's something wrong with them.' You put that out into the community, and then everyone else is like, 'that makes sense to me!' And they just roll with that forever. And it's these things that don't just go away, right? That history exists and affects, and it is pervasive for lifetimes.

You know? Somebody's great grandpa was like, maybe that guy. So, that is what is important to, [00:29:00] to keep perspective on. And I think another thing that might be missing in our community is people to understand that history. When it comes to people who have these historically marginalized backgrounds, it can be important to understand that there is a whole story there, a whole history there, from their perspective. Where things weren't as convenient, or things were exceedingly difficult, or things were awful.

For only the fact that they looked different. And I think that's something that I've also mentioned before in other discussions I've had. Is that this is not to say, of course, that those who, don't come from a background like my own, or don't have a background of being white, or potentially being rich, right, because there's a lot of ways that, it's intersectional.

So, there's a whole other conversation to be had here. But, uh, the long and short of it is that when it comes to these issues, and not to say that you've not had a difficult life or that you've never struggled [00:30:00] before, but the perspective is that you've never struggled specifically and solely because of, say, the color of your skin.

**Emily:** Yeah. That's a good note because I think a lot of people like when they do hear things like this, they tend to like immediately get defensive, but it's like, okay, well, we're not specifically talking about you, you know, it's not like a personal attack.

This is a societal issue and historical, generational trauma coming in here. Um, and yeah, like you were saying, there are so many people's histories that are just overwritten or ignored. And so, the least we can do at this point is actually listen to people and their stories and try to get that history now instead of just being like, oh, well, we don't have anything in, like, the history books or whatever, in the research from the past, so I guess it just doesn't exist. You know, it's like, okay, well, let's at least start trying to repair that now moving forward instead of just continuing to stay in that cycle of ignorance and [00:31:00] repression. It's like, okay, people have like people have stories, people have history, and we're just not paying attention to it.

But, I mean, no time like the present, like we might as well start now with research that's currently going on. So, I think it's good that you brought that up.

All right, well, I feel like we covered a lot of great stuff. I just really want to thank you for, for being on and for sharing all of your perspective on your work in Youth MOVE and in the YAB and just your own personal experience.

Thank you for being open with all of that.

**Josh:** Yeah, absolutely. Thanks for having me. Thanks for inviting me.

**Emily:** Yeah, of course.

If you would like to contact us, you can email us at STAYTuned@umassmed.Edu and check out the TransitionsACR website at https://www.umassmed.edu/TransitionsACR/. Thanks for being here and be sure to stay tuned for next time. The contents of this podcast were developed under grants from the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation [00:32:00] Research.

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