

TAG Final Report
April, 2025
Creating our Mental Health Research Project

PART ONE

THE TEAM

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THE PROJECT

This project was a joy from beginning to end —actually, a pause to write this report, as the project continues. We thank the Taos Institute, through its grant opportunity, for giving us the idea to design and implement participatory research.

This research was an opportunity for the East Side Institute (Institute) to continue its ongoing exploration of how lay people, particularly those in poor communities, understand and relate to individualized, medical model conceptions and practices of “mental health” and “mental illness” (See “Diagnosis: A Thousand People Speak Out,” Holzman and Genn, 2018). The Creating our Mental Health (COMH) workshops—the focus of the current project—grew directly out of that initial exploration, and among its initial participants were some whom we had surveyed on the streets of Harlem and Brooklyn NY.

The COMH workshops have continued (while transforming) for nearly ten years. The TAG led us to create and conduct interviews of participants in COMH group workshops about their experiences of the groups and the impact on their lives. We wanted COMH facilitators and participants to together explore what is meaningful and developmental about the group activity. Participants are always enthusiastic, but their comments are brief. We wanted to involve them in a slower and deeper reflection on how their involvement has impacted their understandings of mental health in general and personally, and in what ways the collective meaning making of these creative and improvisational conversations might be emotionally and socially helpful to them.

The interviews were designed, conducted and analyzed by 3 participant researchers who worked closely with Holzman, Wootten and the facilitators. The TAG grant provided a stipend for the participant researchers.

Creating Our Mental Health—History and Evolution

Creating our Mental Health (COMH) is an initiative of the Institute. Its roots are in the practice of social therapy, developed 50 years ago, and the social therapeutic methodology that has broadened and evolved over the decades (see Holzman, 2020).

In all its forms, social therapeutic practice is designed to allow people to experience the socialness of their emotional lives. It is based on the working assumption that emotions, like everything human (beyond the strictly biological), are socially/historically constructed, and because they are socially constructed, they can be socially *re*-constructed. The reconstruction of emotionality is not an individual matter. It is generated in the social activity of creating groups together. Rather than being centered on the individual and the analytical/diagnostic, social therapeutics is centered on the group and is poetic/emergent. It is not about cure; it is about emotional growth/development.

COMH's methodological approach and sociological/political concerns have deep roots in the history of the Institute and social therapy. Like all forms of social therapeutics, COMH is concerned with involving people, the more diverse the better, in new kinds of conversations. Performance, improvisation, and playfulness are key to the social therapeutic method of group building. COMH focuses on the process of building group environments that allow people to have new kinds of conversations on the broad topic of emotionality/mental health. COMH's task is to unleash collective and creative *meaning making*, finding new ways of understanding and relating to “mental health,” “mental illness,” psychiatric diagnoses, and emotionality.

In Person Group Building

COMH began in 2015 as one of the many offerings—classes, workshops, conversations and performances—of University X (UX), one of the organizations and activities generated within the Institute's grassroots network. UX referred to itself as “a school of continuing development.” It was open to all regardless of educational background. There were no grades, degrees or certificates and all the teachers/facilitators were volunteers. The project was made possible by the students and teachers who organized it.

For the most part, UX held its classes and workshops on West 42nd Street in Manhattan, at the cultural and development center of the All Stars Project (ASP), another group in the network, which has been supporting developmental, performance-based youth programs in the poorest communities of NYC (and beyond) since the 1980s. Like all UX's offerings, COMH conversations were free and drew at least 25 people to each monthly conversation. The conversational “prompt” was how the community (whether they understood that to be family, neighborhood, church, poor people in general, or other) could “create our mental health.” COMH was not conceived of or promoted (nor did it function as) a therapy group in any traditional sense, although many participants immediately responded to the experience as being helpful emotionally. The original facilitators were Rachel Mickenberg, LCSW, and Hugh Polk, MD, psychiatrist, both with decades of experience as social therapists and members of the East Side Institute faculty. They shepherded the COMH conversations through its five years at UX.

COMH Online

When the pandemic began in 2020, COMH pivoted online via Zoom and Harlem physician, poet, and long-time community leader, Dr. Jessie Fields was added to the facilitation team. These online monthly groups continue to this day. Each month, the COMH Zoom room draws 15-25 people from a pool of 40 or so regulars, some of whom remain from the original UX conversations. Most online participants are from New York City, but in the years since going online the monthly conversations have drawn participants from other US states, Denmark, Niger, and Switzerland.

At the end of 2024, COMH began a collaboration with Let the Girls Be, a newly established NGO in Mukono, Uganda on the shore of Lake Victoria. Let the Girl Be was founded to support the educational, cultural and emotional development of girls and young women vulnerable to prostitution and unwanted pregnancy. It has a vocational training program, a cultural program of dance, music and performance, and, most recently, a monthly online COMH session led by Doctors Fields and Polk over Zoom and WhatsApp. Five sessions have taken place as of March 2025, with 8-11 regulars (who walk several miles to get to where there is a connection).

In-Person Group Building, Re-conceived and Re-placed

COMH returned to live gatherings in 2023. Under the leadership of Dr. Fields, in-person sessions began first in Harlem, where Dr. Fields is a fixture in the Harlem community, known for her community involvement (See the recent Amsterdam News feature on Dr. Fields.) The COMH team (now, physician, social worker, psychiatrist, community health worker, and improv theatre artist, all trained in social therapeutics) have expanded these workshops to poor neighborhoods in other boroughs of the city.

Dr. Fields starts each gathering with a poem of her choosing that resonates with the culture and history of the participants, and workshops include listening to and moving with music, usually jazz. The poem and music became the starting point, launch pad, the spark for the conversations that follows. (The poetry has found its way into the online sessions as well.) Marian Rich, an actor, comedian, skilled improviser and social therapeutic life coach leads the groups in improv exercises. She emphasizes the basic Yes/And of improvisation, which, in the context of a conversation, translates into listening to what others say, accepting it without judgment (Yes) then using it to continue the process of building the group (And). Depending on scheduling, Hugh Polk, Rachel Mickenberg, and Allan Cox, a community health worker with decades of organizing experience, participate in the group building process.

These in-person COMH gatherings have been organized in conjunction with various on-the-ground community organizations including: the Committee for Independent Community Action, an organization fighting the privatization of public housing in New York; the National Black Leadership Commission on Health; Sustainable Impact Makers International; Metropolitan College Black Maternal Health Initiative, and various churches and homeless shelters.

As of March 2025, in-person workshops are held regularly in the following places:

1. Harlem Food Bank, which began with 15 participants and has grown to 25 per workshop.
2. St. Philip's Church, on-going for a little over a year, average 8-10 participants per workshop.
3. TOP Settlement Clubhouse, averages 14 people, which includes 3 staff members and the rest clients.
4. The Brooklyn Residential Service Center, on-going for 6 months, averages 15 people per workshop, six staff members and 9 clients.

WHAT WE HEARD AND LEARNED

What follows is a summary of a series of the interviews/conversations with COMH participants in November and December 2024. The interviews were conducted by participant researchers, that is, people who regularly attended online and/or in-person COMH groups—Allen Cox, Denise Kaalund, and Spencer Washington—under the supervision of Dr. Lois Holzman, co-founder and director of the East Side Institute.

The interviews with the online participants were conducted during two online group sessions, with one-on-one telephone interviews as follow-up.

Interviews of the in-person COMH participants were held during group conversations at St. Philip's Episcopal Church in Central Harlem and the TOP Goddard Riverside Clubhouse, a drop-in center for people with mental illness on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. Interviews at the Food Bank of Harlem were conducted one on one or in teams of two people at a time.

In all, 24 participants were interviewed—13 from online COMH and 11 from in-person COMH workshops. Participants, who included some staff members of the site organizations, ranged in age from 20-90, with a median age of 60.

Emergent Themes: Leadership Structure and Approach

Across the board COMH participants say they were impacted positively by the team of facilitators and the way they led the conversations. Many praised the unique combination of a psychiatrist, a medical doctor, psychologist and an improviser leading sessions. The fact that Dr. Fields, Dr. Polk, Rachel Mickenberg and Marian Rich offered their time on weekends was frequently noted as meaningful. As one participant noted: "Where else can you have a therapist, a doctor and a psychiatrist leading a group on a Saturday for free for everybody in the whole world?"

Their facilitation style was described with words such as, "gentle" "harmonious," "welcoming," and "inclusive." The combination of professional expertise with an informal, non-clinical, and non-hierarchical approach was noted by many participants. A number of those interviewed praised the facilitators for, as one of them put it, "stepping back and letting the group do its thing."

Another said, "In Creating Our Mental Health, it's okay not to understand. There's no right and no wrong answer. Each of us can, for example, say what the poem means for us – and can understand its significance. People trust Marian and Dr. Fields. Their attitude is that together we can discover what this means for us." Overall, participants appreciated the leadership for helping the group build with, in the words of one, "whatever we have" rather than pressing the group into prescribed forms or methods.

Emergent Themes: Collectivity and Responsibility

One of the clearest impacts of this leadership approach was the group's embrace of *doing the group*, that is, of "creating our mental health," *together*.

Some praised the COMH environment for being welcoming and accepting. "People can show up just as they are," one participant said, and a number of people used the term "chosen family" for the group they were a part of. "We've established a safe space for real discussions," one interviewee said. "People feel that they can share and won't be shouted down or ridiculed even if what they say is unpopular."

Beyond acceptance, the COMH experience was repeatedly described as a place where participants felt they were actively building something with others, rather than passively receiving treatment. COMH was described repeatedly as a place where people take responsibility not only for their own growth, but for supporting others to grow. Many said that one of their motivations for returning to the group month after month was to “show up for the others.” As one articulated it, “We need to participate. Other people are depending on you.” Another said it this way, “In order to kick the ball you've got to get in the game.”

Interviewees highlighted mutual support activities generated by the group, such as helping each other take social risks, strategizing to overcome isolation, and encouraging members to try new things outside the group.

The interviews made clear that the facilitators had succeeded in shifting authority away from themselves, so that the group could exercise the power of creating itself. One interviewee summed it up this way, “The really radical word in Creating Our Mental Health is ‘our’.”

Emergent Themes: Poetry, Music and Improv

One of the characteristics of Creating Our Mental Health that distinguishes it from other forms of social therapy is its use of poetry, music and theatrical improv games as a portal to engagement and participation.

While all social therapists approach the group as an ongoing improvised play, COMH uses theatre improv games to get people up on their feet, moving and making noises. One participant understood the impact of the improv this way, “The improv games are affirming. Each person introduces themselves, says their name, with a movement and a sound and the entire room echoes it. If we can be goofy together like that, we can talk to each other.”

Dr. Fields, a life-long appreciator of poetry and a poet herself, introduces a different poem for each session and chooses poems that reverberate with Black history and culture. The poem is read aloud by various members of the group. “It's miraculous,” one woman said in response to a poem, “that in the face of all this that Black people exist and survive.” Another participant concluded, “Excellence is what we strive for despite the beatings and repression.”

Reading and responding to poetry were often characterized by participants as “an emotional activity,” and inevitably lead to deeply emotional conversation connecting people’s personal experience with the poem. The variety of responses to each poem surprised many participants and allowed them, as one participant put it, “...to experience the poem new ways. One person could hear a poem as loving, but for another person it could be traumatic.” Another appreciated that, “There’s no right and no wrong answer. Each of us can say what the poem means for us. We can understand its significance differently and that’s okay, in fact, it helps open things up.”

One staff member interviewed said, “In other agencies, this might get categorized as an ‘arts and culture’ workshop, like ‘Poetry Appreciation.’ But the appreciation of poetry is *not* the end. The poetry is jumping off for the discussion. The poetry discussion gives permission to share opinions, all kinds of opinions not just about the poem. It really helps people be more vulnerable in talking to others.”

The use of music, introduced more recently, plays a similar role. Dr. Fields again selects music with cultural reverberations with the participants even if, as is usually the case, they have not heard the music (usually jazz) before. One participant talked about how even what he called “the chaotic jazz music” helped him process his “jumbled chaotic thoughts” in a new way.

The use of poetry by COMH has proven very popular, and some participants now bring in their original poems to be read at the top of sessions. It has also inspired the Harlem Food Pantry, which has hosted many COMH sessions, to organize its own Poetry Salons where participants read their work.

Emergent Themes: Challenging the Stigma by Creating Something New

All the in-person COMH groups consisted of working-class people of color, primarily African American. The roots of the online sessions were similar, working-class, although its five years on Zoom have resulted in broadening its cultural, class and national mix.

As in most working-class communities, psychology and therapy carry a stigma. Going into therapy is considered a sign of weakness that carries the risk of placing yourself in the hands of authority that does not have your best interests in mind. Given how psychology has historically been used to separate children from their families, justify police violence, and humiliate and disempower Black men, this stigma is particularly strong in African American working-class communities. Many COMH participants reported previously having negative experiences with traditional mental health systems.

Social therapy, from the start, has distinguished itself from psychology—traditional or otherwise. In all its variations, social therapy is not something that is *done* to people, it is an activity that people do with each other. Creating Our Mental Health was so named to make clear that it is an activity that the participants do together—and to emphasize that the topic under discussion is mental *health* (which can be created and developed) not mental *illness* (which is diagnosed and treated). As one interviewee said, “A lot of people see ‘mental health’ on the flyer and say, ‘No thanks, I’m good.’ But Creating Our Mental Health creates a way to break that down.”

Charles Martinez, director Food Bank of Harlem, who has participated in many COMH sessions at his facility (staff are welcome to take part, not as observers but as participants) said, “There’s nothing clinical about what Jessie and Marian are doing. But even so, it has a great knock-on effect for people’s mental health. It’s an affirming activity. It’s a practice – and if you participate in the practice, it will positively affect you in the future.” One interviewee noted that COMH helps “demystify mental health and provides an alternative” to traditional mental health approaches. Another went so far as to say, “I didn’t even realize this was a therapy session.”

Emergent Themes: Discovering Emotionality

In what ways does the activity of COMH impact on the participants’ emotionality and how does this happen? Among the descriptions and explanations offered by the participants:

- “Emotional struggles are made normal; they’re not treated like this shameful thing.”
- “As others share, we all become more open.”
- “Each time, I discover emotional feelings I didn’t even know I was feeling.”
- “We help each other find ways to deal with impossible things.”
- “Men [in the group] opened up, that broke a stereotype for me.”

- "You'll be surprised... Creating Our Mental Health is a place where you can discover, in a light and no-judgment atmosphere, a depth in yourself."
- "We create a space for everyone. We say to everyone, bring us your trauma and pain. You all saved me."

All of this is, as we have seen, is sparked by poetry, music and improv which allows a new activist and playful way into the emotional pain and need for emotional growth of the participants. Because the members of the group, including the facilitators, create the group, participants experience that they *can* create something positive with all the negative and painful experiences of their lives, that they can together create new emotional experiences from this way of *being emotional together*. This is the exercise of power going on in COMH sessions. For most, the experience of being a builder and creator, a social constructor, is new.

The development it engenders doesn't appear to end with the session. Many of those interviewed reported concrete changes in how they were living their lives, including: more willingness to try new things; increased social engagement outside of the group; putting themselves "more out there" meaning being more of who they are becoming and more honest with themselves and others about how they feel; and using the creative tools they encountered in the group like humor, poetry and improvisation in daily life.

All of this, of course, impacts on the people who COMH participants interact with—family, friends, neighbors, those they work with. As one participant summed it up, "I think Creating Our Mental Health activity has a ripple effect—reverberations."

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See **PART TWO** of this report for additional reflections, process notes and poetry.

PART TWO

MUSINGS

Members of the team asked to add “more color’ to this report. Some tried to describe the process of a particular workshop. Others wrote of their experience of the COMH process and growth and shared more of what organization leaders and participants said. Others added poetry that facilitators performed in workshops and other poetry created by participants during the workshops. We have organized their contributions by venue, below. We recognize that process, growth and creativity are un-capturable, but we do hope the following musings inspire.

VENUE

1. Harlem Food Bank

A. Marian Rich notes from workshop, October 12, 2023

We began with the name/gesture game then added name/emotion/feeling/gesture.

One resident built on that and shared that he has stopped holding a grudge against his ex-wife. Jessie proceeded to bring me into a scene about this – and we acted out how it might have gone for his wife to discover that he no longer held a grudge. We had a brief discussion about our ability to let go of a grudge.

Then Jessie read a poem she wrote about Harlem Week:

Great Day in Harlem

Wonderful work we did with the team.
Harlem was lit up with multi-colors and ages
All folks together with the people for all time
And for old times making new times.

The people speak in bright lights and deeply
Felt rhythms dancing in the streets.
Drums beat bodies swing like waves move the crowd
Together light and free. Stepping loose in lines along
Harlem blocks look to the streets and the stars simultaneously all.

The first time Jessie read her poem, a participant (Person 2) was pretty much acting it out, moving to the words. I encouraged the whole group to do this, and we read it out loud a second time with the group moving and acting it out.

We handed out paper and pens and gave folks some writing time. Then Jessie read their writings out loud to them and created a collective poem.

Person 1

Harlem Week was great.
I had lots of fun dancing, visiting different blocks, even accepted a cigarette lighter.
I really enjoyed the dancing. I love to dance, me and my walker.

Sometimes without my walker.

Person 2

Da pain...
Da hurt...
Small pinpoint
Of light
It still doesn't
Make it right
Pinpricks of
Pain fighting
The light
Oh woe...
But wait...
The light gets
Brite
It isn't hurting
But showing me
The love.

Person 3

Thank you for your poem, Dr Fields. What a big burst of self- awareness, becoming strong therapy! What I witness in your poem/story is how often we take for granted our blessings. This lesson shows me how people can come together, not realizing the offerings they execute of freedom, fellowship and sharing of each other - race, culture and a feel of contentment, and leaving with the feeling we are one family relying on one another becoming the biggest family of all, which becomes the biggest blessing we can share with each other. I love all my brothers and sisters for this life experience.

We read all these pieces out loud with the group and they began to spontaneously create what felt like how they experienced Harlem Week AND the poems – we all began hugging each other and celebrating their togetherness.



Creating Our Mental Health Photo at the Harlem Food Bank

B. Workshop at Food Bank in Harlem in 2024

Jessie read these two poems:

W.B. Yates, He Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven

Had I the heavens' embroidered cloths,
Enwrought with golden and silver light,
The blue and the dim and the dark cloths
Of night and light and the half-light,
I would spread the cloths under your feet:
But I, being poor, have only my dreams;
I have spread my dreams under your feet;
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.

A version of Let America Be American Again

The original poem by [Langston Hughes](#); with added lines from Ntozake Shange's *Lady in Red* and rearranged and edited by Jessie Fields.

(Questions).

Let America be America again?
Let it be the dream it used to be?

(Declarative)

Let it be the pioneer in the city seeking a home were all are free.

(America never was America to me.)

Let America be the dream the dreamers dreamed and the people enslaved?

*Let it be that great strong land of love
Where never kings connive nor tyrants scheme
That anyone be crushed by one above.*

(It never was America to me.)

*O, let my land be a land where Liberty
Is crowned with no false patriotic wreath,
But opportunity is real, and life is free,
Equality is in the air we breathe.*

**(There's never been equality for me,
Nor freedom in this "homeland of the free.")**

*Say, who are you that mumbles in the dark?
And who are you that draws your veil across the stars?*

We are the Native American driven from the land

We are the Black bearing slavery's scars

Yet the ones who dreamt our basic dream

That even yet its mighty daring sings

In every brick and stone, in every furrow turned

That's made America

*O, Pioneers We are the **poor** fooled and pushed apart*

Whose libraries were torn down, walls flooded and Doors collapsed under endless destruction

For whom nothing new was build that did not quickly fall apart,

endlessly denied trees

only sky under the summer sun

We are the immigrant clutching the hope we seek—

And finding only the same old stupid plan

Of dog eat dog, of mighty crush the weak.

All tangled in that ancient endless chain

Of grab the land, of profit, power, gain.

You are the people becoming, full of strength and hope

Becoming the architects of transformation

Then we had people write. This is one person's poem from the session.

The Strength of a Dream by Person 3

You call this America, but yet you kill or break this mirror, which we were told holds the good dream, hopes, opportunities you show us, but you deter us from sharing our ideas and contributions in making this melting pot even greater.

When we look more so into this mirror of what this country called America is shows, good, a life and making our one great land benefit those that want to be an American and help make it even greater.

Stop shoving us into this trash bucket filled with prejudicial actions because we “so called” don’t conform or are not seeming as the norm! Don’t take away my dream, and the dreams of others, because we stand tall, and will continue to dream.

This is our dream, not just your dreams. You can’t use a dream catcher to destroy what is good, but you can use one to throw our dreams higher.

Dreams are dreams for a reason. Instead of taking your negativity to prevent us, we see our dreams as steps taking us higher for the good of all mankind.

C. Excerpts from Comments from Charles Martinez, Director Harlem Food Bank
Jan 8, 2025

Harlem Food Bank is in contract with NYC Dept of Aging. They provide activities in 3 areas: education/recreation; technical (how to use computers, etc; health and wellness (exercise, nutrition, physical and mental health). They have a fluid community of participants who attend multiple events. Charles Martinez has been the director there for about 8 years – their motto is PLAY, GROW, THRIVE. He has observed and participated in COMH workshops since they began at the Harlem Food Bank 2 years ago.

He's looking to help redefine what it means to be a senior citizen. From the success of COMH and the use of poetry, Charles Martinez has organized regular poetry reading sessions for the members. He uses the Poetry Foundation's poem of the day, he prints them out and leads a discussion.

In March 2024, he organized the Food Bank's first **Poetry Salon**. Dimmed the lighting; served snacks. Dr. Fields and Marian Rich put together poems and fragments of poems from all the poetry and responses people had performed in the previous COMH sessions and synthesized them into a group performance piece.

We now use poetry to spark discussion, share opinions, helping people be more vulnerable in talking to others.

We've established a safe space for real discussions – people feel that they can share and won't be shouted down or ridiculed – even if what they say is unpopular”

D. Comments from interviews of COMH participants at the Harlem Food Bank

“There's nothing clinical about what Jessie and Marian are doing. But even so, it has a great knock-on effect for people's mental health. It's an affirming activity.”

“It's a practice – and if you participate in the practice, it will positively affect you in the future.”

“It's a 100% positively affirming space, where people recognize and support each other. One of the participants for example who regularly writes poetry gets recognition as the group's ‘resident poet.’”

“Even the improv games are affirming. Each person introduces themselves, says their name, or an emotion, and the entire room / group as a whole echoes it. Discussions are affirming of oneself and one's peers.”

“It's a great opportunity to build community.”

“Now members have brought in their own poems to read. Others write responses to the poems Dr. Fields reads in the workshop.”

“In COMH it's OK to NOT understand. People trust Marian and Dr. Fields. Their attitude is together we can discover what this means for us.” Marian and Dr. Fields invite people to make meaning

together. There's no right and no wrong answer. Each of us can say what the poem means for us – and can understand its significance.”

“In leading discussions about poetry, an entry point – a threshold – can be an image, a word or two, a simple phrase.” [e.g., a photograph of ZINNIAS which were a major theme in one of the poems we read.]

“In other agencies, this might get categorized as an “arts and culture” workshop – like poetry appreciation. But the appreciation of poetry is NOT the end. The poetry is jumping off for the discussion – and that's affirming.”

“I believe that people need to keep striving – and when they stop, that's the end. I teach music and had a 99 year-old student, who kept saying, ‘am I getting better?’ ‘will I get good at this?’ He wanted to keep improving”

“I think everyone should have the chance to do what they enjoy – not for pay, or a profession, or because they're talented – whether that's poetry or music, or whatever. That's part of striving...”

“We don't know what the impact of reading a poem together could be. Maybe someone takes a copy of the poem home and shows it to their family at the dinner table, and they have something new, interesting to talk about. I think COMH activity has a ripple effect – reverberations.”

2. Workshops at TOP (The Other Place Settlement Club House Preparation for the first Creating, October 2023.

A.

Our plan from Jessie:

Here is what I am thinking. That we should go very slow.

Introduce ourselves and go around the room and do the names exercise.

Then do an emotion, ask for an emotion that you feel close to or relate to or think of or any emotion, with a gesture and maybe do that twice.

Then I read parts of the poem, **Monet Refuses the Operation** BY LISEL MUELLER

Only do 2 or 3 or 4 parts of the poem and ask for people's responses

And see if they want to write words or speak.

Stay with them whatever they do...

This is part of one of the first poems we read and performed there. After reading the poem participants wrote responses and we created a collective poem.

Monet Refuses the Operation

By lisel mueller (slightly edited by jessie fields)

Doctor, you say there are no haloes
around the streetlights in Paris
and what I see is an aberration
caused by old age, an affliction.
I tell you it has taken me all my life
to arrive at the vision of gas lamps as angels,
to soften and blur and finally banish
the edges you regret I don't see,
to learn that the line I called the horizon
does not exist and sky and water,
so long apart, are the same state of being.
Fifty-four years before I could see
Rouen cathedral is built
of parallel shafts of sun,
and now you want to restore
my youthful errors: fixed
notions of top and bottom,
the illusion of three-dimensional space,
wisteria separate
from the bridge it covers.
What can I say to convince you
the Houses of Parliament dissolve
night after night to become
the fluid dream of the Thames?
I will not return to a universe

of objects that don't know each other,
as if islands were not the lost children
of one great continent. The world
is flux, and light becomes what it touches,
becomes water, lilies on water,
above and below water,
becomes lilac and mauve and yellow
and white and cerulean lamps,
small fists passing sunlight
so quickly to one another
that it would take long, streaming hair
inside my brush to catch it.
To paint the speed of light!

B. Report on The Workshop

We had 17 people in the room, including the Director of TOP and other staff members and volunteers.

As Jessie read the poem Marian moved/performed it. We had a few people who were very engaged and responded, including Person 2, the club house member who comes to the Food Bank and invited us to TOP. People moved with Marian and Person 2 while Jessie read the poem stanzas, repeating them. Some words being repeated with the members.

We had some discussion about what the members thought the poem was about. They referred to both of us as doctors (Dr. Marian/Dr. Jessie). Some members were very quiet and not engaged, not making any contact with us or others (looking down/or eyes unfocused).

At some point we made space for members to do some writing and then had people read out loud. When someone's poem ended with the word "groovy" I suggested we all perform "being groovy." The group seemed to enjoy moving together and their playfulness came shining through. We did a collective groovy dance.

It did occur to me that seeing the image of Monet's painting of the Rouen Cathedral might be useful so I pulled it up on my iPhone and walked around the room to show everyone. Even the people who were sitting with their eyes unfocused seemed to "wake up" when they saw the image.

The Director's response: "Just wanted to thank you again for a wonderful workshop yesterday! Members had really good feedback during community meeting today and would like to continue having the workshops."

3. Online session with co-facilitators Rachel Mickenberg, Hugh Polk and Jessie Fields

A. Poetic notes by Marian Rich on an online COMH group in 2024

Jessie reads a poem.

Have you ever tried to become one
With the lives of others
Those dead and alive
Whose small matter of energy and particles are close enough. Like great great grands
Mothers and daughters here for centuries even tomorrow

And wander by the North star till we see what
Early morning feels like when freedom is free in all
Hands to shape and stretch.

We did an exercise of collective movement with people on zoom, moving together to the poetry.

B. Highlights from workshop conversation

Build with the person's worries.

How to be present?

Sharing helps me be present.

Curiosity as an activity

Becoming. What if I fail? What if I fall flat?

Creativity goes hand in hand - daily process - daily action - creation as interdependent process. I can think about creating thriving environments.

It's okay to be distracted

I've been here in COMH for 2 and half years. This is more than a wellness tool for me. You've offered me so much.

Means so much to us.

77 year old woman speaks of her depression: "I'm a burden. I'm glad I'm here. I'm thankful for you. Trying to survive."

Hugh – "Do your depression with us."

Someone responding about taking care of her mother: "She wasn't a burden to me. I don't think your son feels you're a burden. Let him help you."

C. Interview Responses from online participants

Online Participant 1: “I look forward to it every time. I could do 2 COMH meetings a month! All month I long for it. I’m very attracted to it. I came from a family where there was a lot of physical abuse and violence. I had to cut myself off from that for my system to survive. That’s been a process for some years and now almost finished. COMH is an alternative to my family—for me it’s like a chosen family. What I appreciate most is that I can show up in COMH just as I am—I can talk about any life situation or emotional state I’m in and be seen. Each time I discover emotional feelings I didn’t even know I was feeling. There’s such supportive feedback in bringing myself in just as I am. In the days after each meeting, I realize I’m not alone. That makes it such an important place for me to be. You, Rachel and Jessie are so steady and make such a welcoming atmosphere. It’s like a culture of us helping each other and getting to know each other. Also, important to me, I just realized is, I also have the experience of giving to others, to show up for them. There’s a high motivation in the group to do that. I come to practice that. I remind myself to be of service to others. It’s very intentional for me, very important to me to do that.”

Online Participant 2: “The group is very important to me. The first time I came I experienced how active the group was. People were very human with each other. There are people from all over the world. We learn how others live. Despite the horrible things going on in the world, people love life. We’re fighting to maintain the pleasures of our lives. We’re not giving up. It’s a feeling deep in me how we can be sensitive to others. Every session I’m learning how to be more sensitive to others, how to help others. It’s very useful to me. How you facilitate the group is very important. You don’t frustrate people. They feel they can talk in the group. They’re human and they share their emotions. You manage the emotions very harmoniously. It’s not easy dealing with mental and other problems. I’m learning how I can contribute to the well—being of someone else. We connect with each other. It was very important 2 or 3 weeks ago when we helped one person go visit with someone else who was hurting and isolated, to be with their friend. We learn how to contribute to the conversation. I learn from them and they learn from me. We learn how to do this and it’s very important to me.”

4. Creating Our Mental Health Workshops (began at St. Philips Church in 2023 in collaboration with the National Leadership Commission on Black Health, Black Health) and subsequently continued independently

Poetic Responses

A. Dear Jessie

I thoroughly enjoyed the COMH Session on Wednesday . I attached the "poem" that developed in me as a result of our time together.

Love and Blessings
Denise

Denise's poem was one of the first poems written during a COMH workshop at St. Philips Church

Denise's poem and email to me after the workshop, I invited her to the HOW of ST

*The love of my ancestors
Arrive on the shores of the Nile
And its currents whirl around me.
And invite me to join hands
With the past, with love, with strength.*

Hi Marian

*It was a pleasure participating in the "creating your mental health" today.
Please keep me informed of other sessions or activities related to the social therapeutic approach.
I do have a particular interest in the area of mental health. I believe that particularly during this
post pandemic period there is a need for these services in our communities.
Love
Denise*





B.
“Peace”
By Spencer Washington, 2024

Aiming at a version of me
I was taught to believe as
enemy
A man that looks like
family
Is now adversary

I wonder what we could
accomplish
If we replaced pride with
Peace
When will we wake up from traps of
control
So violence can cease

An eye for an
eye
Does not even a

score

How will we see that Peace is the
goal;

Even at war

Reflections on Repassage

Denise Kaalund

May 15, 2024

All possible manner of difference

Glittering eyes, of all shapes and colors

Viewing the world through unique lens

Waves, colors, straight lines

Love, Fear, hate, giving

This variety enriches me

I call them

Each waves, smiles

Open broad lips

Speak words in different tongues

I understand them all

Diversity, freedom ; skins of madras and plaid

Brings deliverance of soul , of thought

Star nor sun shall wake

Only to sleep eternal

We come together

Woven, patches

Stitched of our blood

Creating a whole that is more beautiful

Then any sameness could be

5. Creating Our Mental Health Series of three Workshops at the St. Mary's Public Housing Development in the Bronx in 2024 (January, February, and March).

These workshops were done in collaboration with the Committee for Independent Community Action working with public housing residents.

Dr. Jessie Fields comments after the first workshop:

Very moving and powerful workshop. We had people from the community who live in public housing and people who don't. Many people from our communities, women and young people, a few young people, who were talking about their lives and experiences in their lives and things that they care about, and the ways that building community, coming together, and supporting each other can make such a big difference. So this is being held in a public housing community center where many people are going through the traumas and the experiences of living in housing where Black and Brown people are in the majority. And as a result, in many ways, public housing has been abandoned and has been the victim of not having full resources and services as they should have. Going through issues of not having hot water, not having proper heat, the mold, asbestos, the asthma epidemic, and much, much more.

And the issue of health, mental health and emotional health of people, Black and Brown people, who are raising their families, have raised generations in public housing. This is so important, it's important to have resources for people to be able to come together and support each other and grow and develop. So, in our Creating Our Mental Health workshops, we use poetry and performance and theater and the arts to give people new ways to build and share. People responded really powerfully to a poem that we read* about going through life and having traumatic experiences that many people in this country and in the world have had.

We don't often have the opportunity to talk about these experiences, so we have come together to build and support each other. The power and the creativity is in the community. So I want us to continue building, to continue doing the workshops, and most importantly, to spread the love, the love and the caring that is in our lives and in our communities, and among our people that's been there historically. That's how we've survived so much structural racism and segregation and discrimination and violence and abuse. We have survived all that and we'll continue to survive and to build. Power to the people. Thank you.

6. January 15, 2025, COMH Celebrating Dr. Martin Luther King's Birthday

"My feets is tired but my soul is rested."

Mother Pollard, 1955 During the Montgomery Bus Boycott

Dr. King and Marching Feet

"...the road that leads from Montgomery to this place..."

"From Montgomery to Birmingham, from Birmingham to Selma, from Selma back to Montgomery, a trail wound in a circle long and often bloody, yet it has become a highway up from darkness."

"..a dream deeply rooted in the American dream."

"There are those who tell me that I should stick with Civil Rights and stay in my place."

"We were convinced that we could not limit our vision..."

"This is a calling that takes me beyond national allegiances."

"It may well be that the world is in dire need of a new organization, The International Association for the Advancement of Creative Maladjustment."
Creating Our Mental Health.

In the face of unrelenting violence Dr. King
arrayed the all, here and now heart of creative maladjustment.

We mourn his death and celebrate his life.

Martin Luther led the march, people across the world followed.

"The pattern of their feet as they walk through barriers...is the thunder of the marching of Joshua, and the world rocks beneath their tread."

His vision eternal. He watches still.
The battle is in our hands.
Tremor the centuries chains
Stand with the poor
Stand with the outcast
Stand with the righteous
As the radiant star of hope
With the play of possibilities
See anew
Re-member
Hold it all close
His voice the dense fabric of history
Carry as we rise and gather, onward.
By Jessie Fields

This workshop is held in the sanctuary of St. Philips Church, which is a historic Harlem community gathering place.

As Jessie read this poem, repeating some lines, Allen Cox began the entire group marching to the poem. Some participants called out lines of the poem as we marched.

Creating Our Mental Health video by Dr. Jessie Fields



COMH October 12, 2024 - St. Philips Church

Jessie, Allen, and Marian briefly introduced themselves.

Then, we did our usual warm up exercises of name introductions/gestures/emotions. Jessie asked people to introduce themselves. Some spoke a lot, others less, and we got to know who was in the room, which was very helpful. One participant shared about the police raiding her home and her difficulties over the last period. Another participant also shared a great deal from his life. Someone else shared his history and art practices.

Jessie read the poems (below) she had chosen for the session. I hesitated a bit but ultimately moved/performed as Jessie read, as we've been doing. I noticed that the person who was sitting by me, was also moving with me.

People responded to the poems – images that resonated, feeling one with nature, the flow.

We moved into writing – then we had people read what they wrote. Denise had shared that her parents were married in St. Philips Church. Her poem is below.

We ended with everyone in a circle, holding hands, and we each said a word about the experience.

POEMS WE READ

The Dream Keeper *Langston Hughes*

Bring me all of your dreams,
You dreamers,
Bring me all of your
Heart melodies
That I may wrap them
In a blue cloud-cloth
Away from the too-rough fingers
Of the world.

Poem by W. E. B. Yates

Had I the heavens' embroidered cloths,
Enwrought with golden and silver light,
The blue and the dim and the dark cloths
Of night and light and the half-light,
I would spread the cloths under your feet:
But I, being poor, have only my dreams;
I have spread my dreams under your feet;
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.

The Negro Speaks of Rivers By Langston Hughes

I've known rivers:

I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.
I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.
I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.
I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset.

I've known rivers:
Ancient, dusky rivers.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

The group moved together as Jessie read the poem, **The Negro Speaks of Rivers**.

The poem Denise wrote after the workshop

The love of my ancestors
Arrive on the shores of the Nile
And its currents whirl around me.
And invite me to join hands
With the past, with love, with strength.

A note from Denise to Marian:

Hi Marian

It was a pleasure participating in the "creating your mental health" today. Please keep me informed of other sessions or activities related to the social therapeutic approach. I do have a particular interest in the area of mental health. I believe that particularly during this post pandemic period there is a need for these services in our communities.

Love
Denise





Janet Wooten interviewing COMH participants

7. On Line Creating Our Mental Health Session with the program, Let The Girl Be, Uganda

An educational and emotional development program led by David Kawanuka Naggenda for teenagers and young women in rural Uganda.

Report on a COMH March 2025 session led by Elyse Mendel (East Side Institute faculty) and Thecla Farrell (Social Therapeutic Coach)

We began at about 9:15am with an ice breaker. The girls were ready to say their names and a gesture which we all repeated, Elyse Mendel (East Side Institute faculty) and Thecla Farrell (Social Therapeutic Coach) as well participated, and it broke the ice well!

Next the girls requested that we each say what Social Therapy meant to us. Thecla started and said a few things as did Elyse ... we were brief but worked to make it personal and share how we learned to create our lives and make different choices with the support of our groups.

Girl 1 then told us a story of what was happening in her life; that her grandmother had decided that her mother and siblings were to no longer live with her - they had done so since their father left/ went away/ was lost (unsure), and they were now struggling. She is the eldest (18) of 6 or 7 siblings and her mother has no job. She expressed wanting to help by getting some money and renting a place.

We asked the girls what they thought of her story and they each gave their thoughts. We asked her how she felt about their responses, and she said that it was encouraging. Many of the girls thought there should be a conversation with the grandmother. One even thought they could all go. We asked if they could each give one line as if they were speaking to the grandmother, which they did.

While it was challenging to hear because the sound system was hard for the girls to use (though they helped each other), and because the girls have slightly different accents, (we asked at times to repeat and go slow) we were able to get through the session well.

At the end, David asked Thecla and Elyse about what advice we had and what we thought, and we shared some thoughts.

The internet then got in the way, and we lost the connection but called back and said goodbye It was 10:05am

Thecla noted that she thought this was a breakthrough session. That having the format decided in advance with David was really good, and he likely shared that with the girls beforehand, which also helped Thecla also noted that all the girls participated. As we said, after Marion spoke, we asked the girls to respond to her, and vice-a-versa, as

well as asking each of them to give one sentence they would say to the grandmother, so everyone had a chance to participate.

Thecla also thought it was a breakthrough because there was a lot of back and forth between the coaches and the group. In addition, the hearing/speaking was normalized. We asked to repeat, go slower, or have one of the girls hold the audio speaker for each other, which became part of building the group. The girls also asked us for some things, like how Social Therapeutics helped us in our lives. So we were all part of the group, less a separation from them and us.

David has mentioned this as well, that there are 2 young women who continuously step up as leaders, which they did in the session. I think we can invite them to other social therapeutic events and think of other ways to support their leadership.

When David asked us for advice at the end of the session about one of the girl's situation, it was interesting. We said that maybe someone can speak with the grandmother, which might include David or see who might have the best relationship with the grandmother. We also added that they can continue to speak with each other and on WhatsApp. (And that's when the connection stopped, though to note, the only time it did, which was also a breakthrough). I think it might be worth a conversation for us about what it means to work with these young women, who struggle with housing, food, violence, being teenage mothers in rural Uganda.

Further Reflections

Denise Kaalund, participant researcher

Reflections on the transformation that takes place during the Creating Our Mental Health sessions - Denise Kaalund

I've been attending Creating Our Mental Health at St. Phillips Church. One of the things that continues to amaze me is the transformation that takes place over the one hour plus sessions. I've always felt that connections and empathy developed more quickly here than in any of the other groups I attended; but I wasn't sure why. On this day I decided to not only participate but to pay careful attention to the behaviors of others. I observe people as they come into the large, beautiful sanctuary. Some come in with warm smiles and others are more reserved. I believe that the majestic environment leads people to sit quietly. We each take our seats, mostly sitting with spaces in between. For the newcomers, of which there are always a few, I know that they are wondering "Creating Our Mental Health" I want to be here but I'm not sure why. For those that have been here they may bring a tidbit that they carried over from the last session. These tidbits might include how they were impacted or drawn to creativity with a poem, a short tale or a wondering. One or two might offer something that is happening in their personal life.

We're invited to join a circle. People seem a little more comfortable now. The proximity seems to lead some to engage with others, if just with their eyes. We begin by saying our

names accompanied by a gesture. Jessie models her name with a swaying motion. The ice is broken as others follow suit with their name accompanied with a jiggle, a wave, a skip – everybody joins in, nobody ever says, I’ll pass. It is so funny and so much fun. We are all in kindergarten again. Some people add an adjective, or a statement, Power to the People. We’re then asked to give an emotion. Grateful. sad, anxious. We move with emotions. We feel closer to each other. We understand, we empathize, we connect. When the activity is over, we have a deeper understanding of who these people who have joined this circle. Our curiosity is peaked.

Jessie reads a poem Stillness Between Breathes

We first listen to the powerful words. “Today, I read about a boy shot by someone who mistook his skin for a question” The breathing in the room becomes collective. Marian performs the words, and our eyes move between the words and the movements. We are then asked to join in and speak as our emotions leads us to. Folks recite phrases, some chanting, some in low moans of voices and others in high pitches. We our creating an orchestra with our voices. We have turned the poem into a symphony. We are in tune and deeply connected with one another. Somehow and I don’t quite remember how; we ended up moving and dancing to the jazz music that accompanied the poem. I locked eyes and mirrored the movement of a young lady who had earlier spoken hesitantly in the group but was now moving so smoothly and beautifully that I felt like I had been transformed out of the building into a beautiful exotic space. She later spoke in such a fluid, comfortable way about her experience in the group. This for me was another example of the transformation of the participants.

Another gentleman in the group was led to share and give the group what he was feeling. We were encouraged to perform his expressions. He had begun speaking with observable tension, but was now laughing, smiling and hugging. This was another example of transformation.

We were encouraged to reflect on the poem. The participants each gave a sentence or phrase which turned into a collective poem.

I was inspired to write the following:

We’re Here Today

We’re here Today

We started as strangers, questions

Still and separate

We move, look in each other’s eyes

We hear the beautiful words

Music fills the chambers

We move, Mirroring each other

Frozen statues turn to liquid gold

We reach into each other's souls.
We're quiet to the sound of music
Wafting music, urging us
Reaching, offering, taking, sharing
We understand
Our hearts say
We're here today
We're here today

The connection continues as the session wraps up. A "Power to the People" participant shares a poem that he had previously written.

People who were strangers an hour ago are reluctant to leave. Like guests at the end of a good party they have to be urged out. A group gathers in the vestibule to exchange information. They, we, linger and cling to the experience.

I've seen the impact of these connections in past sessions. They continue way past the session. One day I joined a new exercise group. A tall stately woman came in. I felt the connection but couldn't recall quite where it had come from. She said, "I know you. We were together at the Creating Our Mental Health at St. Phillips. We talked together about how meaningful the experience was. We saw each other a few more times after that. I haven't seen her lately, but I know that when I do the connection will still be there.

From Dr. Hugh Polk, workshop facilitator

The title says it all—Creating Our Mental Health. I cry every time I read this report. It's been a joy for me to be part of doing that with people from around the world and in the poorest communities in New York City. Mental health and emotional growth is an activity that we ordinary people do together. No diagnosis, no labelling, no telling people what's wrong with them. Instead let's build our lives together. People who participate in COMH do that together every time we meet. It's joyous—let's get on with it!