The Making Connections Hub



Mental wellbeing can be hard to find when the stability and familiarity of one's community are in flux. For East African refugees in the City Heights neighborhood of San Diego, the United Women of East Africa Support Team (UWEAST) has been instrumental in creating a network of support for those who are trying to find their new footing in a new environment. However, trauma experienced by young men seeking haven in this community is exacerbated by negative masculine norms that stigmatize emotional vulnerability; absence of a culturally-and linguistically-sensitive support system to address their common experience of post-traumatic stress disorder and depression can be devastating. A string of 10suicides among East African boys and men drew attention to the urgent need for social connectedness and collective action.

Fortunately, the Making Connections Initiative (MCI), a coalition led by UWEAST, comprised of community-based organizations and the University of CA San Diego, recognizes the community's wealth of mutual support and resiliency. Their goal is to shift the dynamic of young men's mental wellbeing by creating opportunities for them to learn about social emotional health, strengthen peer networks, and apply their combined leadership to mental health advocacy efforts.

UWEAST has opened a dialogue about mental health with community members; encouraged faith leaders to speak up about post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and suicide; and partnered with other local organizations to provide young men who feel hopeless about their future with leadership and career development training. In an area where the experience of refugees and the cultural distinctions of East Africans are not widely appreciated, these young men regularly train mental health providers and community decision-makers.

One of their most important projects has been to open a "Making Connections Hub," which is a safes pace for young men of East African descent to be themselves, honor their friendship and culture, and access resources to help them cope with traumatic experiences, social isolation, and depression. It's a non-judgmental and affirming environment where peer mentors are available for support and guidance. Moreover, it is an organizing space for participants to move from individual needs to community efforts. The Hub draws crowds for open-mic nights, health promotion workshops, and training events, all while celebrating and enhancing the wellbeing of City Heights' vibrant East African young men.

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