Legacy in the Making

MINDRIGHT

*In June 2016, **Ashley Edwards** and **Alina Liao** cofounded MindRight, a tech nonprofit providing personalized mental health coaching to teens in communities of color. Once enrolled, students are paired with volunteer coaches who provide daily emotional and psychological support, supervised by licensed mental health professionals. Edwards and Liao, who met at Stanford's joint MBA and MA in Education program, created MindRight with an ambition to reduce the stigma around mental health and empower young people of color to heal from intergenerational trauma. In 2018, the cofounders were recognized as honorees of the inaugural New Legacy Makers' Showcase, a collaboration between The Legacy Lab and the Disruptor Foundation, for their personal ambition to shift conversations around mental health in communities of color.*

Can you share a little about what MindRight is and how it works for both students and coaches?

ASHLEY EDWARDS: MindRight is a personalized, live coaching service that provides emotional and psychological support to youth of color in underserved communities. We work closely with schools, districts, and community-based organizations toward systemic and cultural change.

Generally, users find out about MindRight through a partnership that we have with their school. The MindRight texting number, 886-886, is shared with all students. To sign up, all students have to do is text that number. After sharing our privacy policy and terms of service, we'll start the onboarding process, which involves a coach reaching out to them and the student taking a couple of different assessments, such as the ACE trauma screening, which quantifies adverse childhood experiences. With users' permission, we then share that data with their schools.

One thing that sets us apart from crisis hotlines is that students don't have to reach out to us when they need support; a coach actually texts them every day during a time window that they choose. They ask the student how their day was, give them room to talk about the things going on in their lives, and help them develop positive coping skills. Although our evidence-based framework provides structure and guidance, the coaching is highly personalized to what the student needs. I think right now, for some of our students, MindRight is the only judgment-free, safe space that they have to process pain or even express joy.

ALINA LIAO: It's been amazing to see the volunteer side grow as well, because it started as just Ashley and I texting a small number of students. Today, we recruit volunteers who go through 20 hours of training. In this training, we've recently embedded more about cultural competency, unpacking biases, and what it means to focus on peoples' strengths rather than their suffering. It's a mix of reading materials, videos, and a lot of role-play where they can practice, get comfortable with the platform, and get feedback. All of our coaches are also supervised in real time by licensed mental health clinicians. In addition to safety, this provides coaches with ongoing growth and professional development, because they're constantly getting practice, support, and feedback.

We've actually gotten a lot of positive feedback on the training from our coaches. They've told us things like, "I did this training to be a MindRight coach, but I'm using it to interact with people in my family and at my job. It's helping me become more empathetic and learn how to process my own negative thought patterns." Our coaches' enthusiasm, dedication, and commitment to showing up each week is inspiring to see.

Can you each talk a little about what inspired you to start MindRight?

AE: Although Alina and I had different paths to starting MindRight, we've always had a common passion for mental health advocacy and serving youth of color.

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I was particularly inspired by the students I worked with at my first job, as director of operations at a charter high school in downtown Newark, New Jersey. My dad grew up in a high-poverty neighborhood in Newark, and his whole life he had to fight for educational opportunities so that he could provide a better life for me and my brother. So when I graduated from Yale and had an opportunity to give back to the community he grew up in, I took it.

At that school, my students would tell me about traumatic experiences they were going through outside of school. There really wasn't an outlet where they could find emotional or psychological support, so my office became a safe space. At 21, I had no training on how to support people who have experienced trauma. But I knew how to provide emotional support, so that's what I did. Still, I knew my students deserved a therapist, psychologist, or more counselors beyond the one counselor we had for over 300 kids.

I had already applied to Stanford Business School during my senior year at Yale and decided to defer for two years. When I realized that my two years working at the high school were coming to an end, I decided I had to do something more for my students. So I went to Stanford with the intention of creating a social venture for them.

AL: My story is different but also inspired by my personal experiences and family background. Although education was the number one value in my family growing up, the idea of a career in education was foreign to me from a young age through college. I worked in economic consulting for five years. My dad immigrated from Taiwan and education was his way out of poverty—his way to make sure he could provide for his family. So I never took it for granted. Once I went off to start my own life, I wanted to do what I could to help create educational opportunities for others, so I began to volunteer.

Even as a volunteer, working with youth one-on-one or in small groups weekly, I found that often we wouldn't get to the academic work we were supposed to because what they needed in the moment was emotional support. Over time, I learned to let go of my idea of what we were supposed to do and just be there for

them. Similar to what Ashley described with her students, a lot of my students didn't have a place to talk about what was going on in their lives and feel validated and supported.

> *"**Our current values are the legacy we're constantly working toward.** We're constantly bringing our values into our work and conversations."*

Seeing this week after week and year after year also reminded me of the big stigmas around mental health, especially in communities of color. When you're affected by these experiences but can't talk about them, you can feel like your feelings don't matter. Realizing this gave me a passion for the intersection of mental health and education, and for creating systems that allow every young person to feel loved, safe, and supported.

For me, Stanford was an opportunity to change careers and go full-time into education, and I was so fortunate to meet Ashley there. We bonded after learning we had this shared passion and started working together to tackle the issue of unaddressed trauma in underserved communities.

How are MindRight's core values evident in your organization? Have they changed over time?

AE: Because we support youth of color who are impacted by systems of oppression like structural poverty and violence, we want to be very intentional with the core values that guide our organization. Today, those five values are unconditional positive regard, intersectionality, being unapologetic, transparency, and radical self-care. Unconditional positive regard means we realize that we need to be mindful about creating a safe space and operating from a non-deficit mindset. Intersectionality means that because our students come from very different backgrounds and identities that may be overlapping at times, we're intentional about fully respecting what it means to be human for each of our students. Being unapologetic means sticking to the core of what we do and who we're for. Transparency means bringing the youth and our community partners into everything we're doing. And finally, radical self-care is crucial because we understand that this work is emotional and affects us all.

AL: Notably, these haven't always been our values. With values, there are some basic ones that every organization should have, like integrity and hustle. We had values like that to begin with. But then we paused and thought, "Of course we operate with integrity. We always hustle. What are some values more specific to our work that will really push us?" Our current values are the legacy we're constantly working toward.

We're constantly bringing our values into our work and conversations. How can we be unapologetically strengths-based? How can we interact with students and with each other with unconditional positive regard? How do we operate as an organization and support our youth in light of our commitment to intersectionality? In this sense, our new values have become much more present on a daily basis than the ones we began with.

> *"Although many crisis hotlines and even some crisis text lines exist, **there's a gap of daily emotional support,** which is the role we want MindRight to play."*

How has MindRight learned from and expanded on the work of existing mental health organizations?

AE: We've looked to a variety of established organizations and evidence-based practices to understand what works and what needs still exist. We realized that although many crisis hotlines and even some crisis text lines exist, there's a gap of

daily emotional support, which is the role we want MindRight to play.

Another cool thing we've done is just taking interesting, proven things that work and making them functionally responsive to communities of color. For example, right now, several different evidence-based practices are shown to help people heal from post-traumatic stress disorder, whether military veterans or other populations. We want to take those practices and transform them into things that work for our youth, whether they are implemented in summer classes or in-person therapeutic programs.

> *"It's one thing to have a text service because you think that teens text a lot, so why not?* ***It's another thing to have youths' voices integrated every step of the way."***

AL: Even the framework we created for our coaching conversations, "empathize, normalize, stabilize," is informed by existing evidence-based practices. One of the sources we drew on was mental health first-aid training done by NAMI (National Alliance on Mental Illness). It takes a similar approach of expressing understanding, providing helpful psycho-education, and working together with a person. Our framework also follows trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy, so we work with clinical team members to shape it and make it accessible and doable by non-clinicians.

The youth you serve have also been influential in creating MindRight. Can you explain a bit more about how they have been involved?

AE: One thing that's important to MindRight is to keep the voices of youth and community members present in our work, guiding our products and services. The youth are in our strategic meetings and give feedback on our coaching model.

Even the name "MindRight" was inspired by students. As we were starting up, it was very important to us to have a name that could be relevant to them. We also wanted to touch on the idea of mindfulness, but we didn't want it to sound too clinical or generic, like "youth empowerment." I remember talking to one student who is now a community advisor for us. He said, "You need to have something that's two words and two syllables to be memorable, like Facebook or Snapchat." After considering a few "mind-something" names, MindRight stuck.

A couple of the youth we both knew prior to launching MindRight, including a few of my previous students, helped us develop the service and coaching model. We call them youth advisors and community advisors—and they are crucial members of our team. They're the ones who are actually going into schools and communities or doing vocational workshops to recruit students. It's one thing to have a text service because you think that teens text a lot, so why not? It's another thing to have youths' voices integrated every step of the way, which is what we try to do.

AL: Getting feedback, both from our youth community team members and youth using our service, has evolved what the text message coaching looks like. Looking at user data, we assess how actual engagement changes when we make certain shifts. A lot of the feedback has been around making MindRight feel like a more personalized experience, making it feel like the person you're talking to sounds really fun, warm, and not robotic, even when they're providing psycho-education or talking about positive coping skills. We've also seen things like effective use of emojis help students feel more comfortable talking over MindRight. So there are a lot of nuances we've learned just from getting the feedback and looking at the data that we would not have realized otherwise.

A milestone we're excited about is that one of our first MindRight users, who started when he was 17 years old, now volunteers as a coach at 19 years old. The idea of having the students that we're serving become the ones who provide the service to younger people in their communities is really exciting. We're in the early stages of building this alumni

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engagement out, but when I think about our brand's ambition to be strengths-based and youth-led, it's very much aligned with that.

We've never wanted to take an approach of saying, "We're outsiders coming in to tell you how you should live your lives. That's how we're going to help you." What we want to say is, "We are here for you. We're here to meet you where you are and provide you with options and support." We don't say, "Do this." We say, "We want to go on this journey with you."

What was one of your brand's biggest challenges so far?

AE: One of our most defining decisions has been changing our mission statement from "serving at-risk youth" to "serving youth of color." Choosing to be unapologetic about creating this service explicitly for youth of color was one of our most challenging moments, but not because we struggled with it internally. Serving youth of color has always been important to us. From the very beginning, 99% of our kids have been kids of color. To us, changing our mission statement was just updating the obvious.

It was difficult because it inevitably created a dynamic where some funders and donors just weren't interested. They didn't understand our focus or would rather we stick to a general focus. But for us, it was a really important moment to choose to stand by our beliefs and passions. We understand that there are systems in our country explicitly designed to oppress people of color and we're very intentionally creating new ones to disrupt those. So for us, this change was about being brave in our voices. Since we made that move, we've attracted funders and partner organizations who get it and are even more powerful advocates for our kids and our communities.

As you've grown, your vision for MindRight has expanded. What experiences led to those changes?

AL: In our first year, we had our first actively suicidal student. It was a real-life test of our support for our students—it was no longer theoretical. She texted us late at night saying things like, "I'm a poor black girl and no one cares about poor black girls. What's the point of living?" We were both out of town at a conference in New Orleans at the time.

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AE: Alina and I were able to come together and support each other through the process. We talked with the student and were able to call a mobile crisis service to visit her house, which she probably wasn't happy about at the time. But more important, she ended up being OK. I think many of our students feel like no one really hears their voice. They feel unseen and unheard. But to that student, this experience meant, "I may not like everything that happened that night, but in the end, someone actually heard me and was there for me." Who would have thought that sending a text about how you're feeling at 9 or 10 p.m. would result in a transformative moment or potentially save your life?

I remember telling my dad about that experience, because it had been challenging for us to provide that

crisis report. My dad said, "You know, a lot of times these kids don't have people who they can talk to, who are going to support them, or they feel just hopeless with the world, and you both literally made the world move for that girl that night." And I realized there are so many other kids who may be having moments like this and don't know there's someone there to listen and support them. It just changed my perception of how this model could work.

What does success look like for MindRight—long-term and short-term?

AL: The long-term goal is changing systems and institutions. Success would look like more schools and districts, especially in underserved communities, switching to trauma-informed models—investing time and resources in psychological and emotional support for youth. A large part of our work is partnering with schools and organizations to help them understand the needs of students experiencing high levels of trauma and how to support them. For example, the first time we created a report, we did a trauma screen of one of our school partners and provided that data to schools so they could actually see students' ACE (Adverse Childhood Experience) scores, an evidence-based measure of the number of adverse childhood experiences that they've had, and it was a powerful experience. It's one thing for schools to generally acknowledge that their students have trauma, but another to actually see the numbers. Thinking about how we can be change-makers on the systems level is something we're continuing to build our brand around. So far, we've been really fortunate to have partners who are true partners. They understand that the transition to a trauma-informed school model is not easy, but they recognize that it's crucial for the whole well-being of their students.

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In the short term, we track success as student uptake and engagement. We want to know how long students are using MindRight and how active they are on it. In addition to usage, we also look at numbers that help us make sure we're actually making a difference for the students. This includes tracking improvement on a variety of adolescent psychological surveys we ask students to take. As we continue to partner with schools, we also plan on tracking how MindRight usage improves the attendance and behavioral data that schools are already collecting. We want to connect the dots to show how helping students heal and develop positive coping skills has a direct effect on their educational outcomes, which have significant impacts on other lifetime outcomes.

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As you think about the future of MindRight, what's on the horizon for your organization and how will it inform your long-term legacy?

AL: We have a big vision for the future and we're working our butts off to pursue our vision. However, we're always thinking tactically and strategically about how we grow. So currently we are focused on key locations. We want to be deep and immersive in every community we serve, balancing our growth trajectory and quality. Over the next year or two, we want to go deeper into the communities we're already in. We want to have a significant impact on the individual and systems level, then be able to grow from there.

Right now, there's some momentum around the culture of mental health,

including in communities of color. We've seen celebrities speak about their own mental health experiences. By being vulnerable, they're changing what it means to talk openly about mental health. There's growing recognition around the impact of trauma on kids' academic and life outcomes. There's a movement of people and organizations talking about making schools common forums for open discussions on issues related to mental health. These are all discussions we are excited to take part in in the immediate future.

> *"Whatever you believe in or are passionate about, be unapologetic about it ...* ***When you're aiming for a long-term impact, you can't be halfway.****"*

As we grow, our ambition is ultimately to change how communities invest in historically underserved youth, so that every student gets the opportunities and resources they need to reach their full potential. There are millions of students and young people who could benefit from MindRight. We want to leverage the data we collect to help schools, districts, and cities understand the investments that can be made to end cycles of intergenerational trauma.

Ultimately, I hope that there's not even a need for MindRight anymore. I hope that our services shift from helping people heal from historical trauma to being purely preventive. We want to have eliminated the systems and structures that cause trauma in the first place.

What advice do you have for other young leaders hoping to create their own legacy in the making?

AE: Whatever you believe in or are passionate about, be unapologetic about it. Just sink a stake in the ground and commit to that. When you're aiming for a long-term impact, you can't be halfway.

AL: I echo that absolutely. Take a stand. Taking a stand on something you believe in means you're going to turn off some people, and that's fine. You can't appeal to everyone.

Moreover, you have to choose who you are serving, understand their needs, and design your solution for *them*. Don't lose sight of *their* needs. Don't assume that you know what's best or that you know what your users feel or need. Go out there and talk to them. Bring the people you're trying to serve in, make them part of your team, and keep their voices present.

With an unapologetic mission and specific set of brand values, Ashley Edwards and Alina Liao are writing an intentional modern legacy for MindRight. As the organization has grown, the cofounders have been strategic about partnering with community-based organizations, schools, and most important the youth they serve, to work toward systemic change in mental health support for youth of color. Through MindRight, Edwards and Liao provide more than day-to-day psychological and emotional support; they empower youth to break cycles of intergenerational trauma and write new legacies for themselves and their communities.

THIS ARTICLE IS PART OF A SPECIAL SERIES OF INTERVIEWS WITH THE HONOREES OF THE INAUGURAL NEW LEGACY MAKERS' SHOWCASE, A PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN THE LEGACY LAB AND THE DISRUPTOR FOUNDATION TO HONOR THE NEXT GENERATION OF YOUNG LEADERS CHANGING THE WORLD FOR THE BETTER.

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