

Lexington Girl Scout educates local children about mental health

Sarah Liu created the Firefly Project, which offers seminars to elementary school students, after struggling with her own issues.

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Sarah Liu, a freshman at University of California, Berkeley, started the Firefly Project in 2020. SARAH LIU

Like so many other teens, Sarah Liu was insecure with her self-image. And as a student at Lexington High School, she found the pressure of rigorous classwork just adding to her stress and anxiety.

But Liu found comfort knowing she wasn't alone. Her peers were struggling to maintain their mental health, too, and despite the school's efforts to help, students continued to have a hard time.

Liu, 18, realized many of her peers had trouble addressing their struggles because of the stigma about mental health issues. To attack the problem, Liu is working to ensure the next generation of elementary school students doesn't internalize the same stigmas through the [Firefly Project](#), an ongoing Girl Scout project she started in 2020.

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Throughout 2021, Liu conducted 30 virtual seminars focused on age-appropriate mental health education with more than 200 elementary school-aged attendees across 12 states. As a result of her efforts, she is part of the 2022 Gold Award Class — the most prestigious award in girl scouting. Liu received the Gold Award scholarship, and earned recognition on local and national levels.

“Mental health education usually begins when you're in high school after you've internalized all of this stigma,” said Liu, now a freshman at the University of California, Berkeley. “So I thought that if younger children could be targeted by accurate information, then that could stop the stigma before it starts and people could gain a healthier view towards mental health.”

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Barbara Fortier, CEO of Girl Scouts of Eastern Massachusetts, said Liu's project is special because of the mental health crisis facing children and teens. With the help of about 10 other students, Liu created the Firefly Project — symbolizing the students' ability to create collective change by each contributing their own light — as the pandemic exacerbated mental health struggles for many. Fortier said the project is injected with a unique sense of

passion and dedication because it centers on a problem that Liu has struggled with personally.

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“I cannot think of a more amazing example of courage, confidence, and character to tackle something [when Liu] has probably faced some of the stigmas that she’s trying to eliminate,” Fortier said. “To have that kind of courage and determination to help other people, it’s just a testament to the depth and the breadth of her character.”

Fortier said young women like Liu are inspiring for their deep dedication to improving their communities, and that Girl Scouts like Liu often become lifelong movers and shakers.

“Our Gold Award girls tend to drive a little harder, they push themselves farther,” Fortier said. “What they do, it’s just fascinating.”

To ensure the Firefly Project’s informative seminars were age-appropriate, accurate, and engaging, Liu interviewed child therapists and 10 elementary school teachers. With their guidance and input from other students involved in her project, she produced a curriculum educating children on topics including body image, stress, self-esteem, sexual orientation, depression, and more, and demonstrated the material to youth groups using slideshow presentations.

Liu said she plans to continue hosting local seminars with youth in her college community after witnessing the change in perception her seminars already fostered for young children. At the beginning of a seminar with 8- and 9-year-old attendees, Liu said the children’s understanding of mental health issues was “when you’re insane and you have to be kept lying on a bed in a hospital all the time.”

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By the end of the seminar, the children understood that problems can be “caused by chemical imbalances in the brain, as well as environmental factors. And [that] there’s medications and treatment plans for people who struggle with mental health issues,” Liu said.

Those who want to schedule a free Firefly Project presentation can reach Liu at contact.fireflyproject@gmail.com.

Liu said she's honored her project has gained visibility, and she hopes her success will empower other women and Girl Scouts to pursue their passions and make a difference in their own communities.

"I really hope to use my platform to show other young women that their visions can be brought to life," Liu said. "I think if there's something that you're passionate about, there's always something that you can do, no matter how big or small."