Letters to Strangers

Annual Report
2022
Introduction

*Letters to Strangers* (L2S) is an award-winning, global youth-run mental health organization seeking to destigmatize mental illness and increase access to affordable, quality treatment through 1) anonymous letter-writing exchanges 2) science-informed peer education curricula 3) grassroots policy-based advocacy. Based in California but active with Chapters and Partner Sites on six continents, L2S is the largest youth-for-youth mental health nonprofit, with over 35,000 people impacted every year.

Most mental health organizations are not for youth or run by youth. *L2S is here to change that.*
Our Origin

When I was 13 years old, I found out I had bipolar disorder. Not long after, I attempted suicide. I was saved by my younger brother on what is by far the worst day of my life. As a first-generation immigrant to the U.S. from the poorest province in China, growing up under the poverty line with parents who didn’t speak English, “mental healthcare” didn’t exist in my vocabulary. So I turned to writing. As I wrote letters to no one, the words stayed afloat. Gushed forth. I no longer wanted to throw them away; for the very first time, I recognized my voice. I realized that I have a story worth telling – and a life worth living. That writing is humanity distilled into ink.

Determined to never let anyone experience the gut-shaking, bone-rattling pain I swallowed down for so long, I started Letters to Strangers in my sophomore (second-year) fall of high school in Southern California. The year was 2013*. And the rest is herstory.

-Diana Chao, Founder & Executive Director

*We received official nonprofit status years later, so our legal age is younger
A Look Back

the 2022 edition
Letters to Strangers has...

“saved me, given me purpose, brought me community, and enveloped me in love. I couldn’t have asked for anything more.”

– Aarushi K., president of L2S+India

“really helped me (and our members) become better at expressing our emotions through writing and create a community where we feel like we can talk about anything without being judged. I’ve learned how to be more empathetic and have refined my interpersonal skills.”

– Diya T., president of L2S+Hawks (Florida)

“[taught me] the importance of putting yourself in others’ shoes. You never know what your peers may be going through, so it is of the utmost importance to show them compassion.”

– Lily K., president of L2S+Lafayette (California)
MENTAL HEALTH EDUCATION
By letters to strangers
THE NUMBERS

10,000
high school students on track to be taught our mental health curriculum in Nepal with Sambhavya Foundation

35,000+
individuals directly impacted annually, focusing on sustained, long-term support & education

20,000+
letters exchanged, including through our free online public platform
$20,000 USD
awarded in scholarships for mental health education, advocacy, and treatment, including $10K to Princeton students from alumni

200+
minutes of free mental health educational videos, written, created, and edited entirely by students

7,000+
attendees of our mental health workshops, from IKEA to the Athens (Greece) Science Festival

75%
of those receiving scholarships are of low-income background

50%
of those receiving scholarships cited cultural stigma and barriers as restricting their access to care

70%
of those receiving scholarships identified as Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color

1st clinical study of our own, run on university campuses with internationally-renowned medical professionals

12 rooms in our new two-story, full-service Mental Health Resource Center open 24/7 in Monrovia, Liberia

14%
of those receiving scholarships identified as a member of the LGBTQ+ community

5,000+
calls to our 24/7 Pan-African Mental Health Hotline, toll-free at 9898. First of its kind
This year, we expanded our affiliated countries to include Chapters in Tanzania, Rwanda, Zambia, Turkey, and Mozambique and Partner Sites in Nepal.
Where We Were Featured...

about mental health, climate change, racial equity, and their intersectionalities
…part 2!
“WHY DON’T YOU EVER LISTEN TO ME?!”

YOUTH & MENTAL HEALTH
PART THREE
The What

so what do we do, exactly?
The Problem

- COVID-19 pandemic led to a 25% increase in depression and anxiety, disproportionately affecting young people and women
- 50% of lifetime mental illnesses begin by age 14 and 75% by age 24
- 37% of students with a mental health condition drop out of school – the highest dropout rate of any disability group
- Suicide is the 4th leading cause of death in the world for ages 15 to 29, and rates increased by 60% worldwide in 45 years
- More than 700,000 people die by suicide worldwide every year
- Serious mental illness costs the U.S. $193.2 billion in lost earnings every year—more money than Jeff Bezos and Bill Gates combined. Imagine the total global cost!
- Only 28 countries worldwide have a suicide prevention strategy
- The Digital Age’s hyperconnected overstimulation introduces concerns that old solutions cannot adequately address.

We need something reflective of the world today. That starts with asking the people who have the biggest stake: the youth.
Our Solution

**Letter Exchanges**
Our unique, therapy-informed anonymous handwritten letter-writing exchange program connects youths through Chapters, Partner Sites, and a free online platform with themes, guides, and discussions.

**Peer Education**
From the world’s first youth-for-youth mental health guidebook to our science-backed S.I.M.P.L.E. and E.M.P.A.T.H.I.Z.I.N.G. approaches to mental health, our resources & workshops are designed for impact.

**Policy-Based Advocacy**
From re-introducing a bill in the U.S. Congress to involving our Chapters in policy advocacy in their communities through hotlines and peer-led reform, our Chapters make strides where they are.
Dear Stranger,

Just in case no one has told you recently, YOU ARE LOVED!! Even when things get rough, do not forget that promise that there is light at the end of the tunnel. Some days I do not want to get out of bed, I just lack motivation; lifting myself up and think of all the happy things there are like my friends and family! What makes YOU happy? I wish you love, happiness, and lots of good days for you! Love, a stranger ☺️
Key Points

- In the U.S. alone, 80% of youth with severe depression receive little to no treatment. Many nations have fewer than 10 psychiatrists.

- Art therapy has been scientifically proven to work, esp. across languages. Our exchanges are based on its themes and guiding questions.

- Exchanges conclude each time with trained-peer-led group discussions and debriefs, incorporating elements of peer support as well as self-reflection through letter-writing.

- Rather than a pen pal approach, we take a message in a bottle format: letters are sent out and received, but there is no guarantee that the writer and reader received each other’s letters. This eases the fear of not knowing the exact right thing to say, reduces assumptions & stereotypes that can impact one’s empathy, and gives people the chance to reinvent their own voice by writing to new people as they figure themselves out.

- In June 2020, we launched a free online letter exchange portal coded entirely by undergraduate students, with badges, safety-first moderation, journaling, and customization systems.

- 10,000 letters per year and 1000+ letters per month are exchanged by Chapters and by non-affiliated individuals through our free online submission portal, respectively.

- The activity is simple enough that anyone can get involved – even those far removed from the mental health conversation.
Peer Education
Key Points

• Our 80000-word World’s First Youth-for-Youth Mental Health Guidebook was written entirely by 14- to 21-year-olds and reviewed by medical and industry professionals. It is free to download in black & white online

• The Guidebook received endorsements from the former VP of Yale-NUS college, former HR director at Bain Capital, National Alliance on Mental Illness’s Chief Medical Officer, Terry Crews, Earl Charles Spencer, and more

• Four print runs have sold out (1000+ physical copies) and a supplementary teacher’s curriculum handbook was released in December 2021 for adoption in classrooms worldwide

• A supplementary Mental Health Certification Exam is required for all our members who wish to teach mental health educational workshops

• Mental health workshops are facilitated to thousands of people every year, including more who are educated online through our intensively-researched free webinars and class-lesson-length videos.

• We focus on intersectionality and mental health. Our Guidebook includes the first deep dive into race, ethnicity, and mental health in the U.S. in over 20 years since the U.S. Surgeon General’s Report in 1999.

• We work with school systems and libraries across the world to introduce our curriculum to students and educators, such as Chicago Public Schools, high schools across Nepal with the Sambhaya Foundation, and more.
Advocacy

Diana is a first-generation Chinese-American immigrant who is working to de-stigmatize mental illness, particularly among immigrant families, and increase access to affordable, quality treatment for teenagers.
Key Points

- Created & expanded the first pan-African mental health hotline, toll-free at 9898. Operated by our Liberia Chapter at our new Monrovia L2S Mental Health Resource Center, now the largest youth mental health hub/service in the country.

- The hotline is available 24/7 for callers in Liberia and 7 AM to 6 PM GMT for all other African callers. It is run by trained volunteers, peers, and mental health professionals and has the support of the Liberian Ministry of Health.

- We worked with U.S. Representative Judy Chu (D-CA-27) to reintroduce the Stop Mental Health Stigma in Our Communities Act.

- We run two annual global scholarships worth over $10,000 USD and provide additional healthcare funding to specific donor-designated school systems.

- Our Pakistan Chapter brought the first mental health professional to their school.

- Our Princeton University Chapter created the first Mental Health Access Guide for its students and conducted a campus-wide survey on mental health needs that was utilized by Counseling and Psychological Services.

- Our Rutgers University Honors College Chapter created their school’s first student Mental Health Task Force.

- Our Zimbabwe Chapter (in Mutare and Chipinge District) provides trained-peer mental health support, partnering with the Police Department’s Victory Friendly Unit to reduce people’s fears by emphasizing peer outreach over police intervention.

- Our Greece Chapter translates educational materials and travels around the country to teach and advocate at secondary schools and universities.
The How

what are our strategies and plans?
Target Audience

Talking about mental health matters not because of everyone who cares, but because of everyone who doesn’t.

The EveryPerson

Our letter-writing exchange program is uniquely designed to attract both those with mental health concerns and those far removed from them. The emotional content level of the letters are fully scalable, and the wide range of topics covered reminds individuals that they are not alone—all the while reinforcing the diversity of mental health experiences through heartfelt, educational anecdotes.

Youth 13 to 24

The United Nations defines youth as those aged between 15 and 24. We include all teenagers to arrive at 13 to 24*. Some of the most life-defining experiences unfold between middle school and college, after all. Navigating adolescence in the digital world amidst increasingly sensationalized and violent storytelling requires an empathetic space to feel, discuss, and grow. With our peer group structure, anonymous nature, and youth-led awareness of unfiltered reality, we believe all young people can benefit from the programs of L2S.

*We do not require someone to be within this age range to participate in or benefit from L2S programs, but this is the age range to which most of our team members & audience belong.
Our Advantages

We offer what has been missing

Our Humble Model

As a nonprofit, our goal is to maximize impact. Our most simple programming can be sustained on a very small budget (letter-writing requires only stationery, writing tools, envelopes, and stamps), but more funds don’t go to waste. Instead, our programming is designed to be flexible and scalable to address access and educational gaps as funding helps support trainings, hotline costs, resource centers, and other programs. It’s the ease with which one can get started with Letters to Strangers that speaks to the power of our multi-pronged, ground-up movement: any young person who cares can make a difference.

Why We Stand Out

• We were the first global, equity & inclusion-focused, youth-for-youth mental health organization in existence when we formed almost 10 years ago

• We address all key facets of mental wellness: self-reflection with our letters, education & support with our peer groups and research, and access with our policy-based advocacy

• We are completely youth-led, so the people we talk to know they can trust us to understand. We remind them of their own power. We don’t just speak or inform: we show them what follows.
# 2023 Growth Strategy

## Outreach & Awareness
- Community-centered media to inform the public of the intersectionalities within mental health. **Launching a digital magazine and podcast “Lessons from Strangers”** tackling decoloniality, conflict zones, feminism, and more with media, influencer, and campus-based campaigns

## Org & Program Expansion
- Formalize our “Mentors Advisory Board” and shadowing/training program to ensure continuity in our program quality as people grow
- Expand our translations team to bring our free educational materials to more communities and train new Chapters

## Scholarships & Access
- Continue scholarships for mental health care & education
- Push for our [curriculum](#) to be distributed in more schools with translation efforts
- Partner with leading academics to complete our clinical study on intervention methods
Marketing & Sales Strategy

Services

- Monetize our upcoming magazine and podcast with limited ads and print/digital copies for sale
- Use a choose-your-best-option model for the Guidebook & Handbook to continue offering resources for free while generating income with prints
- Provide consultancy and education to commercial corporations
- Sell merchandise on our online store

Donations

- Our donor program includes special offers for recurring or large donations
- Our dedicated grant trainees search for and apply to relevant opportunities
- We’ll introduce donation opportunities for the zine and podcast
- Our Chapters engage in income-generating ideas such as leasing idle office spaces or running a mini-mart

Press & Presence

- Leverage media relationships to elevate our presence, increasing merchandise sales and donations
- Collaborate with brands and other advocacy groups to introduce and expand each others’ audiences
- Continue our cross-continent tour in Africa and create more frequent virtual events for different time zones
Preview

Magazine

Our new zine will be available in digital & print versions and tackle mental health intersectionalities.

Learn more now at lessonsfromstrangers.org

Podcast

Our zine is accompanied by a themed podcast of the same name. The first episode on decolonizing psychology is out now with Professor Geetha Reddy.

Listen now at anchor.fm/lessons-from-strangers
Money Matters

how did our 2022 go?
## Balance Sheet/Statement of Financial Position

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Asset Type</th>
<th>FY 2022 ($ USD)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Revenue</td>
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<tr>
<td>Program Expenses</td>
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<td>Long-Term Expenses</td>
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<td>Total Expenses</td>
<td>102,988</td>
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<tr>
<td>Balance</td>
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2022 Income

- Services: 2%
- Donations: 30%
- Store Sales: 3%
- Grants: 64%
- Other: 1%

*Services indicates income from providing education and consultancy to commercial corporations*
2022 Expenditures

- Chapters Programming: 53%
- Compensation: 15%
- Scholarships: 15%
- Products Production: 8%
- Utilities: 3%
- Legal: 1%
- Third-Party Services: 2%
- Other: 3%

*Third-Party Services include amounts spent on domain hosting, data storage, and other essential costs*
Money Matters 2.0(23)

what are our forecasts for **2023**?
## 2023 Financial Forecasts

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Asset Type</th>
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<td>Program Expenses</td>
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<td>Long-Term Expenses</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total Expenses</td>
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<tr>
<td>Balance</td>
<td>19,100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2023 Income Forecast

- Chapters: 5%
- Donations: 31%
- Store Sales: 3%
- Grants: 57%
- Services: 4%

*Chapters indicates income from Chapter fundraising efforts*
The Who

so who makes all of this happen?
Our Team

Diana Chao
Founder & Executive Director
Honors B.A. from Princeton University, incoming University of Oxford Masters’ Student, Former UN IPCC Climate Scientist, Former Crisis Counselor @ National Suicide Prevention Hotline, White House Honoree, Princess Diana Legacy Award, L’Oreal Paris Women of Worth, Oprah Mag Health Hero.

Dan Kanceljak
Chief Outreach Officer
Recent Masters Graduate in Psychology of Mental Health from University of Edinburgh with Distinction, B.A. in Politics from Sciences Po with Merit. Resident Croat and social science researcher with experience in the charity, podcast, and fundraising spaces.

Helen Chen
Chief Content Officer
Princeton Computer Science Undergraduate ’22. Former L2S+Princeton University Chapter board member and events task force leader. Graphic designer and coder by training and experience. Former Facebook software engineer.
Other Key Team Members

Clayton Becker
Chief Learning Officer

Sabahat Ali Wani
Co-Magazine Editor

Pearl Lee
Chief Volunteer Coordinator

Reuben Reeves
West Africa Ambassador

Aarushi Kataria
India Coordinator

Darya Sanai
Grant Writer
Dear Stranger,

It would be improper for us to sign off without a letter.

Love,

Stranger
dear stranger!!

One person I regret not talking more to was my Nan. Granted, she didn’t speak much English and I didn’t speak much Tongan as I was like 7 but still. I look at pictures of her in the hospital and it makes my heart hurt that I didn’t know her like my mother did. I regret not being taught Tongan as my first language, and being able to have full conversations. But I know that she loved me very much. I remember going to her house every weekend and watching her make me the sugariest milky tea, with white loaf of bread from the local bakery smeared with butter and jam. Yum. I also remember her dentures floating in a container of water whenever I went in the bathroom. I just miss her energy and warmth so much. Even though we couldn’t speak each other’s language, we could understand that we both held immense love for each other. I hope that she watches over me and is proud of the person I’m becoming. When I was sad she made me food and held me. When she was sick, she still held me. I think that was the difference between her and I; when I was sick, I felt like I didn’t have any more love to give, But with her, she had even more.

From now on, I think I’ll take a deep breath every time I find myself to be proud of something, and smile to myself (just to remind myself of my nan’s signature thing: dentures and smiles haha).

ofa atu stranger!

August, 2022
Thank You!

Thank you so much for your support this past year and in the year to come! We would not be where we are without your faith and championship. Letters to Strangers has been by far one of my life’s most humbling journeys, and I hope to do it justice. We are welcoming 2023 with the utmost excitement and dedication. Here’s to making this a year of change, growth, and sustainability. Here’s to youth mental health!

Diana Chao
Founder & Executive Director
Follow Us & Contact Us!

- **Website:** [www.LetterstoStrangers.org](http://www.LetterstoStrangers.org)
- **Email:** [hi@letterstostrangers.org](mailto:hi@letterstostrangers.org)
- **Social Media:** [@L2SMentalHealth](https://twitter.com/L2SMentalHealth)
- **YouTube:** [www.youtube.com/c/LetterstoStrangersMH](http://www.youtube.com/c/LetterstoStrangersMH)
- **DONATE:** [www.letterstostrangers.org/donate](http://www.letterstostrangers.org/donate)