The background is a light cream color with several hand-drawn envelopes in various orientations. Each envelope is outlined in brown with a yellow heart on the flap. A central white rectangular box with a thin red border contains the text. Two thick black horizontal bars extend from the left and right edges of the box.

# Letters to Strangers

Annual Report  
2023

# Introduction

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**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 **45,000 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, 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 that same pain, I started Letters to Strangers in my sophomore year 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



# 10 years: A reflection

Last year, Letters to Strangers celebrated our 10-year anniversary with [a special day of celebration featuring three guest panels](#) and a big giveaway.

I think the responsible thing to do is to tell you about all the beautiful, wonderful things that we've done over the last ten years as awe erupts all over my heart. And I will. But I also want to pay tribute to that little girl who learned English through Pixie Hollow adventures and overdue Amelia Bedelia audiobooks. Who wrote more with pen than pencil because she ruined too many papers with her erasers. Who passcode-locked her notebook only to tear it open to see every entry left unfinished, waiting for someone else's words. Because she felt so alone.

Letters to Strangers, the accidental miracle of my life, taught me I never was alone. That pain was not the synonym for life. It *cannot* be the synonym for life.

Stranger, you showed me that a decade is just the beginning in this adventure I am still learning to call mine. A dream is mine until it is ours. Then the cloak you gave me covers us both. Rain still falls, but it slips off like a lie. Under the cloak we are dry. We are safe. We are alive.

Thank you. Who knows where the next 10 years will lead us, but together, I'm not afraid at all.

-Diana Chao



60,000+ letters	exchanged, including creating an <a href="#">online platform for the public to use</a>
23 U.S. states 72 countries	with programs implemented via over 100 Chapters
> half a million people	impacted, including 45K attendees at 400+ workshops with an average rating of 4.95/5
\$50,000 USD	awarded in <a href="#">scholarships</a> for mental health-related higher education, treatment access, and personal advocacy worldwide with over 80% going toward marginalized communities

*A few highlights of the last decade*

---

# A Look Back

the **2023** edition







L2S RANGI X I AM HOPE



3. My parents and my relatives are different from me. (महानज्वालाहरूले मलाई भन्दा फरक छन्।)

Yes (हो) / No (नै)

5. Where should one go when you are sick? (जुन जुन ठाउँमा जानुपर्छ?)

Traditional Faith healers (प्राणी, भातनी)  
 Primary Health Center (प्राथमिक स्वास्थ्य केन्द्र)  
 Hospital/Medical (हस्पिटल/मेडिकल)  
 Psychologist (मानसिक चिकित्सक)

9. I have had a problem with my teachers and friends. (मलाई मेरा शिक्षक/सहपाठीहरूसँग समस्या भएको छ।)

Yes (हो) / No (नै)

10. Social media has a bad effect on my mental health. (सोसल मिडियाले मेरो मानसिक स्वास्थ्यमा बुरो असर गर्छ।)

Yes (हो) / No (नै)

11. Whenever I have a problem, I talk to my teachers and friends. (मलाई कसै समस्या पर्दा मैले मेरा शिक्षक/सहपाठीहरूसँग कुरा गर्छु।)

Yes (हो) / No (नै)

12. What do you understand by Mental Health is? (मानसिक स्वास्थ्यको अर्थ के हो?)

शुद्धता, शान्ति, खुसी, स्वास्थ्य, सम्बन्ध, आत्मनिर्भरता, आत्मनिर्भरता, आत्मनिर्भरता

# THE NUMBERS

20,000

high school students educated with our mental health **curriculum** in Nepal with [Sambhavya Foundation](#)

45,000

individuals impacted in the **past year** across Chapters and partnerships in

21

countries

20,000+

**letters** exchanged, including through our free online public [platform](#)



\$11,000 USD

awarded in global  
**scholarships** for mental health  
education, advocacy, and  
treatment

Government

of Liberia has officially added  
our hotline to the **national  
budget**, supported by the  
Ministry of Health

10,000+

individuals supported by our  
**Pan-African Mental Health  
Hotline**, toll-free at **9898**. First  
of its kind

21

Chapters expanded on 5  
continents

4 million

students can access free videos,  
notes, and quizzes on robust  
mental health basics through  
our partnership with Z-Notes

150

minutes of new, free  
educational video content  
created

9

detailed recommendations put  
forth in our creation of the  
**Mental Health Sustainable  
Development Goals**

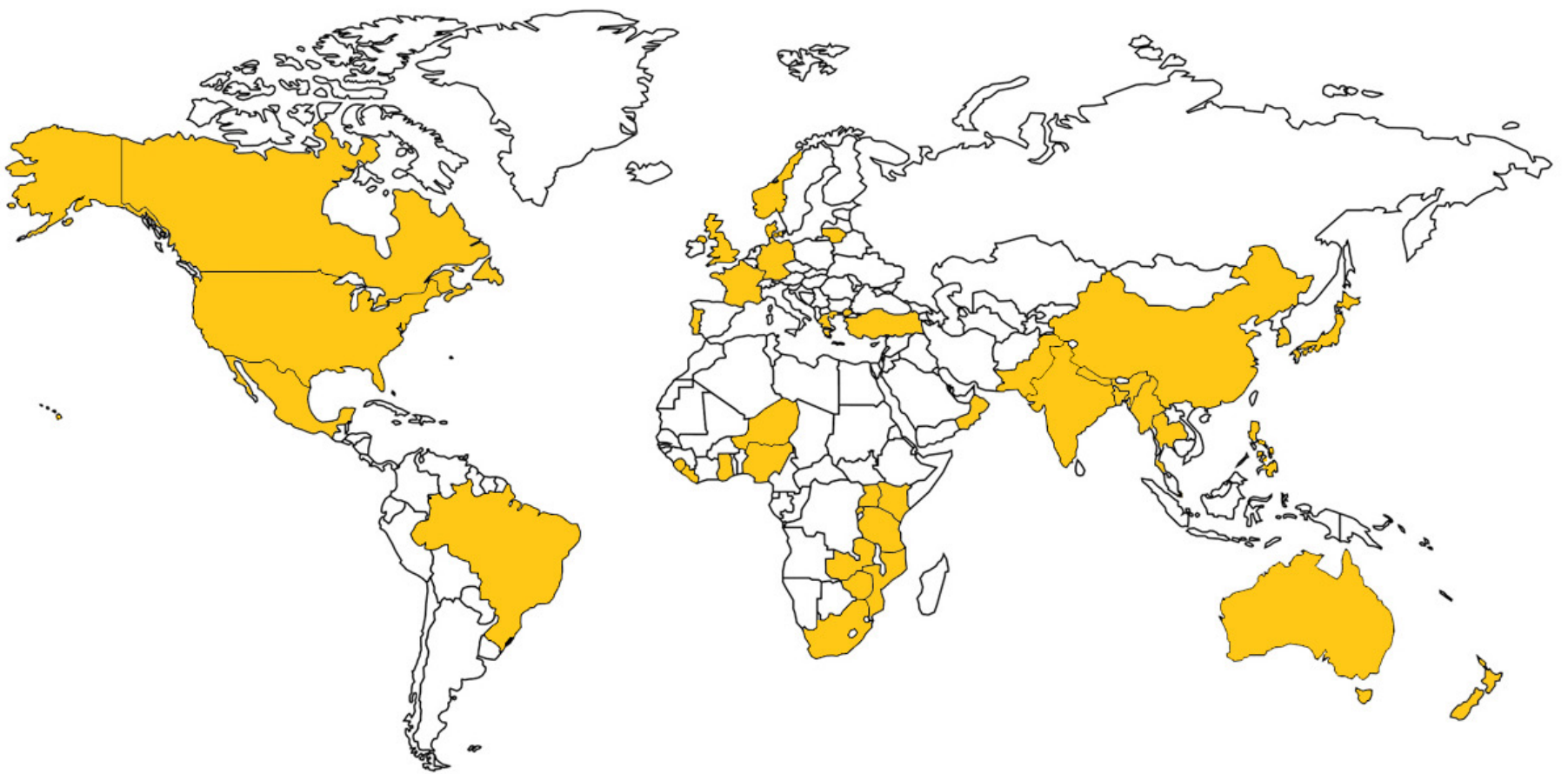
Doubled

the number of students  
educated with our mental  
health curriculum in Nepal  
from projection (10K → 20K)

1<sup>st</sup>

**magazine and podcast** of  
our own, “Lessons from  
Strangers”, themed around  
decolonizing mental health  
with submissions worldwide

# Where We've Worked





## Where We Were Featured...

about mental health, climate change, racial equity, and their intersectionalities

L'ORÉAL  
PARIS

 The New Zealand Herald

yahoo!

skoll

  
ZURICH®

 ANNUAL  
REVIEWS



COLUMBIA  
UNIVERSITY

 MISSOURI BEHAVIORAL  
HEALTH COUNCIL

 MHA  
Mental Health America



  
Otsuka



 UNIVERSITY OF  
OXFORD

MDRT  
The Premier Association of  
Financial Professionals®



## Letters to Strangers made me realize..

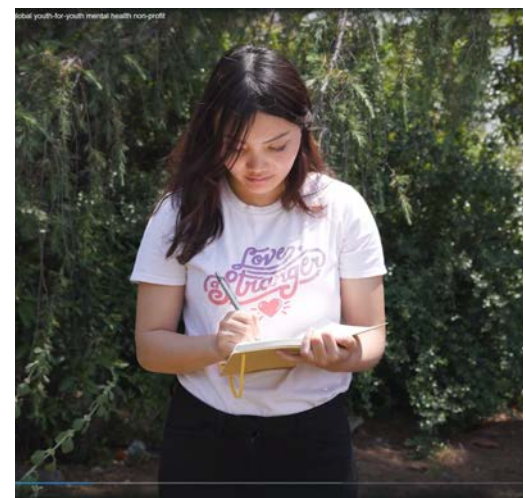
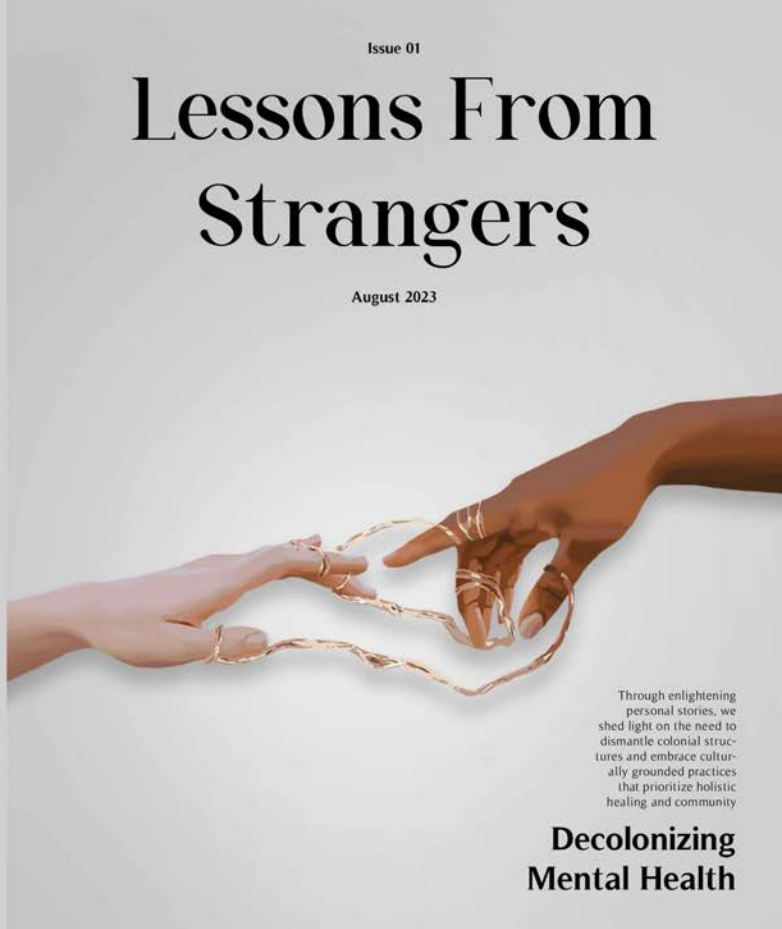
“The importance of empathy in action. Writing letters to strangers requires putting oneself in another's shoes, which can deepen understanding and compassion for others' experiences and struggles. Working with L2S highlights the strength found in community. Whether it's support from fellow volunteers, the wider organization, or the recipients of letters, it shows how collective efforts can amplify impact and provide mutual support. Engaging in letter writing taught me the profound impact words can have on individuals. It teaches that kindness, encouragement, and even simple acknowledgment can significantly affect someone's mental health and outlook.”

– *Sylvester B., L2S+Columbia*


“Creating safe spaces for people to talk about their mental health is not enough if there is not an enabling environment for a brave space as well. Together we made our contribution towards a safer and more resilient world.”

– *Nanabanyin A. M., L2S+Ghana*







A top-down photograph of a white coffee cup filled with dark coffee, sitting on a light green placemat. To the right of the cup is a bouquet of pink roses with green leaves and stems. The background is a plain, light-colored surface. A semi-transparent white rectangular box with a thin red border is centered over the image, containing the text.

# The What

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so what do we do, exactly?



# The Problem

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- COVID-19 led to a 25% increase in depression and anxiety, disproportionately affecting youth 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
- More than 700,000 people die by suicide worldwide *every year*
- 1/2 of all countries in the world have fewer than 1 psychiatrist per 100,000 residents
- 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

**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, **art therapy-informed anonymous handwritten** letter-writing exchange program connects youths through Chapters, Partner Sites, and a free online platform with themes, guides, and trained peer-led 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 to be actionable and *remembered.*



## 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



24

Dear Stranger,

What's your favorite food? Yesterday, I had the most amazing burger at a Cuban joint called First Burritos. I don't think there's anything better than some good food on a nice night - do you agree? This summer, I hope I can learn how to cook well. I grew up eating my father's cooking, and now that I'm in my first year of university, I really miss his food. One day, I hope I can make someone happy with my food too! What did you grow up eating? Sometimes, I like closing my eyes and reminiscing about my childhood favorites - you should give it a try as well!

Sometimes life is really stressful. Recently, it's definitely been tough on my end, and I'm sure that a lot of other people have it rough as well, but it feels isolating sometimes because you rarely hear about the not-so-fun parts of people's lives. So let's get through this together! Since this is a letter from a stranger, we probably won't be in contact after this, but I sincerely am wishing you the best & am rooting for your success!

All the best,  
A stranger



## Kia ora!

Isolation and loneliness amongst elderly populations is growing.

This Postcard Picnic is your opportunity to write a heartfelt message for a lonely resident in a local rest home. It's a simple way for you to share a little bit of cheer and joy with them.

It's easy to get involved:

- 1 100 postcards are included in this Postcard Picnic pack. Each of these features a design, piece of art, or photograph from a young person. Your first step is to grab a handful of cards and a pen.

Once you've found yourself a comfy spot, it's time to get writing. Your job now is to write a kind message on the back of the postcard, letting the rest home resident know that you're thinking of them.

Take your time, as you develop a thoughtful message that a lonely resident may like to read. You may like to use the following question prompts to get started:

- 2
  - Who are you? What do you do?
  - What are some of your hobbies?
  - What's your favourite joke?
  - What's the best thing you've ever learnt?
  - What are some of your favourite memories?

Although you may like to sign the card off with your name, make sure you don't reveal any personal details. And, try to keep your message bright and uplifting - our goal is to spread joy!

- 3 At a later date, your postcards will be hand-delivered to local rest homes, for lonely residents to enjoy. But for now, you can be proud of your incredible efforts! In that small amount of time, you have brightened someone else's day, and made a massive difference in your community. Well done!

# Letter-Writing

# Key Points

- In the U.S. alone, 80% of youth with severe depression receive little to no treatment. Art therapy has been scientifically proven to work, esp. across languages. Our exchanges are based on its **themes** and **guiding questions**
- 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
- 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
- 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.
- The activity is simple enough that anyone can get involved – even those far removed from the mental health conversation





# Peer Education

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# 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
- Six print runs have sold out (**1500+ physical copies**) and a **supplementary teacher's curriculum handbook** was released in December 2021 for adoption in classrooms worldwide
- 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.
- Mental health **workshops** are facilitated **to 1000s of people** every year, including **more** who are educated online through our research-based free webinars and class-lesson-length videos.





# Advocacy

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# Key Points

- Created & expanded the **first pan-African mental health hotline**, toll-free at **9898**. Operated by our Liberia Chapter at our Monrovia Mental Health Resource Center, the largest youth mental health service in the country now backed by the 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 worldwide, the first of its kind to support mental health workforce diversity, growth, and advocacy since over 5 years ago
- Chapters also advocate for changes. Highlights include:
  - Our Princeton University Chapter creating the first [Mental Health Access Guide](#) for its students and conducting a campus-wide **survey** on mental health needs that was utilized by Counseling and Psychological Services
  - Our [Greece Chapter](#) **translating** educational materials and traveling around the country to **teach and advocate** at secondary schools and universities





# The How

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what are our **strategies** and **plans**?

# Target Audience

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*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, though we do often go up to 30 to match other international definitions of youth\*. Some of the most life-defining experiences unfold between middle school and early career, after all. Navigating growth 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

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*We offer what has been missing*

## Our Humble Model

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 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 **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.***

# 2024 Growth Strategy

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## Outreach & Awareness

- Community-centered media to inform the public of the intersectionalities within mental health. **Leverage our digital magazine and podcast “*Lessons from Strangers*”** and create more campaigns with media partners and influencer relationships

## Org & Program Expansion

- Transform our award-winning curriculum into a **workplace-friendly module** to bring mental health education to more communities
- Onboard new regional ambassadors and conduct **in-person meet-ups** to facilitate international collaboration

## Scholarships & Access

- Complete preliminary analysis of our **clinical study** on intervention methods with USC researchers
- Continue **scholarships** for mental health care & education
- Advocate for our **curriculum** to be distributed in more schools with translation efforts



# Marketing & Sales Strategy

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## Services

- Provide **consultancy** and **education** to for-profits, including our new spin-off **workplace module**
- **Monetize** our **magazine** and **podcast** with ads and sales
- Use a **choose-your-best-option** model for the Guidebook & Handbook to generate **income** with prints alongside free option
- Sell **merchandise** on [online store](#)

## Donations

- Utilize our **public-facing, online** letter exchange platform's reach to drive more donations
- Leverage our **advisory board** to discover relevant funding opportunities
- Engage in **income-generating ideas** such as leasing idle office spaces through Chapters

## 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
- Build additional hotline hubs across Africa and create more frequent **virtual events** for different time zones

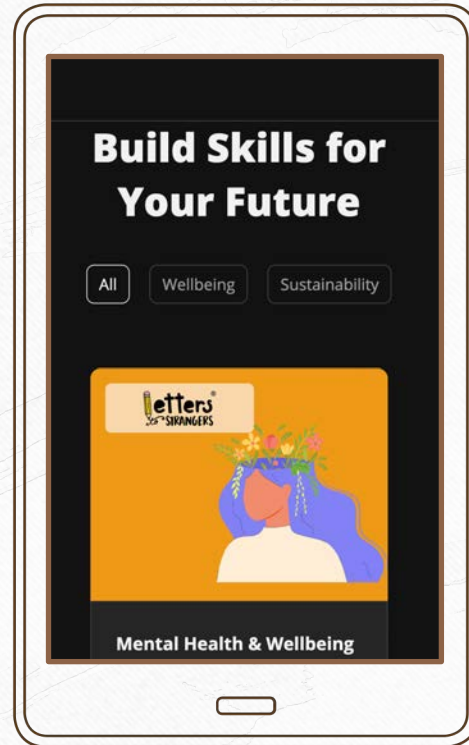
# Preview



## Partnerships

Our partnership with Z Notes allows us to provide 4 million students with intersectional mental health education

**Learn more now at**  
<https://znotes.org/skills>



## Campaigns

We are onboarding new team members and bridging hospitals and media partners to create more robust, international, and human-first mental health campaigns



# Money Matters

---

how did our **2023** go?

# Balance Sheet/Statement of Financial Position

Asset Type	FY 2023(\$ USD)
Revenue	102,835
Program Expenses	79,242
Other Expenses	1,858
Total Expenses	81,100
<b>Balance</b>	<b>21,734</b>

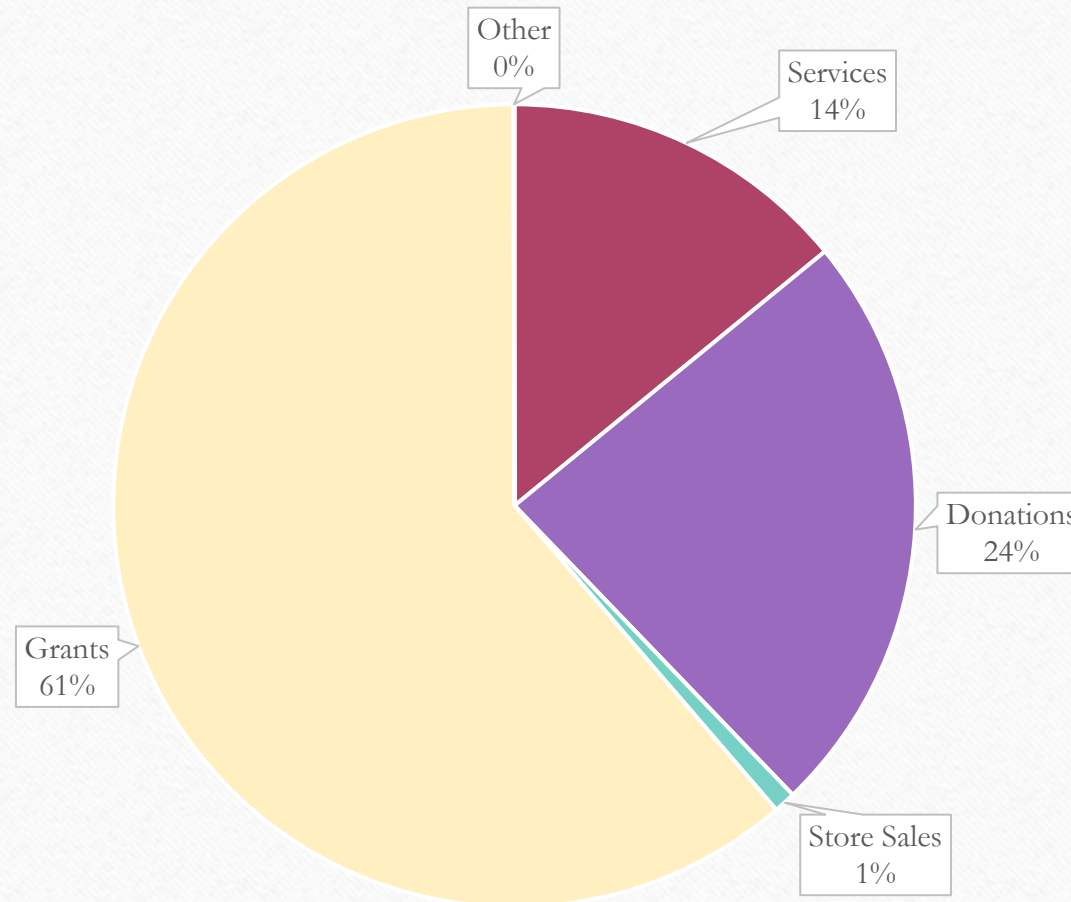
With this, we impacted 45,000 people. That's <\$2 per life changed!



# 2023 Income

- Services
- Donations
- Store Sales
- Grants
- Other

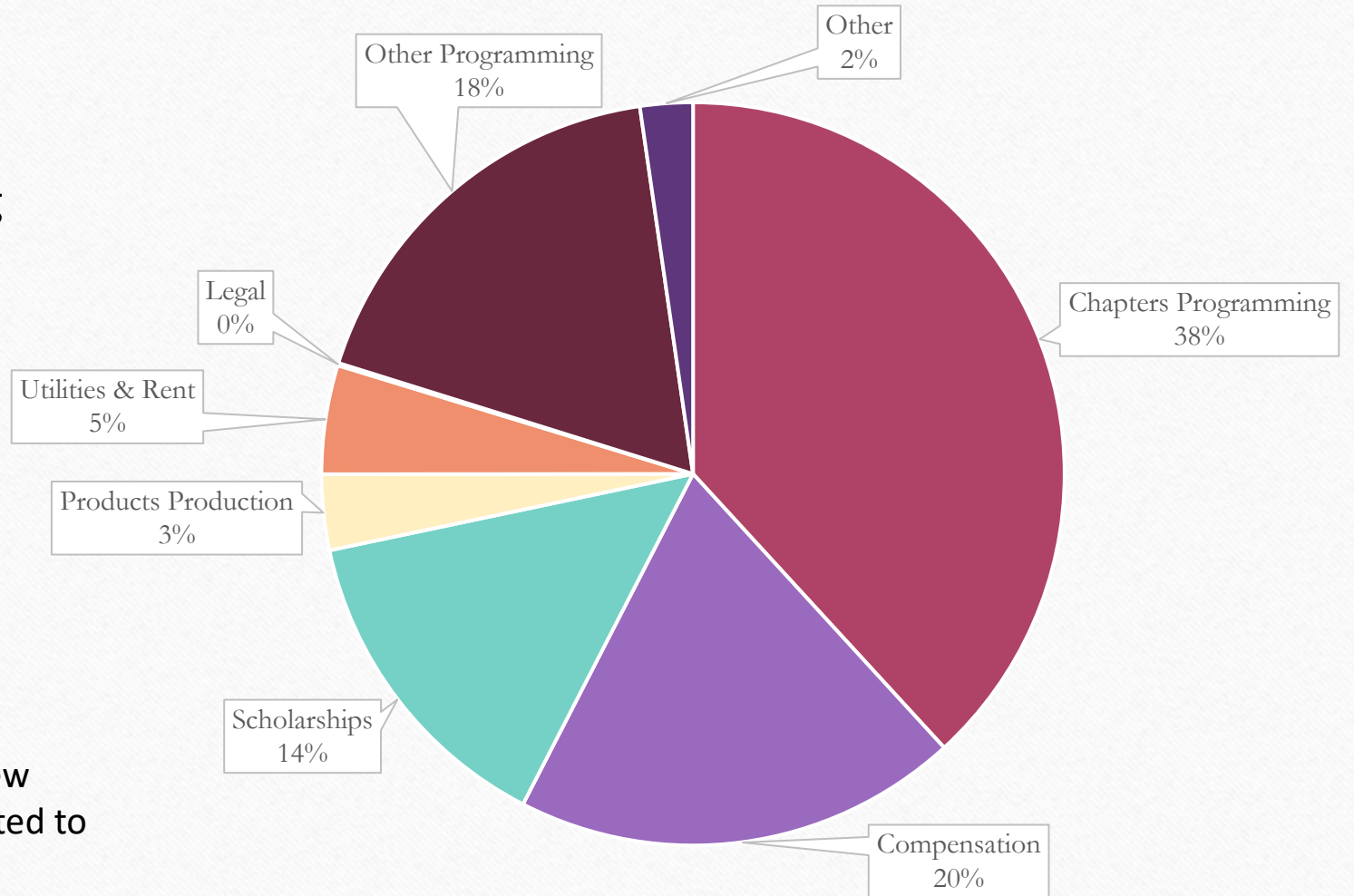
\***Services** indicates income from providing education, consultancy, and other support to for-profits



# 2023 Expenses

- Chapters Programming
- Compensation
- Scholarships
- Products Production
- Utilities & Rent
- Legal
- Other Programming
- Other

\***Other Programming** include amounts spent on launching new HQ-based programs not restricted to Chapters





The background image shows a blue table with various items: a bag of white pom-poms, a bag of blue pom-poms, a water bottle, a smartphone, and a person's hands in a grey sweater. A white paper with pink and purple drawings is also visible. A semi-transparent white box with a red border is centered over the image, containing the text.

# Money Matters 2.0(24)

what are our forecasts for **2024**?

# 2024 Financial Forecasts

including committed, incoming grants

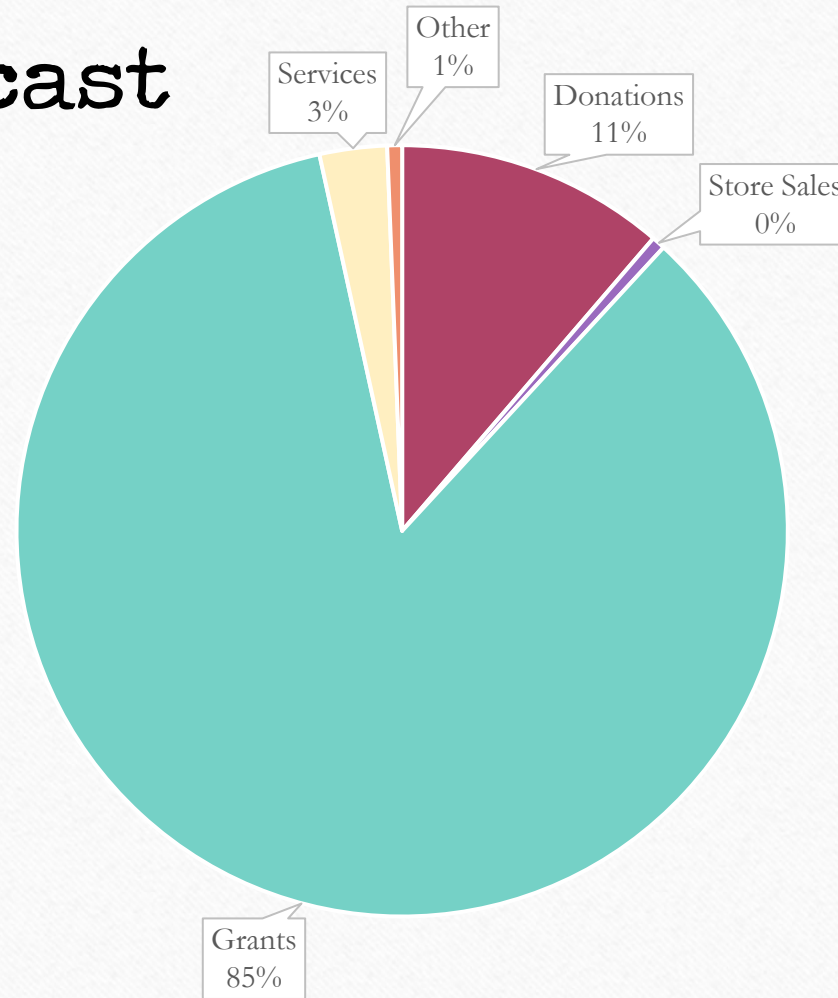
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Asset Type	FY 2023 (\$ USD)
Revenue	222,100
Program Expenses	178,630
Long-Term Expenses	2,000
Total Expenses	198,630
Balance	23,470



# 2024 Income Forecast

- Donations
- Store Sales
- Grants
- Services
- Other







# The Who

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who makes all of this happen?



# Our Team

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**Diana Chao**

**Founder & Executive Director**

Honors B.A. from Princeton University, University of Oxford Masters' Student and Skoll Scholar, Former UN IPCC Climate Scientist, Former Crisis Counselor @ National Suicide Prevention Hotline, White House Honoree, Princess Diana Legacy Award, L'Oréal Paris Women of Worth, Oprah Magazine Health Hero.



**Pearl Lee**

**Chief Programs Officer**

Graduate student at Boston University's Masters in Medical Sciences program. Broad experience across clinical research, hospital logistics, medical scribing, and patient care.



**Timothy Liyada**

**Chief Communications Officer**

English teacher by day, publications specialist by night. Bachelors in Education with a major in English, another Bachelor's of Computer Applications degree, and a certificate in project management. Passionate about mental health across Malawi, Africa, and beyond.



# Other Key Team Members

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**Clayton  
Becker**

Chief Learning Officer



**Helen  
Chen**

Chief Content Officer



**Samantha  
Ng**

Executive Intern



**Libby  
Loftin**

Education Intern



**Hiram  
Nhemachena**

Regional Coordinator



**Thuyanh  
Vo**

Development Intern



**Alyssa  
Vassel**

Content Assistant



**Josie  
Lau**

Research Assistant





Stranger...

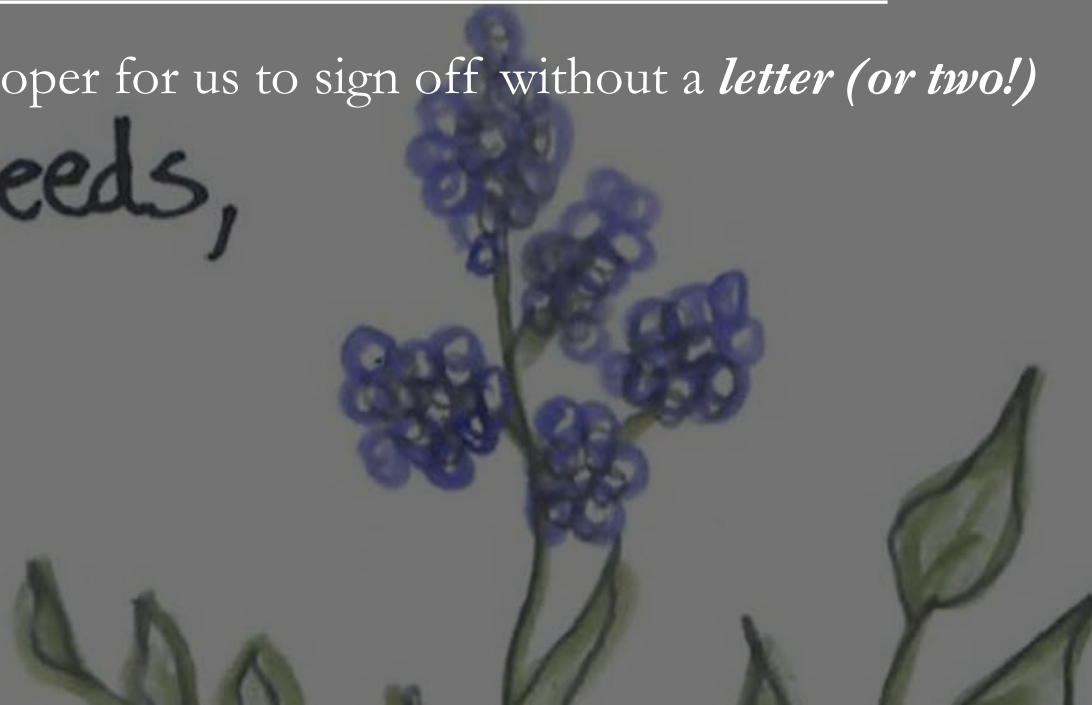
# Dear Stranger

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it would be improper for us to sign off without a *letter (or two!)*

PLANT good seeds,

Remove  
the weeds





“Dear Stranger,

This morning, my 11-year-old son texted me at work to tell me that his eyelashes were bothering him...so he cut them off. He wanted to know if that was the right move, and I quickly typed back “no.” What I was thinking was that starting at a new middle school in 2 weeks was probably going to be hard enough without being the kid without eyelashes. But, honestly - when I think back to middle school, there’s very little I remember. What I do remember is about my friends and I. The truth is - middle schoolers are pretty busy thinking about themselves, and aren’t paying nearly as much attention to anyone else. And, hey - my son's eyelashes aren’t bothering him anymore. So maybe it was a fine idea. Who am I to say? I think it’s actually pretty brave and cool that he prioritized his comfort rather than wondering how others would see (and maybe judge) his eyelash situation.

I work at a boarding school, and I’ve spent about 15 years living with teenagers from around the world. They all worry too much what other people think, and many of them are in a constant state of trying to prove themselves. I wish they could see themselves as others do, because they never see or believe that they have nothing to prove. And neither do you, dear stranger. You are already enough. Wonderful, magical, even. You were born that way - truly. You just started comparing and second guessing yourself along the way. Can I give you some advice I’ve learned the hard way? Be vulnerable, and be yourself. It will make it easier for the people around you to do the same, and you’ll find your people faster. And - don’t be afraid to mess up. The time I felt like I really, really screwed up in a huge way (I was mortified) helped me see that I was really okay, as imperfect as I am. So - I just want you to know: you are worthy just as you are. And also no one else is likely to focus on or remember the things you’re worried about. Finally – in 10 or 20 years, most you’re going to remember the good stuff. I wish you many joyful connections and adventures in the years ahead. And in the hard times, know that my heart is with your heart.

Take care!  
Love, A Stranger”





# Thank You!

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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 my life's most humbling journey, and I hope to do it justice. We are welcoming 2024 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!

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

