

Maddy Fratis (MF): Hello everybody and welcome back to The Powerful Youth Perspective, a STAR podcast, which stands for Stand Together Against Racism. My name is Maddy and I had the lovely opportunity of chatting with Miss Berks County 2022 Jenna Martorana. Jenna uses her platform to advocate for mental health acceptance, working to destigmatize the conversation around mental health and normalize that it's okay to not be okay. This conversation is a little different than anything we've done before. It's kind of a new topic for us to chat about. But I'm excited because May is Mental Health Awareness Month. And this topic deserves our attention. And it's something I think we can all learn more about. I'm so glad you're here to listen.

Thank you so much, Jenna, for joining me on The Powerful Youth Perspective, which is our STAR podcast. We're really just about youth dialogue and amplifying our voices, which you are going to be great at. So first, I just want to ask you to introduce yourself to our listeners. Tell us about yourself.

Jenna Martorana (JM): Yes, so my name is Jenna Martorana. I'm 27 years old and I'm a resident of Wyomissing hills. I recently graduated from Kutztown University with my masters in school counseling and hope to be finding a school counseling job here in Berks County. I also hold the title of United States of America's Miss Berks County, so I have the lovely opportunity of serving Berks County and promoting my platform, It's okay to not be okay, to all Berks County residents.

MF: Awesome. Lots of cool stuff. Tell us about it's okay not to be okay. Because that's kind of what we're here to talk about tonight is mental health and it's May so it's mental health awareness month. And just I want to dive into mental health in a couple different areas. So let's start with your platform. Why? How do you deal with all that?

JM: So mental health is my favorite topic. So I am someone that is diagnosed with depression and anxiety. I was diagnosed as a junior in high school after struggling for many years. I had a teacher, my Spanish teacher. notice what was going on with me that I was upset a lot that I wasn't acting myself, I'd had her throughout high school. So she noticed that change in me and she reached out to my mom. And because of that, I was able to get help.

And now, I didn't immediately see progress, because therapy takes time. I actually ended up surviving three suicide attempts in high school and two in college. But I will be celebrating seven years since my last attempt in September. That's why I share my story to show others what can change in a few years time. And I know what it's like to be in that dark place where mental illness is telling you that it doesn't get better, that you're being a burden, and people are better off without you. But I'm here to instill hope in others that it does get better and that the world is better with you in it.

MF: That's awesome. Thank you so much for sharing and being willing to talk about your story with me. Um, so as like being in the pageant world, like when did that start? Did that cross over into that mental health? Like that dark period of mental health kind of like, did they mix well? Did they mix badly?

JM: So honestly, I would say that that was the beginning of my healing and my recovery. I wanted to get involved with pageants for a while. But I kept thinking nobody would want a title holder with a mental illness. Nobody would want a title holder that's not quote-unquote healthy. And I quickly realized that once I started competing and had won my first title in 2018, that that wasn't the case. And pageantry has given me the opportunity to partner with the National Mental Health organizations like the National Alliance on Mental Illness, and locally with NAMI Berks County that I'm able to share my story across the country, across Berks County, and across Pennsylvania, with other adults and other high school and middle school students.

And what I didn't anticipate when I started sharing my story was the effect it would have on myself. I had hoped that other people will be able to connect and heal but I didn't realize that by sharing my own story and helping others heal, I would heal as well. And so that has been the most beneficial treatment I want to say. For me, I mean, I strongly promote medication and therapy. But this has been one of the best things for my own mental health is being able to connect with others and really share in our joint experiences.

MF: You know, it's something that, like, is a great thing that it's talked about, I feel like it's talked about more, like, often now, you know, we have a mental health council in our school. And it's, I think, something we're like, educated, not enough about, but more, I would say, than in the past. So...

JM: My platform used to be more about mental health awareness. And now I'm pushing it more towards mental health acceptance, because we know mental illnesses exist, you don't live under a rock, where we are now is getting people to accept those who have mental illnesses for who they are and understanding that we're not violent people. We're not crazy. We are your friends, your co-workers, your neighbors, we're your family members, and we're just looking for compassion in those around us.

MF: Yeah, a little bit of empathy and to understand that, like, it's normal, and that, I mean, everybody struggles to not to, obviously, dismiss those that are, like struggling way deeper on another level, like, it's hard to, it's hard to understand what that is exactly like when somebody like me not going through it. But it's so crucial that we learn how to empathize. Because without that, I mean, like, how are we ever going to get anywhere? If you can't say, I'm trying to understand, share with me what that's like opening up the conversation. That's something that I'm really interested in. It's my psychology class, like, although I don't, may not struggle with these issues. The science behind it is really interesting to me, these issues are real. So I really appreciate you using your platform for that. And it's really inspiring, and I hope our listeners find that inspiring, as well. So, tell us about most recently. So I know you've been working with younger kids. In the pageant world, you say you connect with people more your age, but you've been working in schools, which is a different kind of demographic there. Tell us about that.

JM: Yes. So as part of my requirement for my school counselor certification, I had to complete a 100-hour practicum experience last spring and a 600-hour internship experience this school year. So I just recently finished up my internship here in Berks County. And so I had the wonderful opportunity of working with kids grades K through five, doing one on one counseling,

running small groups, coming up with school-wide initiatives. And I was able to end my experience there by reading to a lot of the classes my children's book that I published in April. And so that was a wonderful way to celebrate our time together as well as to say goodbye to them.

MF: Yeah! How does that conversation shift as it's geared towards younger kids? Because, like destigmatizing mental health, obviously, we got to start that sooner. But the conversations can be intense and heavy and, and hard to comprehend, especially so young. So how do you use that platform and your gift to help the little ones kind of understand? Yeah, I'm curious.

JM: I honestly believe that mental health is not a difficult topic when broached in a way that is age and developmentally-appropriate. We talk about coping skills all the way down and kindergarten, because we have to teach our kids how to self regulate and self soothe. And that's something I mean, we teach babies how to self soothe. So while we're there to be able to offer the skills when kids need to learn those coping strategies early on.

My part of the purpose of my book, which is titled, "Pearls Purpose," is to stop stigma before it starts because something I have learned working with elementary schoolers is they don't feel that stigma around mental illnesses. Yeah, they don't, they haven't experienced what society does to people with mental illnesses and how society views people with mental illnesses. And so, when I have kids come to me and be so open about what they're feeling, it's incredible because that's like a breath of fresh air from what I do with adults. And so I want to stop that before they develop that stigma.

"Pearl's Purpose" is very relatable to children. She starts as a happy little girl with lots of stuffed animals and always wants to hang out with her friends. And then one day she just starts to not feel like herself. She starts to withdraw, not wanting to hang out with her friends, and she's really tired. And her story mimics my own a little bit where she had a school counselor, she had her teacher, notice that something was going on, that there was a change and reached out to the school counselor. And she was able to get help because of that. Her school counselor brings her down and they start talking about how there's lots of kids all over the world who feel the way that you feel. So you're not alone. And they talk about what coping strategies are, like drawing when you're sad, or taking deep breaths when you're angry talking to a parent, when you're worried, all those types of things as well as how to take care of our body by getting enough sleep, fueling it with yummy food, making sure that you're getting outside and enjoying the sunshine are all ways that Pearl learns, she can take care of her mental health. And before she leaves, the school counselor Miss Hope reminds her that it's okay to not be okay. And Pearl really takes that message to heart and decides that it's her purpose to spread that message with others.

So the book is meant to empower parents to open up these honest conversations, parents, teachers, school counselors, anybody open up these honest conversations around mental health with kids. Because if they learn and keep the idea that it's okay to talk about mental health, and that there are safe people that they can trust with their feelings, then they never have to feel that they're alone, and they never have to struggle in silence the way many kids do.

MF: That's great! And I love that it mimics your story. And it's perfect. It's perfect for younger kids. So I answered my question perfectly. Like, how do you explain it to little kids? Well, I wrote a book about it. Because you know what, stories are the best way to do that.

JM: And in elementary school counseling, I feel we have a story for everything. For the past couple of holidays, birthdays, whatever, my mom just gets me more and more books for my school counselor library, and sort of like four boxes full of books, because I was a child who absolutely loved reading. And so to have books that I could connect to, is something that I know I definitely needed when I was younger. And so I tried to write what I needed when I was that age

MF: Right, because you know, if like, there's not a kid in your school, that like, seems like you, there's a character that may and so that's where that connection can come in. That's awesome. I need to read more. But I just kind of have to ask your opinion and just kind of perspective on mental health in the pageant world. You said that it boosted your mental health and gave you a place to relate and connect. But also, I think from my perspective is kind of the outside. I don't know a lot about pageants and stuff. But it seems like all the dresses and the makeup and like, the pictures look perfect. And I feel like that's a place where a lot of girls, especially girls, may struggle with mental health. I'm supposed to look this way. Look at them. They're so perfect. How do those two things work?

JM: Yeah, so that I mean, I as much as pageants helped our mental health. When I first started competing, I was with the Miss America organization. And we had swimsuits at that point still, and that was, wow, detrimental to my health. I struggle a lot with body image and self confidence. And so when Miss America got rid of that face competition in 2019, it really allowed not only me, but so many other competitors candidates to be themselves and to feel that the organization was more inclusive and welcoming to people of all sizes.

Right now I will be having to compete again with the United States of America system in a swimsuit. And so that has been a struggle for me recently, just because I do still struggle with my self image. I am not the typical pageant competitor. We all think of tall skinny blondes, which nothing against them, but I am four foot nine and three quarters, I am brown with dark brown hair. And that has kind of become my signature thing is my dark curls. And so, I still struggle with that. But at the same time, we don't talk about mental health enough within the pageant community as well, we do always feel that we need to be perfect, and that we need to have these everything needs to be photoshopped, and everything needs to be so appearance based. And luckily, we have more title holders like myself who are stepping away from that because they recognize that it's not sustainable, and it's not attainable.

We don't want younger title holders, people who are young ladies who want to compete to look at us and be like, "Oh, I have to change this about me to be like them." We don't want that. And when I became involved in pageants, I knew that I did not want to ever be somebody looked at as perfect. I wanted people to know that I was real, and that I was relatable. And that's one reason why I share my story so openly because I know what it's like to think that you can never achieve this persona. Within the pageant community, unfortunately, we have had just this year. I know of at least three suicides between our former Miss USA 2019 all the way to recently

Toddlers and Tiaras star took her life a few days, after her birthday. And so, we do need to do a better job of supporting one another. And recognizing that while we might look a certain way on the outside, you can still be hurting on the inside.

In 2020, I co founded the Mental Health Queens with the, at that time, she was Miss Fort Worth in Texas, Alex Andrews, and we created the Mental Health Queens, which is over 150 title holders across the country from all different systems that have platforms related to mental health, whether it be suicide prevention, eating disorders, ADHD, stigma, and we all come together to collaborate on initiatives like it's mental health awareness month. So we held a virtual spirit week with different themes. We've had a calendar all month of different post ideas. Some girls have been doing different lives with girls from other states. And so we've been able to collaborate and to support one another's platforms virtually.

We started that during the pandemic, because we wanted to keep serving, we wanted to keep helping our communities. But how are we supposed to do when we can get out there? And so the thread the Mental Health Queens group came from, and that was literally an 11 o'clock conversation, well 11 o'clock Eastern time. It was a little bit earlier, we're in Texas, but conversation about how we need to do something because we knew mental health was going to get even worse with the pandemic, and how can we keep, how can we keep promoting our platforms? How can we keep serving throughout the pandemic? And it has been incredible to see the girls come together to support each other in the ways that they have. And I'm glad to have been a co-founder of that.

MF: Yeah, that is really similar to STAR which is a program of Youth Volunteer Corps of Reading. So STAR, Stand Together Against Racism was founded during the pandemic, very similar, like racism and injustice, like those issues getting worse, nowhere to turn, we're isolated, mental health issues were isolated, going downhill, what are we going to do? And both I mean, both groups Mental Health Queens Stand Together Against Racism. Yeah, I guess go all of us because we didn't stop, you know, like, we used what we had, which was these virtual platforms and made it work. And I think it even made the connection stronger, like would you agree, right? Like, would you have been able to talk to those girls and hold all of what happened, like had time, not kind of like slowed down, and you were able to turn to that in that time? I mean, for STAR, like, I would have still been in school and like, my life would have continued, if there wasn't a pandemic STAR would not be what it is. So that's really interesting.

JM: Yeah, I don't think that had we not had a reason to, we never would have. And so I would say this is one of the biggest Silver Linings that came out of the pandemic, because I have a connection with girls across the country. Yes, I never would have had before. I mean, I do have quite a collection of girls that I know of, and talk to because of my business. But it's even more incredible to do it on such a personal level and to be able to support one another in the way that we do.

MF: Yeah, absolutely. And, I can't wait for my STAR girls to hear this because they're gonna be like, "That's us too!!" And something we always say is like, there was nothing else like it. Like there was no other virtual platform where everybody came together about the same issues. One question I had about your story and kind of changing the narrative with being real in the pageant

world. Where did that come from? Obviously, you're a role model to the younger girls being like it's okay to be real. It's okay to not be perfect. But was there somebody who showed that to you? Was that just you? Where did that come from?

JM: Like I said before, I wanted to compete in pageantry for a long time, but I didn't see anybody like me. I didn't see anybody talking about mental health in the way that I do. And because of that, I decided that I wanted to be the person that I needed. And when I did become involved in pageantry, there were role models previous or Miss Pennsylvania at the time, Katie Schreckengast, who was very real and open. And honestly, she was one of my biggest role models and supports when I first started competing because it's scary to try something new, especially being one of the oldest in the organization. Many of the girls have been competing since they were in the teen system, which starts at 13. And so starting at, I believe I was like 21, or 22, or something at the time, it was really scary to go into that, and not have any idea what to expect. So having positive role models like her and some of the other parents and Miss candidates, was really helpful for me.

And so I knew that I always wanted to give back in the way that people gave to me. And that's why I'm kind of like the mom of the teens. I love helping the teens, or new candidates with anything that they possibly need. I have a lot of friends competing for the first time this year. And so I've been sending them packing lists and telling them, "Here's what you need for this day, and that day." I'm just trying to calm any of their fears because I want them to be able to enjoy the week without stressing about it as much as I did.

MF: So, back to, I guess, a little bit of your expertise in like, like school, professionally... because you did you gotta you got a degree in this stuff now! How can mental health resources be distributed more equitably? Like, not everybody has fantastic teachers and counselors and role models. And they still struggle too, something I've heard people say is that mental health does not discriminate. It doesn't matter how much money you have, where you live, like mental health is, is still a factor. So with that being said, how can resources reach everybody across? Like, everybody... that's a really big question. Yeah. How can that happen?

JM: It starts with the government, we need more funding, because the resources are too scarce as it is to even get them where they need to be. We need to have it's supposed to be according to the American School Counselors Association, about 250 students per counselor, I believe. And I mean, in most cases, it's 500 plus. So there's no way for one school counselor to be able to serve all of those students. I know within the district that I was in, it's one school, one school social worker, per five elementary schools. And how on earth is one person supposed to be able to serve that many people and make sure everyone's needs are getting met? It's just not possible.

And there is, I mean, there's a teacher shortage, but I'm sure there's a school counselor shortage and school psychologists and social workers, because we don't get paid enough for the work that we do. And that's something as a country that we need to look at differently. But that starts at the government level, having these funds allocated, and making sure that our politicians realize that this need is not going away, and it's just going to continue to grow. I just hope that our government and our appointed officials realize that and make change happen. So

I always say, you vote with your voice. That's where you got to if you want change to happen, you have to get out and vote. And I am a strong proponent of one of the things that NAMI does is called vote for mental health. And so looking at what politicians support mental health, and you can actually go on nominees website, and it will pull up where different candidates stances are on mental health related issues, or, you know, during the 2020 election that it was able to show what the different candidates stances are on different topics related to mental health. And I think that's really eye opening because some of them wouldn't give a statement even about it and others were more than welcome to talk about their exact plans. And that's what we need. We need to make sure that our legislators recognize this and are working to create change within our mental health field and community.

MF: Now that you mentioned the politician part of this big issue on the political level, I've never seen a politician with a plan for mental health. It's not something that's advertised, put out there as like a big ticket part of the issues in America and it is huge and like hitting everybody everywhere. Duh of course something to be cognizant of because how can we not when it puts lives at risk? Lives of children, adults, elderly, everybody.

JM: And yeah, approximately, like 48 million people have a mental illness in America. That's one out of five adults, one out of five children. And so why are we not? If it was any other issue, we would be addressing that immediately. Why are we not addressing this mental health crisis that we are facing in the country?

MF: Yeah, I could talk about this forever, I think it gets pushed under the rug. So then like, it just gets thrown deeper and deeper and deeper in this pile of issues that need to be talked about. But it can't, it can't any longer. So, yeah

JM: And I think that we're the generation that's going to fix that. I fully believe I mean, you and me here today, we are working to create social change. And I know that the generations after us are just going to be just as hungry for that change. And everything that's happened recently is going to continue to fuel our passions to create change in America.

MF: Yeah, I can't agree more. And I'm so thankful for you sharing your story, and a little bit of your expertise, and your children's book you wrote, there's so many great layers here and different ways that you have reached people and you are creating real real change. So I thank you so much for your time today.

JM: I am so happy to be able to come on with you.

MF: This conversation with Jenna was awesome. She is just so relatable to anybody struggling or experiencing mental illness. And her passion really shows. I just loved how she has written a children's book so that kids can understand better and have a character to relate to. She's just so passionate and ready to make that step in helping educate about mental health at the elementary level because I think she's right, it does start young, learning about those coping skills and we can all find ways to help our mental health, finding things that we enjoy and bring

us happiness. And I encourage you to try and find something new. Try new ways. Explore new hobbies. Until then, you can follow us on Instagram @yvc.star and check out our website. That's why yvc-star.org for all of our updates and exciting things we got going on. Thank you for listening again and I'll catch you next time!

Transcribed by <https://otter.ai> and edited for clarity.