

## Op-ed: Eliminating the Mental Health Stigma Takes a Community

By Ashley Coro

According to the National Alliance on Mental Health, 19.1% of U.S. adults experienced mental illness and 16.5% of U.S. youth (aged 6-17) had a mental health disorder as of 2018. These statistics are staggering, with 1 in 5 adults and 1 in 6 adolescents suffering from illnesses such as depression, personality disorder and anxiety. Yet, what is most upsetting about the mental health crisis in our country is the conversation surrounding it — or lack thereof.

I first became aware of the prevalence of mental illness in teens and young adults when my cousin, Thomas, died by suicide at just 18 years old. His death was a heartbreak to our family. I constantly thought to myself if I had just seen the signs or had a real conversation with him about what struggles he was going through. Losing him meant losing a piece of me and having to find the strength I never knew I had.

At the time, I was in high school and realized someone had to spark the conversation about suicide awareness. My family and I had previously shared stories about Thomas, his artwork and other memories to commemorate his life, but I knew more had to be done. This is when I first volunteered at the non-profit, Music Saves Lives. With Music Saves Lives, I had the opportunity to meet and hear some incredible stories from teens attending the festival. I saw a need for teens and young adults to be able to talk about what they are going through and how easily they related to the lyrics of the songs to which they were listening. With the help of my mother, Jessica, we established a community and platform that fosters a supportive environment for teens and young adults — called Can You Hear Me? Since 2015, we have helped thousands of teens and young adults speak out, express themselves, and be heard without the judgment, hostility, conflict, condescension or reaction all too common to them. These youths are able to interact with one another and teen representatives who are available with open ears and open hearts.

Teens and young adults are vulnerable groups, and hard to get through to. They are less susceptible to discuss tough subjects such as peer pressure, bullying, addiction, LGBTQ+ issues and mental health. With such challenges, we must come together to reach our youth where they live — on the internet and through music. Organizations such as Music Saves Lives and Can You Hear Me? reach teens and young adults through social media, music concerts and festivals. To help fight the stigma, I encourage everyone to volunteer, donate and spread the word about what these non-profits are doing.

Ashley Coro works as the founder and chief executive officer for Can You Hear Me? — a non-profit dedicated to helping teens and young adults struggling with mental health.