

I first met Pooja in November of my freshman year. She started off as one of 40 girls who I would call my sorority sisters, but over the past three years she has become one of the most inspirational people I know—I am lucky to call her one of my closest friends. When I met Pooja, she was very outgoing and lively, always down to go out or hang out with friends. As the semester wore on, I noticed her become more quiet and subdued, and I assumed it was the stress of the semester setting in. How was I to know that she was relapsing into her anxiety? It wasn't something she had talked about with anyone, not something people at Duke knew about her.

When she came back to school after our summer break for our sophomore year, she was a different person. She was back to the outgoing person, but there was a spark in her which I didn't place until I saw her participation in the "What I Be Project" (Example 1). She had come out with her story, and when I told her how cool it was that she did this and how many people she'd help with it, she said "This is just the beginning."

And she was absolutely right. Since that project, she has completely revolutionized how mental illness, health and wellness are treated on campus. To date, she has spoken in three panels about what its like to have a mental illness, from the perspective of a college student, a woman, and a person of color. She is the founder of the Duke chapter of NAMI, which is now one of the biggest clubs on campus and has brought the discussion of mental illness into the public sphere on campus. And she hasn't stopped there, refusing to say that awareness is enough. She wants to see action, and finds ways to make change. When she noticed that most of the discussions surrounding mental illness were catered to white, cis-gendered people, she created mental health support groups for people of color and people with non-traditional SOGIEs, and worked with CAPS to hire counselors from different racial backgrounds. She has always made herself

available to people when they need help managing their disorders, doing everything from sharing her story to accompanying people to therapy to talking people down from suicide attempts—7 times to date.

And as if that isn't enough, she keeps setting her standards higher. She is currently planning an event, Unabridged, which she wants to be the first nationwide awareness event that focuses on suicide and mental health. Whenever she talks about the event I can see how passionate she is about it, and how she will make sure it succeeds no matter what. I've listened as she told me about how organizations wouldn't partner with her on the event, how people weren't hearing about it, how she couldn't get press to write about it, and I've watched her then find a solution and make it happen. Her determination and stamina for this event, for this cause, is absolutely amazing (Example 2). Whenever there is a hurdle, she jumps over it and keeps going forward, faster than before.

When it comes to people who are changing the world of mental health, there is nobody I know who is so up and coming as Pooja. I can't think of a better candidate for the mPower award, and I hope you now feel the same.

Example 1: Pooja's submission and reflection on the project



I am not my anxiety.

In the last 20 years, I've heard a lot of words used to describe me: happy, emotional, driven, rash, accomplished.

Dangerous.

I knew people had varying opinions of me. Because of my anxiety, I was often seen as overemotional, needy and "a bit much." In high school I accepted that. As much as it hurt when people saw me as a burden, I preferred it to having to explain my anxiety and then being seen as crazy. I came to Duke thinking that if I explained my situation to people before I got too close to them, I would be saved the pain of having someone leave me once I became "too much to deal with." That's how I justified telling one of my closest friends at Duke about my story. That's how, when she shared her problems, I thought that I had found someone who would not abandon me when I needed support. That's how, when I got a call saying that she had "requested that I do not contact her anymore, and that I leave campus due to my safety and the safety of those around me," it destroyed me.

As far as mental illnesses go, I got lucky. I'm still a high functioning individual, who doesn't have to do too much to control my symptoms. I'm able to hide behind my resume and my accomplishments, because I'm afraid that if I show my problems, it will overshadow everything. But my work with Steve Rosenfield Photography - What I Be Project has shown me that I'm wrong. If I show my problems, my resume and my accomplishments are despite my anxiety, not instead of. If I share my story and people perceive me as "unstable" or "dangerous," it's because they are making me hide behind their stigmas of mental illness, rather than treating it as one small part of me. If I state the fact that I suffer from anxiety, it doesn't change the fact that I'm a student, a dancer, a leader and a friend.

I've used a lot of words to describe myself: thorough, organized, independent and loyal.

I am not a burden.

I am not dangerous.

I am not my anxiety.

Example 2

<input type="checkbox"/>		To: mha	MHA South Mountains + Unabridged - Dear MHA of South Mountains, My name is Pooja, and I am the co-founder of	Mar 9
<input type="checkbox"/>		To: efields	MHA Central Carolina + Unabridged - Dear MHA of Central Carolina, My name is Pooja, and I am the co-founder of l	Mar 9
<input type="checkbox"/>		To: karenwaldronmha	MHA Cass County + Unabridged - Dear MHA of Cass County, My name is Pooja, and I am the co-founder of Unabrid	Mar 9
<input type="checkbox"/>		To: mwilkey	MHA Vigo County + Unabridged - Dear MHA of Vigo County, My name is Pooja, and I am the co-founder of Unabridg	Mar 9
<input type="checkbox"/>		To: admin	MHA Hendricks County + Unabridged - Dear MHA of Hendricks County, My name is Pooja, and I am the co-founder of	Mar 9
<input type="checkbox"/>		To: info	MHA Putnam County + Unabridged - Dear MHA of Putnam County, My name is Pooja, and I am the co-founder of Ur	Mar 9
<input type="checkbox"/>		To: info	MHA Lake County + Unabridged - Dear MHA of Lake County, My name is Pooja, and I am the co-founder of Unabrid	Mar 9
<input type="checkbox"/>		To: mentalhealth	MHA Vanderburgh + Unabridged - Dear MHA of Vanderburgh County, My name is Pooja, and I am the co-founder of	Mar 9
<input type="checkbox"/>		To: mha	MHA Tippecanoe + Unabridged - Dear MHA of Tippecanoe County, My name is Pooja, and I am the co-founder of Ur	Mar 9
<input type="checkbox"/>		To: mmhodson	MHA Porter County + Unabridged - Dear MHA of Porter County, My name is Pooja, and I am the co-founder of Unab	Mar 9
<input type="checkbox"/>		To: mhajc	MHA Jackson County + Unabridged - Dear MHA of Jackson County, My name is Pooja, and I am the co-founder of U	Mar 9
<input type="checkbox"/>		To: mhahowardco	MHA Howard County + Unabridged - Dear MHA of Howard County, My name is Pooja, and I am the co-founder of Ur	Mar 9
<input type="checkbox"/>		To: mhawabashco	MHA Wabash County + Unabridged - Dear MHA of Wabash County, My name is Pooja, and I am the co-founder of U	Mar 9
<input type="checkbox"/>		To: mitchell.diana	MHA Blackford County + Unabridged - Dear MHA of Blackford County, My name is Pooja, and I am the co-founder of	Mar 9

She once spent 4 hours straight emailing every single MHA chapter about Unabridged. In her words “wow...there are SO MANY CHAPTERS”