

My whole life, I had experienced an indescribable feeling. When I was thirteen, this feeling finally found its name: Anxiety. I started seeing a therapist, and was diagnosed with social anxiety, as well as Generalized Anxiety Disorder. I eventually started taking medication, and my diagnoses fluctuated in severity throughout different stages of my life. Currently, I struggle with Unspecified Anxiety Disorder, Major Depressive Disorder, and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. Getting the mental health support that I needed has played a significant role in my school and life success. While my story as an individual experiencing mental illnesses discovered in my teen years is one of success, many others are not as fortunate.

Alaska has the highest suicide rates per capita in the nation. I am working towards helping change this statistic and as an Alaskan who has lived with multiple mental illnesses, I am passionate about improving student mental health education in our state. The only lesson on mental health I have ever received was as part of my eighth-grade health class. I have had nine years of health classes, and I have learned about my digestive system and heart health in every single one of them—but have only been taught about my mental health once. If my generation is to successfully participate in education, community, and life, we must amend our education and public policies to reflect the reality of quickly rising rates of mental illness.

Over the past several years I have had the opportunity to serve as a student mental health advocate at the local, state, and national level. During the 2022 legislative session I visited our state capitol to advocate for the passage of a pair of companion bills that added mental health education to the health curriculum in Alaskan schools. I met with over a dozen legislators and the governor to promote the legislation. I also partnered with the Alaska Chapter of the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention during their virtual legislative visits and wrote a letter to the editor that was published in the Anchorage Daily News, advocating for both the bill and for increased awareness of student mental health concerns. During a House Finance Committee hearing, I provided public testimony in support of the bill. I was also featured in an ADN news piece and made a guest appearance on Alaska Public Media's weekly public affairs television program, all with the goal of improving student mental health.

I actively work to educate myself in order to help others, by working alongside the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, to provide resources to our community. I have applied the skills I developed as Dimond Commissioner of Publicity and Student Advisory Board Public Relations Officer in creating a social media campaign called Mind Matters, an account that shares not only helpful information, but works to normalize the fact that mental health is something we all experience and live with.

I recognize that the first step to increasing accessibility to resources is combatting the stigmatization of mental illness. I am open about my struggles with anxiety, depression, and ADHD, and am honest about how significantly that has affected my education and life. I have seen firsthand how sharing my personal story has humanized a social and public policy issue and has served as an effective tool in advocating for positive change. I hope to continue my efforts to improve mental health education as a volunteer lobbyist, throughout and beyond my time as a college student. This experience has also influenced my career path and I plan to continue my advocacy work through my dream job creating digital media to promote political figures or causes, specifically mental health, inclusion, and civic engagement.

One objective of success that I have worked towards achieving has been to use the platform I have been provided to make a difference in the lives of my fellow Alaskans. While my work in advocacy has been partially directed towards those who can make policy changes, spreading the message of Mind Matters to all Alaskans is my ultimate priority. One of my goals is to show others that they are not alone. Being open about my struggles has helped me to not only show that my message is relevant, but also shown others that their mental health matters by giving them someone to relate to. I believe I have been successful in promoting a message that fuels positive change in our state, and I view this as one of my greatest accomplishments.