University of Alaska Anchorage Care Team Book Club: From Responding to Students of Concern to Creating a Caring Community — One Story at a Time

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Abstract
Behavioral Intervention Teams too often serve in a reactionary manner, assessing risk and implementing interventions only after a report of concerning behavior has been made. This article explains the efforts of the University of Alaska Anchorage’s Care Team to provide proactive, caring support to students via a book club open to all, where friendships could be made, peer support accessed, and positive connections to the Care Team made.
Introduction
The story started when a trained Mental Health Therapist and former Clinical Supervisor for a substance abuse facility became the coordinator of a Behavioral Intervention Team (BIT) on a complex university campus in the faraway state of Alaska, serving a surprisingly diverse population of students. Her task was to educate the campus community about what a Behavior Intervention Team was, how to refer/report, and what the team would do in response to those reports. Sound familiar? If you are reading this journal, it probably does. However, for the therapist of 20+ years, it was a new concept.

By now, you must have guessed that the mental health professional was me. It helped that I had a background in student affairs from my distant past as a Student Orientation Leader, a Resident Assistant, and a Resident Director, before I launched into my career in mental health therapy. While I could see the benefit of the public health, concerned citizen, and Good Samaritan approaches in the college setting, I was wondering how to move from providing direct care through confidential one-on-one counseling or group therapy to supporting safety and care within a large campus community with diverse needs (14,000 to 16,000 students who primarily commute to campus).

As the UAA community heard more about the Care Team program, and as I adjusted from providing therapy to a new role of triage/case management/problem-solving for students in crisis, I began to see some themes emerge in regards to the individuals referred to the Care Team. For one, our students were clearly in distress. BIT/Care Team reports increased from 245 in 2012–2013, before I became the Care Team Coordinator, to 356 reports in 2013–2014, to 545 reports in 2014–2015, to 586 reports as of June 30, 2016. That’s a 139 percent increase in three years.

To better understand our students’ needs, we started running reports on our database, and developed and launched a Care Team Outcome Survey. From those activities, we found that the number one reason for referral was general emotional concerns (137 out of 586 this year). In addition, 26 percent of survey recipients stated that before Care Team outreach, they thought their behavior and choices had no impact on the UAA community, but that number went down to 17 percent after outreach. Familiarity with student services and resources went up from 25 percent to 71.42 percent after outreach and intervention by the Care Team.

When providing outreach, we found that these students did not seek out resources, tended to have few friends, had tried counseling and found that it “didn’t work” for them, or were afraid of trying something new. Some believed that they didn’t fit in, and thought they were not important to the campus culture around them. We asked: “What can the Care Team do about this? How can we get the message out that UAA truly does care about all students?”

How the Book Club Came About
As it happened, I was going through a personal transition at that time. My group of support persons was changing, moving away from each other in regards to physical proximity, the sharing of ideas/values, and willingness to agree to grow with each other. I needed new friends. It had been so long since I had to actively seek out friends that I started thinking about all those things that I told my former patients, my supervisees, my children, my co-workers, and my assigned Care Team students: Find something you like to do and join other people who like to do the same thing. I turned to Meetup.com to find a new book club. And guess what? It worked. I found women who opened their homes, shared their food, listened and asked great questions on the books we read together. Conversations always turned back to the same questions: “How does this apply to my life? What can I learn about who I am? What can I learn about how to relate to others?” It was a refreshing and energizing experience. We learned how we are connected in the community (e.g., one woman’s son went to the same school as my daughter; another one was an attorney for vulnerable adults — and I worked with vulnerable adults; several of us had teen daughters, and we commiserated on the struggle to adjust to our changing relationships with our “little girls”). The Anchorage Sage Women’s Book Club opened conversation and connection for me, just like I needed it to.

This experience brought an inspiring thought: “Why wouldn’t that work for the UAA community too?” I pitched it to my supervisor and she told me to “go for it.” I contacted our Marketing and Creative Design Coordinator, Liz Shine, who created a great reusable poster (see next page) to advertise the “Care Team Book Club” as a place to connect to a caring community, share personal stories, and be part of the caring messages we all want to
Faculty and staff members have stories of peer incivility, work-related stressed, doing more with less, and dealing with changes in how students respond to them. I advertised in our daily UAA email, called The Green and Gold, and posted e-vites to faculty and staff listserves.

This was our first year, and we had 57 interested first attenders to at least one book club event. The challenges we faced included finding a time that didn’t interfere with classes for faculty and students; choosing books that are easy to read and discuss one chapter at a time, within the once-a-week hourly meetings; and parking, as space was limited near the student union. We were blessed with interest from one of our local Anchorage Police Department Chaplains, who also has a trained National Crisis Response Canine. She shared with me that the book club concept provided, in her view, a wonderfully supportive opportunity to connect with others. She and her dog, Waverly, came to most of our book clubs, providing a soothing presence to book club members and drawing in random people from the Daily Den area. Waverly visits at other times on campus as well, breaking down interpersonal and social barriers wherever she goes. A happy face, fuzzy tail, and genuine excitement at seeing her “friends” helps put people at ease and facilitate bonding for group members.

The book selection process was interesting. It more or less involved me browsing in Title Wave, Anchorage’s best new/used bookstore. I was looking for an appropriate Brené Brown book, as her Ted Talk about listening to shame (www.youtube.com/watch?v=psN1DORYYV0) was so inspiring. I thought Care Team referrals and the UAA community needed to hear that to live with and in shame creates a lack of resiliency and makes failure crippling. Brown talked about how risking vulnerability with each other displayed courage. College, after all, takes both courage and vulnerability.

Something else caught my eye: “Be The Miracle: 50 Lessons for Making the Impossible Possible” by Regina Brett (2012). Each chapter consisted of a standalone story that was designed to “share lessons that will help people make positive changes in the world around them.” Stories that talk about how people connect in small and large ways every day; that show that our impact on each other is the real miracle in this life; and demonstrate that caring for another person by telling a trusted adult that you are worried (i.e., via a Care Report) were just what I hear. The poster allows me to change the time, place, and current book, while continually sharing that the UAA community has a Care Team that truly cares about each member of the community. UAA is an open-access university and functions as a community gathering place, so I made the decision to open the Care Team Book club to not only students, but to faculty, staff, and community members as well. I made sandwich boards, used the electronic student activities advertising loop, and partnered with Commuter Student Services to use our den space so that we could gather around UAA’s cozy fireplace. The book club also provided me the opportunity to share at event tables and trainings that the Care Team doesn’t just look for students with problems on campus, but that it also actively promotes caring for each other and provides a space in which to do so.

Allowing for faculty and staff members to take off their professional hats to join this kind of supportive environment was important. So many would tell me during trainings: “I wish we had a Care Team for our needs.”
was looking for. This supported the idea that offering to connect individuals with help (i.e., via Care outreach) is really up to all of us, and that we can “be the miracle” on UAA campus and everywhere. Every week, book club attendees were asked to share how someone was the “miracle” for them that past week, or what they did to “be the miracle” for others. The stories we read led us to brainstorm ideas that we could try in Anchorage or at UAA. We talked about different social engagement activities in which we could participate (e.g., creating community gardens to reduce food insecurity, raising awareness about homelessness in our community, stopping to talk to a person alone on the bus or cafeteria, or organizing a walking group to encourage community and exercise). The club became not only a time to read, reflect, share, laugh, cry, and encourage, but also a place to foster inspiration for community activities and outreach to others around us.

To understand the club’s appeal, let me introduce you to one of our regular Care Team Book Club attendees, Desiree. She found the group when I sent an e-vite to all the previous year’s Care-referred students. She had previously worked with me on increasing her support network and making new friends. When I told her that I was writing this article, she told me that she came to look forward to the weekly club meetings as a time to relax, drink tea, and hang out friends. Sometimes, she found the stories to be interesting, and sometimes the meetings simply provided a good opportunity to feel important or hopeful about the future, she said. Because she loves books and feels cared for within the group, she was always there and on time. “College can be such an isolated place, because everyone is busy and self-care is not a priority. However, as a psychology student interested in mental health, I made the book club part of my self care,” she said.

Looking Forward
In the future, I plan to find a way for students to get credit for attending the Care Team Book Club on their e-portfolios; to partner with faculty members to provide credit for attendance; to work with our Community Engagement Department to discuss how to put the ideas that emerge from club meetings for creating a more supportive community into practice; to advertise on a Care Team Facebook page; and get on the list for student clubs and find a student to sponsor it.

Members of the group have talked about what we can do to expand; what book to read next; whether we should have an activity day; when to go out and complete one of the projects we have talked about; whether we should write a story about how the UAA community became the miracle for us — the possibilities are endless. As I prepare for next year, I am excited to see what happens with the Care Team Book Club. If you know a good book that could be read and discussed during our weekly group meeting a chapter at a time, please contact me. As long as I am the Care Team Coordinator, I will be holding a Care Team Book Club somewhere on campus.

References