“Talking about it openly is one of the biggest ways to break through the fear”: Amy “Ames” Paulson and Brendah Aryatugumya of Healing Together on building community systems for collective trauma healing

Eleanore Catolico
October 23, 2025

Eleanore Catolico: Please introduce yourselves and your organization, and tell me what's distinctive about your approach in the field of youth mental health.

Amy “Ames” Paulson: My name is Amy “Ames” Paulson, and the organization is Healing Together.

We're building up the infrastructure of peer-to-peer care within communities and allowing them to lead the way through a model that combines both basic neuroscience, and leans into cultural resources for healing whether it be singing, dancing, drumming, storytelling, story circles.

Part of the strategy involves working with teachers, caregivers, and people who work with youth, and offering programs directly to youth, training them about mental health and training them in some of the basic techniques for grounding, for nervous system care, and for peer support.

Brendah Aryatugumya: My name is Brendah Aryatugumya and I’m based in Uganda.

We provide trauma-informed and healing advocacy trainings to community leaders — people who are working with survivors of interpersonal violences, like domestic violence and sexual violence.

We provide these skills to the parents or caregivers of children and youth who are going through different kinds of mental health issues as they grow up.

For them, raising a kid is being harsh, beating you heavily as punishment for you to become disciplined. We are trying to change that through our training so they can attend to these children with more empathy, compassion and care for them to grow and thrive.

We provide the training to teachers in schools, so that we equip them with the skills to manage their own everyday stresses and trauma. If a kid has come from a traumatic home, they can find care at school where they're going to find this teacher who is trauma-informed.

We continue to work with youth between ages 12 to18 to help them develop the agency for their own mental health and provide them with social skills to live in this world knowing that trauma is here.

We started a radio program in the evenings, when everyone is home, talking about mental health. For one hour, we are breaking the stigma. We share healing skills they can use to heal themselves. These radio programs have helped us because when we get to this community, some have already heard about us.

We've introduced breath work on radio, and it has helped people. They give us feedback about how it is helping them calm their nervous system. Others call and ask us how to reach these services, including men.

These kinds of radio programs go far and reach more people in the deeper communities.

Amy “Ames” Paulson: There are five million listeners. That's what the Uganda Broadcasting Corporation shared, which is far more people than our NGO could reach. The fact that most of the work now comes through referrals, or people calling in and asking to bring the training to their own community, speaks to the testament of how the reach is working.

We have hubs in East Africa, so in Uganda, where Brendah is the leader. We have a hub in Nepal, Healing Together Nepal. We work here in the U.S. as well. All of our strategies are attuned to the local context.

We're adopting similar strategies of ensuring that we support community leaders to support themselves, and building up the local infrastructure outside of the medical model.

Eleanore Catolico: What are some of the changes you've seen within young people as they learn these skills?

Brendah Aryatugumya: I've noticed they are now focused in school. Most of the kids come from homes, which have a lot of trauma. There’s domestic violence happening, there is poverty. They are now working towards challenging that.

We are training them to be kind to others and compassionate. They are able to support people like the elderly, which has made the people in the community say, “What happened to this kid? They have improved.”

Because of boundary setting and consent training, kids have started setting up boundaries for each other. We have told them they have the right to say no to things they are not comfortable with. They're now asking people to respect their spaces.

Eleanore Catolico: Have there been moments of resistance or skepticism for what you’re offering?

Brendah Aryatugumya: We go through the administration to get access to these kids. To create our relationship between these kids and us, we start with sharing our own stories. They have helped us to connect to each other, and that's where we always start.

Amy “Ames” Paulson: So much of our work is with the caregivers, so that they can support the children and end cycles of violence within their families and within the classroom. That's been an important aspect of the work — how to create safety, how to create a sense of interpersonal connection, rapport and trust with the community members so that we can support them to support the children. Then modeling how they can do that with their kids.

Brendah shared a quote from a teacher who said they used to come to the classroom with canes to beat the children, and now they come with compassion.

Eleanore Catolico: How does your organization collaborate with other organizations who may be working in a similar vein?

Brendah Aryatugumya: Other organizations reach out to us seeking mental health training for their staff in the communities they work in. We have around 20 of them under one umbrella called Brave Movement Uganda, which we co-chair.

We've recently worked with an organization that is supporting an Indigenous community of people who have been removed from their homes in the forest and forced to live in the local village. These people have been traumatized by the community. They feel neglected because their culture from the forest is different from the culture of these other people who have been here in the community. As well, the rate of gender based violence is extremely high, with nearly 100% of Batwa women experiencing violence.

We are collaborating with them to help them reclaim their own selves, their agency for their own healing and wellness, and support them to become the best of themselves so they do not pass on the trauma to their children.

Eleanore Catolico: Are there counselors or therapists within schools?Are you complementing what's already in the schools, or are you filling a gap for the schools?

Brendah Aryatugumya: There are no counselors in these schools, so we are trying to fill the gap. We are trying to ensure that each school accesses these skills so that someone is able to support children in the school setting.

Amy "Ames" Paulson: Most of the work in Uganda is deep in rural communities. There is no access within these rural villages to any mental health support, let alone within schools. Brendah will go into a community and train the parents, train the teachers, and train a mixed group of community leaders including grandmothers, elders and widowed women who care for children in the community. Within that rural community, everyone is able to speak the same language about mental health, about trauma, the impact of trauma, and how when unaddressed it can lead to cycles of violence.

Brendah, together with Lydia, our co-facilitator in Uganda, are training over 1,000 people a year.

Eleanore Catolico: Aside from funding, what challenges have you faced that you haven't been able to solve yet?

Brendah Aryatugumya: Some of the challenges are the skeptics in the community. You're telling them about mental health and the only thing they think of is someone running crazy, someone who is on the streets. It is hard for them to understand that we've got to take care of our own mental health before we reach that point where someone has to run crazy in the community.

The other challenge is the leaders in the community who feel like it is not important. They don't see the urgency to take care of their mental health.

The other challenge is being an NGO and people in the community think we have a lot of money, a common dynamic that has been created by the "global aid" industry. You find a leader who is sabotaging, stopping the services from reaching the people who need it. They expect you to bribe them. When we find this kind of leader, we try a religious leader of that particular community.

Eleanore Catolico: Are there any particular resources or guides, or tools that have been helpful for you to do your work?

Brendah Aryatugumya: We have the Healing Advocacy Training workbook. This has all the information we use when we are doing community training for the caregivers, for the single mothers, for the widowed women, and their community leaders.

We have a curriculum for the young youth in the primary level. These skills are vital for these children, and they help them to focus their minds and to know how important their mental health is for them to reach their goal.

Amy "Ames" Paulson: We have a basic emotional first aid guide in 27 languages. We share that in the training with the community, and do demonstrations and role plays for how to offer emotional first aid.

Our healing advocacy curriculum covers adverse childhood experiences, signs of trauma, the basic neuroscience of traumatic stress, and we use the Dan Siegel brain-hand model.

We train all the community members so that they all start to use this. We train them on some basic understanding around the neuroscience of stress on the body, how it impacts physical health and basic trauma responses, and how to provide grounding and resourcing to be able to bring the thinking brain back online and have more access to critical thinking.

Eleanore Catolico: How do you hear from and incorporate youth voices in shaping your work?

Amy "Ames" Paulson: We are all survivors of childhood sexual violence, and we bring that lens into the work with a deep understanding, with years of experience of working with youth to try to understand what is important for them and what was missing in our own lack of mental health response around trauma.

Trying to break some of the stigma around mental health is some of the work that we're doing in partnership with the Brave Movement. This is a global movement to end childhood sexual violence. Youth voices haven't been heard or valued. It's a slow process of helping them understand that they have a voice and we're here to listen.

Talking about it openly is one of the biggest ways to break through the fear of telling someone and starting to have some of these conversations openly. People have reported stories afterwards to us about either advocating for the arrest of these perpetrators or aggressors of violence.

We've had to endure a number of cases of youth coming forward to report after our trainings. Then we support the community members to support the kids, because sometimes there's backlash, sometimes there's stigma. It's how to support the community if someone does report, to support the mental health of these survivors, so that the stigma of naming someone and the judgment doesn't come back to become a severe mental health issue.

Justice is not always just the person going to jail, because that's not going to end the cycle of violence. The system might not actually heal the community, and the violence is likely not going to stop. We're trying to work on the underlying trauma that gives rise to violence and cycles of violence.

Where we see hope and opportunity is sharing our own stories and sharing what happened within our own lineage, and how we are the first in our families to end cycles of generational trauma and violence.

When we heal, we are equipping ourselves to not just end the cycle of violence, but to be empowered to be able to have a future, to be able to increase our sense of economic empowerment, like the ripple effect on jobs, wellbeing, physical health, disease, even education.

Brendah Aryatugumya: The system is always not straight. You find someone is taking two years on remand before they appear before court, and that is justice being delayed for them.

They could repeat their abuse because when it comes to trauma, some people become abusers because they were abused too. They have never gotten the healing that they need, so they become abusers, inflicting pain on others because this is what they experienced and this is what they know.

We are looking for how best to reach the prisons where these people are being detained. We are looking forward to giving them healing skills and helping them reclaim their own mental wellness.

Amy "Ames" Paulson: There's a case that we're working on right now and Brendah is supporting the community. We're working with a documentarian, a filmmaker, to highlight what this looks like in a community. It's a specific case of a girl who was raped and murdered in the community. Justice isn't just about finding the perpetrators and taking them away to jail. The community is still left completely traumatized.

How does healing create justice for the entire community in a way that they will not pass on this trauma to their families and communities? Justice can look like preventing violence in the future by training the entire community on how this one single isolated impact of violence is connected to cycles of trauma and violence.

Brendah will be doing community healing trainings with the entire community and supporting a process for creating a healing ritual within the community.

Eleanore Catolico: Is there anything else that either of you want to share in terms of how you work with other organizations, your mission, or any resources you need to continue to sustain your work?

Amy "Ames" Paulson: We have started getting a lot of requests from organizations to work with their leaders who are experiencing trauma. Brendah did a pilot this summer in Uganda and Rwanda to work with leaders through Amplify Girls.

Based on the success of the pilot workshops in Rwanda and Uganda, we've been asked to support the community-based organizations leaders in Kenya, Tanzania, and Malawi, and then come back and do a second round with the leaders in Rwanda and Uganda.

Based on word of mouth of our impact in the community, these kinds of organizations are coming to us now to work with their leaders. This is happening a lot in the United States as well. To some extent, it's starting now in Nepal, and it feels like an opportunity to create that ripple effect and have an impact on multiple levels.

Eleanore Catolico: Thank you.

Eleanore Catolico is a freelance journalist, writer and editor based in Michigan. Her solutions journalism has focused on initiatives in K-12 schools that address trauma, cultivate affirming and inclusive spaces and foster healthy peer connections.

** This interview has been edited and condensed.*