

# #HALF≡STORY



## **“Young people are much more self-aware than I think adults sometimes realize”: Daniella Ivanir of #HalfTheStory on youth agency and digital wellness**

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

**Daniella Ivanir:** My name is Daniella Ivanir. I'm the youth engagement and advocacy manager at #HalfTheStory. #HalfTheStory is a youth-led nonprofit organization dedicated to empowering the next generation's relationship with technology. As part of my role, I run all youth-centric programming, including our summer digital civics academy, our teen advisory board, and any other in-school initiatives that we do. For example, now we're working on a teen tech council for the state of New York.

Something that makes my approach distinct is it's rooted in a philosophy of peer support. I started volunteering at a crisis hotline when I was 15 years old. I went on and started a hotline at my university that was run by college students for college students.

When I work now with teenagers, I really think a lot about co-creation, co-facilitation, and beyond that, just how to create spaces that encourage peer connection. I think that that is where you see culture shifts, is when young people support each other and change stigmas within themselves. I think that's one way that my approach is distinct.

**Eleanore Catolico: What is something that others might find surprising about your work?**

**Daniella Ivanir:** Sometimes there's just a stigma around adolescents and teens, like this idea that working with them would be about trying to extract information from them all the time or get them to do something that they don't want to do. I really believe in the agency of young people, so a lot of my work is just empowering what they already have set in motion.

I think that teenagers are a really powerful group at a really special time. Adolescence is really interesting. I've heard people shy away from co-facilitation because they worry that there is extra work involved, but it's just so fruitful, and I don't find it to be very difficult to work with teenagers. I find it really wonderful. They teach me a lot. I really enjoy it.

**Eleanore Catolico: Can you explain the co-facilitating process a bit?**

**Daniella Ivanir:** The basic idea is that both on an organization level and on a programmatic level, you are infusing the feedback and thoughts of young people to ensure that the way that you are operating your business and the way that you are building a program is going to resonate with them and be something that does what it's set out to do.

I think that's important to do with policy as well. It can be from an advocacy background. The mechanics of that look like having focus groups—an active teen advisory board helps with that. You have monthly meetings in which you bring specific lessons from a curriculum, or have them brainstorm on the website for your program. I think all of those touchpoints are really important.

For example, when we talked to teens about their experience in the program this summer, one thing I heard that I really liked was, “When I opened up the application, it felt like someone who was Gen Z made it.” It's those touch points when you bring young people into the creation of every step of the way, not just for your final product, and then you show it to them and make sure that they like it. They are integrated in the creation of programs and curriculum and business ventures.

When I run a meeting, I usually ask a teenager to lead it with me. Sometimes that takes an extra step of having an ideation call meeting with them, or just creating a run of show so that it's a really a low lift for a teenager to co-facilitate on, and adding a lot of scripting and all of those things. The idea is that it's going to be more powerful for a group of teenagers to be in a meeting that's also led by someone their age range.

**Eleanore Catolico: The Youth Mental Wellbeing Co-Lab has three focus areas: building young people's resilience, giving young people agency, and helping young people build a sense of community and belonging. What does your work focus on? What contribution does your work make in that area?**

**Daniella Ivanir:** #HalfTheStory focuses on digital wellness. We define digital wellness as the relationship between your tech habits and your emotions. At a basic level, we are working with young people to explore their own relationship to the devices in their pocket and in their houses and in their classrooms. We see it as wellness from the inside out.

When you are feeling more in tune and emotionally resilient or able to name emotions, you are likely to be able to use tools like technology in a more active and intentional way than in a passive way. Our idea is really to have this aim of digital flourishing. That's our goalpost. Beyond that, we also think about youth advocacy, the importance of civic

education, and really shifting mindsets for young folks to believe that they could influence change on a local, state, federal, or global level.

We are also trying to build that pipeline, specifically in digital wellness. How do we train young people to believe that the fight for a better digital future is one that they could be the leaders of today? I think a lot about both empowerment within digital wellness and civic readiness and advocacy for young people in digital civics.

**Eleanore Catolico: How do you collaborate with organizations working in the same focus area, or in other focus areas?**

**Daniella Ivanir:** I believe that our ecosystem has done a good job at coalition-building and breaking down silos. Grants like the Responsible Tech Youth Power Fund do a really good job at bridging between some of those different organizations. The Digital Civics Academy that we do in the summer is a really great opportunity to be collaborative, so we have speakers from a lot of the different grantees that are in the Responsible Tech Youth Power Fund. We bring in students to speak to our students.

We'll co-post things with organizations like Design It For Us. We'll also, on an advocacy level, sometimes move in tandem. If there is a support letter coming from all of the youth-led organizations, we will move with them and join in the support letter for a bill or something like that. Then in this last year, we've also had a big partnership with Girls Inc. That has been able to really expand our curriculum program.

**Eleanore Catolico: What emerging work in this field are you excited about?**

**Daniella Ivanir:** Two things. One, I'm really a solution-oriented person. I don't like to stay in the problem statement too long. I'm really interested in what innovation looks like and where we could go from here. I also believe that tech is here to stay. I do love movements that encourage young people to detox social media and go back to basics—I really believe in that. But is there a possibility to leverage these platforms into being better tools for inspiration, connection, and education? I'm inspired by research that asks what a better social media could look like. I think that's a really interesting way to look about it, instead of just being like, we've got a broken platform.

Then I'm feeling inspired right now by movements that are thinking specifically about young men and media. I think this is a really important moment to think about the way that algorithms and communities and group chats are affecting our young boys, which we might not be talking about in the same way that we sometimes do with our girls. I'm inspired by organizations like Movember that are encouraging boys and men to speak more openly about mental health. I think it's really important. These issues need to be really holistic. We need everyone on our team.

**Eleanore Catolico: Can you share an example that illustrates the impact of your work?**

**Daniella Ivanir:** This summer, in July, we hosted a kickoff event for an initiative we're doing with the state of New York in the fall and spring. It's in partnership with Kathy

Hochul and Hillary Clinton. We had 18 teenagers with us. Two of the students were able to interview Kathy Hochul and Hillary Clinton. That's going to be memorable—someone believed in me, and I am worthy of a moment like this. Those moments have the possibility of really directing the way that things go for you. Being able to give those students an opportunity like that felt really special. If the goal is to make young people feel like they're enough, and they could live a life dedicated to social change and to saving lives and to helping people, it felt super impactful to grant a moment like that to a student at a really pivotal time in their life.

**Eleanore Catolico:** What are you learning about young people's relationship to social media, and how does it affect their mental health right now? We hear that all social media is bad for their mental health, that it's making them all anxious, but it could also help them connect with communities that may not be accessible to them where they live. What do you think? I'm curious if there's a deeper story.

**Daniella Ivanir:** Totally. That illuminates how critical it is to have young people at the forefront of this movement, because they have a unique and precious perspective on what it means to be an adolescent who has grown up entirely on social media. There's definitely a nuanced perspective from young people.

The throughline for me is that agency and control are the things that young people want more of, and the things that are most difficult for them in their relationship to technology. The persuasive design on these platforms is making it so that there are times when they say, "I really wanted to get up and get some fresh air, but I literally could not. I scrolled for 12 hours. It wasn't something I wanted to do." That feeling of being trapped is something that I often hear young people want to break out of. They want to create habits that they feel like they have agency in.

I think where adults sometimes get it wrong is that, one, there is a fluidity between where social media and digital life starts and where real life begins. They are intertwined in a way that I think some adults don't totally grasp. In order to be connected to your community, there is a need to be a part of it, which is not necessarily our end goal. I think it would be great if some of those norms changed, that feeling that you would be missing out or you would not be a part of something if you were not on social media.

The other part is that, for marginalized communities, we can actually see in research that there is sometimes a protective factor [to digital spaces]. As young people feel less safe or welcome in real-life spaces, we see them report that they feel safer in digital spaces. It says a lot about our failures in the ways that in-person spaces are operating both in their inclusivity and their safety. Even just in the need for more third spaces.

Coming out of COVID, our world looks different. I think young people really want a different situation. We see there's real nostalgia for the 2000s for the '90s, there's a nostalgia for simplicity, for Polaroid cameras and digital cameras, and going back to something simpler. There are trends on TikTok with a time-travel aesthetic. I think that's very intertwined with what Gen Z and Gen Alpha are thinking about right now.

Usually that resonates more when it comes from other young people, and it comes with a context of: Yes, but not everything we do online is bad. Sometimes it's actually good, or I feel connected or I feel inspired. I just wish I had more control. I wish I could go back to some simpler things. I do sometimes feel better when I'm not on a device. It's complicated, but young people are much more self-aware than I think adults sometimes realize.

**Eleanore Catolico: In terms of shaping digital wellness habits, is it about cutting down screen time or being more mindful about the types of content that they're consuming? How are their habits changing through this program?**

**Daniella Ivanir:** We like to think about active versus passive tech use. I recently heard a young person use this framework that I thought was cool: agentic mindsets. I don't have to shame myself or guilt myself that I spent a lot of time on social media. Can I redirect that and find something that's making me feel good on there? How can I reframe it? Instead of "Oh God, I just spent three hours on TikTok," being like, "I also watched a video of an older sister meeting her baby sister for the first time, and it made me feel good, and that's okay, and I can do that right now." Part of it is the way that you're framing it and the way that you talk to yourself and your mindsets.

When it comes to screen time, we often search for a diagnosis: this much is okay, and this much isn't okay. I think that tech is more like our relationship to food than like our relationship to cigarettes. Different people are going to have different relationships with this tool. In terms of screen time, it tends to be backed up by the research that three or more hours of social media start to be more harmful to sleep, to basic functioning, anxiety, depression, et cetera. But the type of content is extremely important. Not all screen time is the same.

What you are doing on your device is going to influence your emotions. Your tech habits are going to influence your emotions, and the tech habits are not just tied to the amount of hours that you spend. If I am going to spend 35 minutes saving a bunch of videos to a folder of recipes on TikTok because I know that I'm going to make them tomorrow and I'm going to go to the grocery store and I'm going to cook all these things that are inspiring me, or I'm going to go to these restaurants in New York, that's going to be a different experience than if I find myself endlessly on YouTube shorts watching old clips of CSI that I didn't even want to watch. Or on the flip side, consuming really harmful content. In extreme cases, we see that often—people being fed content of eating disorders and suicidal self-harm.

We think about digital wellness as a spectrum from in control to out of control. The tools that we try to teach through our curriculum are about having agency, thinking about makes you feel more educated, connected, and inspired, as opposed to passive habits that you are not necessarily in control of all the time.

**Eleanore Catolico: Everyone learns as much from things that don't work as things that do. Can you describe something that you tried that didn't work, but that you learned from?**

**Daniella Ivanir:** We did an initiative this spring called Screen Free Prom. This was an idea that really came from our teen advisors. We really wanted, and continue to want, to reimagine and support young people in reimagining what their places of joy could look like away from screens. We set out this spring to host some Screen Free Proms across the country.

We get really excited about working with teens, and some teenagers are very, very capable and mature. We had a big learning of the importance, especially with school-based work, of engaging administrators early. That was an important lesson for us: we can help and empower young people to be leaders, but not necessarily drivers. The ecosystem of a school, of an administrator, of a teacher, of parents, is extremely important. Now we're trying to operationalize more what it means to have a student pair up with an administrator and together do a project with us. That was a really important learning and teaching moment.

**Eleanore Catolico: Are you partners with schools?**

**Daniella Ivanir:** Great question. With our curriculum program, which is called Social Media U, we have relationships with schools in which they purchase our curriculum, and then we do a train-the-trainer model. They then take it to their schools, and their own teachers or counselors are the ones that are facilitating our curriculum, so in that sense they are our partners, but we are not the ones that are in the schools teaching the lessons.

Through our teen tech council, we're working with student leaders within their school districts to help get feedback and be a channel for feedback around phone-free school policies and how that's going for students in their own classrooms. Through that we'll build relationships with the schools that they're in.

Girls Inc is one of our partners, again with a train-the-trainer model. We have relationships with those affiliates, but they are the ones in their own communities that are teaching the curriculum.

**Eleanore Catolico: More and more districts or even states have implemented cell-phone ban policies. Is that something that young people are trying to influence in their districts?**

**Daniella Ivanir:** The movement towards distraction-free schools is really interesting. We're learning about it as we go. We have talked to our teen advisors about their differing school policies for years now. Even before some of these state policies, there were variations in schools in their approach to tech in the classroom.

We think it's really important to support a school's whole ecosystem. When these policies get passed, where we come in is that young voices should really be centered in how it's implemented and how it's going to affect things like communicating with their parents. Change is scary, and we really want to make sure that young people's experiences and guidance is centered in how it's done.

We also really believe that a culture shift in digital wellness goes beyond just removing phones from the classroom. We think that it really is about moving from screen-free fear into screen-free fun. How do we reinvigorate joy and social connection? Focus less on, this is harmful, this is scary—but then what are we offering as an alternative?

What we're working on with teenagers now with our teen tech council is empowering their own innovations and ideas to support their screen-free events and wellness centers in their schools, to really just hear from them on what works and what doesn't. The hope is that that can invigorate a deeper change in distraction-free schools and go beyond just removing devices.

**Eleanore Catolico: Aside from funding, are there any challenges that you have faced or are currently facing that you haven't been able to solve?**

**Daniella Ivanir:** How do you convince people to center youth voices, especially in advocacy? When you're up against red tape, it's not always going to be easy. I also think that it is really important that we protect youth voices, and that's not necessarily going to be the ethos of partners that you have. Whether that's a government agency or a journalist, there are going to be times in which young people are seen as either a token or a prop, or not necessarily as experts. It's really important to us to find ways to advocate for their voices within these systems, and that's always going to be both a challenge and an opportunity.

**Eleanore Catolico: Do you think that's a matter of strengthening partnerships with schools, or of actually creating infrastructure or systems within a school to give people more of a platform?**

**Daniella Ivanir:** It definitely [requires] a systems-change approach. There are examples in other countries of children or teenagers on boards, both in schools and in governments, [recognizing] their importance as stakeholders. Part of what we're trying to strengthen right now is that relationship between student and administration. What does it mean to have at least one student on the school board or district board? What does it mean to elevate the voices of a student council? What does it mean to have youth voices at the table when a policy's being written, not just when it's being passed? There's some systems change there. Our approach with that is always to empower young people. We go bottom up, so if we empower the students that are in the student councils, in the school boards, to be the ambassadors in their school, we hope that we'll see some of that systems change.

**Eleanore Catolico: Among the young people you work with in developing better policies and healthier attitudes towards digital wellness, what has been their approach to doing outreach to their peers? How have other students responded? Have they encountered roadblocks?**

**Daniella Ivanir:** There's variance for sure. I think the Screen Free Prom movement we did last spring was an interesting test of that. One of our students was in our summer program, and she led the Screen Free Prom movement at her school in Salt Lake City.

It was really interesting because we did that same initiative in San Francisco, and there are different attitudes in different places. Urban cities versus rural cities, and based on social-economic status, we see differences in attitudes towards devices. [It helps] when our young people lean into things that feel resonant. I remember [the student in Salt Lake City] telling me that her student council really liked the idea of having a retro theme. They really liked having digital cameras or Polaroid cameras—that got them excited. That would maybe get them to turn their phone in.

That was a really important insight for us. We could have a raffle for AirPods. Yes, that's cool, but the thing that was cooler was actually being able to check out a digital camera to use at your dance, to turn in your phone for a wristband and get that camera. We see that when they're empowered to do it their way and in the way that feels cool, there is more likelihood that they're going to be moving together.

That said, some of our young people who are on the teen tech council might hear from peers who are upset about the phone ban policies: "Why are you working to have my phone taken away from me." These are teenagers, and they don't always like being told what to do. I get it.

We're hoping to empower them to find their own messaging that actually resonates with the way that they're thinking about tech and connecting. At the end of the day, I have such optimism that at our core, we are connective beings, so young people are down to connect with each other and to do things that get them away from their technology. Generally, we do see reception from that peer-based approach.

**Eleanore Catolico: What insights or strategic lessons can be taken from your work that others could use in and out of the field?**

**Daniella Ivanir:** The first thing that comes to mind is modeling. It's really, really important that we keep the same standards for ourselves that we expect from our young people. Even in the classroom, a teacher that has their phone out is going to have less authority for telling their students to put their phones away.

We all are on a journey of figuring out how to preserve social connection and humanity and how to set really clear boundaries with the things in our pockets. It's really important that we don't see it as just a youth issue. It's something we're all working towards. We're all on our own journeys of digital wellness, of genuinely asking ourselves, What is my relationship to tech? There are going to be days in which you find yourself feeling numb and just scrolling, and that's okay. There's acceptance there. For adults to reckon with their own relationship with it, what comes up around that, it's complicated. There's a lot there.

The second thing is simple. Am I using my tech passively or actively right now? That mindset has really changed my life. It's really simple. My younger sister has been following what I do. That's really changed it for her, just having those moments where you ask yourself, Do I feel like I'm choosing my time right now? Do I feel like I'm doing what's nourishing and good for me right now? That's hard, but adding the friction of that

question has definitely helped me make decisions that make me feel like I'm doing what I want to be doing, and I'm not being persuaded by addictive design.

**Eleanore Catolico: How would you define current attitudes towards youth mental health? Have you seen attitudes toward youth mental health shift in your community or sector? What contributed to that change?**

**Daniella Ivanir:** I was listening to a podcast the other day where someone was talking about their own mental health. They were probably a teenager in the '80s, and they were talking about the deep shame of anxiety and depression and mental illness. I think that we forget how recent it is that we had really deep stigma and shame tied to talking about anything related to our mental states and what we're going through. We've had a huge shift in the right direction. We have 25 teen advisory board members, and they're across the country. In a general sense, it seems that most of them are in communities in which, on a base level, it is okay to talk about mental health and anxiety. We have seen a huge shift towards people paying attention to youth mental health.

Sometimes it's tricky, because sometimes we overcorrect. There are times when the online diagnosis or therapy speak can [make you wonder], is this being applied to everything? Is it always informed? I also think that we still have many, many cultures that are still in phases where a child's not necessarily feeling comfortable talking about their mental illness, especially as it pertains to their ethnic, racial, or religious background. There are a lot of things that we could do to work with faith-based and identity-based organizations on shifting that culture.

In a general sense, I feel that the power of being able to talk about how you feel at a basic level is definitely more than it ever has been. I feel inspired by that. I'm inspired by the way that young people are able to talk about, [considering] the stigma around therapy and all these things that years ago were considered an extreme thing for a subset of people. Generally, I'm feeling optimistic about it.

It's important that we keep it contained, that we have the right language to speak about it, that from really early on, education for students includes these ideas of emotional resiliency and emotional granulation. Knowing that at a young age, I think, is extremely important. I would definitely continue to advocate for those interventions.

**Eleanore Catolico: What barriers to changing minds still exist? What do you think is needed to change the way people think about youth mental health?**

**Daniella Ivanir:** People are sometimes really not sure what to do with youth and adolescents. I've felt that in my work. We see that even in things like trespassing laws. We don't want kids to loiter. We don't want them in our spaces.

There's an uncomfortability with teenagers. People are not totally sure how to support or deal with this phase in between being an adult and being a child. Remembering that these are our children, just grown up a little bit, is really important. Adolescence can be life-or-death developmental period. I think it's extremely important that we understand how important it is that we give grace to our young people, especially when it comes to

their tech, that we don't blame them for something that they also don't have control over, the way that our devices are addictive. There is work to be done around the way that we think about teenagers and their ability to have agency, and where we toe the line between supporting them and protecting them and empowering them. That's something we continue to teach and try and maybe shift perspectives on.

Sometimes we're afraid of things that we don't understand. With technology, there's a real big fear of, "I don't know what this thing is." I see that in both directions. Sometimes when we're led by fear, then we blame, and we either take it away or say it's the problem of the young person. I don't love that perspective. But I also don't think that we should leave anyone to their own devices. It's important to create those guardrails and safety measurements.

Fear keeps people away from getting on the train of solutions and shifting things. We like to elevate stories. We think stories are really powerful. We like to empower young people to be the leaders of their own movements and their own corners and their own communities and be ambassadors. We'll continue to lean on research and science and facts.

**Eleanore Catolico: Are there particular resources, guides or tools that have been especially helpful to you in advancing your work?**

**Daniella Ivanir:** The Responsible Tech Youth Power Forum has been a really amazing resourcing community. I'm a community-oriented person. I really like working with other folks. I think that we are stronger together. I like to be collaborative. Working with other organizations that are youth-led has been huge. I learn so much from them.

LinkedIn is an amazing tool. We do a lot on LinkedIn. actually. We have our job board there. We introduce it as something that young people can connect with each other on. Beyond that, we have used the digital flourishing scale a lot in our work. Also we use the civic readiness scale for a digital civics academy and adapt it for digital spaces.

**Eleanore Catolico: Looking ahead, what's the most important question you think the Co-Lab should be asking right now?**

**Daniella Ivanir:** I go back to that point that I made before: We've had the problem statement. Where do we go from here? Often we're trying to mitigate the harm that already exists and not always dreaming about what could be possible. I'm curious about that. And I am very interested in the relationship between boys and media right now. It's not necessarily been the focus for the last 5, 10 years. It's mentioned, but I think it's a really interesting place to dig into.

**Eleanore Catolico: Post-election, there's been more news attention on how young men feel alienated. I'm curious what work you're doing in that space right now.**

**Daniella Ivanir:** We haven't done ample research or focus groups on it yet. We plan to; it's something that we have up on the horizon. From speaking with some of our boys, some are feeling less comfortable talking about their story or their feelings between

male friendships. From a social-connection perspective, that's something that is a goal of mine to increase.

There are things online that all of our young people are not sure how to navigate, but it's been particularly interesting to learn about the effects of things like gym culture and gaming communities, and what they might result in, in terms of isolation or going down a rabbit hole. That's really interesting from a research perspective.

**Eleanore Catolico: Thank you so much for your time, Daniella.**

*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.*