“We use the arts to impact communities.”: Joel Bergner of Artolution on youth-led public art in communities affected by conflict

Ambar Castillo
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Ambar Castillo: I'm Ambar Castillo, a Solutions Insights Lab researcher.

Joel Bergner: My name is Joel Bergner, CEO and co-founder of a nonprofit organization called Artolution. My background is as a community artist and muralist. I also used to be a youth counselor in a treatment center, and all that informs my work.

Ambar Castillo: What is unique in your approach to youth mental health that others might find surprising?

Joel Bergner: We use the arts to impact communities. We work with children and youth primarily, but we also have some programs that work with families. We even have one that works with widows who have been through war. What makes us unique, first of all, is the approach of using the arts.

Number two, working in many different humanitarian contexts and in different marginalized communities globally. Most arts organizations are much more focused on one location or one city. We've set up programs in a lot of different refugee camps, informal settlements, and communities around the world. All these are led by local artists, as well as local staff, such as a program manager and finance officer. All of the people facilitating the projects are locally based artists. If it's a refugee camp, the artists are refugees themselves who live in the camp.

That’s a huge part of what makes us unique. One direction would have been to become the Peace Corps of art, where people from the US, Europe or wherever go to developing countries or refugee camps to lead art programs. We purposely decided not to do that, because we recognize the impact for local artists and local people.

First of all, they earn a living and get professional development, but they’re also able to impact the community a lot more than outsiders would be able to. The mental health, well-being, and social cohesion of the local community is served in that way.

Very specifically, we do collaborative art making. It's not just art classes or things like that, which are fine and good. We have some elements of that in our work, but our curriculum, approach and methodology focuses on the collaborative nature of it, whether it's a collaborative mural project, a performance, or any type of art.

Ambar Castillo: Is your organization facilitating the programming that’s led by local artists? What's the difference between local artists just gathering together and facilitating that themselves? What value does the organization bring?

Joel Bergner: Good question. First, we always visit the locations to physically set up the project. Either I or the other co-founder, or other people in the organization, help set up the program. We also provide training to local artists. In any community around the world, you will have artists, but it is not very common for artists to know how to get in front of 20 or 30 kids and say, “Hey, everyone, we're going to create something collaboratively together.” They usually work as a team to make sure each person has a transformative experience, connecting with others, building relationships, and strengthening self-esteem and self-confidence.

Most artists have not been trained in or exposed to this approach. That's where we come in. We recruit the artists. We make sure these individuals are not just good artists, but also people who can connect to kids or community members. We train them, for example, in mental health and psychosocial support techniques. Not to become psychologists, but to learn techniques that strengthen the well-being of the participants. We bring that to the table.

The other huge thing is funding and the infrastructure, because we connect with UN agencies. There's an ecosystem of UN humanitarian agencies in a refugee camp. We are in that ecosystem; that's our network. We help set up programs that couldn't otherwise be set up, and we’re able to pay the artists a living wage, as well as provide the materials and locations. We can connect those artists with schools, community centers, and places where kids and community members are. All of that would be very difficult for artists to do on their own.

Ambar Castillo: When you do psychosocial training and use those techniques in the programming, how does that look?

Joel Bergner: It's a very practical approach. When you're leading a program, you want to make sure that each and every person’s ideas are valued. For example, if we're coming up with an idea for a mural or a play, there's going to be many ideas about the

images, theme, and story. What's our message to the world? What are we saying with this mural? Through a work of public art, we communicate this message with our community and the world. What do we want to say? Everyone needs a role in that.

We've come up with different techniques. Some participants might raise their hand; they have lots of ideas. Others might be more shy and might want to write about it, or draw pictures that express their ideas. We have many different ways for them to share, for everyone to feel that their ideas are valued, and that they have something to say that will become part of the bigger piece. Then we move on to actually creating the art. We do rehearsals, or paint the mural, and our artists are trained. Each and every day, they make sure to interact with each participant.

Let's say you see someone who's on their own, or they're being bullied or excluded. [The artist trainers] are always paying attention to that, making sure to stimulate relationships. We have many games and icebreakers that are not just art, but activities geared toward building relationships, so people very quickly feel they're part of a group.

A sense of camaraderie will impact their experience, in the art itself and the activities, such as creating a portrait of someone who's important in their life or inspired them, like a teacher or a special uncle. A section of the mural will be about their hopes for the future. What future do they want to envision for themselves and their community? These things are all designed for strengthening mental health and well-being.

Ambar Castillo: The youth mental well-being collab has three focus areas, including building resilience, giving young people agency, and helping them build a sense of community and belonging. Which one does your work focus on most?

Joel Bergner: That's a hard question because we focus very much on all three. We've had these discussions. We have a MEAL [monitoring, evaluation, accountability, learning] guide consulting with us to strengthen our MEAL program. We ask questions like, what is the core of what we're working to achieve, and what things support that? Is resilience the core objective? How do agency and belonging support that?

It's a hard question. We've had debates about that. It's not clear. I will say we definitely work towards all three. Resilience may be primary. I think that's what we came to in our conversations, but I'm not 100% convinced of that.

Ambar Castillo: What kind of contributions do you make towards resilience?

Joel Bergner: Everyone we work with has been through all kinds of different traumas, challenges, displacement, and conflicts. A lot of them have been through either war or genocide. We work with the Rohingya, with displacement and growing up in a new location. To me, resilience is about how we can, as a community and as individuals, not just survive these huge challenges that life has thrown at us, but also live fulfilling lives.

There will be new challenges. There will be new traumas. There'll be new situations that arise as well. [The challenge is] to be able to get through it, experience and feel those feelings, but also move through it to build healthy relationships, and live a life of dignity.

Ambar Castillo: How does the program, or participating in this artwork, help these communities find ways to do some coping and resilience work? What is it about the artwork, or the work you do, that helps build that?

Joel Bergner: There's a couple of elements. Number one is community building. How many chances do we get in our day-to-day life to connect with everyone in our community, whether it's kids, elders, teachers, or people of different backgrounds? In some of our urban projects, there'll be people who are homeless, and those who are not. How often do they interact with each other, other than just asking for money or something? Having true interactions between people builds a sense of community, as well as social networks within a community, that are valuable for this.

Ambar Castillo: How often do the gatherings or workshops happen?

Joel Bergner: We do workshops for different projects. In the US, we do a lot of them in public housing, especially in New York. The community comes together in workshops where people from all generations paint together. It's a feature in many of our projects.

Ambar Castillo: Is it usually daily for the duration of the project, or weekly?

Joel Bergner: For most projects, we have different kinds of programming. For our traditional mural project, for example, people will come out and paint for two weeks. Not everyone in the community is going to come every day to paint. We might have 20 participants that come for two weeks through the stages of designing, developing, and then painting it, and then the final celebration. We'll have days within that time frame where community members can all come and paint, like a big Saturday paint day. Participants are often from different backgrounds, and so they're able to connect through that activity. Some of our programs are longer. Some are ongoing. We have several throughout the year as well.

Ambar Castillo: Do you find with longer-term projects that you have more benefits than the regular gathering?

Joel Bergner: Yes. There's definitely benefits to different lengths of time. We're working on measuring this, because it's important for us to know the benefit, whether it's a one-day event versus a two-week project, or something less intense that lasts many months. Not all day, every day for months, but multiple times a week for many months.

We even have programs that are year-round. This goes back to the question, can communities actually start a program on their own? We support this program, which is primarily dance and performance-based. There are other activities as well, such as drawing and painting, in an informal settlement called Kibera in Nairobi. With that one, we were able to support them through training and funding for something they were trying to do anyway, but with no budget or training. We very much respected that they were taking this initiative and seeing the value in it.

I know the man who runs it from when he was a teenager. He's from the community, and I worked with him many years ago. That was an example of being able to support

something that was already started by the local community, and being able to make that become sustainable and long-lasting. Those participants, which range from children up through youth, are year-rounds. It's life-changing when this is something you're involved in from age 8 to 15. It's a huge part of your life, not comparable to two-week projects.

We try to make sure that even the ones that are short-term, like two weeks, are part of something bigger. Perhaps it's part of a bigger community center or school, or a nonprofit doing activities throughout the year, and we bring in this specific component.

Ambar Castillo: What are some challenges in trying to measure progress with the kind of programming you do? Especially when you're dealing with different lengths of time, and some that are also intergenerational?

Joel Bergner: We do pre- and post-surveys, asking questions about someone's relationships in the community, how many friendships and close connections they have before and after, how they're feeling, their self-esteem, their hope for the future. Sometimes we'll do the more standard well-being surveys that we didn't design. Those are ones that the UN uses, and are generally used worldwide.

There are a couple challenges. One is just consistency. We're relying on our local staff, and making sure they're able to keep up with everyone and collect all this data, and being able to analyze it. We bring in people to analyze the data and ask the right questions because we work in many different contexts. There are so many things you can ask, but you can't give out a survey with 100 questions. You have to narrow it down.

We're always evolving and trying to figure out the best way to ask these questions. What do we want to know? Also, what do funders want to know, versus what we want to know? That can also be a challenge.

Ambar Castillo: What's an example of how funders want to know something that you or your local artist partners don't think is that important to measure or ask?

Joel Bergner: Here's an example of a big sticking point that we always struggle with. Funders often want to know, how many participants did you reach? How many direct beneficiaries did you have? They rarely ask how long they participated. We could easily do nothing besides one-day community paint days, and we would reach thousands and thousands more people. It would look really good on paper. We know that this does have a value, but common sense will tell you that's not the transformational experience that a young person going through an intensive two-week program will have, or the one in Kenya that's year-round.

If there's 100 kids in Kenya working year-round in this program, that's a certain level of transformation in that person's life, with a certain amount of impact. Obviously, with that same funding, you could have reached a lot more people. When you reach less people, you can have a much bigger impact on each individual's life. That's always something we're trying to figure out and work with our funders to understand.

We might have a budget in which we can work with 2,000 people and have a small impact. Or we can work with 100 people and have a massive impact on those 100 people. Part of our goal is finding where these thresholds lie. If you do these programs for a certain amount of time, maybe two months, is three months that different? We're trying to find out these things so we know the best use of our funding.

Ambar Castillo: Do other organizations deal with the same kinds of questions? Is there another measurement model that piques your interest?

Joel Bergner: Generally speaking, it's a topic of conversation that we've definitely heard from others. Lots of organizations deal with that kind of thing.

Ambar Castillo: You mentioned bringing in data analysts to look at progress. Who are these people? Is it usually folks who are already on the ground where you work?

Joel Bergner: No. Basically, we train our local staff to give these surveys and collect all the data. Then we need to have it analyzed. For example, right now, we have someone who's based in Colombia, a country where we work. She went to the University of Michigan and was trained in MEAL and M&E [monitoring and evaluation]. We've worked in the past with academics from universities. We worked with different people, but generally with people who have an expertise in MEAL and in analyzing this data. This year, with the support of the ICONIQ Co-Lab funding, we've been working with her as a consultant to reimagine our MEAL program and go back to the basics.

Ambar Castillo: How did you come to that approach? Do funders expect it?

Joel Bergner: The basics of it is just M&E, monitoring and evaluation. There are different layers. Number one is basic demographics, how many people are you working with, who are they, are they refugees, are they male or female? We've gotten pretty decent at that, although it was a struggle for a few years.

Ambar Castillo: Why was it tough?

Joel Bergner: In the field, these projects are just very intense. There's a lot of moving parts. You have a manager on the ground, and if that person is juggling lots of things, basic questions like “How many people did you work with?” might be difficult to know.

Ambar Castillo: It's not necessarily collecting data and figuring out how many participants are regular enough to identify the demographics, it's more about making sure staff members are equipped with the resources to collect that.

Joel Bergner: Yes, exactly. That's one part, and we're good at that now. Then there's the second part, which are surveys about indicators of mental health, well-being, social cohesion, relationship building, all the things we’re trying to achieve with our programs. That’s another thing, and that's where a specialist comes in.

We've measured the impacts of many of our programs in the past, but also, many of them have also been challenging for the same reason. Maybe local staff haven't

collected all the surveys they were supposed to. Then there's language, literacy, and all kinds of [other logistical] challenges.

Ambar Castillo: How much would you say is helpful, versus just having these for funding purposes, which is maybe not so helpful?

Joel Bergner: That's why we use the MEAL system, because it is not just collecting and analyzing data. The 'L,' learning and assessment, is important, because one thing we need to focus on is how to continue developing our programs. We started from the perspective of experiencing that our programs are a very positive thing. It's something that people are responding to, are excited about, and they tell you anecdotally that it's very powerful, but you need data for two reasons.

Number one, what are all the impacts? You have to have a lot of people, a big sample size, to really understand all the different impacts. For example, we had one that was a pretty big sample size, around 550 people in Jordan, with Syrians and Jordanians in different schools across the country. We were analyzing how many days [were best] for different types of activities. Some were more performative, and others were doing more visual art projects. Some were very big groups, with maybe 40 kids working with a couple of artists, and others were very small groups of maybe 10.

Does that make a big difference in the experience and impact it provides? If so, should we gear our programs towards groups of 10 instead of 40, if that's going to make a big difference? We're looking at all of these things so we can evolve our programs and activities to constantly improve. Obviously, we want the best impacts possible.

The other thing is to show [impact] to donors and funders. The arts, especially, is something that people can be initially a little unsure of. It's not the first thing one might think of regarding mental health. People can be a bit skeptical, so [it's very helpful] to have that before and after data on its benefits. We can show that data now. It's something that can encourage donors to believe in this work.

Ambar Castillo: Are funders, specifically, not aware of research on how art can be a powerful tool for mental health and youth?

Joel Bergner: One thing that's helped us a lot in the UN context and humanitarian response is that they've developed an intervention pyramid for mental health and psychosocial support. In the pyramid, level 2 focuses on family and community support. As you go up the pyramid to the top of the pyramid, levels 4 and 3 are much more geared towards how people think of mental health, which is getting clinical support. You're having a mental health crisis, so you go to a therapist.

But mental health is not only about going to therapy. That's important. When we recognize someone in distress who's going through something, if there is support [available] in their community, we can refer them to a psychologist. However, that's not what we do. What we do is level 2, which is a much broader support to everyone in the community who needs to have strong mental health. Included within that is building

community relationships and network building, and people being able to support each other, strengthening family. These are things that everybody in the community needs.

Ambar Castillo: Is the narrative around art as therapy, or as a therapy tool, not broad enough to encompass what you're doing? When people think about art therapy, they're thinking very specifically of a one-to-one practitioner.

Joel Bergner: Yes, exactly. That's why they're still thinking about the top of the pyramid and the clinical side. They'll say, "Oh, you do art, so you must do art therapy." But we don't. Art therapy is great, and it's important, but that's not what we do. That's usually a very clinical one-on-one situation. A licensed art therapist must be the one to do that.

There is a very powerful role for other artists and facilitators in the community who aren't licensed psychologists. We all have a role to play. People in a lot of societies don't have a tradition of psychology before about 100 or 150 years ago.

You might think they just did not have it back then. But they had other ways of doing it, building relationships and opening up to people they were comfortable with, all of the ways we have as human beings. Often, you need a platform or reason to come together on a common mission, and the art project can be that.

Luckily, if you talk to anyone in humanitarian response who knows about mental health, such as an MHPSS [Mental Health and Psychosocial Support] person, they automatically know about the pyramid and what level 2 is. They always understand family and community support. When we tell them that's what we focus on, they get it instantly. That makes it easier to work with them and get that funding.

Ambar Castillo: Are the funders you encounter part of that group?

Joel Bergner: When we work with UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, or other similar UN agencies, that's where the money often comes from. It can come from different places. They have different sectors. There's protection, MHPSS, education, and emergencies. We've gotten funding from different sectors, but with mental health, that's been a big one for us. They will fund us for that reason, knowing that that's what we do.

Ambar Castillo: Are you encountering more organizations or individuals where the narrative is broadening to other aspects of community?

Joel Bergner: I was surprised when I started doing this work how many funding agencies have been open to it, or have become open to it. I wouldn't have thought that someone would give $100,000 to an arts program, or anything related to art. Obviously, humanitarian agencies are not giving money to make a pretty picture; they're giving money because it impacts people's lives. They have to be very convinced of that.

That was always surprising to me. It's something that's grown. There aren't a lot of organizations doing it. I don't know any other organization that focuses on arts programming in a humanitarian context or in refugee camps.

There's Clowns Without Borders. That's not the type of art we do, but it's the circus arts, and that's super cool. Maybe they would relate to what we do, because they work in refugee camps and marginalized communities.

Ambar Castillo: What are some of the biggest challenges of working in these kinds of settings and resettlement camps?

Joel Bergner: There are so many challenges. Funding is always challenging. That's why ICONIQ was so transformational, especially because it was supporting us as an organization and not just a program. We often have funding that supports a specific project, but we also need support as an organization, because you also need a finance officer or an accountant. They expect you to have those things, but they don't want to pay for it. But how can we be responsible in our financial reporting, which funders demand, when no one wants to pay for it? That's why the ICONIQ funding was very transformational and unique for us.

Ambar Castillo: Aside from funding, what challenges are specific to working in these camps?

Joel Bergner: Number one is getting permits and registrations. In some places, like Uganda, we have registration. In others, we haven't been registered, so we've had to work through partnerships with other organizations, which is a big challenge.

Ambar Castillo: What kind of registration is this?

Joel Bergner: In Uganda, we are registered as an international NGO, whereas, in Jordan for example, we just got a registration, but until recently, we didn't have it. Let's say we got funding for Jordan, but weren't registered there. We'd have to partner with someone who is registered, and run our programs out of their center. We couldn't just do it on our own. We'd have to partner with other organizations.

Ambar Castillo: Are you registered as a nonprofit operating [in Uganda]?

Joel Bergner: Yes, we're an international NGO in that country. You still have to get permits to work in the camps, which might be a separate permit. In Uganda, there were all these things we had to learn after we got registered. They told us we had to have an office open all the time in the capital, which is not where we work. We work in the refugee settlement, but we had to open an office in the capital. They forced us to do that. In the US, you don't need a physical office; it can just be a room in your house.

Ambar Castillo: How long did that process take, and how much funding?

Joel Bergner: It's not massively expensive to have a small office, but you have to have a desk and a computer, and sometimes you have to renew the registration every few years. They require a lot of different reports, and they want to see a lot.

Ambar Castillo: How long did that process take in Uganda?

Joel Bergner: In Uganda, it probably took a year. In Jordan, it's taken a long time, maybe a year and a half. There was a lot of bureaucracy in getting a document notarized in the US, and then sent to the Secretary of State in the US to specially mark it. Then we had to go to the US embassy in Jordan, then send it to Jordanian officials, then have it professionally translated through a service. It's 100 things.

Ambar Castillo: How much of this was clear before you entered the country? How much can you prepare for, versus the example in Uganda, where you were already in the country when you found out you had to open an office?

Joel Bergner: It depends. Usually a lawyer who has this kind of service can help you. But sometimes we didn't have all the information. If you work with someone good who gives you all the info, that's very helpful.

Ambar Castillo: Do you work with a lawyer who specializes in these cases? Specifically for Uganda, or in general?

Joel Bergner: Yes we did. We have pro bono lawyers in New York, but they're not going to know about a place like Uganda, and they're not even going to have colleagues in Uganda. They'll have colleagues in London, but they're not going to have colleagues in Bangladesh, so you have to find someone local. We know a lot of people in all these places where we've worked for a long time. We've been there in person many times and have relationships. That's how you make things happen, by getting recommendations and using your network.

Ambar Castillo: Was there a time you tried something and it just didn't work? If so, how did you pivot, or what did you learn from it?

Joel Bergner: Here's one we're dealing with right now. Someone from Colombia who worked with us for a long time was living in New York when I was there. He was part of Artolution. We started working in Colombia in 2019 to start this program. He had a great network, but it was hard to fund all of our programs, and we didn't have enough funding.

We had the idea in 2020 to start an independent organization in Colombia that was a Colombian organization. It was going to be called Artolución, obviously the same organization, but it's legally a new organization. We had a board, and I'm on it, but everybody else is local, including someone senior from Cruz Roja in Colombia.

Now it's 2025. It hasn't produced very much, because they haven't been able to fundraise much. This is hard with boards, in general. Even our own board hasn't been able to raise that much. Some organizations rely on boards to do that. Our board hasn't, but we've been able to do it ourselves. Whether it's me, my co-founder, or other people on our team, we're able to fundraise. In Colombia, the board didn't do it, but no one else was able to do it either. It still exists, and they did a lot of projects, but they've been inactive for a while now because of the funding issue.

We've been working on different strategies to reinvigorate it and bring this program back. We have a great team, great artists, and a lot of connections. I love the idea, and

it could be amazing. We're focused on making it locally sustainable as much as possible. That's the dream. If we could just pull out, and it could be run totally locally, that would be ideal. The problem is that they haven't gotten funding.

Ambar Castillo: To clarify, Artolución is under Artolution?

Joel Bergner: Yes. We describe our relationship as partners in the Artolution network, but they are independent. They have their own board and bank account. They have an agreement with us that they can't do something that's not part of the mission. Other than that, Artolución can do what it wants. Sometimes it works with Artolution to bring in projects as a kind of local chapter.

Ambar Castillo: What insights or lessons can others in the youth mental health field take from your work?

Joel Bergner: One thing is not to set up too many programs in too many different places because setting it up is the easy part, as challenging as that is. You can go to a place, set things up, find great people as facilitators, find a great manager, get some funding to get started, but what happens next? You don't want it to just fall apart. But trying to keep it going year after year and bring in new funding and resources [is hard]. Maybe a particular staff member ends up treating people badly, or steals some money.

Ambar Castillo: It's tough to have that accountability when you're growing in so many different places at once.

Joel Bergner: That's why we've focused on not opening any new chapters now. For example, Afrocure in Kenya is our partner. They are their own community-based organization, a CBO. They have their own center, but we support them in a lot of ways. We are not opening a new Artolution in Kenya. We have our Artolution base in Uganda. That's our East Africa base. We are not going to open a new one. Through that hub in East Africa, we're able to support the program in Kenya, and their success is our success. We are partners, so everything we do, it's together.

That's something that we learned in the past. In the early years, we might have started a new Artolution program in Kenya, because we saw an opportunity. Now, we realize we don’t want to do that. We have Artolution in Bangladesh, Jordan and Uganda. That’s enough. We’re trying to figure out Colombia, and in all the other places we’re working, such as Ukraine and Myanmar, we're not trying to start a new program. We’re working with partners. We're able to do a lot with a little, and still have that impact.

Ambar Castillo: Organizations your mission aligns with that already exist?

Joel Bergner: Yes. You can do a lot with just partnerships. We can bring in the Artolution component, something bigger than what’s already happening, without that whole infrastructure of having your own program. If you try to do too many of those, you won't be successful.

Ambar Castillo: Based on your conversations with individuals, organizations, and funders, what are the attitudes right now about youth mental health, and the best ways to address it?

Joel Bergner: The good thing is that people are very concerned about it, and they're coming at it from very different angles. Some people focus on social media, which is a huge problem with youth mental health. Others focus on youth in their own community, which is very important. We're working globally, but it can be a challenge to get people to care about youth mental health in other places around the world.

Ambar Castillo: When talking with artists, art leadership, and other organizations working in the arts, what are their attitudes towards youth mental health?

Joel Bergner: People in the arts are very supportive and care about it. Often, there's not a very strong sense of how specifically to impact mental health. It might just be an idea that people can learn art to express themselves, and that's great. But what else? Let's think about this in more detail and explore it more. That's something unique to Artolution, in trying to go so much further, not just getting people to paint and feel better. Many people in the arts have very narrow ideas that are not very well thought through.

Ambar Castillo: How do you explain the difference, or talk about that deepening?

Joel Bergner: A huge part of it is about relationship building. Having a skill and expressing yourself is important, but relationship building is maybe the most important thing. To me, it's common sense. If you're going through struggles, having positive people in your life, whether they're peers or adult mentors, is transformational. That's what's needed in your life.

I work with a lot of artists. All our facilitators are artists, and I'm an artist. I understand that sometimes we just want to do the art, we just want to paint. But I'm always working with them to impart the idea that they need to pay attention to the experience that participants are having. Is it positive? Are they connecting with other people? You should be connecting with them in a very personal way, because that's something they respond to. It's a challenge that I'm always focused on with them.

Ambar Castillo: Have you seen a change from 5 or 10 years ago in attitudes towards youth mental health? Has there been a shift?

Joel Bergner: People definitely think about mental health a lot more, so in that sense, it's top of mind. Even in the culture, people talk more about mental health now.

Ambar Castillo: Including in the arts field?

Joel Bergner: Yes. When you're talking about mental health, people have a reference for it that they maybe didn't have in the past, just because it's something that people are talking about. When I bring it up, or when we, as an organization, tell others what we do, it clicks with people faster than it would have before it was so common to talk about it.

Ambar Castillo: Anything else that's been helpful in doing your work?

Joel Bergner: One important thing, especially for older youth or even adults, is the connection between livelihoods and being able to support someone with your job skills, whether that's crafting or learning tech-based design skills, then getting these skills, getting a job or starting a small business.

There's a huge connection between that and mental health. If you are 18 or 20, and you don't have skills or any hope of getting work to feed your family, that's going to have a huge effect on your mental health. If you try to separate the two, as if earning a living and having those skills has nothing to do with your mental health and vice versa, you're not seeing the full picture. That's not true for a 6-year-old kid, but it is true for a 15-year-old. They're thinking about that.

Ambar Castillo: Any specific tools that have helped your operations?

Joel Bergner: We've focused a lot on tech-based tools for livelihoods. We've been doing a lot of learning for design skills, and how to use those skills in the job market wherever you live.

Ambar Castillo: Any specific resources that have helped with that?

Joel Bergner: Designing for murals, and getting instructors for those programs who might be different from those who run your usual program.

Ambar Castillo: Thank you so much, Joel.

Joel Bergner: Thank you so much.

Ambar Castillo reports for Epicenter NYC, covering access and equity in some of the nation's most diverse neighborhoods. A former STAT health equity fellow through MIT's Knight Science Journalism program, her award-winning reporting bridges storytelling and public health. Supported by fellowships like the Solutions Journalism Network, Fulbright and Pulitzer Center, she has carried her reporting across communities from Queens to India.

** This interview has been edited and condensed.*