“You have to keep everything on the rails”: Kurtis Palermo of Roca on helping young people rewire their responses to trauma and build safer futures

Eleanore Catolico
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Eleanore Catolico: Please introduce yourself and tell me about your organization.

Kurtis Palermo: I'm Kurtis Palermo. I'm the executive vice president for Roca Maryland. I have been with Roca since February 2013. I was in Massachusetts at their Western Mass site for about five years until the very beginning of 2018. Then I relocated to Baltimore to open up this site. What we do across not only Massachusetts and Maryland, but also in Connecticut. We work with 16 to 24-year-old men in Baltimore and a mix in Massachusetts and only women in Connecticut. Very highly traumatized individuals are at the epicenter of urban violence. Living in neighborhoods where gun violence is very common, areas where shootings and homicides happen regularly.

They may be involved in some level of crime themselves or their family, selling drugs, using drugs, suffering from PTSD [Post Traumatic Stress Disorder], acute trauma ongoing. We work with them for three years. Our model, while we're in this CVI landscape, Community Violence Intervention, is really about behavior change. We use something that we developed in the mid-2010s, about 2014-ish, 2015, with Mass General Hospital called Rewire CBT. It's cognitive behavioral theory, not therapy. Cognitive behavioral therapy is very common, widely used for a very, very long time. We needed something that was nonclinical and could be used by paraprofessionals.

Across all Roca sites, we have very few licensed clinicians. We're a very diverse staff of experience. In order to be a case worker, we call them a youth worker here; you don't have to be a licensed clinician, but we do offer you this tool of Rewire CBT in order to work with young people to help them understand that what they think, feel, and do are three different things, but one can impact the other two.

Just to give you a little description of a young person, not everyone, but maybe just generally speaking. We'll get a guy or a young woman at some of the other sites who's been through all of this experience in their life. The trauma is there, and they're in survival mode, if that makes sense. Living in this bottom brain, where they think pretty much everyone, everything is out to get them. The response for anyone, but obviously for the young person we're talking about, is fight, flight, or freeze. When I see a threat, the brain's job is to protect me, to keep me alive, so I'm going to do one of those three things.

As that cycle continues, they find themselves in harm's way, whether they're engaging in criminal activity, whether they're shooting someone, they've been shot, they get in a fight, they do X, Y, Z, they go to jail. Our goal with Rewire CBT over time, and, again, we have them for three years, it takes, depending on who you ask, between 18 and 24 months to see the same sustained behavior change. That's with anything that you do. For these young people, we want them to stop carrying guns. We want them to reduce their substance use, address domestic violence, and all these things.

We're using the skills constantly, talking to them about being present, mindful, and labeling how they're feeling, this foreign conversation that they've maybe never had before. Consider what you value before you make a decision. You can act out of emotion, and you're mad and you're pissed off, or you're frustrated, or you're sad, or all these other emotions that just have you react, or you could take an 8 to 12-second pause, and say, well, if I do X, then Y is going to happen. If I pull out a gun and shoot someone, I could go to jail, or they could shoot me and kill me, or, if I get arrested, I'm not going to see my kid.

All of these things that they've really never had to do because they've just lived in this survival mode, they go outside and make enough money to get through the day. While we're doing that over the three years with the Rewire CBT, we offer transitional employment, which is very, very important. We're paying them to show up four days a week at 7:30 in the morning. They have to be in their uniform. They can't smell like weed. They have to follow instructions. The goal is to use that as a practice ground for the Rewire CBT. You don't want to go to work, but you still have to.

You are asked to do something by your supervisor, and you think they're disrespecting you, but then you have to flex that thinking. Are they really disrespecting me, or are they just asking me to do my job? Over time, again, that's their behavior changing. They come enough and they're consistent. Then they string enough days together in these weeks and months, and all of a sudden, they've been in transitional employment for a year and they're doing really, really well. We can then refer them out to a partner. They're still in Roca, but they might go to a vocational school or one of our employment partners. This is when the support is critical. They may not have the same amount of daily interactions with Roca staff, but it’s so important for their Youth Worker to continue to engage them, use the Rewire CBT, and support them.

Then at the end of the three years, you want it to be that they're working, and they have no new arrests, no new incarcerations, they've finished probation, they've addressed

substance use, domestic violence, homelessness, all these things that had they not been able to use the Rewire CBT to identify these unhelpful cycles they find themselves in, they probably wouldn't be successful in a lot of those areas because it takes emotional regulation. That's really what it's all about is increasing that over time, and we're seeing those outcomes as a result of it.

Eleanore Catolico: In terms of the Transitional Employment and having young people come in, what's been the key to getting them to consistently show up, be present, be active, and really benefit from the work?

Kurtis Palermo: One thing that's different about our site is we have interesting contracts where, with the high level of crime in Baltimore, when we got here in 2018, really up until about two years ago, there were 300 homicides a year. That was the regular. That was the norm. 1,000 non-fatal shootings, and all of these interpersonal situations, neighborhood beefs were driving the violence. I don't know enough about where Transitional Employment's working at other sites, but don't quote me on that, but maybe one or two have the ability to move kids further out, and we're able to do that.

We have some city crews, which is great for guys who really don't have safety concerns, but that's a lot of the time is used as a crutch for what you said, not showing up. Kurt can't show up because he's got safety issues in the city. If you're working at Druid Hill Park in West Baltimore, someone's going to see him. Actually, we also have a crew out in the county that is so far away, no one's going to know who you are. We're using that as a tool to coach those conversations with them when they do bring up safety concerns and not. Safety's our number one thing.

We couldn't do what we do if we're not making sure that young people are physically safe, staff are physically safe, and then we can really work on that emotional safety and growth. Beyond offering them the ability to work in different places, again, they'll use safety as a crutch, whether or not it's accurate or not, or true. We just had a conversation about, well, what are you doing instead of showing it? That intentional direct conversation that a youth worker or a crew supervisor, or a staff is having. For example, you could be outside and have a gun and sell some drugs, and make quick money.

Again, it goes back to how you told us you value your freedom and you are having a child. Are you more likely to get in trouble outside doing that, or go to jail, get shot, X, Y, Z, or come to work and learn a skill, and then we can keep you safe and keep you out of jail and alive? It might take longer, but this is the process to get you to where you tell us you want to be. That's what it's all about. We're remembering what they're saying. We're having intentional conversations. We're using the Rewire CBT because we're not projecting on them.

It's not what Kurt wants you to do. You're going to do what you're going to do regardless of what I say. I'm not judging you for whatever you're telling me. I just want to make sure that we can put whatever your goal is in front of you. If you want to go to vocational school, you have to show up for a few months on a work crew, and you can't miss a day

and you got to be consistent, and then we get you to vocational school. Now, you want to get a job.

Three years is not a lot. It's a lot of time and not a lot of time. It's just really about being clear upfront with the young person on expectations, and you just have to hold them accountable. If a young person doesn't show up, we don't just let it go. It's an email, a text message, a call to the youth worker, or to staff who are familiar with that young person. We need to go knock on the door, make sure they're all right, and get them in tomorrow because we don't want them to be in harm's way.

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. First, what does your work focus on? Of those three focus areas, which one is your focus area, and what contribution does your work make in that area?

Kurtis Palermo: We focus on all three directly. I'll talk about resiliency first because I don't know that you can build resiliency in somebody, if that makes sense. You can reveal it, but they're going to have it or they're not. For our guys here, just speaking about Baltimore, they have some of the most resiliency I've ever seen. We have staff from other sites come down or community partners, champions here in Baltimore who have never really seen where these guys live, the circumstances they're in, heard the stories about what they're going through. It's a lot.

We're talking about living in vacant homes, having to sell drugs, maybe there's a family member who's addicted, maybe there's a family member in jail, food instability, mental health, substance use, all of these people getting shot and killed around you. Seeing things, witnessing things from a very, very young age, and they still show up. To me, that goes back to your question about what do you do if a guy isn't coming? This is a safe place for them to come and not be judged, and to do anything that they want to do to better themselves.

When they don't come, then you start to question that resilience. For example, why isn't Kurt coming? What happened? We have to help and support. These guys have pride. They don't want to ask for something, but we want to make sure that they can keep showing up. We have 16-year-old kids who have been through more than a 50-year-old. They've seen so much. They've been shot, but they keep coming to work for $15 an hour because they see what could happen at the end of that journey. If someone's not resilient, I don't know that they're going to be.

I think of resiliency a lot like discipline. If someone's not disciplined, you can coach them. You can give them examples, like, hey, this is what I did, or this is what I do, but if you don't want to do it or you don't want to keep going, it's really easy to do the opposite. That's something that we promote a lot is, doing something that's comfortable is not hard. Doing something that's comfortable is probably the easiest thing. When you intentionally seek out discomfort, when you intentionally have a hard conversation, when you intentionally do something new, that's when you're going to grow.

Promoting that and letting them know you've been through all this stuff. Going to a vocational school for 11 weeks is not difficult for you. You've just never done that. It's a new experience. You might be uncomfortable, but let's talk about all this other stuff you've been through and you've done and you've survived and you've supported. That one's interesting to me. I guess, again, we do support that, but they're either going to have it or they're not. You have to lift it up and help them through their journey.

Kurtis Palermo: The agency piece for me is – this building that we have, these opportunities that we give them, they're for them. We're going to give you a sense of agency by offering you the opportunity to do whatever it is that you may have never thought you could do, wanted to do. Your sense of agency really is going to become an ownership of your life. Like I said, a lot of these guys are just living day by day. I don't know what I'm going to do in a year, let alone five years. That's a classic question: what do you want to do in five years?

If they don't have that agency, if they don't have that belief that they can do something or even see it happening for themselves, they're just going to keep spinning and doing what they're comfortable doing. Going outside, thinking that everyone around me does this, so why wouldn't I do it? Giving them that sense of agency to show up for themselves and hold themselves accountable, that I feel like we've created that here with this place.

Then the community, that really is Roca. Across the board, every site, we are the community for them to come to, with the staff, community partners, with each other. We have young people in here who have sat across from someone who shot their cousin, and they're able to sit in a room and have a conversation and understand, thinking that I'm tired. I'm done with it. This is my new life. This is the new thing I'm trying to do. It's hard because what we create here, this community, this sense of belonging, it only goes so far if a young person always has to go back to where they're from.

I'm not judging the community, but if all you're hearing is negative talk, or asking them why they keep going to that program. And you're never going to amount to anything. It's hard for them, so we have to keep reinforcing that. No, this is Roca. This is your home. We're here for you no matter what.

We tell the graduates when they finish that the door isn't shut. You're Roca for life. If you need help, come see us. Don't be embarrassed if you lose your job. If you're going to get a promotion, you want to do a mock interview, if you're trying to get your GED, if there's this opportunity you just have questions about, we're relentless. When we get you, you're Roca. You're not going anywhere, and we're going to hold onto you as long as we can and support you through whatever it is that you need or want.

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

Kurtis Palermo: Roca really is a convener. That's what we are very good at. We're good at the Rewire CBT and relentless outreach with young people. We're also very

good at relentless outreach with partners. We're going to bring people together who maybe never have, but they have before, and it didn't work out. We just believe that we need to come together to help young people, whether that's working with the police department in every city that we're in, or the mayor. At this state level, we will do whatever we can and ask for anything that helps young people. If that's something, or the bigger picture, legislatively, we're going to step forward and do that.

In this space, the CVI space is interesting because historically, working with the police wasn't a popular thing in this space. The mentality was that if you work with the police, then you are telling. How can you work with guys who have committed crimes or might still be doing X, Y, Z in the street and work with the police? We work with the police to keep staff and young people safe. We worked with the police to get referrals of young people who they feel are going to either get arrested and be in jail for the rest of their lives or be dead.

We're not trading intel back and forth across a desk. We are trying to keep young people safe. We're getting phone calls from the Baltimore Police Department, saying there's been a whole bunch of shootings up in whatever neighborhood. Make sure your staff are careful, or don't go, maybe for the next few days. Or, this young person got shot. We know he's a Roca kid. These three or four guys you might want to reach out to. Getting referrals regularly, following up, having meetings to check in, like, do you have a new address for so and so, because we can't seem to find them?

Just trying to do everything we can to circle the wagons around these young people, and at the end of the day, the vast majority are involved in systems. That's the police department, parole and probation, Department of Juvenile Services. The individuals in those agencies know who they are, so we should build a relationship so that we can try to make sure the young person completes probation.

Or, if their supervising officer hasn't seen them in a while, they can call the Roca youth worker instead of putting out a warrant. For example, we haven't seen Kurt. If we don't see him by the end of the week, we're going to have to cut this warrant, but if you could find him and bring him in, we just want to make sure he is all right, and we need a pay stub, whatever it is. It's those relationships-- I'll speak for Baltimore, those were not very common here because it just wasn't the norm. It was this, you're siloed working. Well, that was Baltimore.

I remember the first year bringing people to the table, and saying that we need this strategic youth meeting regularly just to figure out how we're working together, if a young person is getting touched by multiple agencies? Are we communicating? Are we trying to help just more than the young person, their family? It is critical. We couldn't do what we do without the police. We couldn't do what we do without the state's attorney, just everyone involved. Then, from a community group perspective, we work with everyone because we don't do everything. We're really good at a few things, but we don't have housing. We're not substance abuse experts. We're not domestic violence experts.

If we have someone who wants to come in and teach financial literacy to the young people or staff, we're going to take advantage of that because we can't do it all. We have to be very, very clear about this is our expertise, this is what we're very good at, and what we are unable to do in-house, we need to bring in. A few doors down from me right now, we have a mental health clinician who comes in four days a week, because like I said, Rewire CBT is nonclinical, but the young people still need mental health services.

If we can put someone in a Roca building four days a week, the young person doesn't even have to say that they're going to see their mental health clinician. People are going, oh my God, you're going to therapy. That's crazy. They'll judge him right off the bat, but if you just say you're going to Roca, then you get the benefit of a couple of hours a week meeting with our clinician, Ms. Melvia, that's great. That's something we don't have an expertise in, so we have to bring it in and make sure that it's there for the young people.

Eleanore Catolico: What, if any, emerging work in this field are you excited about?

Kurtis Palermo: That's a really hard question right now because we've come so far, and then so much money was pulled back. It's like these initiatives, the strategy, the forward-thinking writ large. This isn't necessarily Roca-specific, but about the CVI space, about the ecosystem. There was a lot of hope, and there were a lot of things that were developing, but the DOJ pulled, however many millions of dollars from CVI groups. We lost money. We didn't expect it. It was very, very quick, and we were lucky enough to have a plan to move forward, but I don't know the fate of a lot of programs that maybe the DOJ funding was their only sustainable funding.

Some of those strategic initiatives might not exist anymore. A lot of groups right now are just trying to survive. They're trying to make sure that they can serve the population that they're trying to serve in whichever city they are. They have to pay people. It's just a very uncertain time. From a Roca perspective, I'll say that here in Baltimore, and then I'll speak more broadly, but this is the first time in a very long time that we've had strong leadership, mayor, police commissioner, state's attorney, and this is the first time in a very long time where we could potentially have under 150 homicides. That traction and that progress can't stop.

For me, I like the continued work with these partners, that continued autonomy for each group to do what they do, because I'm not a police officer and a police officer isn't a youth worker at Roca, so we have to work together, but understand that what we're doing is very different, adds to the common good, reducing homicide, reducing shootings. The mayor's CVI ecosystem, the police commissioner, and what he's done to overhaul the department in terms of community policing.

The State's Attorney's Office here has done a very, very good job of keeping the promises he made when he campaigned. If you are a violent offender, if you are returning in front of the judge and you have a gun offense and a prior, you're going to go to jail. That's 100% attributing to the reduction in violent crime and shootings, and

homicides. What I'm fearful of, and you don't want to bring the negativity, but how much more pullback of funding can cities take before things start to go the other way? Because you have a trickle-down effect. Federal funds get pulled away, FY26 (Fiscal Year 2026), people, people are good, people made it, made their budget, they're going to figure it out however they look.

I don't know, it might be different staff reductions, things like that. Then we're talking about FY27 and 28, where the state might be saying, we lost some federal funding. Now we can't provide that same funding to cities, and now the city has to figure it out. Again, this is more of a national issue that is in the back of my mind. If you need to keep your city budget for police and fire and EMS and roads and trash, and things like that, the dollars add up very quickly. Then some decision makers might say, well, CVI isn't really that important because we can use the police differently.

I'm making this up. There's no fact behind this, but the trickle-down effect of losing funding at the level above impacts below, and so on and so forth. From a Roca perspective and our work nationally, the coaching from the Impact Institute and trying to empower similar organizations to use the Rewire CBT is a great strategic move, especially now, when people are figuring out how to do more with less. Well, you can learn this Rewire CBT and change the way that you're working with those individuals. It's a very uncertain time, a very odd time, I guess, to be in the CVI space because of the landscape of the country and what could be next over few years.

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

Kurtis Palermo: Two things I'll say. One is specific to young people, and then the other is specific to maybe an initiative that was innovative. In 2018, we had our first cohort of young people who came in, and then they graduated in 2022. We were a four-year model at the time. Smack dab in the middle of that, the pandemic happened. Roca looked a little different. Our work didn't change, but just that level of engagement in the last two years for young people decreased in terms of coming to the building, being around each other. The work crews looked very different.

Traditionally, in Springfield, it happened a couple of times where we would interview former young people to work at Roca, but the trend was that you had to be away from Roca for about a year. You've got to go do something different. Once you graduate, go and get a job, and maybe you'll love it, and you don't want to work at Roca, and it was just this cool thing when you were in Roca that you wanted to be a youth worker or whatever it was.

What was different about that first class was again their separation from the constant engagement with each other. They might've only seen one or two staff during the week, whereas here in the building right now, you see everybody every day. That dynamic shifted. We had one young person who graduated in September of 2022, and we were able to hire him that winter as a youth worker. He was a youth worker for a while, and now he's one of our life skills instructors.

To me, I remember speaking at that first graduation, turning around, talking to the non-graduates, and I said, for all intents and purposes…you don't want to compare. I hate comparing people's risk or comparing people's crimes. It is just bad taste, but that group, I told them, you are probably the most high-risk young people we've ever worked with. When we came to Baltimore, it was different. Young people carrying guns is not great. You don't want it to happen. You want to try to figure out how they can do something different. In Massachusetts, we just didn't see the gravity of crime, the gravity of guns, just the lawlessness and the activities inside these neighborhoods.

I told them, you don't owe Roca anything. You did this all on your own, but without Roca, I want you to think in the back of your mind, where might you be? Would you have made it through the four years? Where do you think, based on some of your peers who weren't in Roca, how could your life have gone? When we hired that young person, it was a great feeling because we took this young person who's one of the top lists of the Western District and BPD (Baltimore Police Department) of guys they're worried about. He goes through the program, and it was not perfect, and he was a pain in the ass, and I love him to death, but it was rough. Ups and downs, F Roca, he left, he came back, he's on the worker crew, he gets fired, tries to hustle everything.

Then he said, wait a second, year three, I can't keep doing this if I want to be alive, if I want to stay out of jail. I have to really commit to this change, and he did. He's been with us ever since. Then the second one is another young person who came in a little bit after Sheldon, who was the first young man. Shooting victim. Again, in the streets for a very, very long time, he was in some very, very traumatizing situations at a young age. He came in, and again, rough start, but then he started to understand what Roca could do for him. If I take advantage of it, I could see something on the other end. For my kids, they could see their dad doing this.

He did great. He got his HVAC certification. He worked for a couple of years. We just hired him on, and now he's running one of our Transitional Employment work crews. To me, those are the successes. It's not about me. It's not about any one of our staff. We pour ourselves into this work. We're here because we love the young people. We want to see this change in Baltimore, but at the end of the day, it's Sheldon and it's Justin.

Those are the guys, to me, that if anyone asks, how can you prove that Roca works? Here are two guys who, if you would ask BPD when they were referring them, or if you'd ask the hospital when Justin got shot, what do you think the outcome is if Roca wasn't around? We know what they would have said. One of two choices was going to be their destiny, but for them to show up and commit themselves and pour all this effort in and show up, it's great.

The second thing, not related necessarily to one or two young people, but I got the question a lot about, this was last year, we're in 2025. In 2024 and 2023, we had significant dips in homicides here. I got a lot of questions. What did Roca do? How did you contribute? We just put our heads down and do the work. That's what we're really good at is we don't want press. We get it. We're not out there with a Roca sign; look at

us. We are just doing the work, and we're here to support the young people. One thing that I can say a direct impact that Roca had was in 2021.

We're 18 months into the pandemic, and we didn't shut down. We kept all of our young people, but we did make the decision not to take on new referrals. From a capacity standpoint, we could serve these young people. In 2021, we started having guys graduate or get ready to graduate, and we said, okay, the caseloads are going to have some space, and maybe some guys got dismissed for various reasons, but I didn't want to go to BPD, Home Probation, or Juvenile Services, who were sending these referrals, because that would have opened floodgates. I haven't been able to send referrals in over a year, and now you're saying I can. For example, here are 50 kids who need Roca.

We get a shooting list. We have been pretty much since day one in 2018, from the police department. It's just a list of incidents with young people in our age range who have been the victims of shootings or homicides, and really, up until that point, it was just a tool. If I know one of our young people has been shot, we can deploy staff accordingly. If one of our young people has been killed, we need to go to the family, figure out what's going on.

I thought to myself, based on something I was doing in Massachusetts, just with an arrest log, very similar, if a young person's been shot and they're in our age range, they probably need something. Maybe they don't need Roca services. I can't guarantee they're even criminally involved. Maybe they were an Uber driver who got shot in a carjacking robbery, but it's worth a shot, so let's go knock on some doors. That's really how this after-shooting protocol I developed started. Within 24, 48 hours of a shooting, every single non-fatal shooting victim in our age range is going to get a door knock from Roca staff, or we'll have connected with a hospital to figure out what's going on.

It was really just this side project. While we had Roca Baltimore happening, it was over time. Nobody was working on the after-shooting protocol. For example, this youth worker wants some overtime on a Saturday. Here's a list of five guys who've been shot this week. Can you do a door knock? Then it just evolved. Almost four years now. We brought in the police department in a different way. We were already working with them extensively, but letting them know what we were doing. Brought in all nine area hospitals that deal with shooting victims. On Wednesdays at three o'clock, we have a meeting with Roca and representatives from nine hospitals. We talk about the shootings and we triage them.

I say all of that because I'm not trying to be insensitive when I say this, but if someone's already been killed, there's nothing you can do in that situation to reduce the homicide number. Unfortunately, they have been killed. They are a homicide. What you can do, though, is you can intervene after a shooting incident, and you can offer services that, hopefully, stop that young person from retaliating, get into their network, and have those conversations that no one is retaliating, a message of nonviolence, and hopefully, by engaging them in Roca, you're putting them in a position where they're not re-victimized.

If they're not outside, if whatever happened, you can maybe get some details and talk to the other side. To me, that has attributed to reducing the number of homicides because we're working with hundreds of non-fatal shooting victims over the past few years, and had we not, they probably would have been re-victimized. They may have gone and retaliated. It's not perfect, but I would think that that innovation has added to the bigger picture.

Eleanore Catolico: Amongst the non-fatal shooting victims that you work with, are you seeing them apply some of the Rewire CBT-like techniques in real time?

Kurtis Palermo: Oh yes, that's our in. It's funny to do Rewire CBT, coach them through these situations when they don't know what it is. Even in your first meeting, a lot of the curriculum is so formal that I have to be in the program, in a classroom. I'm sitting in, and I'm doing this on the board, but with Rewire, we really made it so it can be formal or informal. You can do it in a car, you can do it in a classroom. You can have a conversation, you can pull out a key card, you can do a PowerPoint.

Some staff in the past have said, how can you Rewire CBT with a young person the first time you meet them? I said, you don't have to pull out a PowerPoint. I'm not telling you to scare the kid away. What you can do is say, hey, man. I heard you got shot. Now you're in. You're just there without any motive, and you want them to know that you're supporting them. Then you hear they have a kid, or they live with their mom, or, they're on probation.

Now you start having those conversations. Well, we've got to make sure that you don't do anything to put yourself in a position to get shot again, because we don't want your mom to be burying you. We don't want your daughter to grow up without a father. That's Rewire conversation. Or, talking about being present: look, we know you got shot. It's terrible. It's a traumatic experience. We're going to help you heal from that. If that's all you're focusing on, you're forgetting about what we could do today to help you?

Sitting in this kid's house, there's no food in the fridge. Okay, we'll help you get some groceries. Or, your BGE (Baltimore Gas and Electric) electric is off. We'll help you get that turned back on because we don't want you to have to go outside to make money, to put yourself in harm's way because you feel like you have to do all these things. Now that you're shot, you can't help mom or dad or brother, sister with the bill. We're going to do everything we can to support you, get you services, and get you connected.

That's the initial foundation of a transformational relationship. You have to build that to build trust so that they'll actually come to the building and do these things. Trust us when we're having really hard conversations with them about what maybe decisions they should be making or opportunities they should be taking advantage of. The Rewire, it's no different if you're a shooting victim, if you're a probation referral, police department. From day one, we're trying to have every interaction. We're trying to use some level of Rewire CBT.

Eleanore Catolico: Can you describe something that you tried that didn't work but that you learned from?

Kurtis Palermo: One of my biggest learning experiences here is, we start with this small thing, Roca Baltimore. The first group of kids, it was 75 kids. Then end of 2018, into 2019, we started to pick up steam. We're not just getting referrals from the Eastern and Western District, which at the time were historically the most violent. Now we're citywide, and people know about us. Probation hears about Roca, and the Department of Juvenile Services wants us to go behind the wall and teach classes to kids who were held.

Then, this community group hears about you. You come in, and people don't want you there. When people hear about money, they say, Roca got money. We could have used that money. It's the same old stuff everywhere you go. Then, like I said, we put our heads down, we do the work, we help young people. They start to be our credible messengers. They're telling, oh, no, that's Roca, don't worry. I'm in that program. Then all of a sudden, everyone wants Roca. It's not just Baltimore City. It's neighboring cities.

Baltimore is set up very, very strange. I don't know if you're familiar. We're in Baltimore City County. Then you have Baltimore County. All these counties around it have all these cities in it. It's very, very strange, but these counties and cities want us. How can we have Rocas everywhere? There were a few opportunities, one that we took advantage of to expand. It wasn't about expanding. It wasn't, oh, yes, Roca is going to more places in Maryland.

It was more about, if the Department of Juvenile Services is telling us that they have a need in a neighboring county, we're going to do everything we can to support that, but my learning from that is, when we came to Baltimore, I was in very mid-level conversations at the time. Our CEO, Molly [Baldwin], who I'm not sure if you all have spoken with yet, was planning Baltimore since, I remember distinctly in 2013 when I started, people came to Springfield from Baltimore, I think from the mayor's office. I was so low in the totem pole, I was driving them around, giving them lunch. I'm showing them around.

This was not just a quick thing where Molly said, “We're going to go to Baltimore.” I say all that because in those conversations upfront, it was, we need this in order to come. We need funding for four years. We need the support of the police department, very, very clear expectations for Roca to come to Baltimore, because it was such a big leap. You're so far away from Massachusetts and a new city, new everything. With these neighboring counties, my learning was that you have to put that in place, and you really can't trust that you are going to get the support you think you are just because someone says you're going to.

It's not a knock on the individuals who are in those positions, but the reality of the world is, if I'm an elected official or I'm a senior leader in a county or in a city and I get an opportunity elsewhere, that's better for me, my family, for whatever reason, you're going to take it. When they leave, now, Roca, who went out on a limb to expand our service

footprint, we're left out in the cold from a support in that way. In some of those areas, we still work, but it's different.

We have transitional employment crews in some of those areas because that's easy. We don't need to set up a place, we don't have to have an office, we don't have to do a ton of outreach, but we can drive those crews out to the counties and cities where the young people are safe. That's awesome, but for me, the learning is, if you are going to replicate a brick and mortar, you better be damn sure that you can replicate more than just moving in. You need years of support.

Again, I wasn't signing contracts or doing anything crazy, but I said, just trust this process. This person says we're good and they're going to support. Oh, they talk about us on the radio, and then, all of a sudden, the person leaves, and I think, what are we supposed to do now? I don't even know who to call to ask if we're in the budget, or I don't even know who to call to figure out if they need us here anymore. That was my biggest learning, and it was less about how to expand the strategic thinking forward. It was more about when you do that, you take yourself away from what's important. That's Baltimore City, the reason we came here.

It's not to say that we won't expand. We had a great pilot in Anne Arundel County for our After Shooting Protocol. Did a lot of great work. The health commissioner's office was amazing, and it just happened to be that we both lost federal funding. That's a really shitty reason to stop something. That goes back to the question about strategic thinking in this space. You can only strategically think and plan for so long if a bunch of federal money gets pulled.

The health commissioner's office, are they really in the CVI space? I guess to some degree, but they were partnering with us, and it was an awesome partnership that I hope we can get back to, but they were just as impacted as we were, which allows us to not work together anymore. That's hard. When you thought you had something that was going to be a little bit more long-term, great planning upfront, this is what we're expecting, and the administration decides that's not in their priorities anymore.

Eleanore Catolico: What does it take to be able to replicate a model like this in a totally different region, whether that's in the Deep South in Alabama or on the West Coast, in LA, where there are so many different regional differences, might not have the community ties?

Kurtis Palermo: From my perspective, and I'm sharing the perspective of the executive team and Molly, just based on conversations, and things can change in an instant right now, so who knows, but really, Roca's strategic scaling is through the Roca Impact Institute. How are we training other similar organizations to do Rewire CBT? How are we helping them on a theory of change? How are we helping support them to do their work in the cities where they're familiar, where people know who they are, they already have a footprint, but this is a new framework for dealing with young people, for working with individuals.

We do a bridged version of Rewire called Rewire 4 with law enforcement. Same thing. We're expanding our reach to work with law enforcement, which is an important part of our work from a coaching lens and officer wellness, and things like that. A replication of a brick-and-mortar is a huge undertaking, a big lift. I blinked, and we're at seven and a half years in Baltimore. Again, I was at Roca for a long time before I came down here. I'm very mission-driven. I support what we do to the nth degree. Helping young people is the best thing that I could be doing.

When I came here, my attitude was it doesn't matter what happens. I'm not going to let anything get in the way of me working with young people. I'm not going to put the issues that the grown-ups have in front of that. I'm not going to let them stop our progress. I'm not going to let a pandemic shut us down. I'm asking police commissioners, states, I'm asking them favors and questions that, looking back, it was crazy, but I didn't care because I needed to do it to help keep young people safe.

You have to be a very dedicated individual to literally uproot, go somewhere else, and say, this is Roca, and it works. My staff, when I started, questioned if Roca worked. Again, not from a negative perspective, but, do you really think this can work in Baltimore? I said, “Yes, this can absolutely work in Baltimore.” They said, “Are you sure we're going to do door knocks in neighborhoods where we don't even—” “Yes, we're going to do the door knocks.” Just that culture, pushing it forward. I always say, Roca is a weird job, but crazy things are happening constantly.

It's just chaotic, crises on any given day. You have to keep everything on the rails. You have to lead your team, and that's just in this building. You have to make nice with politicians and leaders and community groups and understand neighborhoods. I can't imagine doing what I did again. I don't know. I don't even have an answer, but my opinion is a brick and mortar is such a significant undertaking that especially right now and over the next few years, who knows what's going to happen in a few years? You're putting what we've done on the line just to expand a physical footprint when we can expand that footprint through partners in this ecosystem, which we've already been doing for the last four years.

For me, it's a risk-reward situation. What it really is is a return on investment, take out helping young people. You've got to just take that out. Helping more young people is the best return on investment, but you can't really put that at the forefront, where we're talking about a financial burden to take on, and how are you going to staff up another site when we have a hard time staffing these sites? Just in general, the workforce is extremely complicated right now, to find dedicated individuals who are going to show up and be professional and have integrity, and be mature.

That's hard here. That's harder to our other sites, that's hard at 7-11 across the street, and we're talking about going into a new city and opening up a brick and mortar and needing to hire 20 staff. There are so many dynamics that I give Molly a ton of credit. She runs this CVI nonprofit, so much different than others because it's a business. People might not realize that. Yes, we're a community organization, we're out, but at the

end of the day, this is a business, and you have to be strategic and you have to plan to say, how are we going to keep the doors open and help young people where we are?

In these super uncertain times, who knows what funding is going to get pulled back? We have to make sure that Roca Baltimore, Roca Western Mass, Chelsea, Boston, Hartford, Lynn, all of these sites can keep showing up for young people because if we open up in Chicago, and all of a sudden, Baltimore crumbles because of it, so we got into Chicago, but at the cost of what? A lot of other organizations might just say we need to be in as many cities as possible, so then we're this big national thing, but how intentional is your work? How effective are you? Are you really helping young people at that point, or are you just trying to franchise and be McDonald's?

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

Kurtis Palermo: One of the most important things I've learned in this space, and I started doing outreach, I had a caseload. I was a worker supervisor for a while. I've done more jobs at Roca than most. As I grew, it was trial by fire to be a supervisor. I had no idea what I was doing, but I had the support, and I used the tools that we had to give them structure to do this work in such an unstructured landscape.

There are plenty of organizations in Baltimore and in this space nationally that are just out in the community and they're being seen, and that's their role, and they're talking to people. At Roca, we're very much a data-driven organization. We're writing everything down, we're recording everything. We have outcomes. We have so much data that sometimes people look at us like we're crazy. To be a youth worker here is very, very difficult. You have this track book where you're writing things down, and a database, and you have to do Rewire CBT with young people, and this list of just so many things, but supervising youth workers is even more complex.

For me, the teaching is, you have to make it as structured as possible, and you have to make sure that the people supervising frontline staff are supervising them well, because when you allow them to just go out and do whatever they want to do, 9 out of 10 times, you're going to find a hole and, well, are you really doing those door knocks? Or it's weird, you're making a lot of phone calls. You have to track everything. You have to meet on a weekly basis. You have to coach them, you have to get in the car with them, and go see young people. That level of support for frontline staff from a supervisor is critical because of how much is really going on in the lives of these young people.

I could list 10 things off for one young person, and you have 20 on your caseload. Now, we're at 200 things on any given week that could be happening. If you're not structured and you're not using the tools, you're not really going to be able to help the young people get to those if it's behavior change, whatever the outcome is for the organization, but just really supporting that management and help coach them through that, and not just putting people in those positions because they're your friends, because at the end of the day, that's not going to work.

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? What's that been like in terms of attitudes of supporting young men's mental health?

Kurtis Palermo: Our advantage is twofold. One I already mentioned is having a clinician here at Roca. You're going to Roca anyway, so you have a clinician. If I said, hey, Kurt, you go to go to so-and-so behavioral health twice a week to see your clinic. The odds of that happening are very, very slim, but if you're here anyway and you're doing GED or you're going on the work crew, or, hey, after work, we want you to see Ms. Malvia for half an hour. You're creating a very manageable way for them to get mental health services, which is huge because so many of them probably never had it, and we're giving it to them in a way that they feel safe.

Ms. Malvia has been here since day one, and she goes and does outreach. Giving them the vehicle to mental health is important to seek those services. The second piece is our entrance point of Rewire CBT is so unintimidating, but it's getting at some of these things, and then in partnership with what Ms. Malvia is doing, we're helping them address their issues: maybe I am depressed, or maybe I am doing X, Y, Z substance too much, or, I really am reacting a lot, and I want to figure out why. Through these seven skills, we're opening up the conversation.

I say it's small, maybe it's not so small, but every morning at 8:05, the guys are coming in from 7:30 to 8:00 for work crew. We do a check-in. On average, we have 20 young people show up every day for work. DeAndre, who's our assistant director of programming and education, oversees all of the work crews. He runs a check-in every morning without fail. All the guys, and he asks them, hey man, how are you doing? Tell us about your night. How are you feeling today? We have rules. We have a list of emotional vocabulary. For them to be able to start to broaden that is huge, and it's in a safe place where, “Oh, I'm good.”

“No, no, no, we're not using the word good, we're not using cool. Really, how are you feeling?” “Oh, I feel motivated today,” or “I feel excited.” Those tiny touches allow you to get to the bigger picture conversations, whatever it is. Again, domestic violence, substance abuse, and carrying a gun seem to be the three biggest issues that we get in, but you can't really get there unless you've opened up the door for them to feel safe doing it. Those two things are just, if you look at Roca on the surface, you'd think, you guys are like an outreach program that does employment.

Yes, sure, but no, we're a behavioral change program that offers you different opportunities to practice those skills in real time to accelerate your ability to gain emotional regulation and all these other things. Just from the perspective of youth mental health, I don't really have an answer for that. We talked about it. It is interesting too. I have opinions about social media. I don't use it. It's terrible. It’s toxic, but it's interesting when people are on social media, they'll say X, Y, Z about youth mental health, whoever says it, it doesn't matter who says it. But you're actively using something that is proven to hinder your mental health.

It's interesting. We talk to these guys all the time about Instagram, Snapchat, whatever they use. It's not normal for you to see someone getting shot on Instagram. It's not normal for you to be on Snapchat and someone sends you a picture of a dead body. That is directly negatively impacting your mental health. It's contradictory. People complain about mental health or support your mental health, but then the platform you're using most of the time is actually harming someone's mental health. That's not for everybody, but if you look at some of the things that are out there, it's so readily available, and I don't know that it's doing more good than harm.

For me, that's always been fascinating. I don't really talk about it much because it's not really my thing. That's interesting because all these guys are on social media constantly. We don't even let them have phones in the building because we don't want them to be on social media. You have to lock your phone when you come in. This is your time to be at Roca, and we don't want you scrolling whatever and looking at this thing that's negatively impacting your brain development.

Eleanore Catolico: I'm based in Detroit, and sometimes when the conflicts are happening, our elected officials are saying it started on social media. People talking smack on TikTok or Instagram or whatever. I'm curious if you've seen that too?

Kurtis Palermo: Oh, yes. Our guys will make rap videos, put them all over TikTok about how they're in this person's neighborhood. They'll admit to killing people on TikTok. It's crazy, which is the problem.

They'll write these rap songs back and forth, insulting each other's neighborhoods. It's so rampant. Just social media is a whole, not negative or positive, but it is just so far-reaching that I don't have a solution. Some people spend hours and hours and hours and hours on their phone all day, every day, and you just become a zombie. You're putting yourself in survival mode, and you don't even know it. It's just not normal to see some of the things you see on social media, or going back and forth with these interactions, or whatever it is. The other thing that's interesting for our guys like seeing things that aren't actually the reality of the world.

This person has these cars and these shoes and these other things. That's probably not accurate to what their life really is, but you look at it, and now you want that, and you go do whatever you do to try to achieve this unachievable dream or whatever.

Eleanore Catolico: **I'm curious what insights you have about what challenges the young men that you're working with are facing in terms of their mental health.**

Kurtis Palermo: The stigma for our guys to seek mental health treatment is significant. It's daunting. That's why I said, we're lucky enough to create this platform for them to get, but I'm not even speaking about our young men. It's funny, too, because regarding a guy who goes to Roca versus someone who doesn't, my guy might have a criminal background; he got caught doing something. He’s coming to Roca for three years and

learning about emotional regulation and how to work and how to show up, and getting all these great things, this commitment, this consistency.

Someone who graduated high school and doesn't have some of the same barriers as a young person who's at Roca in 2025, I would take my guy 100% of the time because I go to stores right now. Maybe this isn't mental health, but there's something missing in the younger people right now. Being able to have communication skills, like customer service. It's just weird. I don't know if the pandemic did some of it, I don't know if it's just a lack of any concern, but people are rude. People don't know how to talk. People are always on their phones, always in their heads.

There's something that has shifted, and it's just odd to me. If we were talking to an employer early on here, he'd say, yes, our guys have criminal backgrounds. Now, it's no, this is Roca, and it's great, and here's the Transitional Employment Program we offer. If we send a guy to work for you, he is going to be ready to work. You're going to take a risk on a random person off the street. Why don't you take a risk on this guy who has all this support around him?

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

Kurtis Palermo: I'm going to call this one down the middle. It doesn't matter left or right, but it's really hard when the top doesn't seem to have much compassion or safety for people who are seeking these services or are vulnerable to even believe that anyone gives a shit about them. We work with a huge population of Central Americans. If all they're seeing on the news is ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) kicking doors down, going into schools, arresting a 13-year-old, and sending him away from his family, and I'm worried about my mental health? Who's to say if I don't seek mental health, someone's going to come in there and arrest me?

It is just a crazy place. Again, that's social media. It's the news. I would be hard-pressed to believe, if I were young, 18 right now, or however, I would probably look around the world and start thinking, does anyone actually give a shit? When I watch the news, it doesn't seem like it. These terrible things that are being said, people in positions of power that are supposed to be supporting the nation as a whole, saying terrible things, that creates some negative self-talk or reinforces things you might've thought. It's really hard right now to be a young person.

Eleanore Catolico: Thank you so much, Kurtis.

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.*