"We were the first to say digital wellness for young people matters": Larissa May of #HalfTheStory on building emotional resilience in the digital age

Holly Wise
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Holly Wise: Please start by introducing yourself and then get right into telling us what's distinctive about your approach in the field of youth mental health.

Larissa May: My name is Larissa May, also known as Lars. I have been doing this work since I was 19 years old, specifically #HalfTheStory.

I do it because I almost ended my own life and I felt that the systems were not in place for young people to flourish in the digital age.

We had to learn how to better empower ourselves in a world where there's no regulation, and give young people emotional regulation to fight against the downfalls of the digital world. What makes our work so novel and interesting is we were the first to say, "Digital wellness for young people matters."

We've been able to build a global revolution of trust and leadership of young people that are paving the way for the movement in the future, while empowering and implementing evidence-informed programs rooted in play instead of fear to drive change.

Simultaneously we're building the largest body of digital flourishing research, which we hope to open source so that we can provide data and tie the full ecosystem together from educator to student, to caregiver to policymaker.

That's the systems change work. When you think about our work, it starts with using stories and science to change outcomes. The layers are systems change and storytelling at the top, education in the middle, peer leadership and empowerment, and then teen-centric training.

Holly Wise: What is something that others might find surprising about your work?

Larissa May: How few people are actually trying to measure this work. It's part of why a lot of people haven't been able to get funding to move it forward, even at a state level. The other thing that people don't realize is that it takes a lot of trust with young people to be able to do research in a way that has integrity and statistical relevance. Usually, there's a lot of other players or people coming to the table, and sometimes it's hard to get pure insights from young people. I'm proud of our team because we protect that at the core.

Holly Wise: Can you explain a little bit about the scope of your work?

Larissa May: There's three phases of our work.

Systems change and storytelling. We reached over a billion people last year through the stories that we've told, from sickness to wellbeing.

Our education work we've primarily focused on the United States. We have partnerships and distribution partners. We're B2B to T, and what we mean by that is business-to-business-to-teen or business-to-business-to-teacher.

We've partnered with institutions like Discovery Education on the launch of their digital wellness curriculum. They reach over 50 million educators in the United States. We also partner with other organizations like Girls Inc. National to scale our programming. What's different about our approach is that we don't need to be the next Jed Foundation. We just need to be the best at what we do and work with Jed Foundation.

That's what brings us a lot of our success, is our willingness to drive collaboration across stakeholders in the space. In mental health, it hasn't happened that much, because everyone tends to be fighting for the same dollars. We've seen that you can move faster and get money faster by partnering.

Outside of the United States, every year we have teams that apply to be a part of our civics academy, which is our program for young people who are most engaged or excited about this work.

We're basically building a whole army of young people that are trained to speak to press with a job board that connects them into the ecosystem. We're creating an opportunity where young people can be paired with those MAMA (Moms Against Media Addiction) ambassadors across the United States to go into their schools and talk to their young people.

We had kids in our program from 66 cities and four continents this summer. Part of the simplicity of what we do is that it is something that relates to people all over the world.

In New York State we want to build a blueprint to have youth engagement at a state level that drives quantifiable systems outcomes in terms of wellbeing. We're building that framework with the state of New York through our team tech council, which is basically taking our civics academy and applying it to a state level. We're conducting

research, and we're building a playbook that now we're taking to Arkansas and North Carolina.

We're talking to the governors to see if we can be the team that shows people how to put teens at the center.

Holly Wise: Could you share an example that illustrates the impact of your work?

Larissa May: The teens that go through our program are some of the best examples of that.

It's a huge risk to partner with a national organization. Just because you partner with Girls Inc. National doesn't mean that the affiliates want to work with you. We raised over a million dollars from the most important female philanthropists in the world and had a lot of marketing around this moment. What it was about was: can we pull this off? Can we get affiliates to want to work with us?

Last year, we did the pilot, and we went and we built the relationships. It's a testament to our team. We did a listening tour with girls around the United States to ensure that our work would resonate in rural Indiana just as it would in urban Texas. As a result of that, this year, when we went to their state conference, 75% of the affiliates of Girls Inc. said that they want our program, which we don't have the bandwidth or capital for.

From a systems change level, to be able to get that level of buy-in from an organization that's been around for 150 years, speaks for itself.

In New York State, in July, we went to the governor and said, "This is great that you're rolling out phone-free schools, but how are you going to get data from young people to see how it's going, because you know, admins and teachers are not going to give you the full truth? Why don't we build a state-level teen tech council?" We'll train them for a year, and fund them to create their screen-free ideas. We'll do research around it to show how empowering young people at the center drives positive outcomes for the environment. Between then and today, we've raised half a million dollars for the execution of this and a fund for teens. We're hosting the kickoff in-person training in a week.

From a systems change level, this is a huge opportunity because we are able to go in with youth leadership and show our ability to execute and drive outcomes and buy-in.

On an individual level, when you look at our programming, #HalfTheStory is meeting and outperforming results on a statistically relevant scale of overall improvement of wellbeing in young people.

What that says about our work is that with finite resources, we can get the same outcomes, if not better, than people that aren't even addressing emotional regulation in the digital age that have SEL programs that have been around for a long time, but are outdated because they're not considering the emotional component of the digital world. From a student buy-in perspective, 100% of the students that went through our summer

program said that they would refer a peer to this, and almost 98% of them experience an increase in positive digital wellbeing and flourishing. That's because of our teen-centric co-design. We've been able to master teen-centric co-design that leads to real outcomes and change.

Holly Wise: What do you mean when you say digital well-being and flourishing?

Larissa May: Digital flourishing is a research methodology that looks at how technology impacts a young person across 21 different areas. We do all of our research and external validation with the Georgetown Thrive Center.

What we are optimizing for and what we want to do is a randomized control trial in the next couple of years so that we can show that whole picture. For now, for the level of resources that we have, we've been able to see some statistically relevant changes.

Holly Wise: We know that everyone learns as much from things that haven't worked as we learn from things that do work. Could you describe something that you tried that didn't work, but that you learned from?

Larissa May: One of the early things in the beginning, is we were sending in our own facilitators into schools. We learned it was operationally unsustainable.

The other thing we learned is that applying for grants without knowing people on the other side means you're not going to get it. We wasted a lot of resources writing grants and applying for grants when I should have been out meeting people. One of the other things that has not worked are fundraising consultants. Earlier on, when I struggled with raising money, I thought if I hire someone that has more experience, that's going to work, but it doesn't.

As an organization, you have to be careful that you don't over-index on some partnerships because it can break your system. We applied for a federal grant and we got it last year with the state of Indiana. We started doing some implementation work before the money hit the bank, even though we had signed the MOU with the state.

Then in January of this year, the state wound up giving the money back to the federal government because one of the programs that we were serving under it was LGBTQ+ and they didn't want it to go against executive orders.

Now we've become much more diligent about what a partnership means? If we invest in it and it fails, do we still have the opportunity to hit our goals with the other things on the table so that we're not over-indexing? Sometimes the biggest opportunity is the one that can break you. We learned that, and I'm much more prudent about that now.

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

Larissa May: What's hard is finding a balance between super specialized people and then people that you're upskilling as leaders. There's that balance as a leader. That's one of the things that our board is helping with.

The other thing is strategizing towards earned revenue and sustainability. There are a lot of people in regions that want our work, and there are a lot of community foundations in those regions that want to fund that work.

Where we've landed is to let the program sell itself. Where there's money to make the case on a big regional level, go do it and get the research done so that you can make a case to the state and create a new product which is low-lift, high return.

Holly Wise: How do you mobilize your team into action?

Larissa May: The way I mobilize is by coming to the table and saying, "Here's what I think we should do, but you guys have 30 more years of experience cumulatively. What's your point of view on this, and how can I help steer the ship?"

Then I take the lead. I'm aware that I could be wrong at any moment and that I have people around me who are much smarter than me. My job is to steer the ship and to inspire and to ignite, but it's also to listen.

Holly Wise: What teachable lessons could be taken from your work that other people could use in or out of the field?

Larissa May: One brick a day is enough. The way I started this was telling my own story and capturing the stories from other young people. We live in a world where entrepreneurs think that things happen overnight, but they don't. As long as you're moving one inch in the right direction every day, you'll get there.

The second thing I've learned is that challenges never go away. They only change.

The third thing I've learned is that public and private partnership is super powerful. The systems change piece as a leader is your superpower, and it's something that there's no road book for. It is like being a spider in the ecosystem, and to a point where you build a big enough web that people know that you're the go-to person for that thing.

The other thing I've learned is that funds that are giving away $100,000 a year is not enough to build a movement. Right now there's a key gap that's missing between social entrepreneurship as an idea and social entrepreneurship in terms of excellence and execution. There aren't the Y combinators of social impact.

Holly Wise: How would you define current attitudes toward youth mental health?

Larissa May: It's never been better. Ten years ago, I was trying to talk about mental health and technology, and the world wasn't ready to talk about mental health. We have never had more reception for this work in a time where a lot of work is being defunded. Mental health is not a partisan issue and it's not political. It's a human issue. It is one of

the things that we can align on as a species in a world that we have to protect in the wake of AI, where human empathy and compassion in our brains are the only thing that technology cannot replace.

Holly Wise: What do you think has contributed to that change over the last 10 years?

Larissa May: COVID was the accelerator, because it showed a lot of the cracks in our system, and then the funding landscape. Enlight and some of these other funders, Hopelab, said, "Hey, this matters."

Holly Wise: What was it about COVID that accelerated the change?

Larissa May: For our work, it was: Mental health and technology, now we get it. We get it, because now we only have our screens, so help.

We realized we were running away from so many emotions that we have, because we were confined with them. The world was changing faster than human minds could handle it. That was the first time we stopped to sit with it.

Holly Wise: What barriers to changing minds do you think still exist?

Larissa May: Fear. Most of the things that people don't want to accept are because they have a fear about them. I'm afraid to hire someone that's mentally ill. I'm afraid to have a child that's mentally ill, because it means that I'm not a successful parent. I'm afraid to talk about my own mental health, because my board of directors will fire me. Everyone in America, especially where there's not a social security net, is afraid that the bottom's going to drop out.

In the same way that I can't beat cancer, we're starting to realize some of us can't beat mental illness.

Holly Wise: What do you think is needed to change the way people think about youth mental health?

Larissa May: Our world profits on the business of sickness, and what I am out for is not telling young people they can be a little bit less sick. It's how do we optimize towards flourishing? That is what I like to call the digital wellness revolution, because it has some things to do with tech, but so much to do about ourselves, and our ability to weather these emotional storms.

Holly Wise: When you say digital wellness and flourishing, is it offline wellbeing and flourishing as well?

Larissa May: I do not believe that being offline is the only way to experience digital flourishing. We've been trained and technology has been designed to keep us in the doom loop. The part of our brain that is activated by that doom and passive consumption is also the same part of our brain that could be activated by the

imagination muscle and creation. The question is, how do we retrain the next generation?

We have to retrain human consciousness and our children's consciousness. So much of our well-being is oftentimes putting down the people that are getting in the way of it. We need to get out of that, and we need to tell people and young people, "You can take charge."

Holly Wise: The Youth Mental Wellbeing Co-Lab, as you know, has three main focus areas. Building young people's resilience, giving young people agency, and also helping young people build a sense of community and belonging. What area does your work focus on, and what contribution does your work make in that area?

Larissa May: Two layers of our work fit into those. Our youth empowerment work fits into the community. The bedrock of our work is, in a world with no tech regulation, building emotional resilience and regulation, and that digital wellness is an inside job.

What we teach is emotional resilience in the digital age, and that happens through Social Media U, which is the program that we've designed for middle schoolers through high schoolers in school and after school.

Holly Wise: How do you see yourselves in collaboration with organizations working in the same focus area?

Larissa May: We're the big sister. For Civics Academy, we hire a lot of the other youth leaders of other organizations to be speakers. I do a lot of personal mentorship. Every Saturday, I devote a couple of hours to coaching next-generation leaders, giving them feedback.

Holly Wise: Are there other organizations that you find a lot of joy in working with and collaborating with?

Larissa May: All of the young people in the Youth Power Fund, we love collaborating with. Generation Patient, Trisha Prabhu, Encode. Young People's Alliance. All of those people are peers of ours. I see myself as a big sister because I've been through a lot. I'd like to think I'm a battle-tested entrepreneur in that way.

Holly Wise: Is there any emerging work in this area that excites you?

Larissa May: I'm excited about the research side of things. How do we use brands to give nonprofits money to do cool research, and how do we partner with the best researchers in the world to do that? There are more models for that now.

I'm excited about looking at the brain. It is the least looked-at organ on the planet, and one in five people in America live with a mental illness. We already know by some of the early findings with OpenAI that it's impacting memory. Our brains are changing right now.

Holly Wise: You mentioned AI. Tell me about that and how your organization is orienting around that.

Larissa May: No 12-year-old cares about Meta or Mark Zuckerberg. These teens are building their own apps on Lovable. They're creating ecosystems and support systems on ChatGPT. What people aren't realizing is that these systems of AI are so much better at preying on the limbic system part of a young person's brain than any other technology in human history. What we do with young people is teach them the mechanics, the pros, the cons, and make a safe space for these discussions, because AI is also a place of a lot of fear for young people.

Holly Wise: Are there resources, guides or tools along the way that have been useful to you in your own learning and advancing your work?

Larissa May: Mentorship from entrepreneurs that were much further along than me. That's it.

Holly Wise: What do you think is the most important question that you and your team are going to be asking yourselves and solving for?

Larissa May: What does it mean to be human, and how do we get young people to protect that?

Holly Wise: What's the most important question you think that Co-Lab should be asking right now?

Larissa May: What does life look like in 20 years, and how do we ensure that we have systems and recruitment from other people, like the ones in the Co-Lab, that want to continue sustaining this work?

Holly Wise: How do you see yourself maintaining energy and vitality for the work?

Larissa May: It's sitting at tables that I certainly would have had to wait 40 years to be at. This is my life's work. I don't have much of a life outside of this work and this commitment to the world.

We can't save the world through fear. I have a lot of hope because of the young people that give me it every day. I'm grateful for the partnership and the opportunity to show the world that we can do things a different way.

Holly Wise: Thank you so much for your time.

Holly Wise is a two-time Fulbright-Nehru Teaching Scholar with extensive experience in solutions journalism and academia. She has held multiple roles at the Solutions Journalism Network, including its first director of journalism school engagement and later its first program director. She is a certified leadership and cross-cultural coach, based in Bengaluru, India. She holds a bachelor's degree in journalism and a master's in mass communication from Murray State University.

* This interview has been edited and condensed.