



“It's about being that backer who believes in them”: Maddison O’Gradey-Lee of Orygen on helping young advocates thrive

Sanne Breimer
October 16, 2025

Sanne Breimer: Please introduce yourself and tell me what is distinctive about your approach in the field of youth mental health. What is something that others might find surprising?

Maddison O’Gradey-Lee: I am the co-founder and project manager of the Orygen Global Youth Mental Health Fellowships. What's distinctive in our approach is that lived experience is at the core of everything we do. The fellowship was born from a direct need that we heard from young people, that youth advocates needed training and support in their work, and wanted to be connected to other youth mental health advocates.

When we did these consultations and heard the same narrative across the globe about young people feeling isolated in their work or not having training, that's what led to the development of the fellowship. We took ideas we've experienced in other advocacy programs and listened to what young people told us to create the fellowship. To this day, the fellowship is run by young people with lived experience.

First it was myself and co-founder Nataya Branjerdporn, we were 22 and 24 at the start of the fellowship. Our core team leading the development of the program was four women under the age of 28 with lived experience.

We use the insights from our advocates to continually shape our work. It's not just something that we think about after. It's at the forefront of everything that we do. That lived experience component is key. Young people's needs drive the program and how we shape it.

Sanne Breimer: The Youth Mental Wellbeing Co-Lab has three focus areas: building young people's resilience, giving young people agency, and helping

young people build a sense of community and belonging. What does your work focus on, and how do you define this?

Maddison O'Gradey-Lee: Our work is at the core of it, it focuses on building agency, but also building communities and connections. The Orygen Global Youth Mental Health Fellowship is a training and mentoring program for youth mental health advocates in select regions aged 18 to 30. Young people apply with an idea or project of how they want to improve mental health in their community, throughout the life cycle of the six-month online program with an in-person forum.

They engage with world leaders in youth mental health and advocacy, attend training sessions, connect with experts to do mentoring, and also work with one another and the alumni to learn from the insights from youth mental health. For us, it's about upskilling and empowering youth mental health advocates. Because we know that young people have the ideas and the solutions, but sometimes they just need a bit of extra support in how they shape it and get it up and running in their communities.

Even just having somebody who actually believes in them and provides that support, they might already have the skills. The fellowship is about building the agency of young people to empower them to continue their work and strengthen its impact. It's about building communities and connecting youth mental health advocates, because the youth mental health space can be tough and upsetting. It is hard work that often goes unnoticed.

One of the things we're proudest about as a fellowship is that in all of our evaluations, the feedback that comes back as the strength of the program is the connection that they feel to other youth mental health advocates and to their region. Some of our fellows collaborate and launch initiatives together, co-found projects together, and create community, whether two young people from the same country or from different neighboring countries.

Sanne Breimer: How did you get the idea to focus on the young people's skills and knowledge? Because you started this at a very young age, right?

Maddison O'Gradey-Lee: Yes. My co-founder and I both have lived experience. We were youth advisors on a project, and part of that project was doing consultations with young people. That's where we kept hearing that young people are doing amazing work, but they just don't feel supported in their advocacy. We co-designed an advocacy toolkit using Orygen's existing knowledge, talked to young people, and designed this as linear as an advocacy toolkit can be.

We're were proud of the toolkit, but the world has a lot of toolkits. There weren't programs that support young people to implement these skills. That's what led to the motivation to build the fellowship, because we didn't want it to just be a toolkit. We identified all the key areas of advocacy from the research frameworks, advocacy organizations, and from talking to young people, but we didn't have the next step.

We spoke with partner organizations and leaders in mental health to hear their perspectives, designed the content, and went to our young people and talked to our friends. We were both youth advocates. We'd both been through that same journey of caring about mental health and wanting to make a difference, without knowing how to do it, what it looks like, and doing it right.

We used a lot of our personal experience in these roles, and what we had heard from young people in our consults, and from partner organizations who are already doing amazing work in this space. We designed the content from there. We often joke that we first started the fellowship, and it felt like we were building the ship as it sailed.

We wanted to be true to the value of lived experience in youth participation and make sure that the program was flexible and adaptable, and designed with young people in mind. We were able to continually evaluate and make changes where possible to make sure that the programming was what young people wanted.

Sanne Breimer: I mentioned the Co-Lab, the first pillar is resilience. Is it intertwined in your work?

Maddison O'Gradey-Lee: Yes, definitely. Resilience is a big part of our programming at the fellowship. Building resilience looks like supporting our youth mental health advocates and their work, not just on the logistical side of doing advocacy, but also on the side where it gets personally draining. People sometimes carry experiences and stories with shame, without having ever spoken about them widely, but want to use those experiences because they've shaped what they're doing.

Building resilience looks like helping our fellows understand their story and how it plays into the work that they're doing, and to feel pride in their lived experience. Whenever we do our evaluations, our fellows often say they didn't think they deserved to be treated well in their work because they feel it's not good enough.

It's always just so heartbreaking that that's the common theme that all of these amazing young people feel. We hope that our program builds up their resilience and ability to cope with the highs and lows of advocacy, because they've often been rejected from grants. It's about being that backer who believes in them.

Also, helping them understand that advocacy doesn't need to be perfect; we're celebrating amazing things, but more often, there will be little losses along the way, like missed grants and projects. We help them bounce back and keep going. Not seeing that as a failure, but as part of the journey.

Sanne Breimer: The people you attract for these fellowships are young advocates, but also young social entrepreneurs. What is the age? Can you describe the group?

Maddison O'Gradey-Lee: Yes. The fellowships are by region. At the moment, we've got a Sub-Saharan African fellowship about to launch, an Asia-Pacific Fellowship currently running, and we previously had a global fellowship. Our criteria are that they're

a young person aged 18 to 30, passionate about mental health, from one of those regions. We strongly encourage lived experience, although it's not mandatory.

We attract a wide variety of young people. We've had lawyers, doctors, teachers, psychologists, and medical professionals. We don't exclude. We want anyone passionate who has an idea on how to create change. We've had people come to us with an idea, and people who've got a project already up and running with a thousand volunteers.

It's a wide spectrum, but part of the criteria is that you need to have an idea or a project to create change in mental health. Most of them are social entrepreneurs who are trying to run programs in their communities. We have researchers, people creating online platforms or social media advocacy, people creating workshops and safe spaces for community members to attend, people who are advocating for policy change in the government and doing consultations with young people, and present that, and we have a wide variety of project areas and topics that people work in.

Sanne Breimer: What, if any, emerging work in this field are you excited about?

Maddison O'Gradey-Lee: There's so much that's exciting and emerging. The thing that I'm most excited about is seeing the integration of lived experience in youth participation in organizations and in advocacy projects. We still have a long way to go, but often lived experience or youth participation could be seen as a tick-box. There's a lot more integration from the start.

That makes me really excited because I have the utmost privilege of getting to work with incredible youth advocates and young people with lived experience who impress me with their ideas and knowledge on how they want to see the world change.

It's lovely to see more programs centering young people's voices at the forefront. Particularly here in Australia, the government listened more to young people and let that shape the work we're doing. The potential that it can bring is going to be amazing.

Sanne Breimer: Is there a specific event that changed it?

Maddison O'Gradey-Lee: Youth participation lived experience isn't a new space at all. It's been around for so long. The organizations of young people that have come before us have continually pushed for this.

What helped the fellowship to be successful is that our attitude was to just ask; we didn't take no for an answer or wait for a seat at the table. We were bringing our own chair to sit down and ask for things. We had the best response from cold emailing and calling people to ask for their support in this program. We're not unique in that; lots of youth advocates have been more pushy to have their voices heard.

Governments know that young people aren't going to quiet down anytime soon. It makes sense that we all come together, rather than these bigger players ignoring the voices of young people.

Sanne Breimer: I noticed that it's often the very young entrepreneurs, the people who start building something in their early 20s, who have the most guts to do the cold calling, and they don't care. They just want to build something.

Maddison O'Gradey-Lee: Yes, that helps so much. When we started the fellowship, we were quite audacious. We were fortunate because so many people were so kind to us and wanted to support us.

We had a plan of how we thought it could be successful, and people believed in us and wanted to take the leap and support us because of that passion and drive, and because it seemed like a good idea. Now we're in the fortunate position of having wonderful long-term partners who've been on this journey with us, with a working concept model and passion and drive to get things through the door.

Sanne Breimer: Can you share an example that illustrates the impact of your work?

Maddison O'Gradey-Lee: I have a couple. One of our fellows was completing her PhD and was interested in advocacy, and she was running this really great advocacy project off the back of her research. We paired her with a mentor in academia, who was also quite interested in policy. They worked amazingly together. Throughout the fellowship, throughout the mentoring experiences that she had, she was able to see that her project was something much more than just a knowledge translation of her research and her PhD, but something that could really make a difference in her context.

She decided that that would be something that she'd want to follow. She'd always thought that she'd just go straight into academia, that advocacy is a hobby, not a job. She ended up learning that advocacy actually is a job. Advocacy is something you can make a career out of. I'd never seen that as a possibility. She ended up shifting her whole career direction, moving away from her plan to go into academia, following her advocacy project, and working in policy. We'd set out to create a community, to support young people in their advocacy. But to see advocacy become a real-life career path for someone so passionate about it, instead of this thing that she just had to do on the side, that one will always stick with me.

We have had a lot of our fellows collaborate on projects. We currently have two fellows who went to run a program in Indonesia on a really big international grant. They partnered with Monash University and designed this project. That came as a result of feeling more confident through the fellowship, learning these skills, and connecting with the university through our program, through a mentor, which was really exciting.

My favorite thing that demonstrates the impact is that in our evaluation, one of the questions we ask centers around how they feel in the fellowship or what it's meant to them. One of our fellows said that she'd never been in a program like this before. She'd never felt supported or connected as an advocate, and she felt really isolated in everything that she was doing. She wanted to give up. She didn't want to do this work anymore. The fellowship created this safe space for her to be who she was as an

advocate and feel pride in that identity, feel connected to that identity, but also understand that she wasn't alone.

She wrote, "This is the first time in my life that I've ever not felt alone, that I've been with people who understand me and who are proud of the work that I do, and I don't have to explain that." That one makes me feel really proud of what we've built, that young people can feel safe, not isolated, and connected to themselves, the work that they do, and other young people.

We have lots of stories like that, where young people say, "This fellowship has kept me going on my advocacy journey. When times are really hard, I think back to the fellowship. I still talk to my peers. That's what's kept me going in this really tough career." That always makes me feel really proud of our programming and of what we can achieve.

Sanne Breimer: Tell me more about your alumni network.

Maddison O'Grady-Lee: In two weeks' time, we're going to have 94 young people from 47 countries in our alumni network. It's very exciting. It was really important to us that this not just be a six-month program and be done. We wanted our fellows to be connected to Orygen and connected to one another throughout their journeys.

We've been developing our alumni network and what that looks like in conjunction with the alumni. We've asked them what they want to see from us. We have a paid alumni committee, with alumni of the program who are designing and developing resources for alumni and online events. Given the global scale, we do some online events where we get to just bring everyone together and chat and workshops where they can come and learn some more things. We also do a lot of regional events when we can.

In Malaysia, we ran a policy lab with governments and international not-for-profits and service providers. We invited all of our alumni to be a part of that program. We flew them in or paid for their transport to ensure that they could all be there. All six of our Malaysian alumni were part of that programming. That's something that we're really passionate about doing—making sure that we can bring our young people together when possible, ideally in person. It's always wonderful.

If we have conferences, we'll offer some kind of support for some fellows, like a competitive EOI process, so they can come along and present their work or present about the fellowship at an international conference and network, an opportunity that might not have been available to them before. At the moment, the alumni network is working on a podcast. That was a project they decided they wanted to develop. Hopefully that will be available in the next couple of months. We're really passionate about making sure that the alumni group stays connected and has a way to be involved and meet one another.

Sanne Breimer: Everyone learns as much from things that don't work as things that do. Can you describe something that you tried but didn't work and that you learned from?

Maddison O'Gradey-Lee: For us, global time zones have always been really challenging. We were working and meeting at ridiculous hours. We did that because we didn't want to put people in our program out. We wanted to make it as accessible as possible. It meant that for the people on this side of the world, and our team in Australia, we might have a meeting at midnight or at 4 AM. We wanted to make sure it was always accessible to our young people. We were happy to put ourselves out.

What that meant is that our team was going to be burnt out and exhausted and couldn't actually run the program the way we wanted to. We learned that this is really not sustainable. You actually can't do that. That was a really big learning. Also, as youth advocates in this role, I think we're very used to being like, "It's okay, I'll do the 2 AM, don't worry about it." Learning to put those boundaries in for the sake of long-term impact was quite important.

Building community is a core tenet to the work that we do. We're now really selective with who we bring into the program to ensure that there is a good fit, because we want this to be a safe space for everybody. When we first started the fellowship, I suppose we didn't have that great an idea of what would work and what wouldn't in terms of who you select for a program. We had a rubric of an assessment, but the rubric we had at the time didn't quite capture what we needed. What that meant is that often we were letting people in who maybe didn't have enough time to commit to the fellowship, because we wanted to be flexible, and we respect that people have busy lives. That meant that we had people who just weren't engaging properly with the program, and we'd have to meet with them and say, "Hey, we need you to do this."

That was a really big learning, to know what questions to ask to ensure that someone is going to be a good fit, particularly around their ability to engage and commit in the program, but also their values and the way they work with other people. Because we had a few of those moments where maybe we hadn't thought those criteria through well and it had an impact on the programming, we saw the importance of it and created a better rubric for how we assess whether people will be a good fit, and actually putting that above anything else, instead of trying to be like, maybe we should have someone from X country.

That's okay. We know that [choosing wrong] is going to have a really detrimental impact on engagement in the program for the whole group, not just them. It also means we use a spot for somebody who may really engage well.

Sanne Breimer: How did you optimize that rubric?

Maddison O'Gradey-Lee: I suppose it came from all of the hiccups that we had in the programming: engagement in the workshops, attendance of the workshops, engagement in the other facets of the program. Those kinds of things were very observable and tangible, and we were able to ask for that.

We used to ask, "Do you see any barriers in being able to engage in the program?" People often said, "No." We changed the question to, "We understand that you are

busy, you are often studying or working while doing this. What barriers are there to engaging in the group, and how would you overcome them?" Because we wanted them to know it's okay—we don't expect you to be here 100% of the time, but what are those barriers and how do you overcome them? That became a way that we asked around that.

I also think we saw how they work with one another and their willingness to collaborate was quite important, so we then added in a question to our assessment around their collaboration potential. That allowed us to assess: Are you going to be able to listen to somebody from a really different context and hear their insights and see them as valuable, even if you are not going to necessarily work that way? Now I think we have a really good formula of how we select people into this program.

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

Maddison O'Gradey-Lee: In addition to the fellowship work that we do, we are also now working on a policy level. We're running collaborative policy labs in different countries. Something that is always a bit of a challenge for us is that we never want to come in and take over. We want to collaborate really openly with countries. Our position is that we're the expert in this subject matter, but you are the expert in your country, in your cultural context. Therefore, let's collaborate and bring these two areas together. We're passionate about ensuring that comes across. That means that if we want to work in another country, we will have a young person as a co-facilitator on the programming to make sure that we have a bridge of cultural knowledge.

Getting buy-in from governments or high-level organizations can be a challenge at times, and it can sometimes be really difficult to get them to engage in the programming, despite there being a desire from the young people and a need in the community that we've identified. Engaging governments is always a challenge. For example, we recently collaborated with a country's government, and it was a wonderful partnership. But their political system is very bureaucratic, which has meant that despite that our results are ready to be published, it will probably be delayed by six months, because we need to wait to have a meeting before we're allowed to share them.

It's fine to respect all of those processes. It does really slow down the work and the impact that can potentially happen, because we would really like to get this report in front of government. That's always a challenge. We see that when we work with a government in Australia. It slows down processes, and sometimes it's really hard to get their engagement or buy-in for the initial part of the program or their ongoing commitment to the result. Once we say, "Hey, this is what we've heard. Let's do something with it," often that's where the government end falls short.

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

Maddison O'Gradey-Lee: The importance of centering youth and lived experience at the core of your work is a key learning. The fellowship program has been so successful because it was led with youth lived experience. We worked collaboratively with lots of young people to shape that. That's a really important lesson from this programming.

We were very lucky that Orygen gave us a lot of trust as an organization to run this. They said, "We're here if you need. We'll support, but do this. Go for it. We believe you. We back your idea," and really let us develop our skills and lead this program. That truly allowed us to shape the vision without a lot of constraints to develop a program that was really successful, because we had that freedom and trust in us. We're always really grateful for that, because it was a really big ask. We're really grateful for Iconiq for that, too. Having a funding source that has so much trust in you and your ability to do the work makes a major difference in your ability to perform and meet the impact that you want. Having the flexibility in advocacy to change when needed is really important for us at the fellowship.

We've learned that you have to be flexible and adaptable, especially working across cultural contexts. Knowing that we have a model that works has been great, but knowing that that model is actually very flexible and adaptable, knowing that we can move things and change things as we need, has been wonderful and has allowed us to create impact.

It's important, too, when you work with young people, to understand the power dynamics that are at play. Even if you are the best organization, the kindest people, there still is a power imbalance for these young people. We've learned that dismantling that power imbalance and showing them that we trust them and we see them as equal partners in the work is quite key. Actively reducing that power imbalance is something organizations can do to ensure the quality of their work and the impact that it might have.

We do expert mentoring. We used to do it one-on-one. You had one mentor for one person. It was really great for some fellows, but some fellows just didn't enjoy it. It felt a bit too uncomfortable. We ended up pivoting to group mentoring. There were more fellows to the mentor to even out that power imbalance. This has enabled a lot better engagement for some of our fellows, because they've got a group that they're going into this with. We are listening to them, we're hearing their voices, we're valuing them, and we're reducing any power dynamics.

When we are willing to pivot and support young people and what they want to do for us at the fellowship, whilst everyone comes to us with an idea, we do not expect them to run it in the duration of the fellowship. I know a lot of programs will want an output. We don't expect them to do that, because, quite frankly, we don't understand their context. We can't know when this is going to be a good time or not. Rather, we want to support these young people and empower them to do this work when it is right for them, and to let them make those calls and position them as experts and give them that freedom.

A lot of our fellows' programs change quite dramatically over the duration of the fellowship. We love to see it, because it means that young people are taking their ideas and strategies and adapting them to make their program better. We never expect that kind of follow-through. Working with young people in the advocacy space is positioning them as the expert of what they can do in their community, supporting that however possible, and allowing for things to change and to be flexible, because that's when we get the best outcomes.

If we're really rigid in what we expect, that becomes quite problematic. Openness, willingness to change, and support throughout the whole journey enables us to have such a better impact, even if it means that the impact isn't going to happen in the next three months or six months. It means there's going to be greater impact and probably longer sustainability if we do it this way. It's playing the long game.

Sanne Breimer: You mentioned mentoring from a university. How does that partnership work? How do you set it up?

Maddison O'Gradey-Lee: With the mentoring, we look at what our fellows are doing, what areas they're working in, what regions, and then we try to find mentors who would be a good match. We often use our own networks to contact or connect with networks. Sometimes by cold email. We go to universities, to professors, to other not-for-profits, to other advocates.

It's just reaching out and saying, "Hey, this is a program that we run. We've got these young people that we think would be a really good fit to be mentored by you. Is this something you would be interested in?" We've been really fortunate that we have a lot of mentors who've continued on with us, who've come back to mentor another year, or who continue to mentor their fellows that they mentored years ago. It has been really wonderful to see that ongoing connection.

It has just been reaching out to different people and gauging their keenness. We're really grateful for their support. We've been able to build lovely professional connections through these networks, and they're doing this for free. They're doing this to support our program, to support young people. It's also making sure that if they have a need from us or a way that we can give back, that we do that, too, where possible.

Sanne Breimer: Is there a specific reason that you're moving more into policy? Was there a moment that you decided that that needed to happen?

Maddison O'Gradey-Lee: We've moved into policy, one, because we've got more funding to do these things. The fellowship works at an individual level and a community level. A lot of our fellows come to us wanting to change some policy. We've got this funding that's expanded the fellowship, so why not work across multiple levels of impact? It's also a great way to support our fellows, because we get to involve them in policymaking with their government or with not-for-profits firsthand. That's why we always wanted to do more and wider work, and we wanted to work across multiple impact levels. Being able to do this through Iconiq has been really great.

Sanne Breimer: Has being part of the cohort influenced your approach or helped you think differently about your work?

Maddison O'Gradey-Lee: Yes. I think it's greatly enhanced our work, and I'm sure that we'll continue to learn from all of the other organizations. It's been so interesting to hear how different organizations conceptualize things or how they run and do their work. I was fortunate to go to a talk with one of the other organizations, and I was really impressed at how they do their mentoring. We want to try and take some things from that into our program.

We also work with some of the organizations who are in the Co-Lab already and partner with them. They're actually mentors for us. They speak for us. That's been wonderful, and trying to forge more of those connections has been great. One organization is running a program and wants to move potentially into the Pacific, and that's somewhere that we work. We've been in conversations with them creating a program together. I think the collaboration that's come has been amazing, and it's always amazing to hear how people position or do things differently.

Sanne Breimer: You mentioned that there has been a shift in attitudes towards mental health, centering more lived experience. Have you also seen attitudes towards youth mental health shift in your own community of advocates in the sector? What has contributed to that change?

Maddison O'Gradey-Lee: There's definitely been a shift in the stigma, the perception of mental health conditions. I've seen that across our work. It differs quite greatly by region, but from what I have seen, there's a consistent theme of more confidence in young people speaking up to their lived experience and sharing their stories despite there being stigma still around, despite these young people feeling quite vulnerable, because it is sharing a really big part of yourself.

I think that the fear of sharing lived experience has gone down. I've seen bravery increase, particularly in sharing stories. There's also been a lot more education on mental health conditions globally. More awareness and more people speaking out about mental health has enabled more people to start sharing their stories.

A lot of work has been done on trying to destigmatize mental health. Some of the older generations don't quite understand, but my peers get it. [They see that] if I can talk about this, maybe I can help some other people. That's been the attitude shift. There's also been more of a focus among funders on mental health, which has allowed more mental health-based organizations or advocates to come through the ranks.

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

Maddison O'Gradey-Lee: How do we continue to center lived experience at the core of the work that we do?

Sanne Breimer: Thank you so much.

Sanne Breimer (she/her) is a freelance journalism trainer, project manager and adviser for international media organizations including SembraMedia, Thomson Reuters Foundation (TRF), European Journalism Centre, Thibi, and the Asia-Pacific Broadcasting Union (ABU). She founded Inclusive Journalism, aiming to educate (primarily) Western journalists about media representation and decolonisation through a weekly newsletter, online courses and retreats. Sanne works remotely and divides her time between Europe and South East Asia. Before moving into training, Sanne worked at a managerial level in national public broadcasting in the Netherlands for almost 13 years, focusing on radio, digital media and innovation. She is Dutch with Frisian roots.

** This interview has been edited and condensed.*