“It's about having really caring coaches, a simple, consistent routine, and safe spaces”: Paula Yarrow and Timothy Conibear of Waves for Change on creating belonging through sports

Sanne Breimer
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Sanne Breimer: Please introduce yourself and tell me what's distinctive about your approach in the field of youth mental health, maybe something that other people might find surprising.

Timothy Conibear: I founded the Waves for Change Organization in South Africa in 2011. People might find it surprising in our work that we passionately believe that play in sport is inherently good for young people. It improves their social connectedness, resilience, and confidence. We're keen to help people scale sports programs with confidence and recognize coaches as essential pillars of a functioning society.

People are often surprised that our work spans far beyond just surfing, and that we work across pretty much every single art, sports, and culture program there is. We now work with partners in over 18 different countries, reaching hundreds of thousands of children.

Paula Yarrow: I oversee our research and funding at Waves for Change. We ensure that what we're researching and learning from what children and young people tell us is working. We go out and raise money to scale and to implement ourselves.

Sometimes people think that complex problems require complex solutions. What we're scaling is actually quite simple, and that's why it works. It's about having really caring coaches, a simple, consistent routine, and safe spaces that are created for young people through sports and creative play.

We can replicate that simple rhythm, the teaching framework we use within our surfing programs, of creating a safe space for young people to come to regularly, and feel like

they belong. They can experience respite from stress by having fun, playing games, and sports together.

It has a profound effect, and it's a powerful solution to a complex problem with young people growing up in so much adversity across the world. We've seen it translate well in humanitarian settings, refugee camps, and detention centers, as well as on the beaches in South Africa.

Sanne Breimer: What type of research are you doing?

Paula Yarrow: We research what works and what doesn't within our programs, but we focus quite a lot on depathologizing some of the mental health space. Society is a hard place for young people to grow up in, particularly where there's conflict, crisis, and poverty. These social determinants and environmental stresses make children and young people feel unwell, which affects the way they think, feel, and behave.

We're researching to change that environment and create safe spaces for young people outside of home and school, using creative play and sport.

A young person growing up in a lot of adversity is at a high risk of developing a mental health disorder when they're older. Things like substance misuse, anxiety, and depression become more likely if there's a lot of stress and no ability to develop healthy coping skills.

We measure overall well-being, emotional regulation, resilience, and sleep quality. If you improve adolescents' self-regulation skills, ensure they're socially connected, and have healthy coping strategies, research suggests they're much less likely to develop a mental health condition.

Sanne Breimer: Is that scientific research?

Paula Yarrow: Yes. We work with the Alan J Flisher Centre for Public Mental Health at the University of Cape Town, King's College London, Edinburgh Napier University, and the Wellcome Trust. We host scientific research, including randomized controlled trials (RCTs). We value qualitative research and storytelling with young people.

Sanne Breimer: And you mentioned coaches, do you mean sports and activity coaches, or also mental health coaches?

Timothy Conibear: We have different names for them; we call them coaches, others call them near peers or teachers. Essentially, they're young people who are relatable to the participant, and we train them in nine key caregiving skills that might be shared by a more formal practitioner, like a social worker, a case worker, or a clinician.

The idea is that when young people transition into adolescence, they tend to listen less to authority figures like their parents or psychologists and are more easily influenced by their peers and by people they see as aspirational. Artists, sports coaches, or musicians could play a pivotal role in the development of an adolescent.

We give those aspirational characters the same caregiving skills that clinicians receive, to convince society that they are worthy practitioners. That's the magic behind this model: recognizing the importance of creative people in the lives and development of young people and giving them simple teaching routines.

Sanne Breimer: The Youth Mental Well-Being 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 mostly focus on, and how do you define this?

Timothy Conibear: I think all of them, to be honest. We define it around a third space. If you connect children to a space where they feel they belong, have fun, and meet people with whom they connect, you tend to see that belonging, agency, and resilience improve.

For many young people, school and home can be very stressful; they're not always great places to build a sense of belonging. The connection with your parents might not be there. By participating in after-school art, sports, and music activities and mastering a simple but often inaccessible skill, something complex that you didn't think you could do, you build resilience, agency, and confidence.

Ideally, we'll identify a sports coach, teacher, musician, or artist, and give them simple caregiver skills to engage these children authentically. A simple teaching rhythm, so that when they've got 60 to 100 kids in front of them, they can quickly create a sense of structure and boost social connections.

They make new friends who make them feel more socially connected, learn some simple self-regulation skills, and breathing skills as part of this teaching routine. Our statistics show that when a child has been in these programs for between three and six months and attends the space weekly, their confidence, resilience, well-being, social connectedness, and sense of belonging go up.

We've seen preliminary findings in a small pilot RCT that children who get access to the safe space regularly show a pattern of a lower cumulative incidence of depression or anxiety, with higher cumulative incidence in a control arm. The growth in social connectedness, belonging, resilience, and confidence is potentially protective, which is very cool.

The great thing is that it's not actually that difficult; it's just respecting the role that creative people play in society and giving them their podium and their place.

Sanne Breimer: You look for actual spaces. How does that work?

Timothy Conibear: We look at the people who employ the most coaches in a society, for example, the government, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Culture and Sports, the Ministry of Health, and the Ministry of Gender. They'll be running sports in schools or community health clubs after school. Or we look for humanitarian agencies that run large child-friendly spaces in refugee camps.

Typically, these people employ hundreds, if not thousands, of coaches or peer educators and inspirators, the profile of the person we look to work with. We form partnerships and provide training and technical support to train their coaches in the Take 5 Model.

It allows them to structure the spaces they already run and make the coaches more confident and competent in working with young people. The attendance at these spaces goes up, and the outcomes for the children improve. Rather than opening up our own spaces, we look at large agencies that are controlling community space, and get as many of their employees using this model.

Sanne Breimer: You don't have spaces of your own?

Timothy Conibear: Yes, we do. The organization started with one program in Cape Town in 2011, and we built a beach center for a voluntary surfing program. I used to pick kids up and take them to the beach. It started with children coming with me, and then a few adults joined the program. They were unemployed, and they had nothing to do.

We got a little bit of funding, some media exposure, and donations. It was never meant to be a foundation, but we decided to give the money to the unemployed adults to run the program Monday through Sunday, to ensure it's always there.

The adults got a job, the program became consistent, and we researched why the children came and what value they derived from the program. A lot of it was confidence and a sense of freedom because they could surf. A huge part of it was connecting to an adult who would listen to them. Many of these kids had difficult home lives and felt they couldn't talk to their parents because their parents were quite stressed.

The coaches weren’t prepared to talk to kids about these challenges, so we invested in caregiver skill training for when the children are on the beach to surf, and have simple activities to help them share their feelings.

We replicated that and over the next few years, we opened five different centers on the coast of South Africa. We were then faced with a choice to either open thousands of these spaces ourselves, which would cost a huge amount of money and would not be fun, or we'd become a fundraising agency instead of a program agency.

We shared the simple beach games and caregiving skills with any agency doing sports at scale. People are becoming more aware of how important sports are, especially post-COVID, when physical activity and our friends were taken away from us, and for a population that's becoming more digital. Governments and humanitarian agencies are looking for scalable models for sports.

We've been successful at forming relationships and connecting caregiver training and the sports pitch routine. With that, we could go from just five self-run spaces to working with UNICEF in South Sudan, and all of their child-friendly spaces across the country. We took the simple beach solution and radically scaled it up by partnering.

Sanne Breimer: What emerging work in this field are you excited about in the context of the Co-Lab?

Paula Yarrow: Some of these humanitarian organizations are working with some of the hardest-to-reach young people in the world. For example, a young person in a detention center in South Sudan who doesn't trust anyone and feels isolated wakes up in the morning and can attend a Take 5 session to build trust and connect with people. They're becoming more open to a session with a social worker or case worker who has the potential to radically improve that child's life.

We worked with kids who were referred by local schools and child and youth care centers in South Africa, and we're now getting complex health referrals and trusted therapy programs in South Africa, because people see the impact of this intervention. Humanitarian agencies, UNFPA, and UNICEF offices are looking for something that works for these high-priority groups of young people.

We honestly weren't sure how well it would translate. We get feedback on how this is the first intervention where social workers, sports coaches, or our facilitators have a program they feel confident with, and young people want to come to. It's exciting that it works extremely well.

Timothy Conibear: The shift in this sponsorship to looking at resilience, belonging, and agency, for me, is exciting because we've been running these programs since 2011, before mental health was spoken about in funding circles. We were often told our outcomes were too soft. People would ask what change we make in kids' lives, and giving them confidence, belonging, and resilience wasn't seen as a change.

A lot of the funding in the mental health sector was about access to treatment and digitalization.

I found it dispiriting because people need to be able to connect; they need to play. The fact that this has now been mainstreamed through this fund is great, because it's a fundamental need.

The people who are more suspicious of our work want to see real, actual change. We might call them laggards or cynics. When you get a big funder saying that resilience and human connection matter, that really helps us to grow the model.

Sanne Breimer: You also mentioned the capacity to deal with change. Is that a superpower nowadays, if you develop that?

Timothy Conibear: It is. The world's changing quickly. If we don't give children access to these spaces, we're going to end up having to spend more money on treatment down the line. We see this fitting in prevention, often described as primary prevention. A lot of money in the mental health space goes on treatment because it's easy to evidence. It's nice and tangible for a funder. It's much harder to prove prevention because how do you prove the future absence of something?

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

Timothy Conibear: The most thorough would be the Alive study, which we are almost able to share. And in South Sudan, the child protection response looks after kids in crisis. They found that the social workers and case workers in the community didn't have the skills to engage with kids because their method was often about talking, and children weren't ready to talk.

We got involved with the South Sudanese UNICEF Child Protection team, run by the amazing Brendan Ross, who always looks to innovate and change the way things are done.

His thing is love and human connection, to help children form relationships that can be life-changing. He wanted to put more caring adults into South Sudanese society. He looked at the Take 5 Model and said that this really could work.

We trained about 300 inspirators, as he called them, and we put them into various spaces around South Sudan. They formed meaningful connections with vulnerable young people, listened to their challenges, and taught them coping skills. The ones that had acute challenges could be referred to caseworkers for onward support.

They did this in the South Sudanese prison system, where lots of children are still being incarcerated. The child protection team sent in several inspirators for Take 5 sessions who quickly formed trust with the inmates. For one hour a day, they would run physical activity sessions using the Take 5 Model and build trust within a week. In the second week, they let the prison guards take part in the same routine to establish more trust.

Then they integrated social workers into the session, who could identify children who are in prison and get 300 of the 800 children out. It shows the value of building trust, belonging, and human connection. Without that initial trust-building exercise, the kids wouldn't have spoken to social workers, and the prison wouldn't let social workers in.

Sanne Breimer: If you look at your work so far, could you describe something that you tried but eventually didn't work out, and what you learned from that?

Timothy Conibear: Probably the best example of that was our early attempts to share our model with partners. We developed a set of activities for the beach and a set of training activities for coaches through our five implementation sites in South Africa. Our first attempts to share those with partners were fairly successful, but a lot of partners found it too complicated. When they received our material and training, they were still faced with a choice between doing it our way or doing it their way. It wasn't complementary to their existing work.

We realized that the arts, culture, and play activities of these partners were inherently good. We didn't need to mess around with that too much. We just needed to identify the most fun, practical, and simple activities that didn't disrupt what they already did. We took the more complicated material out and we whittled it down to five simple steps. The

energizer, a check-in, and a breathing activity are little things that actually make programs much more fun.

The coaches enjoyed doing these simple activities, and the children really loved them. We took away everything that the children and the coaches didn't like, and we left in the stuff that they did. It took a couple of years, but it went from what was called the Five Pillar Method to what's now called Take 5. Being aware of where we were adding value and where we were causing complications was important. And being sensitive enough to take that back, involving communication with our donors.

Often in this type of environment, you're funded to deliver a set number of outputs and outcomes. We were lucky to get flexible funders. The collaboration in the Anglo-American team and Grand Challenges Canada believed in us and were happy for us to adjust the Five Pillar Model so that it would become simpler and easier for people to adjust.

That took a huge amount of back and forth with the donors. The traditional model is to work out what works, and then replicate it, and don't let people change it because then you mess up the fidelity. If that's the approach, you're not really going to scale quickly, because you're going to force partners to choose between your way or their way.

With the Take 5 Model, we put players right in the middle. That's the thing we celebrate.

Sanne Breimer: How was that in the process for you to find out a simpler direction?

Paula Yarrow: It was about ensuring good, caring attachments with the coaches, coaches knowing their names, greeting them warmly, so that they felt comfortable to share their feelings, and that they had a few simple coping strategies that they could remember and use in their lives at school or at home. It helped us reset as an organization.

Sanne Breimer: What were the doubts on the funder's side?

Paula Yarrow: Firstly, they were worried that surfing drives the outcomes in our programs. We've done surf therapy research, and if you can have fun and play with children in nature, you can get an additional boost, but it doesn't have to be there to drive all the outcomes.

The other question was about some of the psychoeducation games and activities that we had in our surfing programs. They were useful, but the coping strategies that children remembered were all based on breathing-based activities that were easy to practice at the beach and transfer into the children’s lives at home. We whittled down the active ingredients, the key mechanisms of change that drive the outcomes in our surfing. Our research using implementation science approaches helped us to demonstrate to donors that the success of our Surf Therapy program was all about the attachment to caring adults, and the safe space. These ingredients were what really drove the outcomes. Initially, this was a bit abstract for funders to get behind.

Children continuously spoke to us about the importance of the coaches and how much they enjoyed building that attachment and feeling safe in the space. We knew those caregiving skills had to be there when we scaled. We've simplified our surfing programs to realign with this work.

Sanne Breimer: Aside from funding, are there any challenges that you face that haven't been resolved yet?

Timothy Conibear: Measuring at scale is always interesting. We've always been able to evidence our work fairly strongly in South Africa, where we deliver our programs directly, because we have access to the coaching staff and the children to collect data, interview, and do studies. As soon as we worked with partners, everything became at arm's length. We're currently working out how to measure change at that scale, but we've got some good advisors on board to help us with that.

The other big one is people. You want to ensure getting the right people in the right positions to implement the work. We've got a good team and one or two more positions to bring on board. Communicating this work has been a big challenge for us. That's where these interviews help, in telling this story.

Communications for nonprofits is one of the last things that we invest in, because we're so focused on implementing programs. Anything that's not implementing, measuring, or fundraising is difficult. We're going to bring in a communications director as part of this grant to help tell the story better.

Our biggest challenges historically have been convincing people that the outcomes around this granular agency, resilience, and belonging matter. This grant is the first one that's shifting the model. We've always had small grants from sports organizations that believe in our message, but it's rare for an organization at this scale to put in significantly more money and fund outcomes that the more complex, scientific funders look down on.

It’s helpful to keep pushing the message that resilience and well-being are important; it can be protective and can stop us from having to invest so much in treatment for future generations**.**

Sanne Breimer: Do you see a shift in the funding landscape also regarding this?

Paula Yarrow: It's definitely happening. Having people like United for Global Mental Health, Grand Challenges Canada, and Fondation Botnar, who've always been big champions of well-being and resilience, has helped a lot. They bring on a lot of small to medium-sized trusts and foundations to create things like the Being initiative [a global, youth-focused mental health program that funds research and innovative approaches to improve the mental well-being of young people aged 10-24].

The fact that the Wellcome Trust has now recognized physical activity as an active ingredient of effective preventive work has helped, because it is a big leader in scientific research, but it's slow to move. There are quite a few so-called laggards that see the

value in it, but are still trying to apply treatment-focused funding models to funding prevention work. For example, asking us to evidence prevention models with symptom reduction tools.

It's still quite a battle to fit a square peg in a round hole, because the funding ways are still set up for a treatment clinical space, and community-based work prevention aligns better with a trust-based philanthropy approach.

Sanne Breimer: What insight or teachable lessons can be taken from your work that others can use in or out of the fields?

Paula Yarrow: A lot of the most successful mental health innovations from Africa require new workforces to be hired, trained, supervised, and paid. What we're doing well is optimizing existing workforces across the world to improve their social value. That's what makes Take 5 sustainable and helps us to ensure that the intellectual property [IP], the program of Take 5, is locally owned and sustained within government or humanitarian agencies for a longer term.

We intentionally pulled out the five-step teaching routine from our teaching framework and branded it differently because we don't want people to feel like they have to scale Waves for Change. Take 5 is an idea, and it's been incubated. It's come through Waves for Change, and it's been developed with the expertise of lots of young people, academics, and partners along the way. We want to give it to the world for people to feel like it's theirs to take and use. Hopefully it also promotes this sense of creating a movement, sharing an idea, and using it in your context, without having to become a Waves for Change organization.

Timothy Conibear: We've protected the idea by using a Creative Commons [license], and we encourage people to share it. Nonprofits are great at creating intellectual property, but not great at employing people at scale, largely due to unstable funding streams. If we can form partnerships with the employers at scale, like the governments or the humanitarian organizations, and we give them an idea to share with their partners, it becomes sustainable.

The questions in grants about the sustainability plan often lead to protecting your IP and charging people for it. It limits how far it can go. Our sustainability plan is the opposite. If we tie the success of Take 5 to making it easy for partners to use and share, then it becomes distributed through a huge network of partners and becomes sustainable in its own right.

We're often asked about the impact of the aid cuts on our work. It's not much, because people can share. If Waves for Change gets bigger or smaller, people can still share the Take 5 Model, because we've designed it like that. The slight shift in mindset to making your model simple to share, not trying to tie it to complicated monitoring and fidelity metrics, is important.

In the prevention-promotion space where we sit, it needs to be simple. The treatment space is harder because you're looking at something that needs to be replicated with strict fidelity.

Sanne Breimer: How much of your revenue model is dependent on grants?

Timothy Conibear: We used to do a lot of the work under contracts, but a contract with a government or an aid agency takes a long time, because you have to get onto their procurement lists, and the negotiation can take 12 to 18 months. Secondly, when an aid crisis or crunch hits, the first thing that gets cut is consultants.

In South Africa, where the government has just had its budget slashed by a third, all consultants are gone. Our model is grant-funded, it's philanthropy-funded, and it's a cost-share model. We cover our own training and technical support costs, so it doesn't cost partners anything. The cost to the partner is implementing all their programs. It makes us dependent on philanthropic funding.

Our goal is that by the end of five years of this grant, several hundred partners will be using the Take 5 Model, and it will be embedded and sustained by them. We can keep a small core team to train and support partners, and fund that using philanthropic money moving ahead. We're not looking to open international offices all around the world and run up an enormous budget. With a fairly small internal team, we can train partners to embed the Take 5 Model themselves. That is the plan.

If we only share the idea when people pay us, there are only so many people who can pay, and it'll only grow at that pace. It is also not likely to reach the most vulnerable children in society. Our gamble, our bet, is to grow fast, embed it as much as possible, and back ourselves to raise grant funding to sustain that. The upside is, if there's an aid crunch in five years, or we can't raise grant funding, instead of Waves for Change closing and Take 5 disappearing, it's already embedded in systems across the world. It outlives us.

I always go back to, what's the purpose of a nonprofit organization? It should be to develop good intellectual property, good ideas, and then put them in the public realm and let people own them.

Paula Yarrow: In South Africa, we directly employ 43 caring coaches, with whom we're constantly improving our nine protective coaching skills, and we ensure that the workforce is well evaluated. We reach about 2,800 children a year through our five sites in South Africa. Children are referred from hospitals, schools, social workers, and all the different statutory referrals. It's a manageable size. It's large enough that we can do meaningful research and development [R&D] work, but it's not so enormous that it's impossible to maintain quality or fundraise for every year.

We plan to keep the surfing programs at that level and make it our R&D hub. Hopefully we can sustain both sides of the business, but if we ever did become vulnerable and Take 5 got a life of its own, it’s great that it’s generating within UNICEF cycles and humanitarian agencies, who are already using it.

Sanne Breimer: How many people are employed by the organization?

Paula Yarrow: We are 80 people, but not all of them are full-time. About 50 are young people, so the workforce is largely youth-led. Many are coaches who directly deliver our surfing programs, and then the training team that shares this method, supervises and trains our coaches in South Africa, but also shares it internationally, is largely youth-led as well. We let the team get experience with some more experienced facilitators. And obviously we have the standard finance, HR, MERL, and governance teams.

Sanne Breimer: Thank you so much for your time and for sharing.

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.*