"I don't think it's possible for you to be racist and socially, emotionally well": Tony Weaver, Jr., of Weird Enough on why youth mental health cannot be race-blind.

Rollo Romig
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Rollo Romig: Please introduce yourself and tell me about your work.

Tony Weaver, Jr.: My name is Tony Weaver, Jr. I wear a lot of different hats, but for the purpose of this interview, the one that's most important is that I am a mental health advocate. I care deeply about supporting mental health for young people. The way that I aim to do that is via the use of stories, multimedia, and narrative art as a way to help kids and, really, everybody. Kids are easier to work with for me, to help them establish a strong sense of self where they can live a life of joy rooted in agency.

Rollo Romig: Tell me more about what narrative forms you have been using. How has that evolved over the years? What different approaches have you taken?

Tony Weaver, Jr.: We started using film. In the very early days of the organization, we were writing and producing short films, web series, short-form video content, partnering them with curricula, and then taking them to schools and doing workshops. We wanted something that could scale, but film production is relatively costly. I think we're educators, but we're also artists who are deeply vested in our work.

We also use a lot of comic books in our work. Comic books are the primary medium that we work with right now. Kids like comics. They get some reading. It gets them engaged. In the era of manga taking over the West in terms of publishing, kids are predisposed to pay attention to it a bit more than they would to prose. That has its pros and cons, but we lean into the pros.

Rollo Romig: Tell me about the pros and cons.

Tony Weaver, Jr.: When I say pros and cons, I mean reading comics over prose. Kids love comic books. There's not a lot to sell. But maybe 10% of the people that we've attempted to work with will tell me to my face that they don't believe in the value of the work because it's comic-book based. I don't have empirical data, but I would wager that there's about another 20% of people that we work with that feel that way but don't tell me that that's a part of their decision-making process and why they choose not to work with us.

Rollo Romig: Do you think there's a common misunderstanding that people have about the medium?

Tony Weaver, Jr.: We have very standardized ideas of what it means to be intelligent, and that plays a role in the way that we look at mental health. I think people really value the idea of performing intelligence. There's this insecurity, because if I destabilize the system that marks me as intelligent, then what will I be marked as in the new system? I would rather stick to this flawed system where the things that I like and the things that I considered learned or enlightened are the things that matter. Because if I remove those things, I'm not sure where my identity will land. I think that's universal in the way that we think about literacy and math and mental health. Those are things that I'm always challenging, or attempting to, anyway.

Rollo Romig: That's such an interesting point, that conformity can be a barrier in all those realms that you mentioned, including seeking help for mental health. What made you take on narrative as an approach? How have you found narrative to be especially valuable?

Tony Weaver, Jr.: It's based on personal experience. I'm very open about the fact that I'm a suicide survivor. At 11 years old, I attempted suicide. I wasn't in a great place, but at that time, narrative stories were super transformative for me. Rooted in that personal experience alone, I think that's what started me on my journey of using narrative in that specific way. I'm also a nerd. If you look at anime fandom, people will tell you about how series like *One Piece* or *Naruto* or *Pokémon* were life-changing for them.

A part of that is because the character showed up for them in ways that nobody else would. If you didn't know if your friends were going to talk to you or if your parents were going to be upset with you or if you were going to have food on the table, what you do know is that every Saturday at 7:30 PM, *Naruto* will be on the TV. *One Piece* has been running for over 25 years. Every time I go to the library, Luffy and the Straw Hats will be there doing something, and that's something that's there for me that somebody can't take. I think the long timeline of narrative allows students to grow familiarity with it and develop an attachment to it.

Rollo Romig: To what extent have these manga, especially the most popular ones, actually addressed mental health?

Tony Weaver, Jr.: I think that they poke at it sometimes. You can get things that are about mental health. There's this manga that's like primarily for adults called *Until I Love*

Myself by a mangaka named Poppy Pesuyama. It is a manga memoir about their experiences as a gender non-conforming person, as a non-binary person, realizing how they felt about their gender and the discrimination that they experienced in the manga industry as a result. In books like that, we're directly talking about mental health, but I think a lot of it is metaphorical.

You see the underdog overcome. Especially in shonen, the cadence is, I want to, but I don't. I want to be the strongest ninja in the village, but I don't know how to control my chakra. I want to be the world's strongest hero, but I don't have superpowers. I want to be the wizard king, but I don't know how to use magic. I want to, but I don't. I want to, but I don't. That structure is very popular, and it resonates with people, because if you pull aside any person, especially a kid, and say, "Hey, what's your dream? What do you want to accomplish?" They'll probably say, "I want to, but I don't." I think that's what makes it stick.

Rollo Romig: I'd love to hear an example of the impact of your work.

Tony Weaver, Jr.: I'm very surprised at how it moves and where that impact pops up. I don't have private communication with minors, ever, but they send me messages sometimes. I don't reply, but I see them. I've received messages from kids from all over the country like, "Hey, I found your book in my library, and it was something that I really needed." Or teachers sharing anecdotes with us about how using our platform and our lesson plans in their classes really help support student engagement. They saw behavioral change in their students.

My approach to mental health is very different because, as a suicide survivor, I ask, "Tony, what do you want?" I say, "I want more kids loving themselves. I want more kids knowing what it's like to feel joy. I want more kids looking at themselves outside of any particular binary or standardized system. I want less kids killing themselves." That's what I want.

Mental health is in this interesting space right now where the suits have shown up. When I say the suits, I'm primarily talking about mainstream philanthropy. They're like, "We care about mental health. Here are the data metrics that we need for impact measurement." But you can't treat mental health like you treat reading. With reading, I can say, You were reading at this level before you got my program. You're reading at this level three months later. You got better. But you can't really look at mental health like that. You can't really treat it like that. I attempted suicide multiple times, and between attempt one and two, I was seeing a therapist, and that therapist was helping me. I still tried a second time, but that therapist was helping. Progress was happening, even though I wasn't at that point yet to not attempt again.

If you talk to any adult about mental wellbeing and personal growth, they'll tell you it's not a linear thing. But the suits want it to be linear so they can put it on a chart and show it to the board, and they'll say, "Wow, we did good." In some ways, mental health work is [approached with] this pretense that you can only do it if you also know how to make our board feel happy about the fact that you're doing it.

That's just the game of philanthropy. That's how it goes. That's what you do. Everybody has parts of their jobs that they hate. Everybody has a boss that they don't like. Everybody has a policy at work that they think is stupid. If you care about it, that's just something you have to learn to navigate. I do wish that people in philanthropy would care about mental health enough to not just fund it but also get out of the way and understand that it won't always look the way that they think it should or the way that they think it's going to.

Rollo Romig: What do you think are better ways of tracking impact or even just understanding what's working?

Tony Weaver, Jr.: Before we even answer the question of what's working, we have to look ourselves in the mirror and ask, when we say we want a child to have strong mental health, what does that mean? For example, when I think about mental health, it is influenced a lot by the facts that I'm young, that I'm Black, and that I grew up on the internet. My idea of mental health is covered by these things. When I was 12 years old, my parents bought me an Xbox, and I learned how to connect it to Xbox Live. I was playing first-person shooter games with people in their teens, 20s, and 30s who were calling me every slur under the sun as soon as they heard my voice.

I grew up in a space where the definition of mental health is very different from mine. Because a lot of people, when they think about mental health, they think grit, resilience. It's not like, don't do bad. It's learn how to deal with bad. The idea is that the world's not fair. The world's not nice. I need to teach you how to be able to navigate a world that's not fair and not nice. I buy that. I think there's validity in that, but from where I'm sitting, I don't think it's possible for you to be racist and socially and emotionally well.

I don't think a socially and emotionally well person goes to play a video game and, when something doesn't go their way, calls somebody the n-word. I don't think that's socially and emotionally well. In our current context, you start talking about mental health and you apply race to it, people look at you kind of funny. CASEL didn't have race included in any of their stuff until 2020, when everybody felt bad and were throwing Black people a bone.

I think that a mentally well child is one who understands themselves enough to use the agency that they have to make decisions that center their joy, and who is going to make decisions that go outside of the chain of command of me, of you, of any adult or system that you put in front of them. I think that's healthy.

As someone who had anxiety attacks in college trying to figure out what my backup plan was—because I really wanted to do the arts, but I didn't feel like things were working out well—I want a child in the ninth grade to be able to go, "Actually, I think the system that you have me under is kind of wack. Actually, what I want to do for my life isn't really something that can fit inside of a Scantron bubble. So I'm going to do these standardized tests, but I'm going to start doing things that actually make me feel how I want to feel."

So many of the systems that we have for kids right now are rooted in taking away their agency. I remember my parents dropping me off for my first day of college and leaving me in my dorm room. I remember violently sobbing, because six months ago I was in high school, and I had to ask for permission to go to the bathroom.

Now you expect me to know what I want to do with my life, what I want to study, where I want to intern, where I'm trying to move after graduation, what career I want at what company. You have never given me the opportunity to think about myself as a fully formed and realized human being with that much agency. For me, a mentally well child is thinking like that in ninth grade, in eighth grade.

It's difficult for me to even answer the question of what's working, because I don't think we as a sector have an answer for what is a mentally well child. Because a child that behaves well isn't always mentally well. A child that knows what to say isn't always mentally well. What exactly are we trying to get kids to know how to do and be able to do?

My personal feeling is that if we extrapolate this to its most reasonable conclusion, what we actually want kids to be able to do is something that our current systems and ways that we engage kids are not ready for. Schools aren't ready for a child to be able to say, "I performed poorly on this test, but just because I did poorly on the test doesn't mean I'm a poor human being. I'm actually not going to let this test determine how I feel about myself. I want to move forward, and I'm going to continue trying to expand these skills, but having this D in red ink on the front of this test is not going to influence how much I apply or don't apply myself in this class."

We use discipline and otherness and this top-and-bottom type of thinking to influence how kids are supposed to behave. Then we get surprised: Why are they self-harming? Why do they feel so hopeless? Why are they taking their anger out on other people? Why are they susceptible to the alt-right pipeline? Why is my son suddenly quoting all this Andrew Tate stuff? Because the systems that we put kids in use negative reinforcement to force them to comply. Every malevolent system that wants to get their hands on kids gives them instant gratification and instant acceptance as a way to pull them in.

I don't feel like I've answered your question, but I don't have one.

Rollo Romig: I think you really did answer the question by taking a step back and saying that a lot of what we assume is the appearance of healthy behavior actually isn't. Maybe we're describing health the wrong way, and if we can't have a good common definition of what health looks like, then we're never going to be able to measure what a good intervention is.

Tony Weaver, Jr.: Exactly.

Rollo Romig: I want to jump back to the race question. As you noted the mental-health field and philanthropy often overlook race entirely, or misunderstand the role of race. What is lost when that happens? And what are

some better ways to take race into account without being obligatory or tokenistic about it?

Tony Weaver, Jr.: I think any mental health intervention that isn't taking race into account in the foundation of the way that it's built is doing its job incorrectly. If you look at any mental-health tool that we put in front of a kid, we say, "Hey, man, when you're feeling frustrated or getting overwhelmed, take 10 deep breaths, regulate your emotions, calm down." How is that supposed to work in a world where Black girls are suspended at three times the rate of their White peers for the same things? How is that supposed to work in a world where Black boys are seen as criminals as early as eight years old?

I might not even be upset. I might not even have any emotion to regulate right now. I'm fine. You perceive me as having an attitude. Oh, he's angry. He's in need of correction. What I learned as a kid is that I actually have to moderate your feelings. I have to be intensely aware of the adults in the room and how they feel about me. It's not about if I'm upset. It's about, do they think I'm upset? Am I coming off as upset? I have to put on a completely different mask as a third-grader just to make sure that I don't get written up and sent to the office. You take kids that are experiencing things like that, and then all of our kumbaya, breathe it out, mental health people show up with their bongo drums. How do you expect that to help me? What do you expect that to do for me?

When we are not thinking about race, things like that happen, with negative outcomes, in every part of the mental-health space. If you're not thinking about race, those are the systems that we're reinforcing. I wish I had notes on which interventions do it well. The way that we try to do it is to start from a place of possibility. That's why we start with agency. I don't care about how other people want you to feel. I care about how you feel.

It is far more important to me that you, as early as the fifth or the sixth grade, can sit with yourself in calm and in quiet and tap into your brain, like you're observing a setting in nature, and go, "What's happening right now?" If I go to the Amazon rainforest, and I look at a waterfall, I can say, "Water's falling from the top. It's hitting the river below or the pond below. There are animals drinking from that water. There are predators lying in wait. Birds are building nests."

In the same way that I can observe nature, I need to be able to observe myself and go, "I'm tense because even though I knew I had to be up at eleven o'clock today, I went to bed at 4 AM because I was working on something that I was very, very excited about, but I didn't get enough rest. When I woke up this morning, my head was hurting, and I still have the throbbing of that pain that's influencing my actions. I don't want to accidentally get upset with anybody, so I'm trying to put on my game face. For whatever reason, when I do that, I hold tension in my jaw hinge that I might need to let go of. I'm aggressively hydrating because if I don't, the headache will get worse. Maybe if I hydrate enough, the headache will go away."

I can sit with myself and know that in five seconds. I want a kid to be able to do the same thing. There are people in their 30s that can't do that. I want a kid to be able to do

that, because if we're starting from that place—here is how I feel and why, this is the effect, this is the cause—if you can establish that for yourself, and you have that strong core understanding of yourself, I don't inherently have to be a race expert to know how to support you or what you need.

Because at that point, what we're talking about are causes and effects. Now, it does get back to some of the systemic stuff that we talked about earlier, because sometimes the cause is the system that I'm in, and there's not really a solution or another place for me to go. Sometimes there aren't things I can do. "What's wrong, Timmy?" "I'm tense." "Why are you tense?" "Because I have Ms. Williams's class in an hour." "What makes you tense about Ms. Williams's class?" "Ms. Williams always thinks that I'm talking when I'm not talking, and when I raise my hand, she doesn't answer. When I don't know the answer and I don't raise my hand, she picks me deliberately, as if she wants me to be wrong in a public setting. I'm tense about what she's going to do when I get to her class today." I might not be able to offer you an intervention or a way to stop you from being in Ms. Williams's class. It gets back to some of that resilience stuff. There's a place for that. Even the way that you build that out is going to be different if you start with what do you feel and why.

Rollo Romig: Earlier you mentioned your platform and the lesson plans that you've developed. Tell me about what form those take and how those have evolved over time.

Tony Weaver, Jr.: The way we deliver interventions is always changing based on what schools need. It is one of the core conflicts of youth mental health. If you want to do mental health and you want to do it well, it costs money. If you want money, you need funding. If you don't already have that money—if you're not plugged into a high-net-worth individual, if you're not the philanthropic arm of a Fortune 500 company—if you want to get funding, you need to participate in the philanthropy circus.

The philanthropy circus demands results that I can put on a chart and understand. What it also demands is scale. If you want to do work, you need money. If you want money, you need scale. If you want scale, and you're trying to work with kids, 90% of the time you are going to end up in a school. Maybe you'll end up in an after-school program. Depending on how much you want to scale, you might end up in a regional charter network, where they're a little cooler and a little more chill. Ultimately you are going to end up in a standardized place of education where kids show up every day, because that's what the circus demands.

We've lost funding because we've sat down with people, and they've said, "This doesn't work for me because I need to know how your work impacts the same group of kids over time. It's not enough for you to go and do a workshop in one place, one time, and see what's happening right there. I need to see how this works with kids in January of 2026 and how those kids have changed in January of 2027."

School is basically the only place where you're going to get that, because it's the only place where they're required legally to show up. I'm at the behest of the school, and our

platform and our programming reflects that. I want to have a positive impact on kids. "Cool. You're not getting them after school." "Okay." "Teachers are very strapped for time." "Okay." "They don't have a special period for this. We care about mental health, but we don't prioritize it in that way." "Okay." "Most of us don't have counselors, so you're getting it through the teacher." "Okay."

You go to the teacher and ask, "What do you need?" They're like, "Time." I'm like, "Oh, I can't give you time. I'm trying to take a little bit of it from you." "It has to be worth it for me to give it time in the classroom." "What does 'worth it' look like for you? What do you need?" "My supervisor's up my ass because reading rates are low, so I need the kids reading." "Okay." Before I've touched the mental-health thing, suddenly I'm an academic literacy expert. I'm building stuff to get them reading on grade level.

Cool. The kids are going to read, but while they're reading, we also got this mental health stuff. They're like, "I don't know if it's going to improve their reading. It has to be standards-aligned." Okay. Which standards? Some schools use Common Core. Some schools use state. Some schools do these other things. Now, I got to build a literacy curriculum that's aligned with eight different standard sets to get in the classroom so that they can get the mental health thing.

I build the mental health thing, and I go, "We got the mental health thing. It's in there." Then they go, "How do you know it's working?" "I don't know." You gave CASEL millions of dollars. You gave the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence millions of dollars. You did not actually ask them how any of their stuff worked. You gave them millions of dollars to figure out how it works, but I can't have $20,000 to figure out how it works. I guess I have to go with them. Now I got to go get Yale standards and CASEL standards.

As we discussed earlier, if race isn't involved in the foundation, I don't even believe in the validity of it. CASEL ain't got all that going on. We got to make our own standards inside. We align the lessons with all those things, like a giant constellation, the stars come together, and we put it in the classroom. The teacher's like, "I don't like the UI. The menu's difficult to navigate." "Got it." I got to go hire a designer. Because in the education world, they're using things like Flocabulary and Nearpod and BrainPOP, where it's so simple a mouse could do it. I'm a mental health practitioner. I'm a writer. I'm not a UI designer.

Now we got to expand our technology infrastructure to make sure that those things are working. We get it all in there, and the teacher is like, "This is good, I like it. I'm going to use it." I don't have the option to go to that teacher and say, "Can you make sure you use it three times a week for at least 15 minutes so that we get the maximum data?" The data that comes in is just the data that I have to use.

That's where we have evolved. Our first platform is called Get Media L.I.T. We launched it in 2016, in part because my big thing was that media literacy plays a huge role in mental health. You tell a kid to love themselves, and then they get on the internet and see these YouTubers and Twitch streamers doing all these anti-Black things, and you're

concerned about why the Black kid has little self-esteem and why your White, perfect child came home a white supremacist. What happened? I'll tell you exactly what happened. You left him alone with Jake Paul for like eight hours a week for months, and this is where we got.

I was really focused on media literacy as a means for mental health. Schools didn't really care about media literacy; they cared about traditional literacy. And mental health people didn't care about media literacy. They cared about kumbaya, take 10 deep breaths. For Get Media L.I.T., we used media literacy as the base, but we ended up being ahead of our time. Everybody's talking about representation now, everybody's talking about the alt-right pipeline. One of the most frustrating things ever is knowing that the sky is falling and nobody believes you when you tell them.

Our new platform is called Nerds for Literacy. We're leveraging the need for improved reading and improved reading scores as an inroad to get mental health tools in the hands of kids. I wouldn't say that we perfected it, but that's because every step that we take is on infinitely rocky ground, and nobody on the school side or on the funding side seems to want to compromise on exactly what they want. If we want to do the work, that's just the tightrope that we walk.

Rollo Romig: Do you feel that there is now more interest in the value of media literacy, and if so, why has that changed? Is it simply because there's a crisis that couldn't be denied, or are there other factors?

Tony Weaver, Jr.: There's a crisis that couldn't be denied, but I also think that the powers that be are seeing a lack of financial results, and that's what's driving things. I still think people are focusing on the wrong things.

When I say media literacy, I mean I need you to be able to consume, interpret, analyze, and create media content. Those are the four pillars that we look at when it comes to media literacy. I need you to be able to read an article. I need you to know what the article was trying to say. I need you to know who created the article and how that might have influenced the bias of what they're trying to do and make. I also need you to be able to communicate information in a factual way. That's what I need you to do when it comes to media literacy.

Because of these streamers and things like that, people are paying attention to it more, but the way that they're paying attention to it is binary. It's in two specific ways. It's either screen bad, stay away from screen. If you're two, I do understand there's data around that. If your child's six months old, do not put a tablet in front of that baby. But when he's 13, let that boy watch some cartoons. It's fine. The other one, which to me is the one that's significantly more sinister, is that it's not that watching is bad, it's that you're watching the wrong people. You should be watching me.

People in the private sector do not like the amount of bandwidth and market share that fourth-screen things, such as streaming platforms, social media influencers, and YouTube content creators and streamers, have. It's not that they don't want kids

watching; it's that they want them watching themselves instead. There was an organization that was like, "We think kids aren't getting news from the right places. We are launching this multimillion-dollar program to teach kids how to get news from the right place, which is us. We want them watching us get news from the right place. Know your source, and the right source is me."

I don't know if that's true. Even places that we think are great sources, people who are doing national news. I'm going to do a thought experiment for you right now. I'm going to share my screen with you. This is a local news affiliate. It's small, not a corporate conglomerate. We got some good things going with WRAL. This is an article about something that happened in the community, but when I scroll down, what do I see? "Knee surgeon baffled—new device relieves years of knee pain." "Amazing! This warm fleece lined hat helps to reduce seniors' heart stress." "Hidden gelatin trick melts fat shockingly fast. Try it."

This is a reliable source. You are, in theory, the right people. You're the correct people. You're spending all this money to say, "No kids. Don't look at the streamers, look at me." When they look at you, if they scroll down far enough, you are selling AI art of fat-burning medication.

Rollo Romig: All the same slop.

Tony Weaver, Jr.: It's the same thing. You just make money off of this one. You need to be able to understand the revenue model that drives everything that you consume. Where is the money coming from? Who makes it, and how are they incentivizing me to contribute to that cash flow? You don't get 16-year-olds playing Genshin Impact, stealing their mom's credit card and spending $4,000 to unlock a super rare character because they don't understand that the revenue model for the game is literally gambling. That's what it is. They don't understand that. All of the interventions that are set up seem to be like, "No, kids, come gamble over here. No kids, come get misinformation over here." It's not giving you the tools to navigate things as an individual. It's just, "You are not relying on the system that I want you to be relying on. I would actually rather you be reliant on me."

Rollo Romig: One thing that we've heard from a few participants in the CoLab is that trying to eliminate screen time misses the variety of experience that happens on screens. A lot of it can be harmful, but if you cut off screens from people, you're also possibly cutting off support networks they have, or third spaces that maybe take them out of a bad place at home. You were talking about video games, and certainly you can find very negative things in those spaces: gambling, racial hatred. But video games can also be a space that promotes mental health. It's a vast area that does many different things. I wonder how you think about that nuance around screens and online activity.

Tony Weaver, Jr.: Video games have been super, super important for me. I made some of my best friends on video games. I've deepened relationships with friends I've met in real life on video games. I've had interventions on video games when I was at my worst,

mental health-wise. I was playing an RPG called MapleStory. My guild in MapleStory noticed that something was off with me before my parents did. They pulled me to the side and were like, "Hey, are you okay? What's happening?"

At a time when I felt like I was the only person navigating my experiences, my guild caught what was going on. I don't even know those people's legal names. It's been years. I can't find any of them, but online allows for community in this specific way. I am very sensitive to the fact that even though it allows for community, it also allows for danger. If you look at some of the legislation that's happening right now with the child predator problem on Roblox, I think, as with anything, there's a need for balance. It's easier to operate in absolutes than to have balance, but we can't give in to that ease.

Rollo Romig: Tell me how you think about incorporating youth voices, youth feedback, even youth co-design of things that you make, or the value of that in this work in general.

Tony Weaver, Jr.: It's really important. I have a Discord chat full of kids that make fun of me on a daily basis. That's not hyperbole. Those kids bully me. Most online creators, Discord is their sycophants. They're the fans for whom they can do no wrong, the most enabling group of people in their entire audience group. Not me. My Discord, I'll post a video, and someone will screenshot a part of the video and circle a piece of clothing that I have on, and they'll be like, "Dang, getting old."

I'm like, "I am 31 years old. Do not call me unc. I am big bro. What are you doing? Cut it out." I think we go above and beyond to make sure that kids' voices are heard, but any adult that's not a parent is probably not going to have a deep and fruitful relationship with a child whose point of view they could get at any point in time. That just doesn't happen, which is a good thing.

Sometimes you create committees and the committees are structured like these student council things. It's a resume thing. It's difficult to gauge what's true and what's the thing that they think will make you happy. For me, the strongest youth voice doesn't come from their mouths; it comes from their behavior. I'm far more interested in how young people behave versus what they tell me. I'm far more interested in buying habits, viewing habits, spending habits. What show are you watching? Why do you like this movie more than this movie? This show only exists on YouTube, but it has over a hundred million views, and you're going to an anime convention, and you actively decided to dress as a character from a YouTube video instead of any of these pre-established shows. Your peers at the thing know this character, even though this character exists only on YouTube.

That's so intriguing to me. I'm so intrigued about that data. Because a kid will tell you many things, but the behavior intrigues me more. When we decided we wanted to do comic books, they were like, "Well, how do you know that kids like comic books?" Look at sales of comic books. Middle-grade graphic novels were the highest-grossing vertical in print publishing in 2019. They were outselling literally everything. I think it's romantasy now, but in 2019, middle-grade graphic novels were king of kings. The New York Times

Best Sellers list got so upset they put us on our own list. They made a different list. They said, get out of here.

That's youth voice to me. When an organization says they incorporate youth voice, it's very difficult to know, are you actually talking to young people, or did you ask your friend's daughter if she thought this looked cool before you went ahead and kept doing it?

Rollo Romig: If you were advising someone else who was just starting to get into this kind of work, who wanted to do something for kids in youth mental health, what advice would you give them from what you've learned over these past years?

Tony Weaver, Jr.: First piece of advice I would give them is, go somewhere else. Do something else. When I say that, I don't mean don't work with kids in mental health. What I mean is, get funding for something else. Be beholden to funding and impact measurement for something else. Then go above and beyond and make sure that mental health is baked into everything that you do. That's what I would tell them to do.

In mental health, I have to basically fill out an SAT sheet to get $20,000. In literacy, you can be like, "I want to give kids books." They'll be like, "Man, that's so cool. Here's $5 million." Go do something else where the constraints aren't as tight and you don't have to walk as much of a tightrope, but for your own personal edification and also for your organization's sense of self and being, connect mental health to what you're doing, and make sure that you're keeping track of that, monitoring that, and creating impact in alignment with your integrity and your core values.

Right now, it would be easy for me to go and start a completely separate nonprofit where I said I wanted to help kids get confidence and communication skills with video games in order to prepare them for STEM careers. I could go raise $5 million in probably 1/10th of the time it would take me to raise $5 million for mental health funders. Then, in everything that I did with the video game or the college to career thing, I just put all of the mental health stuff in there and made sure that it was standards-aligned and collected that data myself and made sure that the movement was happening time over time.

Unfortunately, the mental health space has created such a tight circle that if you are not Yale and you are not CASEL, the work that is required to make these people listen to you is genuinely not worth the hassle. I really care about Enlight, I really care about Prospira, and I really care about ICONIQ because they're willing to peel back the curtain and say, "Let's build this together and figure it out." Most of these people, they're just not going to do that.

Like I said, I've been doing this since I was 19 years old, so this is my 11th year. I've been working in mental health since before people cared about mental health, since before CASEL got their millions of dollars to figure out what mental health was supposed to be. Looking at how the space has changed and shifted and moved, the

largest piece of advice that I would give is literally go do anything else. You'll raise more money for a Christmas fund to give stuffed animals to kids in underfunded communities than you will to get kids to stop killing themselves. That's stupid, but it's where we are right now. Everybody wants to be right, everybody wants to be connected to their power structure. They care so much about it that they're willing to let the work suffer.

Rollo Romig: When you say it's a tight circle, what do you mean by that exactly?

Tony Weaver, Jr.: I think it's two things. First it's a tight circle in that the requirements that they set up are only met by a very small circle of organizations. I'm an Echoing Green fellow, and Echoing Green did a study that said that Black led nonprofit organizations do the same work as their white peers with 10% of the budget. If I got a $100,000 budget, I'm creating the same impact as a white-led organization with a $1 million budget.

You look at people that say, "We want to fix funding and equity in the nonprofit space," and they show up and say, "Here's our grant for $1 million. In order to qualify, you must have an annual operating budget of $1.5 million. You got to have $1.5 million to get my $1 million." You had to have had $1.5 million for the last two years and spent it on your Form 990. Not just having $1.5 million in the bank. It's having $1.5 million, you spent it, then you got $1.5 million more, and you spent that, and then you got $1.5 million more, and now you want my $1 million, and if you want it, I'll give it to you. The organization doing the same work out of a $150,000 budget is never in that conversation. They set up stratifications like that with funding. They set up stratifications like that with impact measurement requirements. They get very esoteric about these specific metrics that we don't even have key evidence that proves that it works, but that's how they want it. Small organizations are always outside of that race.

It is a tight circle because they create this infrastructure where before the application even goes out, there are like 15 organizations that qualify for that. Most people just don't qualify for it. Then it's also a small circle in the sense that we care a lot about brand and pedigree rather than outcomes and work. I think CASEL is CASEL because they're CASEL. Why are they CASEL? Because people care about CASEL. Why do people care? Because other people care. Why is the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence? Because it's Yale. Why is Yale Yale? Because it's Yale. It insists on itself.

Rollo Romig: You were talking earlier about how you'd advise doing anything else. I wonder if that approach is actually helpful in the sense that it's easier to get to kids if you're not going directly at mental health, but instead talking about something else, but then the subtext is mental health. What do you think about that?

Tony Weaver, Jr.: I do think that tracks. I wish organizations didn't have to do that. I wish mental health didn't have to, like, put the medicine in the peanut butter. I do think there's validity to that. That's certainly what we've seen because, even our comics aren't mental health comics. It's not like the Emotion Squad fights Captain Depression.

They're real stories about real characters experiencing real things that, in theory, you could turn on TV and watch, or that you could get on Webtoon and watch. One of our comics was on Webtoon, and that's a part of our work.

Rollo Romig: Thanks so much, Tony.

Rollo Romig is the manager of Solutions Insights Lab. He is the author of I Am on the Hit List: A Journalist's Murder and the Rise of Autocracy in India, which was named a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize.

* This interview has been edited and condensed.