

ThisWeek COMMUNITY NEWS

New Albany's Sarah Underhill adding to local focus on well-being

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For Sarah Underhill, mental health has been a lifelong challenge.

But rather than hiding in shame, the 41-year-old New Albany resident began talking to people about her struggles, often finding that her listeners struggled, too.

Those conversations gave way to volunteerism, which in turn has led Underhill to start a nonprofit organization, the Well-Being Connection, that will attempt to connect New Albany residents to local mental-health resources.

Underhill said her vision includes educating the New Albany community about mental health and creating a dialogue around it through multiple sources, such as a website, lectures and book talks.

Well-being commonly is defined as being healthy both physically and mentally. It has been a focus over the past few years in New Albany, with the New Albany Community Foundation regularly inviting mental-health advocates and experts to speak for annual Jefferson Series events and the New Albany-Plain Local School District launching a community-oriented Well-Being Initiative focused on students.

"I plan to promote and get people connected to what is already here and add more support, resources and education in ways that are needed," Underhill said.

In 2020, Underhill plans to start a website for the Well-Being Connection and register it as a nonprofit. Until the latter happens, Boundless, a Columbus-based nonprofit organization that helps people with behavioral disabilities, will manage money on behalf of the Well-Being Connection, she said.

The Well-Being Connection already has secured some funding, she said.

After presenting her plans to the community foundation at the board of trustees' July meeting, the board started a fund for the Well-Being Connection, Underhill said.

Keith Berend, chairman of the community foundation's board of trustees, said he and his wife, Cindy, decided to start a fund through the foundation to support and fund mental-health advocacy.

The Well-Being Connection will act as the primary conduit for developing and supporting mental-health initiatives in New Albany and central Ohio, he said.

Although some therapists and counselors are in New Albany, the city, central Ohio and the state as a whole lack adequate resources, Berend said.

"I think if we're going to be the healthiest community in America, we can't leave this behind," he said.

Underhill said she wants to use the Well-Being Connection website to promote resources that are available in New Albany. She said use of the website would be free of charge.

She said she also hopes to create a blog to express thoughts about her own mental-health journey and entries from local psychologists, psychiatrists and specialists in alternative medicine.

Five years or so down the line, Underhill said, she wants to open her nonprofit in a local building that would serve as something of a mental-health incubator, a place for support groups and classes for yoga or mindfulness practice, for example.

She said she hopes to work with New Albany leaders to provide space to rent affordably to therapists.

Underhill's foray into community mental-health advocacy started when she began volunteering at New Albany-Plain Local in 2016 as part of its Well-Being Initiative beginning. Her role was to create learning opportunities for parents, such as forums about alcohol and drug use, she said.

The Well-Being Initiative consists of trying to ensure the physical and mental health of local students, said Superintendent Michael Sawyers. Activities have included parent forums, programs for children, staff professional development and the R Factor, a training framework expressed as $E+R=O$, meaning that an event and one's response to it create an outcome.

Underhill's son, Bradley, is a 10-year-old fifth-grader at New Albany Intermediate School. Her other sons, 13-year-old eighth-grader Nathan and 16-year-old sophomore Will, attend Marburn Academy, a nonprofit independent school in New Albany that serves the educational needs of students with such learning differences as dyslexia and attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, according to the [school's website](#).

This past summer, at the request of a community member, Underhill worked with the National Alliance on Mental Illness to start a free addiction support group in New Albany.

The experience, Underhill said, made her realize she needed to begin working outside the school district to secure more community-based mental-health opportunities for residents. Many people, she said, have to drive outside the city to seek such resources as support groups and therapy.

Although Underhill no longer volunteers for New Albany-Plain Local, the Well-Being Initiative there continues.

The district has one full-time staff member dedicated to implementing the program, along with a part-time contracted worker, Sawyers said.

The part-time position is for well-being community liaison, according to the district. Diane Herman recently was hired to that post for up to \$10,000 for monthly services on an annual basis, but she has volunteered for the initiative for several years, said district spokesman Patrick Gallaway. She started Nov. 1, he said.

Jon Hood, director of student services, safety and security, also works on the initiative and started at the district in the summer of 2018, Gallaway said.

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