

Evan Schneider:

Hi Eleanor. How are you doing today?

Eleanor Letcher:

I'm doing fine. How are you doing Evan?

Evan Schneider:

I'm great. Thanks so much for agreeing to talk with us.

Eleanor Letcher:

Good.

Evan Schneider:

So I just want to start off by asking, what is CONTACT and how do you all operate in Mercer County?

Eleanor Letcher:

Well, CONTACT is a unique organization. We started in 1976 as a private nonprofit. We're a 501(c)(3) organization and we really have had the same mission for the entire time. And I'll just tell you that in general terms, was thinking about it, I was thinking about our fancy mission statement, but it all boils down to this. We train volunteers to provide emotional care and support to total strangers. So what we do is, and in all of our programs, we've done this for the past 44 years, is we train our volunteers in active listening and all kinds of mental health topics. And then we use our trained and certified volunteers as our workers and we have a crisis hotline, we have a regular hotline. Through our crisis hotline, we also are part of the national suicide prevention lifeline, which is a familiar number to most people or many people anyway. It ends in 8255 and there was a special rock song that was made. So +1 800-273-8255 and our volunteers answer those lines.

Eleanor Letcher:

So we do prevent suicides, we talk to people in extreme crisis and if at the end of the call or drawing near to the end, we feel that they are still in major imminent risk of suicide, we will call for help. Otherwise, we just give people a chance to talk about their suicidal thoughts and they're thinking they haven't made a decision and so we really invite them to call the number back and talk about it some more because talking helps. I mean that's the fundamental thing, an active listening of course helps people to talk. So that's part of what we do. Our hotline, our other hotline (609) 896-2120 that one we talk to people. For years and years and years, these are people who struggle with a persistent mental illness. They live at home, they live in the community, and they just need to check in with somebody to get by, to get through the day. So we do that.

Eleanor Letcher:

And then we have a telephone reassurance service for people over the age of 60 who live alone in Mercer County. And we have a separate group of volunteers who make daily calls to these people just to check on them, see if they're okay, how are they doing? So during this Corona crisis, we've added a second call because we know that loneliness is a killer. Loneliness is something that makes people depressed, makes them feel disconnected, and it can lead to all kinds of depression and so forth. So we've added a second call, so we've got these volunteers who call their clients in the morning and they

call them back in the afternoon to check on them. And we don't charge for any of our services. So everything is confidential, it's done by trained people, and it's free of charge. And Mercer County supports us in those endeavors.

Eleanor Letcher:

Oh. And then our big thing, I think it's really important, is our training programs. So we now have four separate training courses that we offer twice a year. And one of, well actually two of our courses are offered in Pennington for the general public and we also get college students who attend those. Then we have special training at Princeton for Princeton students and this was started in 2014. So every semester we have a crowd of Princeton students, we take our training and then they become part of CONTACT Princeton, which is a student club that is sponsored by the Pace Center. The Pace Center has been very helpful to us and then Princeton provides us with a phone room and phones and so forth. And we have now the same arrangement at The College of New Jersey. So we have two of our local colleges, very supportive in providing both students and training spaces as well as separate phone works.

Eleanor Letcher:

So our big thing is training, and we train in active listening, and active listening for those people who haven't taken courses in it is very helpful to a person in regular life, family life, business life, and so forth. Active listening is our main technique as well as we train in all the mental health issues as well.

Evan Schneider:

Thank you so much for that explanation. I've actually had the privilege to sit in and watch some of those trainings in real time and also as a professional who works with students and thinks about student development, it's a wonderful example of what a "soft skill" training looks like. It's really hard to describe that for someone who maybe doesn't really understand what a soft skill is or doesn't really believe in soft skills or something like that. But active listening as you said, is definitely something that will serve the students who choose to do this volunteer work for the rest of their lives. It's a wonderful skill-set for connecting to other people. So it really, as much as our students are contributing to your organization and really stepping in and helping folks, they're also getting a lot out of that experience as well.

Eleanor Letcher:

I absolutely believe that's true. And I know that these skills have helped me in all kinds of relationships. And the whole idea is stop talking, let the other person talk.

Evan Schneider:

That's right.

Eleanor Letcher:

A little bit more refined than that. But that's essentially what it's about.

Evan Schneider:

I mean, there's a lot of wisdom in those short simple words.

Eleanor Letcher:

Yeah.

Evan Schneider:

Well, so right now, COVID-19 is raising a lot of concerns across the board about the impacts of grief and stress on individuals and communities. So what advice or suggestions do you have for those who are experiencing this type of impact?

Eleanor Letcher:

Well, I've been thinking about this and I think that what particularly young people have lost is, they've lost the idea of predictability. Up until this point, people in college or people in high school, they knew what their next steps were. I mean, there was some uncertainty of course, and there was some stress around that. There's stress around completing all your requirements, but they sort of knew that if they met the requirements next year, this would happen, this is what they would do in the summer, this is what their internships would be. And was quite predictable, not all the details but quite predictable. And now it's all uncertain. I mean nobody knows what the next week will bring or the next few weeks. So that is anxiety provoking and that is stressful. So my thinking about that is to remember that this too shall pass, this is temporary, life will be different. And to gain a measure of exceptions.

Eleanor Letcher:

That is not to say that everything's going to be fine, I'm not saying that at all. But I think especially for young people, there is so much hope for the future. There are so many possibilities, possibilities we have no idea of. I mean I just think of technology, we don't know. I mean the last thing I thought I would be doing is spending almost every day on Zoom, this was not a part of my life until now.

Evan Schneider:

Me too.

Eleanor Letcher:

But I think for young people, this is a challenge, it's a major challenge for everybody, but challenges have always been part of people's lives and we work around how to meet the challenge. And I know that all of our students are able to do that, that if they take the time to just take a few deep breaths rather frequently and just assess where they are and possibilities and just grieve for those things that are lost. And unfortunately there will be a lot that is lost and also significant people in their lives will be lost to this virus. So I'm just saying, stay with it and stay connected. And we know that being connected to other people is one of the best things that we can do. So if you're home and you're a college student and you're really grieving the loss of your friends, I don't mean the death of your friends, I mean that you can't see them.

Eleanor Letcher:

Well, actually you could see them even on Zoom, but that they're not, you can't just look over in your dorm and see them, that I think you have to find ways to make those connections. And I know with our five grandchildren who are in college and who are now at home, this is not easy, this is difficult. But I think there are so many opportunities. If people would just recognize this as a hard time, it's a hard time for everybody and to also recognize and be inspired by people who are in the healthcare field and who are risking their own lives. And just seeing the challenges of saying what can I do to help? And maybe what I can do to help is to just shelter in place, make sure I wear all the protective mask and gloves and

so forth if I go out, just do what I can do to keep us as safe as possible. But I do have a lot of hope and faith that our young people will step up to the plate.

Evan Schneider:

I do too. Yeah. So you talked a lot about the challenges facing people, especially young people, college students. Right now I'm just wondering if you as an organization, CONTACT has experienced any significant challenges at this time?

Eleanor Letcher:

Yes, we definitely have experienced challenges. Because the college is closed our phone room at the college is closed and our Pennington phone room also was closed, due to the coronavirus. So we had to make some changes. We had to converge to doing everything remotely, which we can do. We have crisis chat, which is a program where it's a national program out of the national suicide prevention lifeline. So our volunteers, our Princeton volunteers and our other volunteers can do that remotely with no problem. And they do, so we've asked all of our volunteers to volunteer on a remote basis. Our regular hotline, we can call forward to volunteers wherever they are. And so many of them are stepping up to fill that gap. But our suicide prevention line, I did check with the national organization and they checked with SAMHSA and because it's a suicide prevention line and our volunteers are all over the country now that the schools have closed, they would have to take these calls remotely on call forwarding. And that is not an acceptable vehicle at this point, just regular call forwarding.

Eleanor Letcher:

There is specialized equipment that we could get but we don't have the money to buy that. So at this point our volunteers cannot take the suicide prevention line calls. But we are hoping that we will be able to, if this lasts a longer time than it's currently predicted, we're hoping to be able to get the financial backing to upgrade and some of our volunteers will be able to then take those calls remotely. So it has made a change and our reassurance program that is continuing.

Evan Schneider:

Eleanor, if anyone listening is inspired to act or want to make contributions toward that system that you were talking about, how could they reach out to you or donate?

Eleanor Letcher:

They could donate through our website, which is [contactofmercer.org](http://contactofmercer.org). So it's [contactofmercer.org](http://contactofmercer.org) and there is a donate button. They could send us an email which is also on that website.

Evan Schneider:

Great. Thank you so much. So thinking ahead a little bit and I think this is pretty hard to do because I feel like we're probably closer to the beginning of this than the end. But if you want to go there for a moment, just thinking about envisioning your work in a future, a post COVID-19 future, what do you think might be different and what do you hope people will learn from this crisis?

Eleanor Letcher:

Well, I think this will take a long time to get over. And in retrospect it's often easier to see how you've met certain challenges, how you have had certain victories. That's in retrospect and my guess is that for

a lot of people they would say, when I look back at the time that I spent alone or spent with family or was quarantined or perhaps had this illness, I realized that in some respects it was a benefit to me. I had time to think, I had time to plan, I had time for gratitude. And I think that all of us taking some time to be grateful for the gifts that we have been given, and these might be personal gifts. I mean the ability to endure, the ability to make the best of the situation. I don't necessarily mean gifts in terms of monetary things, but to recognize the value of other people in our lives. And we don't really usually have time to do that because we're so busy doing whatever it is we have to do.

Eleanor Letcher:

But I think this opportunity, even though it will be very difficult, it is very difficult, it's very disconcerting. But I think looking back, there will be many people who say, I really grew from this, I really matured from this. I was able to sort out what was important to me and what was seemingly important, but not really. So I think long-term, not short-term, but long-term, I think there will be many values that come from this. And I think people recognize getting together with friends is important and getting together with family is important.

Evan Schneider:

Yeah, you're really speaking my language. I'm a firm believer that our greatest blessings and gifts in life have absolutely no monetary value.

Eleanor Letcher:

Right. I think that's true. But we're so busy I mean, I think of running, running, running, running, running. And what I also laugh about is that for many years I've thought, Oh, I wish the world would just stop for a couple of days so I could get caught up on this. Now it stopped and I'm not happy about it. What's up anyway, so you have to be careful what you wish for.

Evan Schneider:

The grass is always greener. Yeah. Well, so and uncertain times like these, it's often helpful and you've done this throughout this interview, but I just want to spend a little bit of time intentionally on this to talk about what hope you have. It's often helpful to concentrate on those things and so I'm just wondering, what makes you hopeful right now?

Eleanor Letcher:

I have a lot of hope and I know that people can rise to the occasion and I think that people are doing that and they are giving us examples of the joy of helping other people. When you listen to some of the interviews, and these are often young people, doctors, nurses, and they talk about, they felt compelled to serve and how they are benefiting even though they're exhausted. They'll say things like, yes, I'm exhausted but I'm exhilarated at the same time. So I think that one of our greatest gifts to each other is giving time and care. And that is often lost in our regular busy world because who has time? Nobody. And yes, you care about people, but do you show them that? Probably you don't have time. So I think that I do have a lot of hope and I particularly have hope for young people. I know some of their dreams have been dashed, I understand that but there will be other dreams and there are other pathways.

Eleanor Letcher:

So I don't think that we are stopped in our growth. I think we are growing new branches and those just will have flowers on them.

Evan Schneider:

Well that's right. I mean I think one of the toughest lessons to learn in life is that sometimes the best thing that can happen is for the thing you really want to not happen.

Eleanor Letcher:

Yes.

Evan Schneider:

That's because then it forces you to try something else and as it turns out that other thing ends up being the thing you become the most passionate about. Right.

Eleanor Letcher:

Yeah. But I think if they connected, if you're part of a group where you have friends, call them and just resume some connection.

Evan Schneider:

Good words. Eleanor, thank you so much for talking with us. Wish you the best at this time.

Eleanor Letcher:

Thank you. It was a pleasure.