Drawing Out Stigma

These Are Our Stories

A program dedicated to reducing stigma and increasing mental health awareness through the arts.

These are our stories.

I'm okay

I don't need help

A project of

KOREAN COMMUNITY SERVICES

A PROJECT OF

MECCA
MULTI-ETHNIC COLLABORATIVE
OF COMMUNITY AGENCIES
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We invite you to read the stories created through our Drawing Out Stigma program where youth and adults courageously shared their stories of recovery, hope, and resilience. Deeper reflection and discussion about these narratives were shared in virtual workshops and in ethnic-specific “chapbooks.” In this chapbook we highlight some of these stories from our member organizations. We hope that they inspire you so that collectively we can end the stigma associated with mental health.

Please visit our website at ocmecca.org for our These Are Our Stories page where you can also share your story.
It has been a long time, maybe 30 or 40 years, since I picked up a pen and wrote down my thoughts. When I was younger, I would write things like my dreams, would be this... would be that...

Life doesn’t contain only good days or days filled with only happiness, but also days when one must live based on the human instinct for survival.

Because of the political situation, I settled in another land different from where I was born. I told myself that I am searching for freedom, happiness, and life in a civilized country. Although I mentally prepared myself before making this important decision for my life, I could not help but felt the culture shock in my new place. Language, work, life, society, how to make a living to provide myself with a daily meal. With a community and many loved ones, I still thought often about my own responsibilities. I am now almost 70 years old and still find myself thinking back about my youthful ambitions, about my life, my accomplishments, whether I was able to achieve them or not, and if my goals were achieved fully.

Now I seek to understand what is “Enough” and how to know if it is enough. To determine what is “Relax” and know how to live happily and healthy in my advancing age.

"Enough."
My life

My life, past or present, is always sad
Smiles covered all the tragic sounds I’ve had
There were nights that were filled with tears
As I live through each day with fears
When I find myself laughing out loud
I found my sadness most profound
That is when the stream of tears flowing outside
Matches the loneliness silently flowing inside
Too weak and soft, so I had to suffer
Too emotional, so pretending to be tougher
I am very afraid of being lonely
But the loneliness kept calling out to me
At the top I stand, arms stretch wide
I accept this great pain in stride
Life these days has been keeping me down
On the way back to my hometown
There is a small road that I adore
The road is narrow but beautiful at its core
Grass grew on both sides with many flowers and leaves
This memory in my heart, forever I’ll keep.
My dear friends, our existence is only temporary on this earthly realm. You and I, rich or poor, will return empty-handed and turn to the dust when it is time. Therefore, why don’t we live and love each other with all our hearts?

No jealousy, no hatred, whether winning or losing, you must accept, never regret, or feel sad. Then, when it is time for us to go, we can be serene and peaceful. We cannot worry or regret our life anymore when we leave this human world.

Serene & Peaceful
Nostalgia.

Remember about ten years ago, when I left Vietnam. At that time, I had feelings of disappointment and pessimism. The nostalgia for my homeland pained my heart. After around two years, I found myself trying harder to assimilate into the American life. Every day, I would attend English classes and try to understand more about the culture of this new country where I am living. As life is passing by and my mind and spirit became more stable, my sadness is also lessened.

I consider life precious to myself. I cherish myself. I told myself to value me.

There is a song that I still very much enjoy, I hear it in my head through the voice of the singer Elvis Phuong. The first 2 lines went like this:

“My best friend, let’s try to love others, 
Even if they don’t love you back, 
Let’s try to love others, 
Despite the many lies...”
Getting help.

When you are sad, what do you do? Whom do you go to?

Do you believe in the language of the world, its signs, and its compassionate stance? In my personal life, I have felt lonely many times in carrying the burdens of the world on my feeble shoulders. I feel constricted; despair and sadness overtook me. I have often prayed for a hand and some encouraging words from someone who can lift me up and help me carry on. There was no compassionate hand or any words. It was then that I came across a book. This lifeless book gave me life and spoke to me of good days.

Maybe you cannot believe this, but when sadness comes, if we are aware and if we can seek a voice to soothe us, we will find the voice through the universe. I once read in a book that “the universe has a voice that everyone can hear, but they have forgotten about it.” Since the beginning of childhood, I have come across the word despair sooner and more frequently than I cared to. I experienced sadness sooner than joy. I heard about the voice of the world, and I soothed my pain through that. All of us can find such inspiration from hearing the conversation of two people in the street, reading a book, or even watching the play of two children. In this way, we can build a bridge from our sadness and despair to a new ground of joy and light.

Rest assured that when we look for true peace, the whole universe is going to collaborate so that we can fulfill our desires. You may ask how the universe would collaborate. I will tell you my story.

One day, I decided to end the sadness that was a reminder of my past. I really wanted that from the bottom of my heart. A friend recommended that I see a psychologist. In the beginning, I denied it, but then I decided that apart from food for my body, I needed food for my soul. I was supposed to listen to the voice of the universe, and a therapist might provide one such voice. She recommended the Art Stigma classes, and I attended the first session.

In the first session, I hesitated to write, but my courage was mustered by an individual who attended the class. He told us, “Write simply. Let go and even be okay with writing badly.”
Unclear thunder,
The era of narrow solutions,
The sound of my panting with limited depth.
Sohrab’s sorrow and his delicate touch . . .
The darkness and the rise of a moth in the quietest moments
And the footstep of a little girl in a boundless farm,
A ragged handmade doll with raptures of love,
And my heart that traveled every inch of farmland with anxiety and love.
Sohrab’s voice percolates within me:
“There is a voice that calls me from afar.”
Sohrab is alive and present in my heart.
My strides have changed, and my outlook is more natural.
I have traveled to another time, a time
“When no one polluted the water”;
A time that
“People ablated with the beats of the window.”
Being Sohrab requires one to tolerate pain.
It needs an infinite amount of silence and loneliness such that
“You can be wide and lonely, innocent and bashful.”
It is the loneliness that makes you acquainted with silence.

If you have not borne aloneness, silence is a challenge that needs to be overcome.
Being Sohrab requires generosity—generosity of forgiving and being forgiven.
If you are Sohrab, you are not popular.
You are going to be isolated, but silence becomes your best teacher.
Oh, my Beloved,
How in the gray of the chimney within the moist of the rain...
I hear the throbbing of time as it’s slowly injected into the pathways of my chest.
My heart turns gray as it burns a fire in its quest for water.
Longing for life as it stands still, slowly flickering away, erasing all that it held dear.
Disfigured and dismembered, I still feel the throbbing of time,
Its touch was as gnarled as my burnt fingertips.
Tired of it all, tired of the rush of time, I need peaceful silence.
Thrust me aside to the magnificent green plains from the trains of relentless competition!
To the endless green grasses where the wind dances among the tresses of spring with an ever-green companion. With the dignified and gracious Earth humbly by my side.
Brotherly gathering of heroic branches, flying with the free dragonflies, singing with the pleasant insect sounds, and entertaining boundless travels with the dandelions.
The fearless breeze of time: So carefree with who it lets me be, such a dignified servant;
yet such a cruel mistress, always serving as a reminder of how long we all have.

Here, in quiet, I am restless; in laughter, gloomy; in safety, unsafe; and I am defeated to the ground. The child who left the paradise in joyful play has yet to find the green plain of dreams, the indigo sky, and the ever-radiant sun; I am shrieking for a new path back.
The strange presence of night has concealed the migration of the day. Its patterns are as obscure as the lines drawn onto my hand, resembling a faded past, a dream I can no longer ascertain.
The fearsome domain of doubt and indecision has paralyzed the fluency of my mind.
The fearless breeze absent, as the mother of compassion has slapped its own face.
Her hand was as fierce and malignant as the hands that cradled me.
In total disbelief, I stand still, monitoring my image in the mirror of age and mourning my losses.
Counting off all the number of ways I’ve failed the images that now resemble faded ghosts.
Each one an empty husk, strikingly painted onto a white portrait already on fire.
Within the throbbing of time, my heart stands still as it relentlessly reimagines the blessed days in hope of its resurrection. Attempting to forge a new identity out of the pits scorched by fire, I try to mend the disheveled pieces of my being. No longer can I distinguish the sensible path.
The attack of ambiguity has dried up my last drops of courage, and it, my current hell, is directing my gaze from a strange mirage to an imminent truth in the hope that I can find my Beloved and chant it again.
Voices of OMID Multicultural Institute for Development

Hello, Pain.
I feel you and I know why you have come.
I accept you and listen to your message. I value your mission.
I know that this will not be the first time or the last, and you are going to be with me for years.
You are going to be my companion, and we are going to have conversations. O, Pain, don't leave me alone and don't dismiss your messages from me.
And my poor body. You have carried all my pain throughout my lifetime, and you have tolerated my pain.
O, my body, I love you, and like a loving mother, I embrace you for the injuries you have inflicted on me.
And in this moment, I treasure the reconciliation of my body and pain, and I accept it with love.

Pain.
Moments in silence with the wind it blows ever so steady
Like a mountain and the beautiful scenery and all its splendor
The aroma of pine fills the air with its fragrant aroma
Tranquility is present like a soft breeze
Calling out peaceful thoughts swiftly and with love.

Thoughts of Calm.
"I can't help but feel bad because they
Express themselves like that against me.
They grow tired of me
As if being around was a heavy burden.
I think little of it if they hurt me,
mistreat me,
Reprimand me, and exclude me.
I am strong
I have resistance.
My husband has long been gone,
I am alone.
In solitude,
Rosa and Trino are my strength,
Because of them I live,
Because of them I do not die of sadness.
With loud music, I speak to my beloved,
And so I live, and so I continue.

Strength."
What brings peace to me
Is going to the beach
Walking and sunbathing
Going to the park
I feel as if the universe is with me
And I with it
When I am at the park
And I see the yellow shouldered blackbird
I like it because
It stops here
And jumps there
And flies over there
And the bees
They stop on all flowers
They take the nectar
And fly and fly
They stop on one
And stopping on another
And they keep flying
To lots of flowers
And never tire
It’s OK.

It’s OK to be hurt,
Someday, you’ll get back up again.
It’s OK to be sad,
Someday the happiness will find you.
It’s OK to be stressed,
I know you’ll get through it.
It’s OK to feel pain,
It’s just another part of life.
It’s OK.
Crisis & Gratitude

“A crisis can change a person on the way they see the world, it can make them more grateful, more understanding. And to make them no longer picky, because they will eat whatever in case of an emergency.”
I can’t help but feel bad because they
Express themselves like that against me.
They grow tired of me
As if being around was a heavy burden.
I think little of it if they hurt me,
mistreat me,
Reprimand me, and exclude me.
I am strong
I have resistance.
My husband has long been gone,
I am alone.
In solitude,
Rosa and Trino are my strength,
Because of them I live,
Because of them I do not die of sadness.
With loud music, I speak to my beloved,
And so I live, and so I continue.
My beloved James,
it's been already two years since you vanished from this world!
It was the day my fate disappeared!
I cannot forget that day, that moment!

I have waited for you to return!
You who said, “Honey, I will be boarding in 12 hours,”
And “I miss you.” With wishful thinking, I waited a year sitting still on this chair.
Just like that, I sent you to your parents, and here I am now.
I put all those days with you behind and I came here!
To your country America, with your children.
To this place that I thought had nothing to do with me. To this place where I know no one.
I came here with your children.
Therefore, I am happy!
I left that road, that house, that place that made me tear up at the thought of you, and
came here! I left behind all the beautiful moments with you and came here!
This is a place with no memories with you and no times shared with you!
Every living moment was precious, but I am here creating new beautiful memories! It’s
already been 2 years. February 22nd, 2018. I remember that day.
I wanted to live with you forever. I can’t keep the promise about how we’d die on the same
day at the same time. I am sorry!
I am the mother of the four children that you left behind, and I am the mother of the baby
boy that you loved so much. Therefore, I must have a long life! I must have a good life! I
must live passionately! Because that is my goal! That’s why I came here. In order to raise
your children that were your gifts...
I know that you loved me very much. I am living with that memory. Wearing the clothes,
the shoes, and the bag you bought for me. I know what a wonderful person you were to
me. I know how well you treated me. That’s why I praise you, talk about you, and live on
that memory!
My heart still breaks thinking of you. I realized how sick you were while translating your
medical records. You only gave me compliments when I could’ve been more caring. I only
complained.
I remember your words that called me the best wife, the best mom.
“I love you and I am sorry. I should have I cared about you more.”
“I wish I could eat the kimchi you made,” I remember your last words.
I came here leaving those times behind. I will live your life here, I will raise your children
here. I am still trying to get used to this life, the time without you, the place without you.
I am getting better.
Still, my love, I want to see you.
I miss you.
Looking back, I don’t think I’ve ever considered that my life is easy. Especially because I overestimated myself, I had many goals in life that I wished to achieve despite my cause struggle to catch up with every one of them. From a young age, it felt like many people around me often praised my abilities, which caused me to believe that I could do more than I thought.

As greedy as I am, I always wished to be above average in every field, which is almost impossible for an individual. I believe that was what started my depression.

I’ve always thought, and I still do think that I never get the results from effort I am putting in. I often compare myself to another individual, and this got me depressed even more. Why does the other person get a higher grade when I put in more effort and time into this subject? It had me thinking that no matter how much I can put in; I will never get the results I wished for. I was always aware that I was a pessimistic person, but I never knew those thoughts would add up to a darker thought. That was the peak of my depression and I had to get professional help before it got worse.

After receiving treatments from a doctor and a psychologist, I could understand why professionals are called “professionals”. Taking depression pills helped me a lot in controlling my emotions and receiving therapy allowed me to think in a different perspective. I had more time to examine myself and my unrealistic standards and how it was ok for me to not know what I would have in the future.

Reshaping my ideals truly changed me and it felt like I was one step closer to being an adult.
Dear Mom,
It’s been so hard. And I want to blame you for my difficulties but I know I can’t. But I want to tell you this: your never ending unrealistic expectations – of course, started with good intentions – stress me out so much that I’ve thought the worst.
Mentally, it has been so mortifying because of the pain I’ve been feeling. It’s even worse when everyone asks me how I’m so good at handling stress because frankly, I’m probably the worst at it. I can’t even put into words how I’ve been feeling recently. You may not know but crying every day has come to the point where I cry about the littlest things even when I don’t want to. I’ve always turned your expectations into expectations I put for myself and these expectations have led me to push myself beyond reason.
I always think “I have to be perfect or no one will like me” and this mentality is breaking – no, ripping – me apart. And I don’t know how to stop running myself. I don’t want to turn to substance use despite the fact that everyone around me vapes, drinks, or smoking. I don’t want to harm myself anymore. Did you know pulling hair is a form of self-harm? Sometimes I’ve thought I should just end it, but is it really worth it? I’m ashamed. I’m sure other people have problems much worse than me. But I can’t handle my issues like others. I’m seventeen and my mental health has been and is plummeting. Send help.
Jealous.

My dear best friend,
I know I was rude to you and annoying. But in the end, know that I’m jealous of you. I may have much better grades but it doesn’t make me happy at all. Look at your life. Perfect family, perfect friends, but what do I have? You get whatever you want because your parents buy anything and everything for you and you can pretty much do whatever you want. I’m appreciating that you’ve stuck by my side for ten years but I’m jealous that you get to be happy and I’m here, struggling to find reasons to stay alive. What’s more is you can’t even tell I’m suffering.
Hello Mom and Dad,
I live for the sacrifices you have made.
The soil you have laid for my growth,
I will continue to tend with care.
Mom you are my sun,
That is where this melanin skin comes from.
You light up my darkest days.
Father, you are the water that replenishes me,
When my life thirsts for survival.
I will continue to grow,
spread my roots into the soil.
I am fresh.
I am a flower.
That will always grow.
Unfinished Business
There’s so much left unsaid
Words glued to my tongue
What do I say
When this could be the last day
Unfinished business
Words unspoken
Trapped in my head
Should I follow my heart
So what if the world crumbles
So what if I die
Not speaking what was in my head
Silence is golden
Let my heart speak for itself.
I miss the past, that is a fact without saying. History of the Khmer kingdom, the sorrow that was deep in the heart.

Pol Pot era, cruelty occurred over expectancy, millions of Cambodians faced crisis, lord had no mercy for the citizens.

Working non-stop, morning to night to no end. Children and adults were not able to complain.

We were overworked, then got sick from the lack of nutrients. Truth was, there was no food, no sympathy or mercy. The sick received no care, left like animals to suffer alone; Some were severely ill and passed away, one after another. When wind blew and rain stormed, still shivering with thin clothes, we could not beat the cold air. When work was not satisfied, they punished us until we died. They called it “fixing” and took us away, though no one ever did return.

Lived like animals, depressed and in pain, every individual. Some lose consciousness or became crazy because the pain was too tremendous.

And their families, separated in despair, isolated every day from each other. They left their loved ones behind like everyone else.

Starting today, to all Cambodian citizens: please learn and participate in politics and the news in all provinces and unite as one.
America.

The next time I see my mom and dad I will be grateful. I would tell all immigrants that without us, America wouldn’t be America.

I will tell them that they should not be ashamed of who they are or where they come from, because my childhood was trash until now.

For all the immigrants out there, don’t be ashamed for who you are or where you came from because remember without us, America wouldn’t be here.

And I would like to say thank you to my parents.

I am here today to represent all immigrants.
“Happier Times...”

I miss living in Amman, Jordan. Everyone knows everyone and says hello to each other on the street. Everyone is friends with each other and helps each other. Here in America, people are strangers. People on the street do not greet each other. It is very cold. In Jordan, you felt the community even with little amounts of people and here in America, you feel alone even though you are surrounded by the most people.

“"
I'm My friend’s a very shy person. She’s a very sensitive person. She may try to stop her sensitivity but eventually it begins to eat her alive until she snaps. I’m She’s a very happy person. Many say she laughs a lot if she truly can’t help it. When she’s happy, she’s happy. When she loves something, it shows. When she doesn’t, it also shows. She’s never one to give up on anything and anyone. Even if she gets hurt she still forgives with all her heart. Some say it’s a weakness but she says it’s a strength.
If SWANA was one person, they would be loud but their voice would shake. If SWANA was one person, they would put everyone before themselves. If SWANA was one person, they would lose sleep to uplift their community. If SWANA was one person, the presence of other SWANA people would feel like home. If SWANA was one person, they would be unified that they would be the opposite of the corrupt governments that birthed them. If SWANA was one person, they would be sad only behind closed doors. If SWANA was one person, they would make everyone laugh. If SWANA was one person, they wouldn’t tell you they need help. If SWANA was one person, you should probably give them a hand. If SWANA was one person, they would be powerful enough to start movements. If SWANA was one person, they would be the loudest movement.
Vegas

I feel so out of place in Vegas but I love being there. I love the lights and city vibe; the smell of smoke reminds me of the streets of Amman, Jordan. But I feel so out of place wearing a hijab. I mean people literally ask me, “like what do you do in Vegas if you don’t dance, drink, smoke or gamble?” Truthfully, I go for the food. I was walking out of a buffet in December 2019 feeling like a satisfied blueberry after how much I ate and feeling proud having spent the whole day walking in Vegas confidently, and I hear a man shout, “F**king women’s rights” in the middle of the casino. I thought to myself, don’t look, it’s not about you. There’s plenty of women here. But my gut knew he meant me and just I acknowledged my gut, he shouted, “F**king Islam and women’s rights” as a woman dragged his drunk, staggering body towards the door, tripping over her own handbag that had fallen on the floor. I felt terrible but he’s right. I don’t belong in Vegas.
Isn’t it funny how life imitates art? We started this journey together and now I’m here, weaving these stories together and you’re over there, finally able to know the answer to life’s biggest mystery. We were born, we were raised, we became “adults” all while developing our own ideals, minds and life philosophies. We met, we brought all of who we were together, combined it and we married.

We shared so many experiences, some sweet and some tough. Those experiences have now become important learned lessons and memories dear to me.

We laughed, A LOT, we FEARED, WE LIVED, and had destinations we wanted to go, TOGETHER.

Remember, Gabriel? How much we loved the art of storytelling?

Whether through our TV shows at home, movies we watched together, books you read (I’m not much of a reader) and evenings at the theater we ALWAYS loved a great story and learned so much through them.

We started planning these workshops and lesson plans together. Now I’m reading through all these stories and trying to create a cohesive narrative with a nice beginning, middle and end, I realized that I didn’t have to try; the stories wrote themselves.

Gabriel, to you and to me these are NOT just “stories”; these are the voices of our community. And if there’s something to know about you, Gabriel is how much you really cared about our communities; this sense of duty came from your heart.

Much like life, at least “biologically”, these accounts begin in “order”, with our Youth revealing who they are in this moment in their lives, their fears and where they’re going. But because life happens in a way that’s not always in “chronological” order as we’d thought, the second half of these stories come from our Adult workshop participants. Our adults also reveal who they are, at least in this moment in time, their fears and where they are going. I remember as we were reviewing our prompts for the participants to write their entries, one of the prompts that I suggested to you, Gabriel was to, “personify and write a letter to your biggest fear letting them know how they’ve impacted your life. Could you make peace with them?”

Well Gabriel, here I am writing to you and directing these words to heaven. My BIGGEST FEAR of course, losing YOU. Reading and weaving these stories together, and I use the word weaving intentionally because I realized through this process that we all, young and young at heart, no matter the background or belief, share a lot of the same and have more in common than not.

To YOU reading this,

Take comfort in the fact that you are NOT ALONE. You are not alone with your thoughts about what you see when you look in the mirror.

You are not alone in your fear of loss or fear the loss of a loved one or maybe fear of rivers or the coronavirus. And maybe, just like me, you’re about to embark on a journey of making peace with your BIGGEST FEAR though, I fear I might fail MISERABLY.

Gabriel, I was so moved to tears when I reached the end of my weaving these words together because I realized that these words all tied very well together in the end. That’s the signature of a great story, at least in my mind.

Gabriel, Lupita Tello-Gonzalez, ABRAZAR and I invite you to hear the voices of our community. Read through to the end, or maybe jump around and read our heartfelt REFLECTION from one of our workshop participants, it ties in so well with the stories we’re telling.

The very last words in this collection ring so true in my heart and my current reality. Happy or heartbroken, life keeps on and we must journey on.

To you, Gabriel
Voices of Abrazar

Love

"LOVE Can Conquer All...FEAR

(My biggest fear) I think it is flying on a plane. I should remove all fear for the LOVE of going to visit my dad whose very old now with 89 years of age. It could be that I might NEVER see him again because he’s been sick. I think I have to go and abandon FEAR of flying on a plane for the love of seeing my father. I think of making friends with my fear. LOVE can conquer all. If my dad passed, I would be left with pain in my heart. This is why I’m going to face my fear. I’ll go for two weeks and when I return I’ll say, “I’ve conquered it!” And I’ll return HAPPY
Happier.

I arrived in this country 40 years ago when I was 22. I worked very hard to have and achieve everything that I am.

I’m thankful to God for being merciful with me, for giving me two wonderful gifts which are my children and a husband.

Above all I want to thank God for giving me a second opportunity at life and to that angel which donated her kidney to me; she is now in the glory of God.

I am now happy, much happier.
This book reflects lots of things I carry in my heart. And this workshop has taught us to share our story of life and to listen to what our workshop peers have manifested. Thank you, it was beautiful to learn to BREAK THE STIGMAS...
And because life continues, we will continue imprinting our future experiences.
See you soon beloved book.
Life stops only when God determines.
But TODAY we have the grace of continue on these travels.

Reflection.
Our stories are powerful. The most effective way of combating stigma is for ordinary people to share their story. When we share our stories, we empower ourselves and others who have gone through similar experiences and let them know they are not alone. Sharing your journey can mean everything to someone who is struggling in silence. There is healing power in telling your story allowing for expression and release. By sharing our stories we overcome our fears and challenges including the stigma associated with mental health and substance use. Stories create connections among us. We would like to thank all the participants that shared their stories throughout this project and our agencies who made this project possible.

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