

## Elk River College Scholarship Essay 2019 - Crystal Clark

An unspoken and deep-rooted belief in the African American community is that therapy is taboo. “Based on a report from the Federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, only 8.6 percent of African Americans saw a therapist, took medication or used some other kinds of mental health service between 2008 and 2012” (Thompson, 2017). Where I grew up, I constantly heard that under no circumstance were you to seek “outside” help from a therapist. The overarching feeling was that therapists were strangers, “head doctors,” “not like us” and were not to be trusted.

As an African American female and aspiring marriage and family therapist (MFT), I plan to become an advocate for mental health practitioners and services in wary communities, much like the one I grew up in. There is a dearth of licensed and practicing minority MFT’s and this contributes to the cultural taboo that has been placed on therapeutic services. By becoming a part of the profession and having been a part of the culture, I can empathize with the misgivings and will be able to combat them with cultural sensitivity and professional savvy.

Although there are many current challenges of getting individuals to therapy (affordable care, transportation, accountability), I feel that two of the most pervasive challenges are lack of awareness and the stigma of cultural barriers associated with asking for help, particularly in minority communities. If one is surrounded by disparaging comments about mental health, its professionals, and mental health care facilities, can we fault them for their hesitancy to engage with available resources? There needs to be a flood of outreach that aims to engage with marginalized communities to bring awareness to and education about the benefits of mental health services.

Most recently I worked as a middle school teacher for the Spectrum Program at New Roads School in Santa Monica, California. The Spectrum Program is a unique social support program that focuses on teaching life and social skills to students with high functioning Autism; our goal is to provide students with the executive functioning and communication skills necessary to be successful in life. Like minority populations, students with developmental differences are often underserved and fall between the cracks. As a Spectrum teacher, I communicated and collaborated with students, their core academic teachers, and their families on a daily basis. In order to best serve my students socially as well as academically, I needed to be conscious of each student's home life, social life, and emotional state throughout the course of a school year. When not teaching, much of my time was spent meeting with students parents, psychiatrists, psychologist, educational therapist, tutors, and other outside support systems. In these meetings, we would discuss social and academic concerns and goals, objectives and progress, and any additional information that was necessary to help our students reach their goals. Additionally, meetings with teachers kept me current on a student's progress in the classroom and allowed me to advocate for student accommodations and other needs. My door was always open to students when they needed a break from class, had a question on how to navigate a social situation, needed help organizing their school work, or when they just needed to cry. I took my role as advocate seriously and will put just as much heart into championing mental health well-being for everyone.

Currently, I am pursuing my M.S in Counseling with an emphasis in Marriage and Family Therapy from California State University, Northridge. After receiving my degree, I will spend the next two years working as an Associate MFT accruing required hours towards licensure. These hours can be completed in a number of settings, however, my goal is to secure a position at a clinical site within the Los Angeles Department of Mental Health. As an employee of the Department of Mental Health, I will have the opportunity to work with underserved populations in need. I believe that my background partnered with the education that I am receiving will prepare me to be a culturally competent practitioner that is needed to serve in these communities.

While I understand that awareness and representation are not enough to fix the problem; it is a start. Through outreach efforts that educate communities on the benefits of mental health services, we can start to alter the dialogue and assert that it is okay to need help and to ask a *professional* for help. My goal is to have a presence, make a mark, and to fill a void. If something is seen and heard often enough, it becomes normalized. Fortunately, our nation is experiencing a mental health awakening that is bringing more attention to the field and its professions. While I alone cannot break down a cultural barrier, I can put chinks in the wall. If we all work together to champion this work, one day the wall will come tumbling down and there will no longer be any shame or stigma in reaching out for help.

There are two additional areas of interest that I would like to develop during and after graduate school that I believe will elevate my effectiveness as a practitioner. I plan to expand my areas of expertise by pursuing certification in Positive Psychology and Drama Therapy. Positive Psychology is a young branch in the field of psychology that focuses on optimal functioning as opposed to dysfunction. I hold a BA in Drama and while I chose not to pursue performing as my ultimate career, there are many foundational skills and tools from theater that are aligned with therapeutic practice (the ability to listen actively and read between the lines, to question specifically and honestly, and to communicate effectively and respectfully). Some people are discouraged or find it difficult to voice how they are feeling. One way to combat this challenge is through play, by creating a safe and fun space where one can pretend and express themselves without fear.

Recently, I completed my first year in graduate school with a 4.0 GPA and during my first semester was chosen to be a trainee at the Mitchell Family Counseling Clinic (MFCC). The interview process was rigorous and the competition was high, of about 30 applicants, eight were chosen. The MFCC is a CSUN affiliated clinic that provides clinical training for CSUN MFT students while providing mental health care services to the local community on a sliding scale. We also provide school-based counseling services for at-risk youth attending select Magnolia Science Academy Charter Schools located in underserved communities across Los Angeles. Recently my clinic partnered with the Ed Asner foundation so that we can provide therapeutic services to families who have dependents with autism.

Being a recipient of the Elk River College Scholarship will assist me on my journey to develop, practice and hone my clinical skills as a Marriage and Family Therapist. My goal is to be a social and mental health care advocate and established LMFT working with individuals, families, couples, and organizations in an effort to boost effective, respectful and purposeful interpersonal communication.