

BEYOND  
DIFFERENCES®

ANNUAL REPORT  
**2020-2021**



***Ending a Pandemic  
of Loneliness***



## Our Founding Inspiration

**Beyond Differences®** was founded by Laura Talmus and Ace Smith to honor the life and memory of their daughter Lili Rachel Smith (1994–2009). Since 2010, Lili has been the inspiration and guiding light for the organization's accomplishments and growth. Her life sparked a national movement that has now touched the lives of millions of children.

## Our Ambitious Mission

**To inspire students at all middle schools nationwide to end social isolation and create a culture of belonging for everyone.**

*We've been preparing for these last 18 months since we began.*

## Our Impact



8,500 SCHOOLS  
IN 50 STATES



20,300  
FACEBOOK  
FOLLOWERS



342 YOUTUBE  
SUBSCRIBERS



4.2M STUDENTS  
REACHED  
(*& COUNTING*)



18,600 TWITTER  
FOLLOWERS



462 LINKEDIN  
FOLLOWERS



138 TEEN  
BOARD ALUMNI



2,442 INSTAGRAM  
FOLLOWERS

## Once Upon a (Before) Time

**If you're reading this, you've lived through lockdown and maybe even a period of quarantine. You understand the sorrow of loneliness and the joy that comes when social isolation ends.**

You've probably pledged to never again take a hug or a dinner invitation for granted.

Today, we are learning about the devastating health impacts of loneliness and that connection is a basic human need. As we make our way out of this strange time in history, we mustn't forget about the students in our country who experienced social isolation every day -- their "new normal" -- when attending school online.

The good news is that these children don't need a medical miracle to cure their loneliness. The cure is acceptance and human connection.

Thanks to your support and friendship, our Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) curriculum, student leadership activities and national awareness day events—such as National No One Eats Alone® Day -- are reaching more children every year.

We're excited to share this 2020-2021 Annual Report with you to show you the impact your generosity is making in the world. And because of you, we're proud to mark 12 years of inspiring children to make friendships and create connections.

My daughter, Lili Rachel Smith (1994-2009), endured the insidious effects of social isolation when she reached middle school. At that time, nobody knew what social isolation meant. We had to educate our ourselves and the public about how it was different from the overt type of bullying that we all easily recognize.

Our first big initiative, held in 2012, was a No One Eats Alone® event at a local middle school. The following year, we were thrilled to have four more middle schools in California participating! Today, our award-winning programs are being used in all 50 states by more than 8,500 schools, reaching 4.2 million students and counting.

As the only organization in the United States singularly focused on ending social isolation through youth leadership, we've become the go-to experts on the subject. We're contacted for media interviews; we've earned a seat at the table for policy discussions; educators are reaching out to us for help; and children are telling us about the difference we've made in their lives.

Some of our Teen Board alumni are going on to study law and political science. One is planning to study film so they can tell stories about the power of connection and belonging!

With your support and the wisdom of our Teen Board leaders, we are sharing our message of acceptance around this country.

Beyond Differences® was founded as a student-led organization. That has never changed. Today's middle school students are going to be adults that lead, teach, run for office, and have children of their own in a few short years. They are our world. Our future. Our hope.

**We won't stop until every middle school in the United States has a culture of belonging.**

## Laura Talmus

Executive Director and Co-Founder



## Our Response to the Events of 2020-2021

When middle schools across the country closed their doors and our entire audience sheltered in place—after taking a minute to catch our breath—**we immediately got to work.**

### WE ADAPTED

our Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) curriculum for use in both online and in-person learning environments.

### WE REDESIGNED

our National Awareness Days for virtual celebration.

### WE GAVE

educators a forum where they could connect.

### WE LEANED

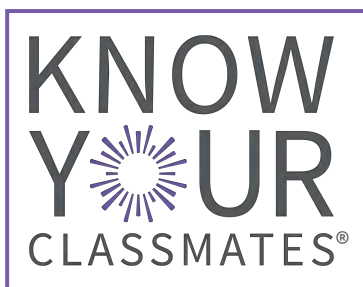
on our high school Teen Board to offer tips and strategies for surviving lockdown to other youth their age.

### WE SHARED

everything we could find about how to stay connected while socially distancing.

KEEP READING TO LEARN HOW **WE SHIFTED** TO MEET THE NEW NEEDS OF THOSE WE SERVE.

## National Programs



**Know Your Classmates®** was designed to explore youth identity and belonging and to help students embrace diversity and speak honestly about their feelings. This program includes a curriculum, a student leadership unit, a celebratory national awareness day, teen-created lessons on How to be An Ally, Diverse Expressions of Gender, Recognizing Bias as well as Anti-Racism + Stand Up for Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) Youth campaign materials.

National **Know Your Classmates® Day** has been celebrated annually in October since 2016.



**New!** For the 2021-2022 school year, we've introduced an exciting program called **Let's Connect!™**, to help students readjust to returning to school after so much time away from the classroom.

As students transition back into in-person learning environments, we want to make sure everyone feels **like they belong.**

To help students re-engage and get to know their classmates after months away from in-person learning, **Let's Connect!™** welcomes students back to school with games and activities and helps them get reacquainted and make new friends.



# National Programs



**No One Eats Alone®** is a program containing a curriculum, a student leadership unit, and a celebratory national awareness day. Through No One Eats Alone®, youth learn to make new friends at lunch, beyond their existing peer groups, through community building activities, courageous conversations, and suggestions on how to include those who are being left out.

National **No One Eats Alone® Day** has been held annually in February since 2012, always near Valentine's Day.

## New!

In 2020, **No One Eats Alone®** was held in a virtual format—and the participation numbers blew us away! Accepting, respecting, and including others is the new cool in school. Children from New York City to Washington state, from Los Angeles to Nashville, were encouraged to design and decorate a slice of (paper) pizza, upload it to see how their and their classmates' slices fit together into the whole pie, and celebrate differences through the joy of sharing a pizza. Students could also choose to build a virtual cafeteria with personalized Bitmojis, swag and other graphics supplied by Beyond Differences®. Their creativity was incredible and inspiring!



Two celebrities helped mark **No One Eats Alone® Day**.



FRESH OFF THE BOAT ACTOR  
**HUDSON YANG**

He virtually visited PS/IS 266 in New York to share his experiences and challenges around social isolation and bullying as an AAPI child. He encouraged students to get to know each other. Laura Talmus and New York City Schools former Chancellor Richard Carranza made special appearances as well.

[QUEEN'S CHRONICLE  
NEWS ARTICLE HERE ►](#)



NASHVILLE SINGER-SONGWRITER  
**OLIVIA FRANCES**

She approached Beyond Differences® about writing a song for No One Eats Alone® Day. She wrote a catchy, upbeat song that reflects Beyond Differences®' key messages. She performed it live at two virtual No One Eats Alone® Day events - Nashville and Los Angeles. The students, teachers and school administrators loved having her there.

[LISTEN TO OLIVIA'S  
SONG HERE ►►►](#)



**Be Kind Online®** is a program containing a curriculum, a student leadership unit, and a celebration national awareness day. The program focuses on creating inclusive communities online and ending social isolation in digital spaces. Students learn how to stand up to hateful behaviors, the positive and negative aspects of screen time, social media's effect on emotions and how to regulate those feelings, how to build self-confidence online, and how to build their future online.

National **Be Kind Online® Day** is held annually in May, sending children off for summer with a positive reminder of how to use social media to create friendships.

In May 2020, 720 schools participated in **National Be Kind Online® Day** and, despite the pandemic, 700 schools participated in 2021!

Young people spend lots of time on screens, but they can use them to recognize social isolation among their peers and use our strategies and tips to become more inclusive. In fact, Beyond Differences® encourages students to be online activists!

With children spending even more time on screens—some statistics show as many as up to nine hours per day—we knew our **Be Kind Online®** national awareness campaign would make a bigger difference this year.



# National Youth Leadership Programs

At the onset of the pandemic, like most of us, our high school Teen Board members struggled with isolation and fear of the unknown.

They helped themselves by helping others, sharing their tips for dealing with loneliness and social isolation.



## CREATION OF A NATIONAL TEEN BOARD

Driven by youth voice, vision, and Beyond Differences® core tenet of youth leadership, we are excited to announce the launch of a **National Teen Board of Directors**, fulfilling our long-awaited dream.

The National Teen Board will comprise high school students from all over the United States who are motivated by the mission of Beyond Differences®.

The design of the National Teen Board is the culmination of a six-month process led by Teen Board members and alumni.

One of the Board's first initiatives is developing a summer training camp called the Activist Academy!



QUARANTIVITIES VIDEO

## CASEL'S VIRTUAL SUMMIT

In October 2020, Beyond Differences® was invited to present at the 2020 SEL Exchange Virtual Summit hosted by the Collaborative for Academic Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL). More than 2,500 summit participants from 24 different countries increased their understanding of individual and societal healing and transformation through SEL. Three of our Teen Board members—Kuniko Randles, Matteo Diaz, and Chandler Golden participated in the 2020 event while another, Will Wolf, is involved in the 2021 event!

## AWARDS

We are fiercely proud of each member of our Teen Board, but especially proud to share these public acknowledgements.



**CALIFORNIA ENDOWMENT**  
2020 YOUTH VOICES FOR  
CHANGE AWARD FOR  
LGBTQ + GENDER JUSTICE  
**MATTEO DIAZ**

## DIGCITCOMMIT VIRTUAL CONGRESS AT FACEBOOK HQ

Beyond Differences® staff as well as members of the Bay Area and Portland Teen Boards attended the DigCitCommit Virtual Congress at Facebook HQ in February 2020. Teens participated in conversations around digital safety, inclusion, effective use of social media, the pervasiveness of cyberbullying, and how to use social media for good.

**HEART OF MARIN 2020**  
YOUTH VOLUNTEER OF  
THE YEAR at the annual  
CVNL (Center for Volunteer  
National Leadership)  
Awards Ceremony

**ALEX PALOGLU**



We are grateful to both Matteo and Alex for the years of service they have dedicated to Beyond Differences®.

# Professional Development

At the end of 2019, Dr. Lisette Ostrander joined our team as Director of Education Programs. She certainly had her work cut out for her as we traveled an unknown educational landscape together. We're excited to share the work we've done to help our beleaguered educators, administrators, resource counselors, social workers and health and wellness coordinators to stay strong for themselves, their families, and for their students.

When schools started shutting down in the spring of 2020, **our concern immediately went immediately to the mental and emotional health of educators.** To borrow the "oxygen mask on an airplane" philosophy, if educators weren't okay, their students wouldn't be either.

**In ordinary circumstances, educators are already on the classroom front lines navigating the challenges of middle school.** Due to the shutdown and the awareness of racial injustice, they faced an even greater challenge of figuring out how to support their students while maintaining their own well-being. **We were ready to help them.**

## INNOVATIVE EDUCATOR COHORTS

In September 2020, in partnership with the **New York City Department of Education** and **Florida's Seminole County** Social and Emotional Learning community, we piloted a year-round Innovative Educator Cohort with close to 70 middle school educators participating. We hosted brown bag discussions and workshops via Zoom covering topics such as gender identity, how to build an anti-racist classroom, trauma-informed practices, mindfulness, mental health and well-being for youth, and much more.

**Selected as 1 of only 3 nonprofit partners in the country,** we have since received a grant from the Cigna Healthcare Foundation to start new cohorts in **Nashville (TN), Aurora (CO) and Phoenix (AZ).** Thanks to the generosity of the Koret Foundation, we are also going to start a **San Francisco Bay Area** cohort.



## COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

In partnership with the **Marin County Office of Education (MCOE)**, and with funding from the federal government, we developed a Social and Emotional Learning Communities of Practice (SEL CoP) training program for all Grades 5-8 educators and community-based partners in the county. The program was designed to expand educator knowledge on identity, belonging and youth agency, and tools and strategies to support students' social and emotional learning.

We also collaborated on and presented three different webinars: two for **California Department of Education** with 1,348+ attendees and 6,000+ Facebook views (and counting) and one for **California's Multi-Tiered System of Support (CA MTSS)** Professional Learning Institute 2021 in July 2021 with 180 participants.

## Special Events

### WE DINE TOGETHER 2020 - HOME EDITION



▶▶ Read the Gazette article here, featuring Dominique Crenn.

Raised over \$41,000 to support our national school programs.

### THE POWER OF BELONGING 2021 SPRING GALA



Raised over \$412,000 to support our youth leadership programs.



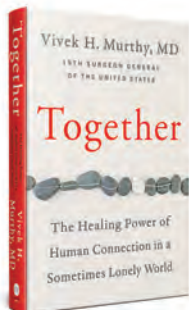
# Did We Mention?



## NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AMERICAN JEWISH HISTORY HOMETOWN HERO CONTEST FINALIST

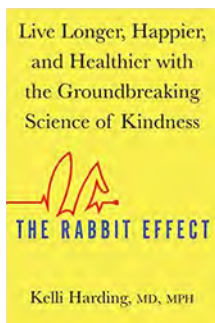
Our Executive Director, Laura Talmus, was selected as a finalist in the Hometown Hero category of the National Museum of American Jewish History's Only in America Gallery/Hall of Fame!

To honor Laura's work in the community, Beyond Differences® received half of all donations made to the Museum throughout the voting process.



## TOGETHER: THE HEALING POWER OF HUMAN CONNECTION IN A SOMETIMES LONELY WORLD BY DR. VIVEK H. MURTHY

The founding story of Beyond Differences® was featured in a book authored by Dr. Vivek Murthy, the 21st Surgeon General of the United States. Dr. Murthy spent almost two hours with our Executive Director Laura Talmus to learn about the life and memory of Lili Rachel Smith (1994-2009) and the movement she inspired to end social isolation.



## THE RABBIT EFFECT: LIVE LONGER, HAPPIER, AND HEALTHIER WITH THE GROUNDBREAKING SCIENCE OF KINDNESS BY DR. KELLI HARDING

Dr. Kelli Harding, MD, MPH, Assistant Clinical Professor of Psychiatry at Columbia University Irving Medical Center in NYC mentioned Beyond Differences® in her book, The Rabbit Effect.

"Ample scientific evidence shows belonging and connection are critical to human health and well-being. Beyond Differences® beautifully transforms research into reality to create a world where every child is accepted, valued, and included by peers."



## AUTHORITY MAGAZINE: 5 STEPS THAT EACH OF US CAN TAKE TO PROACTIVELY HELP HEAL OUR COUNTRY

In the aftermath of the George Floyd killing, Authority Magazine launched a series of articles which asked nonprofit and business leaders to talk about ways our country can heal. It gave Laura Talmus a platform to talk about how our SEL programs can help children and teens embrace diversity and help build a culture of belonging at schools and in communities.



## KCBS RADIO DIFFERENCE MAKERS

We were pleased to be recognized as a Difference Maker by KCBS Radio.

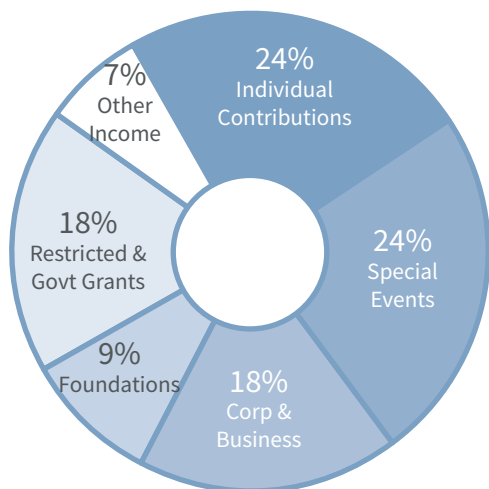
- ▶▶▶ "Social isolation can often lead to bullying, teasing, and violence - especially in middle and high school. The nonprofit Beyond Differences® aims to prevent that and instead promote inclusion among all students."

# Financials (FY 2020-2021)

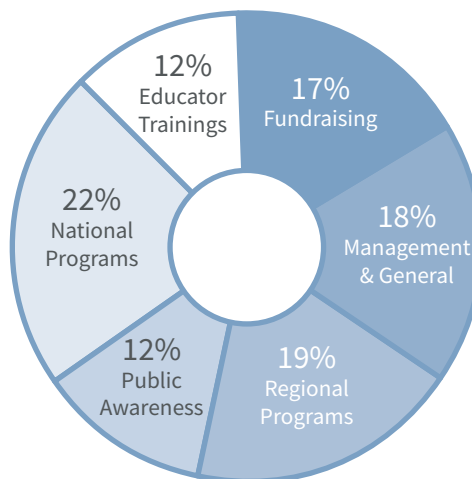
"We've all watched in shock as COVID-related deaths rose across the country. We now have a tool to deal with the virus by way of a medical miracle that is the vaccine. But on an annual basis, those deaths are exceeded by deaths of despair. We don't have the tools to deal with loneliness and isolation. Facilitating acceptance is fundamental to the health of individuals, families, and communities. We must invest in programs that provide positive models of health, broadly defined."

- TOM PETERS, PUBLIC HEALTH PHYSICIAN AND FORMER PRESIDENT AND CEO OF THE MARIN COMMUNITY FOUNDATION

INCOME TOTAL | \$1,960,785



EXPENSES TOTAL | \$1,382,767



Program Total: \$895,470 (65%)

## Help Us Go Above and Beyond

At some point, we were each a middle schooler who felt out of place or we can remember the person in our class who wasn't invited to birthday parties. We can't go back and change anything, but we can move forward with a spirit of teaching connection and acceptance. And we can't simply tell a child that things will be better when they leave

middle school because middle school is their current lived experience! As one of our middle schoolers said to her teacher, "Who are adults to invalidate the traumas that we have experienced?" **As adults, you have power.** And with power comes responsibility. Here's how you can exercise that power:

Set an example by modeling acceptance for your children.

Encourage your children to make new friends at school every day.

Smile at a stranger. Say hello to others who look and seem different.

Share Beyond Differences in social situations.

Learn the signs of social isolation so you can reach out to someone who's struggling.

Show our curriculum to a teacher at your nearest school.

Volunteer your time or donate your money.

Wear our hats and masks to start a conversation.

Listen to and amplify the voices of youth, especially from marginalized communities.

Engage with our posts on social media.

JOIN THE MOVEMENT TO END SOCIAL ISOLATION TODAY!



# Words From a Former Teen Board Member



Dear Laura,

I was on the Teen Board for all high school and was even on LATP (Leadership Academy Training Program) in middle school! After graduating high school, I enrolled at Duke University in North Carolina. Upon taking various sociology classes, interacting with a variety of people, and experiencing more of the world around me, I can appreciate and understand all that Beyond Differences® did to shape me into who I am. It has recently become very clear to me that many of the values I have originate in the love, acceptance, and care I felt in Beyond Differences®.

My journey with Beyond Differences® started in the 6th grade. I had never met someone that went by the pronoun "they." At the time, I didn't even really know what it meant to be gender non-conforming but that was irrelevant. What was important was that I

learned to accept, appreciate and embrace our differences.

As we are all aware, the lack of diversity in Marin County is problematic. Until college, my exposure to people that were different than me, especially in terms of race, was rather minimal. However, I am often known as the "hippy-liberal" friend. I think it's important and politically correct, to ask people their pronouns, to support the voices of the underrepresented, and to be accepting in all aspects of life. *Marin alone did not prepare me for college, but Beyond Differences® did.*

**Beyond Differences® taught me love, leadership, and most importantly empathy. It taught me how to come into all situations with open arms and to be open to learning. I am so grateful to you and this organization. Of course, the goal of Beyond Differences® was to serve others through inclusion yet Beyond Differences® helped me more than I ever helped anyone else.**

I am so grateful for my experience, and I hope you are aware of the impact you are having on so many teens. Thank you, Laura!

Amelia

## Why Support Beyond Differences?

First and foremost, because we're doing work that reduces the need for future intervention.

Our focus is creating a social justice movement to give voice and confidence to today's youth so that middle school isn't just something we all endure and "have to get through."

It may take years to fully fulfill our mission, but look at how far we've come in such a short amount of time! We're amplifying teen voices, empowering

young leaders to become activists, and turning bystanders into upstanders.

Educators in 20 countries have downloaded our curriculum and participated in our campaigns.

The world is more accessible, so we're taking advantage of every opportunity that we can to spread our campaign against social isolation.

Because that's what Lili would do.

# We Can't Thank Them Enough

**We want to thank the following individuals, companies and foundations who have supported Beyond Differences® and invested \$250 or more in our student leaders and school programs. The list reflects contributions received between July 1, 2020 and June 30, 2021.**

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Seymour Kaufman  
Vinati Mishra and Arthur Wachtel  
Wendy Coblentz and Jim Lowy



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# Meet Our People (July 1, 2020 to June 30, 2021)

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Rahul Chandhok  
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Carolyn Hambleton

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Alan Loving  
Wade Rakes  
Jacqueline Neuwirth Swire

Michaela Simpson  
Ace Smith  
Evie Talmus  
Jen Traeger  
Marla Wiacek

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Laura Talmus, Executive Director  
and Co-founder  
Laura Congdon, Grant Writing and  
Program Design Consultant  
Laurel Druke, Operations and  
Development Manager  
Mollye Fryday, Program Manager,  
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David Tarpinian, Marin  
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Barbara Zamost, Zamost  
Public Relations



## Join the Movement to End Social Isolation Today!

Beyond Differences® is the only student-led nonprofit organization dedicated to ending social isolation. From the start, we identified social isolation among youth as a public health crisis that puts children at risk for negative health consequences, lower academic achievements, and the increased risk of depression that can lead to self-harm, suicidal ideation, or violent behavior.



P.O. Box 9070, San Rafael, CA 94912 • 415.256.9095 • [www.BeyondDifferences.org](http://www.BeyondDifferences.org)

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