

# A Kind Community of CHANGEMAKERS



Riley's Way  
foundation

2023 IMPACT REPORT





# REMEMBERING RILEY

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Today and every day, we remind ourselves that it is Riley's kindness and friendship that guides our work. We celebrate and remember Riley Hannah Sandler and honor the legacy she leaves behind by investing in and supporting the next generation of kind leaders.

**"Always have a smile on your face."**

RILEY HANNAH SANDLER 💜 🐰

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PHOTO (FROM LEFT TO RIGHT):  
MACKENZIE, RUBY, BRODY, AND IAN SANDLER AT THE 2023 YOUTH LEADERSHIP RETREAT

# A LEGACY IN THE MAKING

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A Message from Ian Sandler, Co-Founder of Riley's Way

My wife Mackenzie and I started [Riley's Way Foundation](#) as a love letter to our daughter, [Riley Hannah Sandler](#), whose short yet meaningful life embodied the spirit of kindness and friendship.

Today, we could not be prouder of the community of changemakers that Riley's Way has become. Riley's Way is grounded in our guiding principles of kindness, empathy, inclusive community, and youth leadership. Riley loved nothing more than to bring friends together from her different worlds. Riley's Way is an inspirational story about how young people, often from diverse backgrounds and experiences, unite through friendship, kind leadership, and service. We are carrying Riley's love of friendship forward through our collective efforts.

**Every day, I am inspired by Riley's Way's young changemakers. They see a world of hope and possibility. They are building a better tomorrow - TODAY.**

In this 2023 Impact Report, you'll learn more about these inspirational young changemakers and staff. Leaders like [Thais](#), a recent Cornell University graduate and current Riley's Way Program Coordinator and first-ever Alum to join our staff. And [Christina Alvarez](#), our social media guru who recently graduated from the University of Maryland and joined our team as the Communications and Development Coordinator after interning with Riley's Way for two years.

Then there's [Dylan](#), a 2021 C4K Fellow ([Computers4People](#)), who also sits on our Youth Advisory Board and mentors many of his peers in the Riley's Way community. 2019 C4K Fellow [Daphne Zuckenberg](#) ([Enabling Access to STEAM Education](#)) was part of our first [Call For Kindness](#) cohort and is still connected with Riley's Way years later. She's even set to work next summer as an Investment Analyst Intern at the company where I'm employed, Insight Advisors. And [Laura](#), Riley's Way's first-ever employee and Director of Operations, wows us daily with her extraordinary organizational skills and steadfast dedication to advocating for young leaders.

As many people in our kindness movement know me to say, once we've connected, we're bonded for life. These connections are invaluable and forged in our common values. Our changemakers bond over shared initiatives and social justice issues they care about in digital environments, community centers, coffee shops, classrooms, and at our [Youth Leadership Retreats](#). They each possess a healthy dose of impatience rooted in kindness, leading them to build a world that aligns with their vision of justice, equity, and much-needed change.

Through their shared experiences, whether organizing marches for racial justice, launching campaigns to combat the climate crisis, or developing tech solutions to close the digital divide, their bonds grow stronger with each passing day. And as their seeds of friendship and purpose take root, the connections they've nurtured evolve into enduring friendships and a robust Riley's Way Alumni Community.

My hope is that Riley's Way will be a multi-generational foundation. **[This lifelong community of young changemakers at Riley's Way is not just a passion project or passing phase - it's a legacy in the making.](#)** Our young leaders continuously pass the torch of purpose on to the next generation.

The story of how Riley's Way changemakers form a lifelong community of kind leaders is a rich narrative of hope, purpose, kindness, and boundless potential. When young people are given the tools, support, and infrastructure they need to lead, they create lasting change that reverberates through time, building a better, kinder tomorrow.



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ian Sandler'.

Ian Sandler  
Co-Founder of Riley's Way





# LEADING, LEARNING, & LEANING INTO KINDNESS

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A Message from Dr. Christine O'Connell, Executive Director of Riley's Way

Our young changemakers have been at the forefront of a remarkable year for Riley's Way. These emerging leaders demonstrate what kindness, empathy, and inclusivity look like in action as they lean into [our values](#). All of us who have the privilege of working with them are inspired and grow because of what we see them do.

The Riley's Way Youth Advisory Board (YAB) helped survey our community to define kind leadership. Common themes emerged: empathy, listening, building community, inclusivity, and trust. The YAB also planned the [Alumni events](#) this year, incorporating that same definition of kind leadership. **YAB member Michal Ruprecht shared that kind leaders "listen to others, take care of themselves, and ensure everyone feels welcome."** A Riley's Way Council member added that kind leadership involves **"hearing the voices of others and uplifting those around you."**

Inextricably tied to Riley's Way's culture, [mission, and vision](#), our values also paved the way for our Council's and Chapter's expansion this year, where youth leaders tackled some of the most significant social justice issues young people face today.

Passionate about women's reproductive justice, The Young Women's Leadership School (TWYLS) of the Bronx and Horace Mann Council created a drive to collect children's clothing, baby formula, and books with handwritten notes for mothers and caregivers in the community. The TYWLS of Astoria and Hewitt Council brought awareness to the impact fashion has had on the environment. The TYWLS East Harlem and Nightingale Council addressed food insecurity and period poverty in prisons, while our Chapter at Browning tackled food insecurity and kindness through music. And we started our first college Chapter at the University of Michigan.

**Our Council members' thoughts on leadership changed over the course of their year with Riley's Way:**

- |                         |  |
|-------------------------|--|
| <i>I used to think:</i> | <i>"leadership was people in charge"</i>   |
| <i>Now I think:</i>     | <i>"leadership is people taking charge to make a difference"</i>                         |
| <i>I used to think:</i> | <i>"leadership was the ability to make decisions and speak up"</i>                       |
| <i>Now I think:</i>     | <i>"leadership is the ability to listen and uplift voices that are underrepresented"</i> |
| <i>I used to think:</i> | <i>"leadership was getting others to follow your footsteps"</i>                          |
| <i>Now I think:</i>     | <i>"leadership is giving to other people"</i>  |

Our community's steadfast courage and kind leadership served as the blueprint for my *Psychology Today* piece, [Kindness Matters In Our Leaders](#).

The words of Riley's Way Alum Julia Huth remind me of the kind of leader all of us at Riley's Way strive to be: "Kind leadership means caring about all the people you are leading. It's incredibly important to be an empathetic listener to truly understand the needs and opinions of those around you."

All of the inspiring work you will read about on the following pages wouldn't happen without the Riley's Way team, who are some of the kindest and most effective leaders I know. Each day, they approach our mission with dedication, empathy, creativity, and, most importantly, hard work. I am honored to work with such a talented staff, board, and community of young leaders.

With gratitude,



Dr. Christine O'Connell  
Executive Director of Riley's Way



# WHY RILEY'S WAY?

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## OUR THREE PROGRAMS SUPPORT & CONNECT YOUNG LEADERS WHO ARE BUILDING A KINDER, BETTER WORLD.

### Riley's Way Call For Kindness

Our national flagship program gives young changemakers the skills, connections, and funding they need to run social impact projects – tackling anything from big social or environmental justice issues to creating inclusive communities. The Call For Kindness comprises a start-up grant of up to \$3,000 and a 12-month Leadership Development Fellowship with skill-building, networking, project support and expert coaching, peer mentoring, an in-person Retreat, and a community of other young people making a difference in the world.

Our Fellows deliver inspiring projects and grow as kind leaders who continue to make an impact. Fellows join an active Alumni Community and can access Continuation Grants of up to \$2,000 and ongoing support.



### Riley's Way Councils and Chapters

Councils connect public and private high schools in New York to inspire teens to lead with empathy and kindness. Young leaders create social justice projects around issues they care about and partner with community-based organizations. With Riley's Way staff and teacher support, they drive positive change in their schools and communities, build bridges, and practice leading with kindness.

Chapters bring together a group of young changemakers within one high school, college, or community group, creating opportunities for them to practice and model leading with empathy and kindness. Riley's Way Chapters are independently run and operated across the country, with support from Riley's Way staff and peer leaders.

### Riley's Way Youth Leadership Retreats

Youth Leadership Retreats bring diverse communities of young changemakers together from across the country to learn from each other and experts, build meaningful connections, and grow as leaders and friends.

Through our Retreats, we build a dynamic community of young leaders. The connections between them influence their individual changemaking journeys for years to come.





At Riley's Way, we know effective leadership is anchored in kindness, empathy, and an inclusive community and young people are the key to advancing social change. Riley's Way's young changemakers are emerging leaders in business, nonprofits, public service, and their communities.

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## WHAT WE DO

Riley's Way is a national nonprofit that invests in and supports the next generation of kind leaders, providing young people with the programs, support, and inclusive community they need to thrive as changemakers. We support these young leaders to envision change and achieve it.

## OUR IMPACT

To date, we have invested in more than 3,000 young people across the country with over \$2 million in grants and programming, impacting hundreds of thousands of people.

**300+**

Call For Kindness Fellows  
& Continuation Grant Winners

**350+**

Council & Chapter  
Members

**400+**

Youth Leadership  
Retreat Participants

**800+**

Alumni Community  
of Changemakers

## OUR VALUES

### Kindness

Kindness is an active choice and the intentional practice of compassion, respect, extending oneself, and showing genuine care for others.

### Inclusive Community

An inclusive community values and celebrates everyone's unique voices and experiences. It provides a space that fosters belonging, where diverse voices are heard and amplified, intersectional identities are honored, and authentic relationships and meaningful friendships are cultivated.

### Empathy

Empathy is the willingness to see, feel, listen, and learn beyond your own lived experiences. It requires actively listening and learning from others.

### Youth Leadership

Young people are at the forefront of decision-making, creating change, mobilizing their peers, and contributing innovative solutions to pressing issues they care about most, with adult allyship and support from others.



# OUR TIMELINE



2014

Riley Sandler Memorial  
Foundation Earned 501C3 Status

2015

First Program Director Hired  
Riley's Way Program with  
Elementary Schools Began

2016

**Council Program Launched**

**First Council Created:**  
TYWLS East Harlem and  
The Nightingale-Bamford School

2020



COVID

Communications Associate and Program Manager Hired  
Covid-19 Response Grants Dispersed  
Programs Pivot to Virtual  
**Buddy-Reading Program Established**



**Rang NASDAQ Closing Bell**



**Continuation Grants for C4K Alumni Launched**  
**22 C4K Projects Funded**



**3 C4K Continuation Grants Funded**



**First Virtual YLR**

2021

Communications Associate, Communications Director,  
and Program Coordinator Hired

**Youth Advisory Board (YAB) Established**

**First Chapter Piloted**

Virtual Poker Event Hosted



**First C4K Special Category Established:**  
**Food Insecurity**

**30 C4K Projects Funded**  
**3 C4K Continuation Grants Funded**



**Second Virtual YLR Hosted**





## 2017

New Name Announced:  
**Riley's Way Foundation**

Second Program Director Hired

**Second Council Created:**  
TYWLS Astoria and Hewitt School

Hosted Author Event Featuring  
R.J. Palacio (Wonder)

Inaugural Community Fundraiser

## 2018

Experts Convened to Help  
Inform Organizational  
Strategy

Mission, Vision, and Strategic  
Plan Pivoted to Focus on  
**Teen Changemakers**

## 2019

Executive Director Hired

**Third Council Created:**  
TYWLS of the Bronx and Horace Mann



**Launch of First National Program:**  
**Call For Kindness (C4K)**

**15 C4K Projects Funded**



**Youth Leadership Retreat (YLR)**  
**Launched**

## 2022

Five-year Strategic Plan Adopted

Engagement and Events Director Hired

**First All Boys Chapter piloted**  
at The Browning School

**Visionaries Initiative Launched**



**C4K Expanded To Colleges**  
**36 C4K Projects Funded**  
**8 C4K Continuation Grants Funded**



**First Virtual Networking Retreat and**  
**First In-person YLR (post-Covid)**

## 2023

Communications and Development Associate  
and Program Coordinator Hired

**First College Chapter Established**  
at University of Michigan

**Alumni Program Created and First Alumni Meet-up Event**



**First In-person C4K Retreat**  
**First In-person Continuation Retreat**  
**40 C4K Projects Funded**  
**18 C4K Continuation Grants Funded**



**First Gender-Inclusive YLR**



# "PRIORITIZING KINDNESS, EMBRACING CHANGE, AND GROWING IN COMMUNITY"

RILEY'S WAY'S FIRST-EVER EMPLOYEE:

## Director of Operations Laura Dunn

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**Laura Dunn holds the distinction of being Riley's Way's first-ever employee! Formerly known as Laura Kikuchi (she got married in the summer of 2022 to her partner, Conor), she was an Intern at [Community Resource Exchange](#), and Riley's Way was one of her clients.**

"In January 2016, I was supporting Katie Leonberger (then CEO of CRE and now a Riley's Way Board member) with helping Riley's Way figure out the mission, vision, and programming. When I graduated in May, I needed a full-time job, and Riley's Way needed a full-time employee. Eight years later, here I am!"

Before starting at Riley's Way, Laura studied Nonprofit Management at Columbia University, earning her Master of Social Work. Before that, she worked at the National Center for Victims of Crime in Washington, DC, as the Program Coordinator for the Stalking Resource Center.

A mission-driven professional, Laura has long been drawn to the role kindness plays in work and life.

"I have always wanted to help others, and helping through kindness is a meaningful purpose in life. I believe in the goodness of others. Knowing that I work with a team that wants to make the world better and that we are supporting young people with the long-term drive to create positive change is what gets me out of bed each day. In today's divided world, it is so important to prioritize kindness as a leadership trait so that we are producing empathetic and inclusive leaders for our communities in the future."

While the original mission of Riley's Way has evolved, its core purpose has remained the same.



"When I first started working at Riley's Way, we were focused on empathy education for third and fourth-grade students, so it was very different! However, kindness, empathy, and connection-making have always been core values of Riley's Way. We first started working with high school students to help us with programming for the younger students and soon realized that we could help young adults make real change if we shifted our focus. Since then, we've grown to work with young people between the ages of 13-22 and even older with our Alumni programming."

Laura is honored to have worked with so many wonderful young changemakers during her time at Riley's Way, including Julia Huth.

"Julia first came to Riley's Way through our 2019 Youth Leadership Retreat and has joined every Retreat since. Watching her take on different leadership roles, challenge herself, and continue to work with Riley's Way has been incredible. She has supported our work through a myriad of projects and recently joined our [Youth Advisory Board](#). She was accepted to the University of Michigan and will be helping us start our first college Chapter there in the fall!"

Laura has witnessed a lot of change during her tenure, including within herself:

"I have changed a lot since I started working at Riley's Way. I say to my friends and family that I used to be a nice person, but now I am a kind person. I am so inspired by all of the young people I work with that it pushes me to be a better, more inclusive person. I am always learning from them and working to be a mentor and inspiration to them, too. As Riley's Way has grown, it has challenged me to delegate more – it is surprising how difficult it was for me to go from the only person on the team who has to do everything to a member of a now nine-person organization. However, working with my talented coworkers has allowed me to better focus on my work and trust that they will be doing the same. On a personal note, since I started at Riley's Way, I have met my now-husband, gotten married, and adopted the sweetest dog, Lucy!"

While Laura has always had a personal connection to the [Call For Kindness \(C4K\)](#) program, which she started "with a lot of help" in 2019, she's proud to see how C4K has grown and has remained connected to many of the young leaders who have gone through the program. She also appreciates that there is now a new director of the program (Cheyenne Rosado).

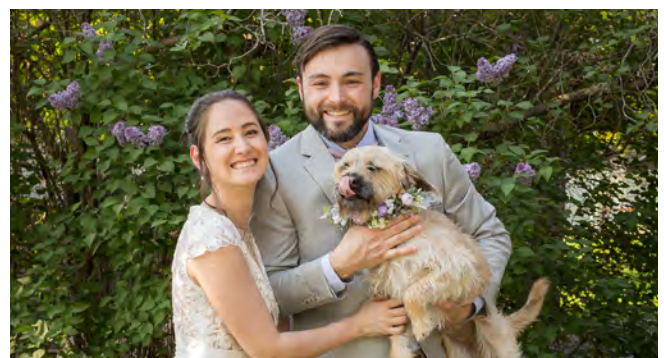
"I love knowing we have created something that will last, providing skills and fostering meaningful relationships."

In honor of Laura's beloved grandmother, [Yuriko](#), the pioneering dancer, choreographer, and keeper of Martha Graham's flame, Riley's Way supports one C4K Award in a special dance and performing arts category, the [Yuriko Kikuchi Arigato Award](#).

Laura reflected on this Award's significance for her and her family during a speech at the 2023 C4K Retreat:


"My grandmother, my aunt, and my cousin were involved in the dance community. I did not follow in their footsteps, but my grandfather was a social worker, so my brother and I are both following in his. Having the ability to bridge the two worlds through the Arigato Award and use my skills to keep my grandmother's legacy alive is an incredible opportunity. This is the second year we have offered the Award, and the 2023 winners, [Wired 4 Dance](#), wrote in their application that they studied the same technique as my grandma, which brought me to tears. It is truly an honor to be able to mentor young dancers, even though I have two left feet!"

Even if dancing is not a skill Laura will claim, she says Riley's Way is like no other organization because "I get to work with amazing people and watch the world become a better place."



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PHOTO (RIGHT): LAURA WITH HER PARTNER, CONOR, AND BELOVED PUP, LUCY, ON THEIR WEDDING DAY



# "IGNITING PASSION AND PURPOSE — ONE ROBOT AT A TIME"

WATCH NOW ▶

2022 C4K Fellow and founder of RoboRecovery, William Bai, spoke during Riley's Way's first-ever Call For Kindness (C4K) Retreat, which took place February 10–12, 2023, in Washington, DC.

## CHANGEMAKER SPOTLIGHT

### William Bai

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**It's a Wednesday evening at the library in my second semester at Tulane University in New Orleans, LA. At Tulane, I need to complete community service to graduate, and this Wednesday evening, I am searching the internet for somewhere to complete my service. One of my first ideas is to mentor an educational robotics team at a local school. And while that is oddly particular for most, it seems like the most logical thing for me.**

In middle and high school, I was thoroughly obsessed with robotics. I thought it was so fun to turn some plastic or metal into an animate being that could move around, could sense the world around it. And I think to myself, "You know what, if I enjoyed robotics so much, I want to facilitate robotics for students as my service opportunity."

So, I jumped on Google, and after 30 minutes of searching, I cannot find a single robotics club in a New Orleans public school.

Interesting.

I could find plenty of results from the private schools in the area. But not one from a public school. So, I kept digging. I eventually found a remotely related news article from a few years back. This article makes some passing reference to a cut in New Orleans after-school budgets.

I begin to wonder, "Can these public schools afford robotics programs?" Turns out, for the most part, no.

When I found out about this, I felt really frustrated. I grew up practically surrounded by extracurricular opportunities like robotics, and I believe that every child should have the same or better opportunities than I did.

But the worst part was that no one was doing anything about this issue, and there was certainly no service opportunity. And so, by then, it's already 11pm, and I am walking back to my dorm, tired and grumpy but just awake enough to where you start just thinking random thoughts. And the silliest thought comes to me. What if I created my own service opportunity? I saw a community issue I really cared about, and no one was doing anything about it. Why couldn't I be the first?

**And so, I started a free after-school robotics program called [RoboRecovery](#) the next fall.**

And it's no walk in the park. I had to find schools willing to work with some college kid, recruit volunteers, apply for funding, and ask for donations of equipment.



Essentially, the stars had to align, and if it did not, the after-school program would fall apart. So, in the weeks leading up to our first program, I am a nervous ball of stress, but on the first days of the program, I realize my struggles are nothing compared to the obstacles that my students face just growing up. We start our first program with this organization that mentors many boys from families living near the poverty line.

One of these students is Dylan, and as I chat with him, I cannot even begin to imagine the obstacles Dylan faces just to be where he is.

But regardless, Dylan is a pain in the butt to work with. Every Monday and Thursday, Dylan shows up to make a scene, riling them up and turning robotics club into an awful symphony between younger boys with high-pitched squeals and older boys whose voices are just beginning to crack. My volunteers and I, as well as our ears, cannot handle this mess.

Eventually, I got the courage to confront Dylan after class. I'm trying to be as nice as possible to a 5th grader.

*And so, I say, "Dylan, be honest with me, do you really want to be here?"*

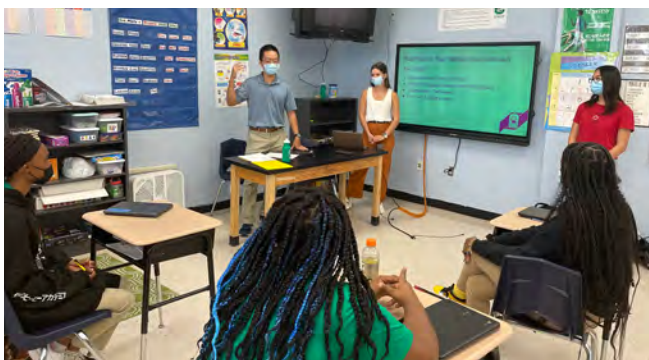
Dylan looks down and says nothing.

I'm trying to work a response out of him:  
*"Dylan, you're not gonna make me upset if you say you don't."*

There is this long pause, and I think that made Dylan uncomfortable enough to talk.  
*"Sometimes I just don't get it."*

I try to clarify, *"What don't you get?"*  
*"I dunno, the whole coding thing."*

And at that point, I had a hypothesis. Dylan had fallen behind, and instead of asking for help, he hid it so perfectly by being the troublemaker. And I resolve to start working more closely with Dylan.



**RoboRecovery** works to dismantle socioeconomic barriers to STEM enrichment for K-12 students in the Greater New Orleans area, specifically in robotics.



LEARN MORE →

I started quizzing him because he couldn't hide what he did not understand if he had to explain. And the more we did this, I saw his eyes open wide, and he shouts, "OOOOHH, I get it."

And rather than asking him questions, he starts asking me questions like, "How can my robot find an object?"

He is getting it, and he's excited to come to robotics, and I am equally as excited to be learning.

It's now a year and a half later. I am talking to Dylan's mentor and learned that he is the lead programmer on their robotics team, which is an incredible turnaround.

*I tell Dylan, "You've really changed a lot, I guess you got a lot out of robotics."*

Rather than looking down while he talks to me, as he did before, Dylan looks at me confidently and says, *"Oh, for sure."*

I was pleasantly shocked. I want to probe further and say, *"That's awesome, do you want to do something with robotics in your career?"*

And he says, *"Kinda, I want to major in chemical engineering in college."*

As I drive home that day, there's a lot of traffic, which gives me time to think.

"Chemical engineering"? Heck, when I was Dylan's age, I did not know that those two words went together. How did Dylan know chemical engineering? And then I realized I had gone full circle.

Back when I couldn't find a robotics club to volunteer with, I set out to create that opportunity in a community without it. And now, seeing that Dylan sees himself as a future engineer because of robotics made me feel so awesome inside.

And even as people were honking at me and cutting me off in rush hour traffic, I could not resist the urge to smile the entire way home. I realized that even as hard as it was to work with Dylan, I really enjoyed it and want to continue to work with people like him.



# "TURNING TOWARD OPPORTUNITIES AND EXPERIENCES THAT BRING LIGHT"

CHANGEMAKER SPOTLIGHT

**Daphne Zuckerman**

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Daphne Zuckerman shares that her experience becoming a [2019 Call For Kindness \(C4K\) Fellow](#) was an unforgettable leadership experience she still holds close years later.

"The resources and community of the program have extended far beyond what I could have imagined. My project, EASE (Enabling Access to STEAM Education), brought monthly science, technology, and arts programming to homeless shelters for women and children. The grant provided by the Fellowship allowed me to provide children with creative and robust hands-on experiences such as making slime, creating light-up Valentine's Day cards, and exploding potions. Moreso, the workshops helped cultivate my leadership skills and led to meaningful relationships with other Fellows, some of whom I still keep in touch with today!"

She continued, "At a time when it feels like we are at a precipice of necessary change, Riley's Way is a constant reminder that we can turn to a new generation of changemakers to lead the charge. It is a community where young people feel championed to use their voices and creativity to make a difference, grounded by the core tenets of kindness."

Daphne referred to Riley's Way's ability to "cultivate a community of kindness and friendship that drives this next generation of leaders," and she shared some news about an exciting role she will soon take on at [Insight Partners](#), where Riley's Way co-founder Ian Sandler works as Managing Director and Chief Operating Officer.

"I could not be more excited to join Insight Partners next summer as an Investment Analyst Intern, where I will gain exposure to venture and PE (price to earnings ratio) through sourcing companies, speaking with entrepreneurs, and learning about the lifecycle of a deal. Part of what drew me into venture capital was that it's an industry where you can grow new and innovative ideas. Since Riley's Way, I've sought out similar spaces that bring together people who want to create change, and this role feels like an extension of that goal. It is a full-circle moment for me after starting at Riley's Way four years ago and getting to know Ian throughout the years."



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PHOTO (LEFT): 2019 C4K FELLOW DAPHNE (EASE) CONNECTS WITH PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS.



## C4K PROJECT OVERVIEW

### Enabling Access to STEAM Education (EASE)

partners with organizations to provide an after-school program to children ages 5-12 focusing on science, technology, engineering, art and mathematics.

[LEARN MORE](#) →

Daphne believes that Riley's Way's value of inclusivity has played a role in her leadership style.

"Part of what makes a good leader is investing in others to have the confidence and skills they need to make an impact, and I've found that inclusivity plays a huge role in that. Creating an inclusive environment that celebrates differences of thought and experience allows every team member to contribute meaningfully to the group. Everyone will have different strengths, interests, and skill sets, but an inclusive environment allows a team or project to be greater than the sum of its parts."

When asked about the best advice she's ever been given, Daphne shared:

"I recently learned from a friend that young sunflowers follow the sun when they're beginning to grow. Their advice was to be a sunflower and turn toward opportunities and experiences that bring you light and happiness. As a young person trying to find my own path, this has been a grounding and impactful idea."

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PHOTO (BELOW): DAPHNE AND EASE PARTICIPANTS ENJOY A SWEET TREAT.



"Riley's Way has been a home away from home since I started as a Council member in high school...The connections I made with staff and young leaders kept me grounded and led me to find my purpose."

THAIS SALAS

RILEY'S WAY PROGRAM COORDINATOR  
AND COUNCIL ALUM







## RILEY'S WAY YOUTH LEADERSHIP RETREAT

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 29 TO SUNDAY, OCTOBER 1, 2023

The words "magical," "inspiring," "hopeful," "community-focused," "invigorating," and "fun" stitched the proverbial thread and sentiment of Riley's Way's fifth annual Youth Leadership Retreat (YLR) held at picturesque Tyler Hill Camp in Pennsylvania from Friday, September 29 to Sunday, October 1, 2023.





Aptly named "**From Roots to Ripples: Leadership and the Power of Identity**" by 2020 C4K Fellow (Modern Divergence) and Riley's Way Intern Faith Ajanaku, the Retreat hosted over 120 young changemakers nationwide, our largest gathering to date.

"It's simply amazing to see what is possible during just a couple of days when you get like-minded changemakers together from different backgrounds and give them time to connect away from screens," shared Riley's Way's Co-Founder Ian Sandler.





## FRIDAY

Even the torrential rains that hammered parts of the Northeast on Friday could not dampen the excitement of camp participants arriving on buses. After participants collected their nametags and swag items that included generous book donations from Riley's Way Visionaries Leon Logothetis (*Go Be Brave*) and Natalie Silverstein (*Simple Acts Day-by-Day: A 2024 Planner*), a group of dedicated team mentors - Abigail, Agha, Andreanela, Aneesha, Anika, Dylan, Grayson, Jiahao, Kristie, Lauren, Manavi, Michal, Tati, Tatiana, and Tiara - helped their bunks become acclimated and embrace a sense of camp community and identity.

Later on Friday, Executive Director Dr. Christine O'Connell warmly welcomed everyone, facilitating interactive activities emphasizing the importance of being open, vulnerable, empathetic, and kind.



## SATURDAY

On Saturday morning, an interactive session delved into how we can lean into all aspects of our identities, moderated by Agha Haider, Co-Founder of Riley's Way's Youth Advisory Board and a 2020 C4K Fellow (Literacy Initiative). Panelists included Paul Aviles, Project Coordinator at AHRC NYC, Alia Carponter-Walker, Director of Equity and Community Life at the Hewitt School, Jiahao Guo, Georgetown University Student and 2023 C4K Fellow (Concourse International), and Andreanela Ordoñez Carbajal, a UCLA student and 2021 C4K Fellow (*Taboo Talkz*).

When Agha asked, "Is it possible to have a conversation with someone who doesn't respect your identity?" Andreanela emphatically noted why self-care is paramount and that leaving the room is sometimes the only option. "Some people don't deserve my energy. My safety is my number one priority."

**"I am building toward a life dedicated to service and kindness. I am building toward getting a better understanding of the role and impact I can have on the societies and communities I care for."**

**FAITH AJANAKU**

2020 C4K FELLOW AND C4K INTERN



Paul addressed an audience question about balancing universal self-acceptance while embracing one's identity: "In a world with so much negativity, I don't want to turn into that. I want to leave this world much better." Paul also noted, "I will always be an equity over equality guy."

Alia reminded the audience of the power of fully embracing who you are: "You do not ever have to make yourself smaller to fit into someone else's mold...it's all about kindness first, and then everything else follows."

Jiahao, passionate about traveling to other countries and immersing in different cultures, noted the beauty of building understanding between ourselves and others to learn and grow as kind and empathetic leaders. "It's important to deepen engagement with others."

YLR Participant Chelsea Osei from Illinois shared how identity is a significant factor for her when it comes to accessibility: "It's not about the checkboxes you tick off, but ensuring that the specific experiences of the whole community are represented – even if we all look the same."

**"Kindness reminds us that we go farther and make a greater impact if we live according to collaboration and unity rather than competition and division. It allows us to address challenges with humanity and empathy."**

**NAYA HOUGHEN**

RILEY'S WAY PROGRAM COORDINATOR

Ikimot Siyanbola, a high school senior from New York who learned about Riley's Way during her summer 2023 internship, attended the Retreat to share her experiences and learn more from peers passionate about social justice. "I want to speak for those who don't have a voice."

The Retreat also comprised identity workshops where facilitators and participants explored topics such as "Sharing Your Identity Through Storytelling," "Talking About the Many Who(s) I Am," "Looking Beyond the Borders: Building International/Intercultural Understanding," "What Should I Even Say? Identity and Networking," "Creating and Maintaining a Community of Inclusion," and "The Power of a Photograph: Visible vs. Invisible Identities and Identifiers."

Ian walked around the dining hall during dinner, happily taking questions from participants. YLR Participant Yordanos Lemma of Pennsylvania asked, "What do you hope for the future of Riley's Way?" Ian responded, "I want us to grow like crazy, to be everywhere, and for each of you to pay it forward." He added, "The goal is to have Riley's Way synonymous with kind leadership."

Along with engaged and intimate affinity group spaces where participants bonded over shared identities and displayed their allyship, Saturday closed out with Retreat participants taking the time to rock climb, sun print, tie-dye, dance, and hike, as well as do yoga, kickball, pickleball, board games, letter-writing, shout-outs, toast s'mores around a campfire, and sing happy birthday to Riley's Way Co-Founder Mackenzie Sandler.




## SUNDAY

On Sunday, Board Member Mindy Jacobs led the traditional closing circle, where participants expressed how life-changing the weekend was. So many participants acknowledged their awe and gratitude for deeply connecting with others in such a short period.

In the end, eight-year-old Ruby Sandler profoundly summarized why the weekend was so incredible:

"We are all here to be kind leaders like my sister Riley was. We can all do this. We just need to dig it out from the bottom of our hearts to the top of our hearts."



2021 C4K FELLOW AND FOUNDER  
OF COMPUTERS 4 PEOPLE (C4P)  
DYLAN ZAJAC WAS A PANELIST AT  
RILEY'S WAY'S FIRST-EVER CALL  
FOR KINDNESS (C4K) RETREAT.

# "NEVER NEGOTIATE WITH YOURSELF"

## CHANGEMAKER SPOTLIGHT

### Dylan Zajac

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**2021 Call For Kindness Fellow Dylan Zajac, 19,** is focused on balancing his academic studies as a Business Administration major at Babson College and his role as the founder of **Computers 4 People**, a nonprofit he started during his sophomore year of high school.

Computers 4 People (C4P) was founded in 2019 to address e-waste pollution and bridge the expanding gap in digital accessibility.

When asked about the early stages of forming his nonprofit, Dylan shared: "I didn't doubt in my mind that this would work. Later, I faced countless challenges surrounding funding, sustainability, age, and balancing school, but I overcame them one at a time."

Over the years, C4P has made significant strides in narrowing the digital divide by donating over 1,900 refurbished computers to individuals with low-income backgrounds, along with free computer literacy and building classes and internet services.

C4P also partners with 200+ nonprofits and schools across New Jersey, New York City, and Massachusetts, allowing individuals in need to connect with C4P.

"Riley's Way has truly been a game changer for Computers 4 People, providing invaluable support and guidance," Dylan shared in [Riley's Way: Fostering The Next Generation Of Leaders \(Forbes\)](#). "As a young entrepreneur, their instrumental role in supporting my vision has been transformative. They have not only provided funding, but they have forged partnerships with mentors, lawyers, and business leaders that have helped me succeed."

Dylan became involved with Riley's Way when he earned the [Call For Kindness \(C4K\)](#) for his work with C4P in 2021, and he now sits on Riley's Way Youth Advisory Board and mentors new Fellows and Riley's Way Council members. Dylan also spoke on our fundraising panel at the [C4K Retreat](#) in D.C. this past February.

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PHOTO (RIGHT): A DELIGHTED RECIPIENT EMBRACED A NEW LAPTOP, AS PART OF C4P'S COLLABORATION WITH AT&T AND NUMEROUS DEDICATED PARTNERS. (COURTESY OF C4P IG.)



## C4K PROJECT OVERVIEW

**Computers 4 People (C4P)** was founded in 2019 to address e-waste pollution and bridge the expanding gap in digital accessibility.



[LEARN MORE](#) →

"I'm drawn to the story and people behind Riley's Way. It's an inspirational organization that believed in me when I started with Computers 4 People," Dylan shared. "I enjoy getting to know the staff and use my experience to mentor more young people trying to make an impact."

Dylan is committed to making a meaningful difference in the world through his nonprofit:

"Seeing our organization's impact on people's lives and getting multiple phone calls and emails daily from recipients telling me they received a job or are accessing school keeps me motivated. While I get stressed, it pushes me to work harder, knowing people benefit from what I do."

In the next five years, look out for C4P providing digital inclusion services nationwide. "I'm currently building the framework to duplicate C4P across the country to serve the most vulnerable communities. We are about to open our second office in Boston, Massachusetts."

While Dylan shares that he gets a lot of inspiration from other business leaders, content creators, and 'most importantly, friends and family,' his best advice for anyone willing to listen is "Never negotiate with yourself."



**"My biggest inspiration is my friends. They have accomplished many things, overcame small obstacles, and faced big hardships, and each still finds a reason to smile at the end of the day or do something that makes them happy."**

**CHRISTINA ALVAREZ**

COMMUNICATIONS AND DEVELOPMENT  
COORDINATOR

# "LESSONS FROM SLIME: WHAT I LEARNED TEACHING SCIENCE TO CAMP KINDERGARTNERS"



## CHANGEMAKER SPOTLIGHT

### Sriya Tallapragada

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This spotlight is an adaptation of a speech Sriya shared at Riley's Way's first-ever Call For Kindness Retreat, which took place February 10-12, 2023, in Washington, DC.

WATCH NOW 

There is nothing more terrifying than being alone with a group of kindergartners. But somehow, this is what I found myself in last summer.

I find myself standing in front of an old science classroom door, with a cart of science supplies trailing behind me, mentally preparing myself for what was to come.

I had no idea what to expect, especially considering this was the first time I would be running a camp without any adults present. Still, I talked myself into opening the door and entering the classroom. What I saw immediately made me want to turn back.

Inside were about fifteen kindergartners. Half of them were running around, chasing each other in what looked like a game of tag. The other half were crying, some even throwing temper tantrums, their faces bright red as they shrieked.

It certainly didn't help that the classroom was hot. Really hot. Turns out science classrooms over the summer in New Jersey don't have AC. Just perfect.

I immediately ran in, throwing my hands in the air, separating the students fighting, stopping someone from running around, and giving tissue papers to those crying. I wish my attempts were helpful, but I think I only made them more freaked out. Also, I was only one person, and there were only so many kindergartners I could help at once. It was like the second I consoled one from crying, another would be a mini emergency I had to attend to. Only 20 minutes into the camp, I was quickly exhausted.

That's when I decided to pull out the science experiments I had brought. As a child with a lot of energy, science experiments were what distracted me and calmed me down. I was hoping it could have the same effect on the kids.

**The experiment I had brought for that day was slime. It's relatively simple: you take the glue, mix in saline solution and baking powder, and then add whatever food coloring you want. Surely there's no way to mess this up, right? WRONG!**

Within seconds, the table was covered in glue, baking powder spilled everywhere, and kids chased each other to get food coloring on each other's clothes.



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PHOTO: A YOUTH PARTICIPANT WITH THEIR SLIME PROJECT.





[GirlsWhoSTEAM](#) is a 501c3 nonprofit organization dedicated to empowering womxn in stem and closing the leadership gender gap by investing in community, coaching, and connections for girls and through free events and workshops.

[LEARN MORE](#) →

I watched in horror as the entire room was transformed into a saline solution slip and slide, knowing that I would have to clean it up.

There was one girl who was actually doing the work, though. She carefully mixed the saline solution into the glue, but she spilled too much in when she added the baking powder. The slime grew stiff and separated easily.

"Here! Fix this!"

She shoved the slime in my face, and I desperately tried to make it better, adding in glue and materials that I thought would reduce the density. To my dismay, it wasn't working.

She did not take it well when I tried to explain this to her. "You can't even fix my slime? What kind of teacher are you!" She fumed. She stomped away, her pigtails swaying behind, leaving me with a messy room, screaming kids, and a slime that wouldn't yield.

After the first day was finally over, I packed my bags and began the silent drive home. My mom kept asking me questions, wondering how the first day went, but I gave boring answers, still figuring out what happened myself.

By the time I had arrived home, I had two conclusions: 1) the girl was right. I had no place in that classroom trying to teach those kindergarten students. I wasn't even qualified myself. I'm 16, for god's sake, and I wouldn't know how to teach them science! 2) I refuse to spend another day in that camp. Forget about two more weeks.

When I shared these discoveries with my mom, she sighed, but instead of letting me quit, she encouraged me to stick with the camp. "You never know," she said. "You might find them growing on you."

It wasn't the answer I was looking to hear, but I decided to trust her. The next day, I returned with my kit, bracing myself for the worst. I did this for the next two weeks.

Turns out my mom was right, as moms so often annoyingly are. I soon decided to change my approach. These kids weren't listening to me when I tried to be their teacher, so maybe I should try becoming their friend.

For the next day, I stayed and solved fights, listened to their stories about summer vacations, and essentially learned more about them as people. I was shocked by what I discovered, but to my relief, it seemed to be working. They soon were listening to what I was saying.

It also was a lot easier to run through experiments with them once we were friends. They dictated the curriculum just as much as I did. Turns out they really liked making slime, so with patience, I taught them how to do it without making a huge mess. They listened.

By the end of camp, I was actually sad to see them go. The yelling girl with the pigtails left by giving me a hug and gifting me with slime she made, this time perfect. "For you," she said. "For being a great teacher — and my best friend."

Working with kids for that long is not easy. But if you stick with it long enough, you might find yourself learning more from them than they'll learn from you.



PHOTO: 2022 C4K FELLOW SRIYA (GIRLSWHOSTEAM) CONDUCTS A SLIME WORKSHOP.

# STAFF

## MEET RILEY'S WAY'S NEWEST STAFF MEMBERS



CHRISTINA ALVAREZ

### Creating Change with Kindness at the Forefront

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Christina Alvarez began interning with Riley's Way in September 2021 before joining the staff full-time on August 1, 2023 – and she's thrilled to be part of the team!

"I've learned and grown more than I could have ever imagined. Through the many projects I have worked on, I've used my skills and voice to create change. I'm excited to continue to create change and support young changemakers in impacting their communities."

Riley's Way's inclusive and nurturing community motivates Christina in her daily work, and she is grateful for the community.

"The Riley's Way community is an inclusive space that teaches young people how to be kind leaders and encourages leaders of all ages to lead with kindness at the forefront. This community is a space for people from all backgrounds to learn from one another and truly change the world. It's also where people are encouraged and supported in following their passions, offering many opportunities to learn, grow, and achieve their goals. I'm thrilled to see what comes in the better, kinder future Riley's Way is creating."



THAIS SALAS

### My Home Away From Home

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Thais Salas attended the Hewitt School in New York City, where she was a member of the Hewitt and TYWLS Astoria Riley's Way Council during her sophomore, junior, and senior years. After graduating in 2019, she enrolled at Cornell University, majoring in Human Development and minoring in Global Health.

Thais was hired as the Council & Chapter Program Coordinator in July 2023 – and she became the first Alumni to join Riley's Way staff.

"Having been part of a Council in high school, I am learning more of the logistics behind leading this program...Whether it is through collaborating on a project or having a quick check-in, I have been met with kindness and empathy every day. I hope to continue doing the same for others and inspire young leaders to reach their full potential."

Thais is passionate about creating spaces for young leaders to cultivate their purpose and find the support they need.

"Riley's Way has always been a home away from home. Being a part of this community has allowed me to find my purpose in life and has given me the space to be the person I am today. Everyone who is a part of Riley's Way is like family to me. We continuously support each other and find new ways to make change in our communities. This community is special to me because, as a collective, we embody kindness, empathy, and compassion."





## RILEY'S WAY STAFF AND INTERN CORNER

<b>Faith Ajanaku</b> .....	Call For Kindness Intern
<b>Christina Alvarez</b> .....	Communications and Development Coordinator
<b>Laura Kikuchi Dunn</b> .....	Director of Operations
<b>Naya Houchen</b> .....	Program Coordinator
<b>Stephanie Kingston</b> .....	Engagement and Events Director
<b>Dr. Christine O'Connell</b> .....	Executive Director
<b>Kris Qiu</b> .....	Communications Intern
<b>Cheyenne Rosado</b> .....	Program Director
<b>Thais Salas</b> .....	Program Coordinator
<b>Lauren Shenkman</b> .....	Director of Partnerships and Programs
<b>Tatiana Simmons</b> .....	Alumni Engagement Intern
<b>Ikimot Siyanbola</b> .....	Communications Intern
<b>Shonda Smith</b> .....	Director of Communications





**“Although young in age, I know I can have BIG dreams.  
And with commitment and dedication, those dreams can turn into a reality.  
I am committed, I am dedicated, I plan on making history!”**

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**AVERY KELLEY**

2022 C4K FELLOW AND FOUNDER AND CEO OF INSPIRED MEELANIN, LLC



# IN THE NEWS

In 2023, a wide range of media outlets, including *Forbes*, *Psychology Today*, *BK Reader*, *Good Morning America*, and more, featured Riley's Way staff and young changemakers! [Visit our website](#) for a complete list of press featuring Riley's Way.



A Local Nonprofit Pivots Because  
Of Recent Book Challenges, Bans  
In Florida



These BK Teens Created  
myNetworkHer Platform To  
Attract More Girls To Stem



San Diego Teen Shares Helping  
Heart With Young Adults With  
Special Needs



CHARITY MATTERS\*

Charity Matters Podcast -  
"Riley's Way"



Riley's Way: Fostering The Next  
Generation Of Leaders



Turning Tragedy Into A  
Kindness Movement



Christine O'Connell: The Leading  
Voice Of Empathy In STEM



Student-led Tech Organization  
Codology Wins Call For Kindness  
Competition



Lynnfield Teen's Campaign of  
Kindness Garner's State, National  
Recognition



To Attract and Retain Top  
Gen Z Talent, Managers Need  
To Be 'Servant Leaders'



Kindness Matters In Our Leaders



Riley's Way Foundation Envisions  
A Future Where Kind Leaders  
Build A Better World



Understand The Impact Of  
Making Connections Outside  
Your Age Group



Simple Acts, Big Impact:  
Celebrating Teen Changemakers

Hosted by Natalie Silverstein, this podcast  
highlights and celebrates youth changemakers.



Chess Club Brings 'Noble Game'  
To Enthusiasts of All Ages



# OUR BOARD OF DIRECTORS

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PHOTO: YOUTH ADVISORY BOARD MEMBERS DYLAN ZAJAC, AGHA HAIDER, MICHAL RUPRECHT, AND GIA GAMBINO

## **Ian Sandler**

Co-Founder & Board Chair

## **Mackenzie Sandler**

Co-Founder

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Secretary

## **Paul Burke**

## **Scott Eisenberg**

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YAB Co-Chair

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## **John Horner**

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## **Oseloka Idigbe**

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## **Lauren Hyman Kaplan**

## **Terry Kaplan**

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## **David Kerstein**

## **Katie Leonberger**

## **Lindsey K. Levine, Ph.D.**

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## **Anika Nayak**

## **Dylan Zajac**

## **Victoria Hernandez**

## **Julia Huth**

## **Phoebe Grace**

## **Nia Huff**

## **Everest Maya-Tudor**

## **Sonika Menon**

## **Michal Ruprecht**

## **Tiara Soto**

## **Jonathan Tamen**

## **Julia Westra**



# 2023 IN REVIEW

## A RECAP OF RILEY'S WAY EVENTS



### Inaugural Call For Kindness Retreat

Riley's Way's first-ever Call For Kindness Retreat was "The BEST weekend with the BEST people!" shared one attendee. The Retreat, held February 10-12 in Washington, D.C., convened the 2022 cohort of C4K Fellows and some Alumni for a weekend of learning, fun, and friendships — all in the spirit of growing as an effective and kind leader. Fellows heard from [Eva Maria Lewis](#), practiced telling their stories, and learned from an accomplished group of fundraisers.



### Regional Alumni Meet-Up

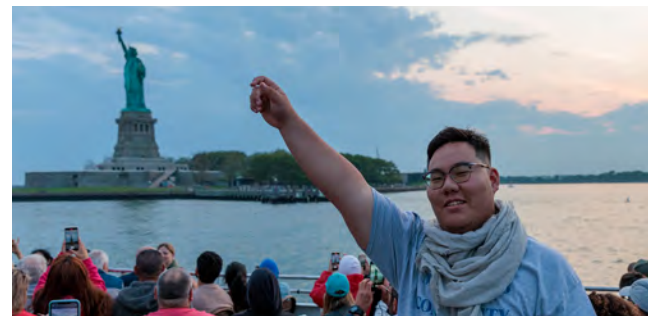
Held on Saturday, January 21, in Orlando, Florida, the inaugural Riley's Way Regional Alumni Meet-Up event included a service activity with the [Clean the World Foundation](#) and dinner where attendees heard from Call For Kindness Fellows, played Riley's Way trivia, and deepened connections.

The next Alumni meet-up is being planned for November 2023 in New York!



### Virtual Networking Workshop

On March 15, Riley's Way hosted a virtual Networking Workshop, which taught attendees the importance of kindness and empathy while curating connections. The evening's event commenced with four distinct workshops, all centered around the power of networking, and later moved into speed networking sessions. Participants then put their skills to work with over 24 industry professionals in various fields such as law, social work, fashion, public health, marketing, finance, non-profit, and more.



### Continuation Grant Retreat: Mentoring Builds Community

On June 9-11, Riley's Way held its inaugural Continuation Grant Retreat, hosting 25 Continuation Grant Fellows nationwide for an informative and fun weekend in New York City. Each Fellow learned the fundamentals of mentoring new C4K changemakers through the perspective of managing their own C4K projects and reflecting on the qualities they looked for in a mentor.





Riley's Way  
foundation

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