



**The Paper Smiles Project**

Project Management- Community Awareness

Atlee High School

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# I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The idea for The Paper Smiles Project came when my best friend, Baylee Buchanan, was battling intense mental health issues including an eating disorder. She stayed at a residential treatment center for six weeks over the summer of 2021, and I wrote letters in an effort to motivate her and make her smile. To make the letters more meaningful, I reached out to our close friends and had them write encouraging notes on cardstock. I collected about 100 notes and I put between three and five of them in each of the 19 letters I sent over the six weeks she spent at the treatment center. After she recovered, she told me that the notes brought her joy when times were hard and helped her stay motivated to keep fighting. I realized the power of kindness and empathy, and I decided to take the project to a larger scale to help more people in the community.



*Pictured right: Notes written during the original Paper Smiles Project hanging on Baylee's wall.*

In conversations I have had about mental health, many people think poor mental health equates to suicidal thoughts, which is not always true. There are a variety of mental health conditions, major and minor, that people experience every day. In fact, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that “more than 50% of Americans will be diagnosed with a mental illness or disorder at some point in their life” (2021, para. 5). Because of this, it is imperative that people begin to recognize mental health as a serious, but common, issue and treat it as such. We can do this by reversing the stigma surrounding mental health, encouraging people to speak up about their feelings, listening to those who may be struggling, and fostering kindness all around. These points, combined with Baylee’s struggle with mental health, led me to organize The Paper Smiles Project with the intent of opening the narrative around mental health and providing support to those who need it. The world could benefit from more kindness and empathy all around, and The Paper Smiles Project aims to stimulate just that.

### Milestone #1

Host events after school and in the community to write encouraging notes and educate about mental health.

### Milestone #2

Collect craft supplies to donate to Hanover Safe Place and the Ronald McDonald House to encourage creativity.

### Milestone #3

Set up two note-writing stations around Mechanicsville to encourage kindness and positivity.

### Milestone #4

Bring donations to Hanover Safe Place and the Ronald McDonald House with the help of Atlee DECA's leadership team.

**502**  
encouraging  
notes written  
and donated

**2**  
note-writing  
stations  
established

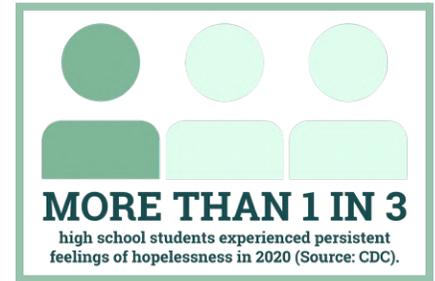
**≈70**  
project  
participants

## II. INITIATING

### A. Statement of Problem

According to a study by psychologists Giada Pietrabissa and Susan G. Simpson, “anxiety and panic, obsessive-compulsive symptoms, insomnia, digestive problems, as well as depressive symptoms and post-traumatic stress,” are among the psychological disorders emerging due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the (2020, para. 3). Though avoiding contact with others is essential to reduce infection rates, prolonged social isolation can lead to intense loneliness, depressive symptoms, and a negative self-perception (Pietrabissa & Simpson, 2020, paras. 11-12).

In October 2020, the CDC reported that “more than one in three high school students” had experienced “persistent feelings of hopelessness or sadness in the past year” (para. 2). Such data likely influenced the release of an advisory from the U.S. Surgeon General highlighting “the urgent need to address the nation’s youth mental health crisis” in December 2021 (para. 1). The CDC states that the most commonly diagnosed mental illnesses in youth are “ADHD, behavioral disorders, anxiety, and depression” (2021, para. 3). Though it is estimated that “14% of 10-19 year-olds experience mental health conditions,” these issues are largely “unrecognized and untreated,” according to the WHO (2021, para. 2).



### B. Project Scope and Expected Benefits

This data demonstrates why it has become vital to recognize the mental health challenges that people face daily. There is a massive stigma surrounding mental health that causes people to keep their feelings to themselves, meaning that many of those who struggle are doing so without help from a professional. To address this ongoing problem, the WHO calls for the prioritization of “non-pharmacological approaches” (2021, para. 19) to mental health treatment, which could include therapy or mindfulness. I recognize that it is not feasible for The Paper Smiles Project to curb the mental health crisis, but it is possible to provide encouragement and validation to those who are struggling and open the narrative around it.

As someone who has seen first-hand the effects of mental health disorders, I have become passionate about reversing the stigma associated with them. Mental health is not something that should be overlooked, and it should be treated with immense respect. Since it is not as easily recognizable as physical health, it is crucial that a person with poor mental health speaks up about their symptoms and that we, as a society, recognize and validate them.

The goal of The Paper Smiles Project is to inspire kindness in the community while emphasizing the importance of speaking up about and respecting mental health. This will be accomplished by hosting events for students to write encouraging notes to be given to people who may be in need of positivity in their lives. At these events, students will gain awareness on the significance of mental health in society and have an opportunity to better their own mental health through a creativity-based activity.

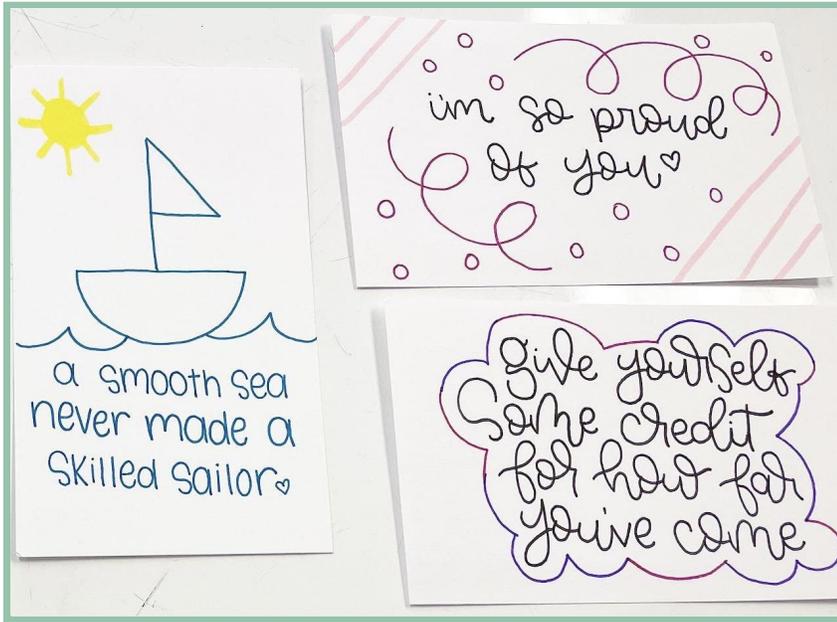
### C. Target Population

Primary	Secondary
<p>Since youth mental health is such an urgent issue, the primary market for The Paper Smiles Project is Mechanicsville teenagers ages 13 to 18. This will be the group attending note-writing events as well as directly learning about the importance of mental health.</p>	<p>The project aims to provide support to adults and families in the Mechanicsville and Richmond area who are in tough situations and could be experiencing mental health issues. This group will receive the encouraging notes written by the primary population.</p>

### III. PLANNING & ORGANIZING

#### A. Project Goals

**Write 500 encouraging notes:** This goal ensures that the impact of the project will reach many people who would benefit from it and provides a measurable metric to use to evaluate the project's success. A journal entry from *Frontiers in Psychology* explains that motivational quotes contribute to a positive self-esteem and better quality of life (Bulaj & Bedrov, 2018, paras. 1-2, 13-15). Since this article also mentions the importance of specific quotes rather than generic ones, I will put together a list of thoughtful quotes for attendees to reference while writing encouraging notes (paras. 6-12) (see appendix for quote list).



*Pictured above are three examples of encouraging notes using quotes from the list I put together.*

I reached out to Hanover Safe Place (HSP) and Ronald McDonald House Charities-Richmond (RMHC), which provide services to people in tough situations (see appendix for details), to ask if they would be interested in receiving the notes as donations. Both organizations were excited about the project. I also spoke with my DECA advisors, Mr. Stephen Hogan and Mrs. Karen Charney, the co-owner of my dance studio, Mrs. Glenda Sink-Hale, my Theory of Knowledge (TOK) teacher, Mrs. Kelly Pace, and my Girl Scout troop leader, Mrs. Tracy Surratt, to see if I could hold note-writing events within these respective groups.

**Collect craft supply donations:** Art is proven to reduce stress, so a craft supply collection drive was added to the project (Otto, 2016, para. 1). Donating craft supplies to Ronald McDonald House and Hanover Safe Place in addition to the encouraging notes allows the project's impact to continue beyond my direct involvement. It also gives an opportunity for people to support the project without attending note-writing events.

**Emphasize the importance of mental health:** In order to educate note-writing event attendees about the project's initiative, I plan to present data showing mental health's severity along with a video about how mental health is viewed in society. This video, as well as pictures taken during the execution of the project, will be posted on the @ThePaperSmilesProject Instagram account to help my initiative reach its target audience.

To ensure the initiative continues beyond my direct involvement, I will set up two note-writing stations in popular businesses or restaurants in my community. These stations will consist of a corkboard, push pins, a container for markers and index cards, and a small informational flier. This means people can write encouraging notes to other members of the community and spark a cycle of positivity.