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POETINIS: DRINK IN THE TRUTH

Art and Empathy

Overcoming mental-health stigmas in Latinx communities.



Kaylan Amezcua

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The pavement in front of us is a myriad of color, striped and swooping around into a circular disk. As we step closer I can see that the disk taking up most of the space is surrounded by a chameleon, which feels appropriately placed amongst the presence of so much color.

We're at The Los Angeles Eco-Village, a place of inspiration for third year Woodbury University student, Jackelyn "Jackie" Tejada. The Los Angeles Eco-Village is an "intentional community" located on Bimini Place and White House Place on the edge of Koreatown and Rampart Village.

If you are thinking, *what could be so eco about the concrete jungle?* that's the point. The 40 or so community members try to live environmentally conscious lifestyles, right down to caring for the soil and urban gardening, in the middle of one of the densest urban environments in the country.





Urban oasis

Jackie leads me across the street, past the chameleon and onto the steps of the large house surrounded by vegetation. Already I can see apples growing on a tree, saturated orange poppies everywhere, a huge compost bin and vegetables growing in this untamed garden. The plants' freedom reflects the artistic freedom that the members of the Eco Village have.

“So members painted this street art?” I ask Jackie.

“Most likely!” she replies. “They have hired local artists in the past but the community has been known to encourage their members to paint wherever they want.”

Despite her cheeriness, Jackie seems slightly anxious. This is understandable considering I've dragged her out to talk about her major, her ethnic background, her budding career and, oh yeah, her struggle with borderline Bipolar II Disorder.

Bipolar II is a spectrum bipolar disorder in which the elevated moods (“hypomania”) don't reach full-blown mania, but the diagnosis is characterized by more frequent bouts of depression, often referred to as “manic depression.”

Most of us are familiar with Bipolar disorders. In fact, some of our favorite celebrities have opened up about dealing with it (Mariah Carey did just one year ago!) and it's depicted in a multitude of TV shows and films: think *Silver Linings Playbook*.

Bipolar disorders affects millions of Americans. Perhaps you or one of your family members has it. But despite 82 percent of the U.S population knowing the disorder by name, only 64 percent are able to correctly define it, according to the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI). This naturally paves the way for misconceptions about the disorder — leaving sufferers vulnerable to misunderstanding, judgment and feeling alienated.

When we talk about mental illness, we're really talking about brain health. Biology plays a huge part in what makes all of us vulnerable to a diagnosable mental illness. In fact, NAMI reports that about 1 in 5 U.S. adults experience a diagnosable mental illness in a given year.

There are two types of bipolar disorder. Bipolar I is categorized by manic, hypomanic and major depressive episodes. Bipolar II is categorized by hypomania and major depressive episodes without a full manic episode. Then, there is threshold bipolar. Figures vary, but the National Institute of Mental Health estimates that nearly three percent of the U.S. adults had a bipolar disorder in the past year.

While most of those battling bipolar return to full functionality between episodes, bipolar can impair work, cause unemployment and greatly increases the risk of suicide among sufferers.

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Jackie and I have been casual friends since high school. We had classes together, went to prom together, ate lunch together, and graduated together. We kept our mental health challenges secret from each other. We were suffering through similar episodes of major depression. We both felt alone and misunderstood. It wasn't until college that we began to open up more about it, and were shocked to discover we shared so many of the same feelings.

Both of us are Latinx, and there's a notorious pattern of silence regarding mental health in our community. The familismo concept reflects the central role of the family in Latinx

culture, so much so that it affects whether or not U.S Latinx citizens with a need for mental-health services seek it out or not.

In fact, only one-third of adult Latinos in the U.S with a clinical need utilize mental-health services. Religion-based recovery services are the primary option used. Familismo culture colors both social perceptions and self-perceptions when it comes to seeking help and the community has a tough time encouraging others to do so. Latinx college students face fears about getting therapy based on familial ideas of mental health — it isn't considered a necessity.

The first hurdle is recognizing that something is wrong. Jackie suffered through a depressive and hypomanic period for eight months before anyone paid attention. For Jackie, her boyfriend (who also experiences mental-health issues) was the person to bring up concerns for her health. She then approached her Mom.

“She didn't think much of it”, Jackie recalls, despite a streak of depressive episodes dating to her adolescent years.

A lack of parental acknowledgment is no surprise in the Latinx community when it comes to “feelings”. It wasn't till her older brother stood up for her that her parents came around in support of Jackie getting help for her bipolar disorder.

Thus, her recovery process began. She saw a physician who prescribed her antidepressants almost immediately only to find they only agitated the problem. Therapy became Jackie's saving grace. The cost, though, was a hurdle. “It was either therapy or having zero money for anything else,” says Jackie.

Indeed, ability to afford therapy is one of the main reasons people across cultures who dealing with mental-health issues don't seek it out. Jackie was lucky that Woodbury University had a great counseling center with licensed therapists ready to help. With their help, she adopted better coping skills, learned about her disorder and how to healthily communicate it.

Since then, Jackie, who had been studying architecture, decided to explore other

options for her career. She discovered an alternative-housing in an urban-studies class. The class opened her up to what she really wanted to do with architecture. “I shouldn’t just be an architecture major, but take an opportunity to explore the different uses for architecture,” she says.

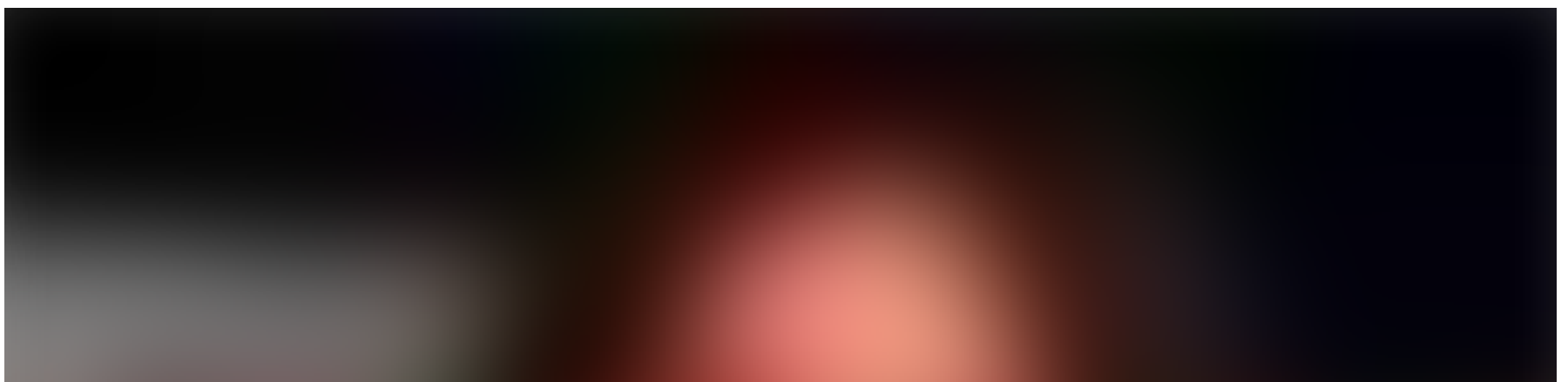
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Which brings us back to the LA Eco-Village. Discovering this community and everything it offers for its members inspired Jackie. Her she found a building with architectural character in a bustling urban environment. To Jackie, it represented to the rest of Los Angeles what can be done to support sustainability and alternative living.

Since becoming inspired by the Eco-Village, Jackie has designed her own major to incorporate architecture and urban studies through an interdisciplinary studies program at her school. But a defining feature of Jackie’s passion is her artistic nature. From satirical doodles to complex, research-based architectural constructions, and everything in between, she can master representation and abstraction.

“Pain shows in my work. I am a very artistic being and my emotions always bleed into whatever medium or style I’m working in,” she says.

Her personal and emotional suffering fuels artistic output that helps engender empathy for those suffering in her community. [A recent profile of Jackie by Woodbury’s communications office](#) says, “She has an almost boundless ambition to improve the lives of others.”





Jackie, courtesy of Woodburn University.

For example, Jackie has helped organize and volunteer in the Skid Row Women's Wellness retreat, is working with Devorah Brous, a master gardener and non-profit organizer, and she's landed a job with Homeboy Industries, the LA-based organization founded by Father Gregory Boyle that specializes in rehabilitating former gang members and previously incarcerated men and women through a variety of therapeutic approaches and job training.

You don't have to go to Woodbury to access the tools Jackie found at her disposal. Whittier College has a support system in place for students struggling with any mental stress or affliction. The Counseling Center is no joke and has counselors, nurse practitioners, and a licensed psychologist available to students. The director, Dr. Romberger, is a licensed psychologist herself. She has been with the college since 2009 and feels she understands the challenges college students face pretty well.

The counseling center report an overall increase in ethnic minority participation. The Latinx population using the center's services has increased from 27 percent to 31 percent in the past couple of years. Dr. Romberger recognizes the difficulty that people face when seeking health. "Mental health challenges are some of the greatest disabilities worldwide," she says. "Most people are hesitant to share and many are unwilling or unable to support or intervene." She hopes that more students utilize all that the counseling center has to offer next year, specifically the "Let's Talk" outreach program that provides walk-in mental health services.

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Finally, we have the Whittier Scholars Program (WSP) as an on-campus option for designing a major that's right for you if it's not offered by one of the departments. To be a Whittier Scholar, you have to present a well-devised plan and get it approved by an oversight committee. Many WSP majors are artists and even more have an art component wrapped into their major.

This is particularly relevant to me as an artist, a Latina woman, a student, and a psychiatric survivor. Latino households have traditionally lagged in encouraging children to seek help for mental and emotional issues. So, it's up to us individually to take responsibility for ourselves and use what's available to us. If you struggle with similar issues, they don't need to define your life. People like Jackie show us that success and achievement don't need to be limited. We can use our struggles to empathize with the struggles others face. Artists can use their talents and combine them with their vocational and academic skills to not only enrich themselves but their community as well.

Mental Health

Counseling

Latinx

Whittier College

Whittier Scholars Program