Student's Nonprofit to Alleviate Loneliness Expands to Pregnant Women

As a Washington University in St. Louis undergraduate, Harsh Moolani volunteered in a nursing home. After a few visits, however, he sensed that simply talking to senior citizens didn’t sufficiently alleviate their loneliness. Consequently, he founded Create Circles, a nonprofit that pairs older adults with volunteers who are trained to help craft a sense of purpose that extends beyond visiting hours.

“If we try to reduce loneliness,” Moolani said, “maybe these nursing home residents will live longer, healthier lives.”

Today, Moolani is a second-year M.D./M.P.H. student at the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine, and Create Circles is flourishing under a grant from the Centers for Medicaid and Medicare Services.

“The secret sauce of Create Circles has always been its training,” Moolani said. Instead of coming in with preconceived ideas to engage the residents, Create Circles’ volunteers start by asking questions about their interests and past life, then they build out projects accordingly. For example, one popular activity is creating cookbooks. But
volunteers don’t just breeze in and announce a cookbook project.

“Week after week our volunteers ask for just one recipe, until talking about new foods becomes a ritual,” Moolani explained. “Then, when they look back, they realize that they created a cookbook without ever leaving their nursing home bed.”

**Tailoring ‘Create Circles’ Program to Pregnant Women**

According to Moolani, Create Circles has led to a 33% decrease in loneliness over a 12-week span based on the UCLA loneliness scale.

An interesting thing happened when Moolani was talking with OB-GYN residents about Create Circles. “They realized that the stories I tell about lonely older adults are similar to many women who are stuck in the hospital for months until it’s safe to deliver their baby,” he said. “It can be devastating to feel disconnected from your community for so long. So, we are working together to launch a program to help reduce loneliness.”

The team at the OB-GYN department, he said, is now talking to these women, asking about their frustrations and what they miss most. “Then you build projects around that.”

According to Lindsey Finch, M.D., a fourth-year OB-GYN resident at the University of Miami/Jackson Memorial Hospital, “Whether in a nursing home or a hospital, a lot of the agency you have as a person – when you eat, when you get your vitals taken – feels outside of your control. When I learned about Harsh’s organization it made me think of our long-stay
patients.”

Due to an increased risk of infection, umbilical cord prolapse, placental abruption and pre-term delivery, Dr. Finch said, these patients usually need to be hospitalized and monitored until giving birth. She noted that U.S. Surgeon General Vivek H. Murthy, M.D., has said that loneliness is an epidemic and a public health concern.

The Create Circles OB-GYN program is ready to launch.

“We wanted to make sure that what Harsh had designed fit with what our patients wanted and needed,” Dr. Finch said.

After lengthy discussions, they’re tailoring the Create Circles approach “starting with group activities so that our patients who desire to do so can get together once a week outside of their rooms.” Any University of Miami student interested in participating should email harsh@createcircles.org to learn more.

“The goal,” Dr. Finch said, “is for all of our patients to feel empowered in their care and in their lives, so they can understand that a key part of health is a sense of inner peace and agency.”