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THE FACES OF SOARING MINDS:
Making the World a Better Place



 Best Version Media

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THE FACES OF SOARING MINDS: Making the World a Better Place

By Julia Jaegersberg • Photos by Lulu B Photography

EARLY THIS YEAR, MY FRIENDS AT THE PROHEALTH CARE FOUNDATION CONTACTED ME ABOUT AN AMAZING NONPROFIT ORGANIZATION FORMED IN 2018 by young adults who saw a need to help those suffering from mental illness. This nonprofit is Soaring Minds Inc. To date, the organization has raised funds for local mental health institutions and hospitals, created opportunities for community engagement and utilized various media platforms to destigmatize and ameliorate the issues surrounding mental health. And it all began while they were still in high school at Brookfield Central.

I'd like to introduce you to Soaring Minds: Shankar Thiru co-president/founder, Rajat Mittal co-president/founder, Riley Swart communications director and Andrew Li secretary/treasurer.

"There is no health without mental health" – Anonymous

Soaring Minds Inc. aims to advocate for and destigmatize common mental-health problems by allocating resources to support current organizations that actively provide mental-health services to the community. The organization raises money via special events and uses those funds to donate to local behavioral-health programs/non-profits. Currently, Soaring Minds generates an annual revenue of \$12,000 – thanks to the generosity of donors – in order to support community members in a variety of ways. Additionally, the organization works toward raising awareness about the issue of mental health and educating people through various means such as a blog, newsletter and podcast (find Soaring Minds Podcasts on Spotify).

Its community partnerships include:

- ProHealth Care
- Rogers Memorial Hospital
- Healing Hearts
- Children's Hospital

"The ProHealth Care Foundation is honored to partner with Soaring Minds to improve the mental and behavioral health of our adult patients," says Shawn Verdoni, major gift and grants officer with the ProHealth Care Foundation. "Soaring Minds generously donated almost \$3,700 to our medically assisted treatment program for opioid-dependent pregnant women, and to our behavioral health inpatient and partial hospitalization programs. The organization's gift to provide behavioral health services for our pregnant patients will offer these women the resources they need to achieve and maintain long-term sobriety, as well as deliver a healthy baby."

Currently, Soaring Minds is working toward a few main endeavors. The organization is developing an app to allow for a more convenient way for everyday care of mental health. Plus, the group is in the beginning stages of researching and establishing an educational program to be implemented in local

high schools to raise awareness and give better access to professionals. Finally, Soaring Minds is in the midst of planning an annual gala to raise funds for its cause.

Shankar Thiru

Shankar, a rising junior at Georgetown University, grew up in Brookfield. He has a younger brother, Sridhar, who's starting high school in the fall; his mom serves as a physician in the Milwaukee area. Traveling to national parks is a fun activity for Shankar's family. "We enjoy visiting national parks and have been to 8 so far."

He's always had a fascination with math and science. "That coupled with my philanthropic interests has directed me to participate in varying activities at my college." He serves as a STEM tutor for underprivileged kids in the D.C. area, and he's a volunteer on an ambulance at a local Maryland fire department.

Apart from academics, Shankar also enjoys cooking, playing sports, reading, singing and playing the Indian carnatic violin. The most recent book he's enjoyed is *1984* by George Orwell.

Shankar is appreciative at how far along Soaring Minds has come. "The team has been really persevering and driven, enabling Soaring Minds to be what it is today. This all really started with a simple vision to better the mental health in our local community. Witnessing a lot of fellow high school classmates suffering from mental illnesses, some even taking their lives, definitely was eye-opening and served as the impetus for our organization."

He and Rajat felt they had to do something to try to alleviate the problem, and in trying to figure out what exactly they could do to help, they created Soaring Minds Inc. "It has been very rewarding seeing all the progress we've made and the smiles on the faces of those we have helped. Soaring Minds has grown to be a large part of my life, and I am glad it is. I am excited to continue working with the amazing team we have and to keep striving to push the frontiers of mental healthcare."

Rajat Mittal

Raised in Brookfield, where his family still resides, Rajat graduated from high school in 2019, and now is beginning his sophomore year at UW-Madison studying engineering. "I have a younger brother, Rohit, who is a freshman at Brookfield East High School. My parents are both physicians in the Milwaukee area."

"I try to be involved as much as I can within my community," Rajat says. He serves as a member of Badger Consulting, helping local businesses in Dane County along with being a member of Circle K, a volunteer-based organization.

Beyond his college career, Rajat also enjoys playing tennis, reading, cooking, and spending time with his friends and family. The most recent book he's enjoyed was *Exhalation* by Ted Chiang.

"I'm proud of what Soaring Minds is today and

how far we have come," shares Rajat. "One of the prominent realities of a mental health affliction is how it's a very personal thing that most people cannot outwardly recognize. Having a healthy functioning mind is an important part of dealing with the inherent pressure we all face from daily life; yet, mental health is often neglected and left untreated. It is crucial for us to take a stand and raise as much awareness as we can while destigmatizing the notion that seeking help for mental health is bad."

Riley Swart

A Brookfield native, Riley's parents still reside in the City of Brookfield. Riley graduated from Brookfield Central High School in 2018. She now attends the University of Miami in Coral Gables, Florida. "My sister, Mackenzie just graduated from Ripon College in Ripon, Wisconsin. My mom, Kerrie, is currently a teacher at Whitman Middle School, and my father, Gary, is an emergency physician serving at multiple hospitals in the Milwaukee area."

Riley is a senior majoring in communication studies on a public-advocacy track. She is also pursuing minors in health communication and public health. The most recent book that she's read is *Big Little Lies* by Liane Moriarty.

She plans on graduating a year early in 2021, and then pursuing a master's degree in communications. "I just finished an internship with a Miami-based nonprofit called The Women's Fund of Miami-Dade, where I created content and managed their social media, as well as created promotional materials and campaigns for the organization."

Most recently, she developed a "Know the Signs – Stop Sex Trafficking" campaign with the SuperBowl Host Committee in preparation for the 2020 SuperBowl LIV, which is now used by multiple NFL organizations.

Beyond Riley's college career, she also loves graphic design, which began in high school when she worked on the *BCHS Legend Yearbook* as its editor-in-chief. She applies these skills to Soaring Minds by creating its promotional materials, social media postings and website. "I manage the majority of external communications produced by Soaring Minds. I am also working with everyone to plan our first "Mind Your Health" Gala in May of 2021.

"Getting involved in Soaring Minds was a no brainer for me," she adds. "I was friends with Rajat throughout high school, and I graduated in the same class as Shankar and Andrew. They are all such motivated and phenomenal people to work with.

"I also have a deep interest in supporting mental health. As featured in our first podcast, my sister was diagnosed with Generalized Anxiety Disorder and Panic Disorder at the age of 7. Growing up with that opened my eyes to the experience, skills and assistance needed to manage mental-health problems, and the toll it can take if not managed properly. Living in Brookfield, there are many afflicted with serious mental-health issues, especially in our high schools, who aren't talking about it or

Andrew Li



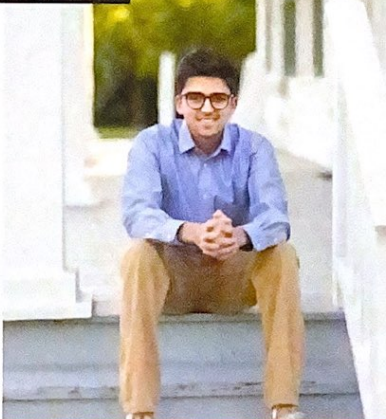
Riley Swart



Shankar Thiru



Rajat Mittal



seeking help. The stigma surrounding mental health is preventing people, especially teens, from getting the help they need. In the future, I see this organization becoming a key piece of mental-health awareness and advocacy in the Milwaukee area as we work to eliminate the stigma."

Andrew Li

Andrew and his family call Brookfield home, where his mother serves as an application analyst at Froedtert Hospital and his dad works as a consultant for a Chinese insurance company. Andrew's older brother, Peter, works as a systems developer for Great West Casualty.

He graduated from Brookfield Central in 2018. "Today, I am a senior at UW-Madison majoring in finance," states Andrew. "I try to stay active on campus while actively developing my financial knowledge through club activities, including market research and stock pitches. I also have a side job delivering food on my bike, which allows me to stay fit and make some money on the side. I'm currently interning for a startup company that's focusing on providing 3D printing services to assist workers in the wake of the pandemic."

Apart from his education and work, Andrew enjoys watching movies, hanging out with friends, playing the cello and tennis. The most recent book that he's read is *Grit* by Angela Duckworth.

Andrew has enjoyed a close friendship with Shankar throughout high school, and they also played together on the tennis team. "I've also spent lots of time around Rajat and Riley, and they are both great people to work with in our organization."

Soaring Minds was just an idea when Andrew first became involved. "Compared to when this organization first began, I can't believe how far we've come. I truly believe in the work ethic and promise that each member of the team shows. And, with the progress we've made along the way, I'm sure that we'll keep our momentum going."

Andrew says he feels so lucky to be a part of a committed team that actively tries to fix problems within the community, with mental health being at the forefront. "Nobody should have to endure the pain that comes with losing someone close as a result of mental health issues," he says. "Having felt this kind of pain myself in high school, I hope to do as much as I can to try and prevent others from experiencing the same. I know that the rest of the team has just as much passion for our goal, and we are doing the best we can to go beyond the limits of mental healthcare."

Learn more about Soaring Minds Inc. by visiting SoaringMinds.org.