

VOL.08

BELONGING

HOW YOUR SUPPORT
IMPACTS YOUTH.



**Covenant
House**
Vancouver

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COVENANT HOUSE VANCOUVER (CHV) acknowledges with gratitude that our work takes place on the traditional lands of the xʷməθkʷəy̍əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and səliłwətaʔ (Tsleil-Waututh) First Nations.



Letter from the Director, Clinical Care

I'm thrilled to introduce this issue of *Belonging*, which is focused on a topic that is dear to me: mental health. It isn't an overstatement to say that every young person who accesses Covenant House Vancouver (CHV) has struggled with their mental health or wellness at some point in their lives. As you'll learn in this issue, mental health challenges can be both a cause and a symptom of homelessness.

So many of the young people we support are stuck in survival mode, also known as fight or flight. It is close to impossible to improve your mental health when your basic needs — access to shelter, food, and clothing — are unmet. The need for mental health supports among youth experiencing homelessness is significant, and while CHV has made considerable strides in providing access to mental health services, we recognize that there is still more work to do.

In this issue, you will learn about some of the mental health concerns that youth in our programs commonly experience; hear from one of our Registered Clinical Counsellors and Art Therapists, Caitlin Hall; and get an overview of the ways that CHV works to improve young people's mental health through our wraparound services.

My hope is that this issue of *Belonging* helps to reduce the stigma around mental health, which, after all, is deeply connected to a person's overall health and wellness. That's why it's so important for us to create a space where youth feel supported, valued, and empowered.



LOUISA BRETT
DIRECTOR, CLINICAL CARE
COVENANT HOUSE VANCOUVER



NAVIGATING HOMELESSNESS & MENTAL HEALTH: NIKO'S STORY OF RESILIENCE

YOUTH COMPOSITE STORY*

When Niko first connected with us, he had been navigating the uncertainty of homelessness for over a year.

**Note: This is a composite story that reflects the experiences of multiple youth while protecting individual privacy.*

Niko's experiences were shaped by intense mental health challenges that included hearing voices, overwhelming paranoia, and difficulty distinguishing between reality and delusion. These struggles made it hard for Niko to feel safe or trust others.

Fear and frustration built up over time, which was often expressed through angry outbursts — a protective response to a world that felt unsafe. Sleep deprivation, brought on by the dangers of living unsheltered, made things worse. To stay awake, Niko used substances, which further complicated his mental health.

CONNECTING WITH OUTREACH

Niko's first interactions with our Outreach team were guarded. Years of surviving on his own had left him mistrustful. The team showed up consistently, and offered Niko food, water, and clothing, with no strings attached — small gestures intended to help build trust.

One day, the Outreach team saw Niko on the street, shouting at strangers. To people passing by, he might have seemed hostile, but the team understood Niko could be experiencing psychosis. They had met him a few times before, but trust hadn't been built yet. They approached carefully, keeping things calm, while ensuring everyone's safety. They didn't push him to talk but let him know they were there.



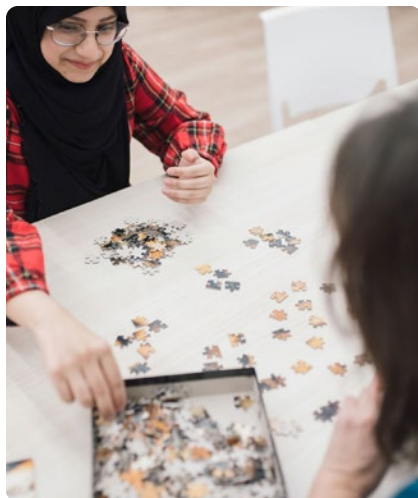
Over the next few weeks, the team continued to check in with Niko and offered their support. Eventually, Niko accepted an invitation to visit the Drop-In Centre, drawn by the promise of warm food, clean clothes, and a space free from expectations.

A SAFE SPACE AT THE DROP-IN CENTRE

At the Drop-In Centre, Niko found more than just basic resources. He found a place where he could breathe. Staff respected his need for space and waited for him to engage at his own pace. Trust was built slowly, through respect and consistency.

Over time, staff noticed that Niko became agitated when the space got busy or loud. They developed a strategy to help him cope: a youth worker would take Niko on a brisk walk to clear his head, and then Niko would relax in a designated quiet room, away from the noise and bright lights. This routine helped Niko feel calmer and more in control.

As Niko grew more comfortable, he began to participate in activities where he would find small moments to connect with peers. Recognizing his need for a stable place to sleep, staff offered Niko a bed in the Sanctuary program. Thanks to the trust that staff had built, Niko accepted, and found comfort in having a consistent and safe place to rest.





THE SANCTUARY PROGRAM

Recognizing Niko's need for psychiatric support, staff consulted with professionals that included a nurse, social worker, and youth workers, who developed a plan that respected Niko's autonomy. A nurse began to visit Niko regularly and built trust through casual conversations. Over time, Niko agreed to meet with a psychiatrist to address his symptoms.

After weeks of consistent care that included stable sleep, routine, and meals, Niko began to experience moments of clarity, free from his symptoms. Diagnosed with schizophrenia, he started to take prescribed medication, with supportive daily reminders from staff. His outbursts decreased, and he rediscovered the feeling of joy in activities like basketball and watching movies with peers.

When Niko is ready to leave the Sanctuary program, Outreach staff will work with Niko and his mental health team to monitor his progress and provide trauma-informed support to help him stay on track with his medication and overall well-being. This thoughtful continuum of care empowers Niko to continue to build a life rooted in resilience, hope, and belonging.

FOSTERING CREATIVITY AS A WAY TO EXPLORE MINDFULNESS



AN INTERVIEW

Caitlin Hall joined Covenant House Vancouver (CHV) in February 2024 as a Registered Clinical Counsellor and Art Therapist. They have been overseeing our art therapy sessions for youth who access our services.

Why did you want to join CHV?

I was drawn to working at CHV because of the dedicated art studio, which is an anomaly in the non-profit sector. Having a committed and protected location for creating and storing youth artwork is such a privilege and creates a trusting and safe environment for arts-based healing.

How does art therapy help?

Art therapy can be a bit of a sneaky way to give youth support. Some youth are unfamiliar or uncomfortable with the idea or experience of people helping them. It is normal for youth with complex trauma to have complex relationships with people who express or show care for them. Art therapy positions the art as an extension of the self, so when we bring the focus to the art, it can take the direct (and sometimes uncomfortable) attention off the youth.

This can be an indirect way of exposing youth to support and attention (via their art) and hopefully helps them build trust around receiving care from other people. Art therapy can be a way to express feelings without getting into specifics and can relieve the pressure of having to share verbally. It allows youth to develop a visual language to understand their thoughts, feelings, and experiences, which some youth have never shared out loud because it hasn't been safe to do so. Art therapy offers an alternative to talk therapy, and offers a space to express and explore.



What has been the response to art therapy?

We have a group of committed youth who join every session, and other youth who pop by occasionally. Many youth stay the entire two hours, and some drop by for a quick cup of tea and to have a chat. Most of the regularly attending youth have personal art projects. We have youth who come to paint, draw, sew, sculpt, collage, or try it all out! I try not to give too much creative direction unless youth ask for it.

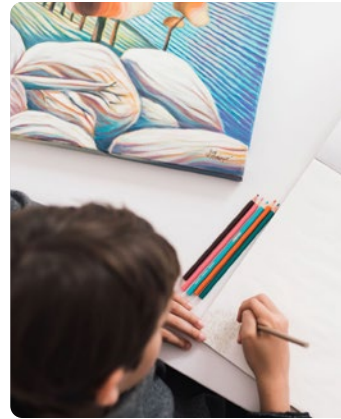
I like to give them space and agency to explore what they are personally drawn to. This way, I can do my best to meet them where they are at and to support their current creative interests.

How does art support youth?

In so many ways! Art gives youth a way to express and explore their feelings by creating something physical that they can look at and talk about. We sometimes need to get outside of ourselves and words are not always available to us! We can explore and prompt alternative ways to check in with ourselves; instead of “How are you feeling?” — think about: What colour is it? What shape is it? How much space does it take up? Art can be a great way to explore mindfulness, and bring awareness to the senses. We may encourage attention to how different art materials feel, sound, or smell. Most youth have experienced trauma, which can rob them of choice or agency. Making art can be a low-stakes way to explore agency, by offering a range of art materials and creative opportunities. Ultimately, there is no right or wrong way to create art, which can be liberating and encouraging.

What is your favourite aspect of the work that we do?

I love to model creative problem solving, self-expression, and curiosity about the forever-varying process of artmaking. I sometimes make art alongside the youth, and I try to be openly verbal about the unknowns of my project. I publicly discuss the creative successes, failures, and questions that come up as I create. I remind myself and the youth that if something isn't working, or if I get frustrated, I can always pause and come back to the project. It is incredible to see youth responding to their art (and themselves) with more patience, compassion, and curiosity. I love to foster a creative environment and support the community that's built through artmaking, together. It is an honour to see creative and hardworking youth regularly come together and I love making art alongside them.



MENTAL BREAK

RAINBOW GROUNDING

Look around you and find one object that is red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and purple.

WHAT DOES CHV OFFER TO HELP SUPPORT POSITIVE MENTAL HEALTH?

OUR PROGRAMS AND SERVICES

Navigating mental health challenges can be overwhelming, especially for youth who face housing insecurity and limited access to healthcare.

Many youth have experienced trauma within systems that are meant to protect them, such as foster care or institutional settings. These experiences can make it difficult to engage with traditional mental health services.

Practical barriers further complicate access to care. Youth often lack stable phone access for appointment reminders. For those without secure housing, staying connected can be a challenge, which leads to gaps in care. Transportation is also a significant hurdle — without personal vehicles or funds for transit, getting to mental health centres becomes impossible for many.

Long wait times for free counselling or psychiatric care can leave youth in crisis, and navigating fragmented systems for the right care can be overwhelming, which can discourage youth from seeking help. These barriers highlight the need for accessible, youth-centred mental health services that prioritize safety, trust, and timely intervention.

CHV bridges these gaps by providing accessible, trauma-informed care. CHV offers a wide range of supports designed to address the mental and emotional well-being of youth, to remove barriers and foster resilience, and to help youth navigate their mental health journeys.

Here's how we deliver these essential services:

ONE-TO-ONE COUNSELLING AND EVIDENCE-BASED THERAPIES

CHV's Registered Clinical Counsellors offer free, personalized sessions that are tailored to meet each youth's unique needs. These sessions provide a safe space for youth to explore their emotions, develop coping strategies, and build resilience. Our counsellors use evidence-based therapies, like cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) and dialectical behaviour therapy (DBT), to help youth reframe negative thoughts and manage intense emotions.

While there may be brief waitlists for counselling, they are much shorter than those in the community.



In the meantime, youth have access to supports like art therapy, 24/7 assistance from trained youth workers, and informal counselling from social workers. These interim services ensure that youth feel supported as they wait for regular sessions.

PHYSICAL HEALTH AND MENTAL WELL-BEING

Recognizing the strong connection between physical and mental health, CHV offers a fully equipped gym and fitness room. Regular physical activity helps reduce anxiety, improve mood, and build self-confidence. Our staff and volunteers support youth in developing fitness routines tailored to their preferences and goals. Additionally, we offer recreational outings like hiking that may otherwise be inaccessible to youth, due to financial constraints. These activities foster peer connections and promote mental well-being.

CREATIVE OUTLETS: ART AND MUSIC THERAPY

Creative expression is a powerful mental health tool. CHV's art therapy sessions allow youth to explore their emotions and express themselves in a safe environment. In the music room, youth can play instruments, write songs, and experience the healing power of music.

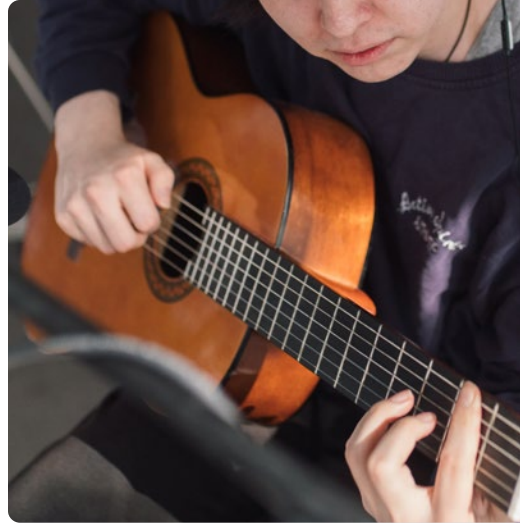
TO LEARN MORE about the healing power of art, visit [page 8](#) to read an interview with Art Therapist, Caitlin.



MENTAL BREAK

3-3-3

Name three things that you see, move three parts of your body, and identify three sounds.



SPIRITUAL CARE SERVICES

Many youth who have experienced significant loss may struggle to find meaning and purpose beyond day-to-day survival. CHV's Spiritual Care team provides inclusive support for youth of all faiths and traditions, to give them the option to explore their spiritual, religious, and cultural identities. If desired, our team can connect youth with safe spiritual, religious, and cultural communities. The team also offers compassionate support during times of grief and loss.

PARTNERSHIPS FOR COMPREHENSIVE CARE

When specialized care is needed, CHV works closely with trusted community partners to provide seamless support. We facilitate access to psychiatric care, treatment centres, and other essential services. We advocate for youth by ensuring that they are connected to the right resources and that clear communication with our partners is maintained throughout the process.

We also assist with logistical details such as getting to appointments (we will attend with youth if they desire), and by providing reminders. By working together, we create a holistic approach to mental health that addresses both immediate challenges and long-term wellness.

FREEDOM TO THRIVE: CHRISTINE AMUGE

ALUMNI STORY

At 21, Christine (she/they) had never imagined a life outside of her home country of Uganda. But in the wake of political unrest and danger that she'd experienced as a 2SLGBTQAI+ activist, her family decided to visit Canada.

Christine's arrival in BC was disorienting. Her family initially told her that it was a side trip to wrap up their vacation, but when they arrived they informed her that she'd have to stay behind for her safety — with people she didn't know.

At first, she was shocked. Then angry. Then afraid. She was stranded with strangers in a foreign country, where even the simplest tasks were unfamiliar and overwhelming. With no legal status, she was completely dependent on her hosts and when that relationship became strained, there was nowhere to go.

Christine heard about Covenant House Vancouver (CHV) from an acquaintance and decided to make her way there. The memory of that day is still vivid: "I was on the train bawling my eyes out, just crying the

whole way." She arrived, drained and distraught. One of the first faces that greeted her was Lesley, a youth worker who would eventually become a trusted ally, who ushered her in the door. Then Christine slept for a week.

In her first days at CHV, Christine was withdrawn and, understandably, distrustful. The staff checked in, but respected boundaries. "I just needed processing and healing space."

Gradually, she began to open up and make friends. With the support of her social worker, she connected with legal support to begin the federal

asylum process, and with local resources for refugees and the 2SLGBTQAI+ community. As time went on, and with further supports, Christine participated in goal-setting exercises, and eventually therapy.

Through community events, cultural experiences, and the simple act of celebrating milestones, Christine also found joy and connection at CHV.

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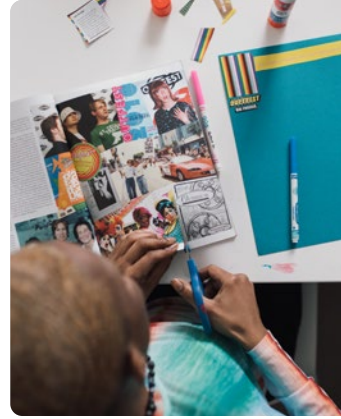


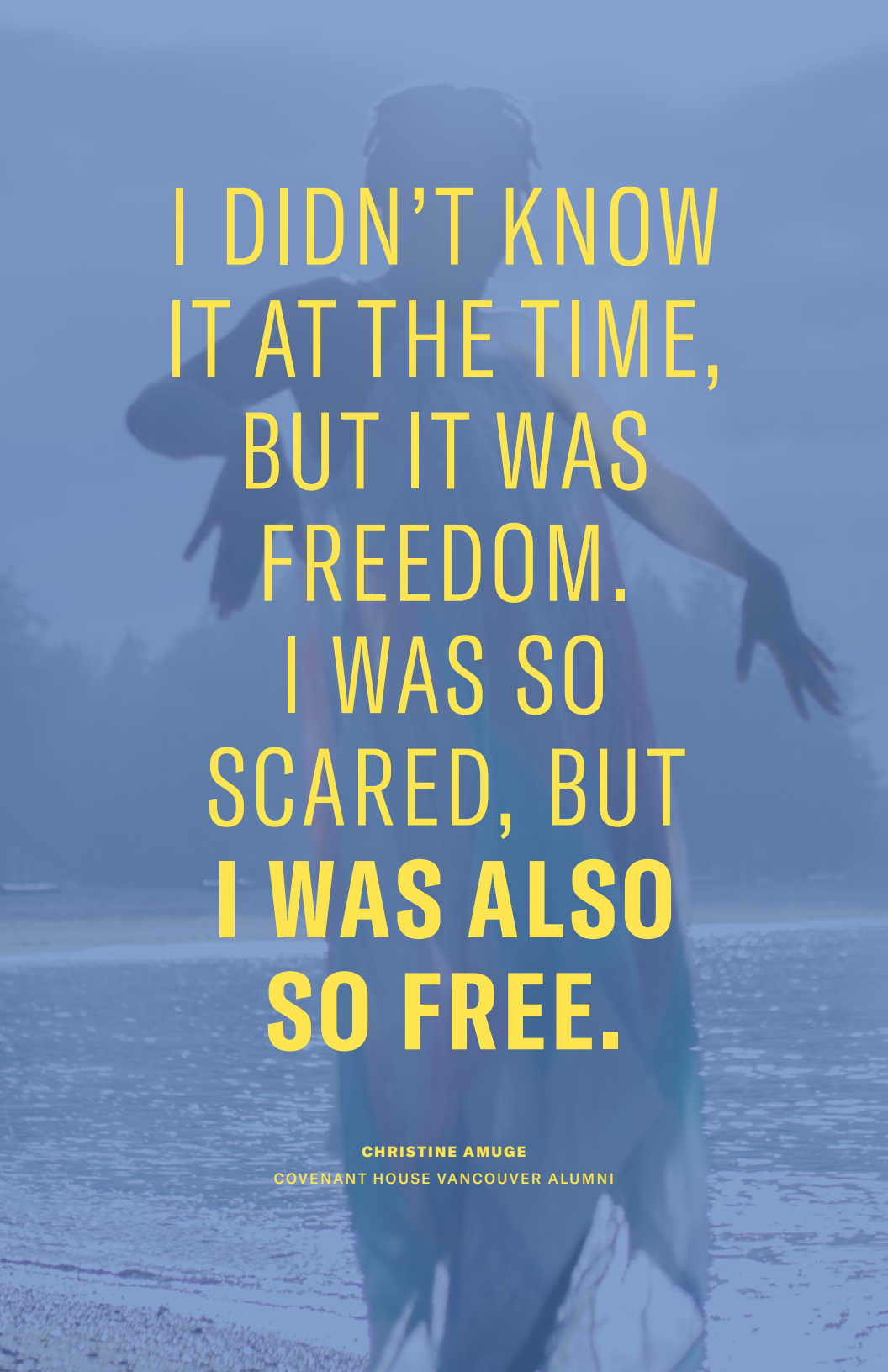
Drawing upon the full range of CHV amenities, from meals and clothing to transit tickets, she was able to save her earnings and eventually move into independent housing.

Christine's time at CHV wasn't just about survival, it was a rediscovery of self. A lifelong creative, she began to seek outlets for expression, and found opportunities to model, dance, and work in the local film industry, with encouragement from the CHV team. Through career counselling and workshops, she also realized that she had a passion for helping people, and went on to pursue formal training in counselling.

For Christine, CHV was a stepping-stone to a new kind of life, where it's possible to live openly and without fear: "I didn't know it at the time, but it was freedom. I was so scared, but I was also so free."

Today, Christine is thriving. She works as a counsellor and often draws on her personal experiences to support others.



A person is running on a beach, their arms outstretched in a gesture of freedom. The image is overlaid with a semi-transparent blue filter. The text is in a bold, yellow, sans-serif font, centered on the image.

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CHRISTINE AMUGE
COVENANT HOUSE VANCOUVER ALUMNI

PHILANTHROPY IS A FAMILY AFFAIR

MEET THE NICOLA FAMILY

John and Claire Nicola, and two of their sons, Jason and Jared, discuss the importance of philanthropy and why they support Covenant House Vancouver (CHV).

Philanthropy has always been a part of the Nicola family and is reflected in their business, home, and family life.

In 1994, John founded Nicola Wealth to better serve his clients. As the firm grew, the Nicola family increased their commitment to philanthropy. This was initially done as direct donations to charities, and later through the Nicola Family Foundation, which supports a number of charities, including CHV. Claire is part of the Nicola Wealth Gives Back committee that supports and drives charitable initiatives within Nicola Wealth. Each member of the family has found ways to contribute to Nicola Wealth and make an impact within the community.



Jason has been involved with Nicola Wealth for 20 years. His interest in CHV began when his parents told him about the annual Sleep Out fundraising event. Curious to learn more about CHV and Sleep Out, Jason had his first experience in 2018. “No young person should be in a situation where they’re having to tackle life completely on their own without some level of support from their family or their community, let alone be living on the streets. From a donor perspective, CHV uses my money wisely and in an impactful way.”

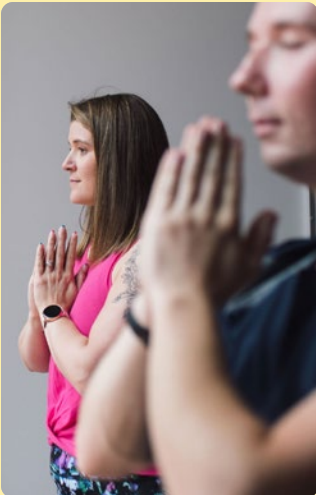


Jared also works for Nicola Wealth and is involved in the Foundation. His connection to CHV comes from an understanding that most adults who are homeless first experience homelessness early in life and Jared values intervening at a young age. “What I find unique about Covenant House is that I view what you do as getting ahead of the problem. It’s a much bigger challenge to look at someone in their thirties, with 15 years of trauma.”

The Nicola family believes that it is important to talk about mental health because of the stigma that surrounds it. John shared, “As with most families, we have experienced issues around mental health. When people become ill, good treatments and organizations can help many of them turn things around.” Jared added, “I think we’re inherently wired to think that if we accept help from a person that we are weak, dependent, and that there’s going to be judgement. Struggling youth should take advantage of the services that are available [at CHV] as quickly as possible, because trying to stand on your own two feet just out of pride isn’t fruitful.”

The family wholeheartedly supports CHV, stating, “Covenant House has done more with less and made more of an impact than anybody else in the city, as far as addressing the issue of homelessness as a whole, but specifically youth homelessness.”

Thank you, Nicola family, for your ongoing support of vulnerable youth in the community.



MENTAL BREAK

BREATHING FOR WELLNESS

Inhale for four seconds through your nose, exhale for four seconds through your mouth, and hold for five seconds. Do this for at least a minute, but stop if you feel overexerted.



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