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Why do I feel a need to write

*Rhetorical Speaking Project*

Nothing has impacted my life more than mental health. During my young childhood, I watched my mother struggle with postpartum depression, which later developed into a bipolar II disorder diagnosis. Her diagnosis took her life when I was eight, leaving my twin sister and me motherless. In addition, I saw the presence and consequences of mental illnesses in my home and close friends' lives. In high school, my best friend suffered from anorexia, where she oscillated between recoveries and relapses. During my senior year of high school, her illness worsened to the point where I was worried every day for her life. Finally, I decided to tell her parents my concerns and observations; my best friend was soon sent to inpatient rehab for three months. On top of my experiences with my family and friends, I struggled with my undiagnosed depression and anxiety. The battle with mental health has been an integral part of my life for my entire life and always will be.

My desire to learn, write, and speak about mental health is an impulse and an obligation. I am instinctually an advocate. I feel called to action when a situation warrants words to be written or someone to speak. I follow the kairotic moment – all movements come with timing. I am not a planner; I observe the situation, gather information, and put my pen to paper. Writing

and sharing my ideas, experiences, and values with my community allow me to combat stigma, create conversation, and make people feel less alone. I am most fierce when advocating for mental health resources and eliminating stigma because this passion is engrained in my being.

When applying to Emory, I wrote my supplemental essay about the demand for education on interacting with those with a mental illness. I hoped that by choosing Emory University, I was choosing a university that followed my values and passions.

Skip ahead to the spring of my sophomore year of college, and I am recovering from the worst episode of depression and anxiety. Simultaneously, student mental health on campus plunged, and rumors spread like wildfires about student suicide(s) and suicide attempts. So, I decided to write. I wrote the Emory Wheel Article, "Letter to the Editor: Emory administration, you're blind to student struggles. We need reform now." because I felt something needed to be said, and no one else was saying anything. I initially wrote this letter as a personal piece because my therapist told me I should write when I feel overwhelmed. However, I felt obligated to share once I finished scribbling my anger onto a page because the Emory Wheel or the University said nothing. I knew I had to share my writing because I knew what I felt was a universal experience for Emory students. I wanted something to be done about the University's implicit ignorance and seeming lack of action. I also hoped that sharing my upsets could help some students feel less alone in their experiences.

At 1 am, I emailed Madi Olivier, an editor and author at the Emory Wheel and a member of my English portfolio class, and sent her the letter I had written. In the following days, a team of Emory Wheel editors and I worked on the letter and prepared it for release. Then, we released it. I was shocked by the amount of attention the letter received. Students reposted it on their

Instagram, talked about it in the dining hall, and reached out to me about their personal experiences with mental health at Emory.

Although I knew my article was bringing attention to mental health, I knew that, like all gossip, it would fade out and lose awareness. While I still had momentum from the article, I wanted to meet with the administration to create a relationship with them. Therefore, I decided to email all of the administration. In this email, I asked if someone could meet with me and have a sit-down conversation.

Two weeks later, I had a sit-down meeting with Dean Enku Gelaye, Senior Vice President and Dean of Campus Life at Emory University. In our discussion, I brought a list of concerns, student comments, and possible solutions and ideas to the mental health crisis on campus. Outside of business, we got to know each other as people. This initial meeting was crucial in building the foundation of our rapport.

One meeting leads to another, which leads to handshakes, coffee chats, and thank-you emails. I continue to make my voice heard and listen to the voices of students and staff. I do not follow an exact plan; I have an outline of what I would like to accomplish and practice flexibility in executing the tasks at hand. Through my writings and meetings, I have learned how powerful rhetoric can be, especially when using Kairos, ethos, and logos methodically.

Recently, I wrote an article for the Duly Digest, "Better than bad isn't good – except when it comes to mental health." In this article, I wrote about my struggles with mental health, my work with Dean Gelaye, and the progress that was made toward improving Emory University's mental health resources. In writing this article, I aimed to connect with students to promote feelings of community and hope for the future. Additionally, I have continued my work

with Dean Gelaye and have begun working with James Rapper, Ph.D., LCMHCS, Associate Vice President for Health, Well-Being, Access, and Prevention. Currently, I am working with Dr. Rapper on promoting a new advertising campaign to promote student wellness and improve the office of respect.

From when I began my work with mental health on campus, I have learned the importance of open listening and informed discussion. Through numerous conversations with students, I have found that resentment towards the University stems from feelings of neglect. From meetings with staff, I have found that staff did not understand the depth of students' struggles due to a lack of "round table" discussions – not purposeful ignorance.

I empathize with students' frustrations, fear, and disappointment around mental health issues on campus. However, it is impossible to trust that the University is listening if the administration is not actively engaging with students on campus and the University is not taking actions that meet some of the students' pleas. However, after meeting with the campus leadership, I learned they were not ignoring students. Instead, they did not have enough conversations with students to understand the student struggle fully.

I am working on becoming a bridge between student and campus leadership for active conversation and listening. To do this, I had to learn to put my frustration feelings aside so I could fully engage in productive conversation and listen. I want to understand fully. I want to meet the administration on common ground and understand them as people with their own struggles.

Work towards superior mental health resources on campus may never be done, but it can be constantly improved. My work with Emory may be done when I graduate Emory, but I hope

that the improvements and the future work students do continue. In my personal life, I will never stop advocating. I will continue learning, listening, supporting, and conversing about mental health.