



Lighthouse Leader Interview

Insights from visionary social entrepreneurs on fusing expertise, experience and passion to tackle society's urgent challenges

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Haylin Dennison, LCSW
Executive Director, Spill The Tea Cafe

“You don’t need permission to change the world—you just need community and a plan.” Haylin Dennison

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Tell us about the origin story of Spill The Tea Cafe. What sparked the initial idea?

The idea for Spill The Tea Cafe (STTC) was born from personal urgency and professional heartbreak. As a mother of a transgender teen navigating their transition during the isolation of the pandemic, I quickly realized that Hawai‘i—my home—had virtually no affirming mental health services for LGBTQ+ youth. At the time, I was working in a stable healthcare position as a Licensed Therapist, but the systems I trusted failed us. A trusted physician even advised me not to support my own child’s identity.

What started as a desperate search for care became a calling. I made the terrifying decision to leave my secure job, take out a \$100,000 loan, and open a clinic within three months. We called it “Spill The Tea Cafe” because I wanted it to be a place where youth could show up exactly as they are, be heard, be safe, and be loved.

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How did you go about assembling the people and resources to make your idea a reality?

I started with what I had: grit, lived experience, clinical expertise, and a belief that we could build a

new system if the old ones were failing us. I hired my first therapist before we even had funding. I trained and onboarded interns to serve as care coordinators, created clinical pathways from internship to licensure, and infused the space with music, culture, and joy.

We grew entirely grassroots—with drag performers and local businesses hosting monthly fundraisers, students volunteering time, and my own consulting work with a local medical school temporarily funding our operations. I leaned into mentorship, community leadership, and the power of storytelling to bring the right people to the table. The team we have now is a tapestry of youth, clinicians, creatives, and changemakers who believe in healing as a community act.

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When it comes to working with licensed therapists, did you have to work with any state agencies or accreditation boards?

Yes. As a licensed clinical social worker, I had to ensure that we were fully compliant with Hawai'i's Department of Commerce and Consumer Affairs, which regulates social work and mental health licenses. We also pursued credentialing with private and public insurance panels, which took nearly a year.

Because we function as a training ground for pre-licensed therapists, we also had to create strong clinical supervision and documentation structures. We developed a trauma-informed training pathway that aligns with state requirements while also elevating culturally grounded practices—something often left out of traditional systems.

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For the financing, what steps did you need to take around any reimbursement concerns and what models, if any, did you use in getting the cafe going?

Reimbursement was one of our biggest hurdles. Most funders won't touch a new nonprofit until year three, and the insurance credentialing process was lengthy. In that first year, we survived by offering my services to the medical school under a separate consulting contract, using that income to make payroll. I essentially became our primary funder and fiscal sponsor for the first 2 years. Today, on year 3, we are a fully sustainable community clinic.

We run a hybrid model—offering both reimbursable clinical services and non-billable services like mentorship, care coordination, and cultural healing practices. We’re now developing a social enterprise approach to reduce reliance on grants and create sustainable income streams—because I believe impact work should be economically viable, not martyrdom.

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Tell us about the indigenous care model and any concerns around reimbursement or funding.

Our care model is deeply influenced by community building, connection, Native Hawaiian practices like Ho’oponopono, which centers family healing and accountability. We also integrate regular “non-clinical” events, arts, community storytelling, and peer mentorship. These practices are vital to healing trauma, especially in communities historically marginalized by Western medicine.

But reimbursement doesn’t recognize these modalities—yet. That’s why we’re negotiating with insurers to innovate payment structures that include traditional practices. It’s also why we rely on community partners and in-kind contributions to keep culturally responsive care alive. We’re proving that culturally grounded care can—and should—be fundable.

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What’s been the reception in your community, and what are your greatest hopes for the cafe?

The reception has been overwhelmingly affirming. We serve over 600 youth annually across O’ahu and neighbor islands—most of whom are LGBTQIA+, Native Hawaiian, or trauma survivors. Parents tell us we saved their child’s life. Teens walk in depressed and isolated and walk out performing poetry, leading groups, and reclaiming their voice.

My greatest hope is that we become a national model—a replicable, community-rooted system of care where any youth in crisis can walk into a space that sees them fully. I want to train a new generation of therapists who are both clinically rigorous and culturally attuned. And I want to shift the narrative that healing has to come from institutions—it can come from community.



What advice would you give to others who want to offer something similar in their community?

Start before you're ready. No one is coming to save us. The system is not set up for people like us—working moms, queer folks, people of color—to succeed without breaking ourselves. But we don't have to do it the old way. Use your story as your superpower. Anchor your services in love, not bureaucracy. Train people into power. And most of all—make it joyful.

It's not easy. I cried for days after signing the initial lease. But I also knew in my bones this was the right thing to do. If I can do this with no business background and four kids in tow, anyone can. You don't need permission to change the world—you just need community and a plan.