

# FOR THE SAKE OF GEN Z: SHAPING THE FUTURE OF HEALTH

THE PPHR COLLABORATIVE SUMMIT 2020 - THE YOUTH PERSPECTIVE

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**Health and Generation Z - how do these fit together?** Like oil and water or peanut butter and jelly?!? If you are providing services for or employing youth in your recreation programs, this article is for you. Born between the 1996 - 2014, Generation-Z (gen-Z) makes up 24.3% of the U.S. population, as estimated by the 2016 U.S. American Community Survey. Gen-Z is the generation known for being too technology-reliant, too private and closed off, losing their minds trying to make it through adolescence, hiding behind a screen, and more anxious than ever. But what does it really mean to be in gen-Z? What do these preconceived notions from other generations have to do with

That's what the Colorado Public Health/Parks and Recreation (CoPHPR) Collaborative wanted to discover during their 2020 Summit at Bison Ridge Recreation Center in Commerce City. Being able to attend this summit and be a part of the planning team was an amazing opportunity, "especially as someone in gen-Z" (Bradley and Staunton). During the summit we had the chance to hear from extraordinary youth and professionals in parks, recreation and public health that believe strongly in what they do, while also empowering youth. The Summit had one keynote speaker followed by 6 breakout sessions and spontaneous dancing to the "Cupid Shuffle".

## THE BACKSTORY

Parks are an essential part of a healthy and active community and play a vital role in the health of Gen Z. The CoPHPR multi-sector collaborative came together to address health challenges in Colorado communities, work toward shared goals and elevate parks and recreation as a critical component of public health infrastructure.

Depression is the number one risk factor for suicide, a leading cause of death for Colorado's youth and young adults. High school students who reported having some form of depressive symptom increased from 29.5% in 2015 to 31.4% in 2017. A number of scientific studies have identified a link between mental health problems, such as depression, and the use of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs during adolescence. Trends show teen involvement in high risk behaviors such as alcohol use and smoking has increased, with 57.5% of teens reporting ease of access to alcohol and 27.0% of



**Colorado Public Health  
Parks and Recreation  
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teens reporting ease of access to smoking equipment like e-cigarettes. .

Creating or enhancing access to parks, trails, and recreation centers is a strategy proven to increase physical activity and emerging evidence shows the positive impact access to outdoors, open space or nature can have on mental health.

Out-of-school-time programs that provide protective factors, including enrichment activities, youth sports and physical activity, access to healthy foods, youth development opportunities, tutoring and mentorship, and social experiences, can transform lives. These critical offerings support improved mental and social-emotional health through the positive effects of physical activity and a connection to nature, but also by providing opportunities to link relationship-building skills, teamwork and respect to existing activities.

## THE SUMMIT

The CoPHPR Collaborative chose to address the health challenges facing youth and young adults and intentionally engaged youth in the planning and delivery of the Summit. The planning committee felt it was important to hear directly from members

of Generation Z as experts in their lived experiences and as partners in promoting positive health behaviors. Over 160 public health, parks, and recreation professionals, students, community members, and speakers attended. The Summit provided a diverse, welcoming, and fun environment to foster inter-generational learning through interactive presentations on topics impacting the health of Generation Z, opportunities for reflection, meaningful dialogue, networking and connection.

Heather Kennedy and Nariah Smith presented the Summit keynote “You Are Enough: Increasing Youth and Adult Belonging.” This presentation was both inspiring and heart-wrenching to hear. Nariah, a high school student, shared her story of what it’s like being in high school as someone in gen-Z. She shared the challenges she’s had to endure being

an impressionable youth within her high school classes. Nariah’s story showed how the adults in youths’ lives need to be more aware of what they say and do, because their actions have lasting impressions on that person.

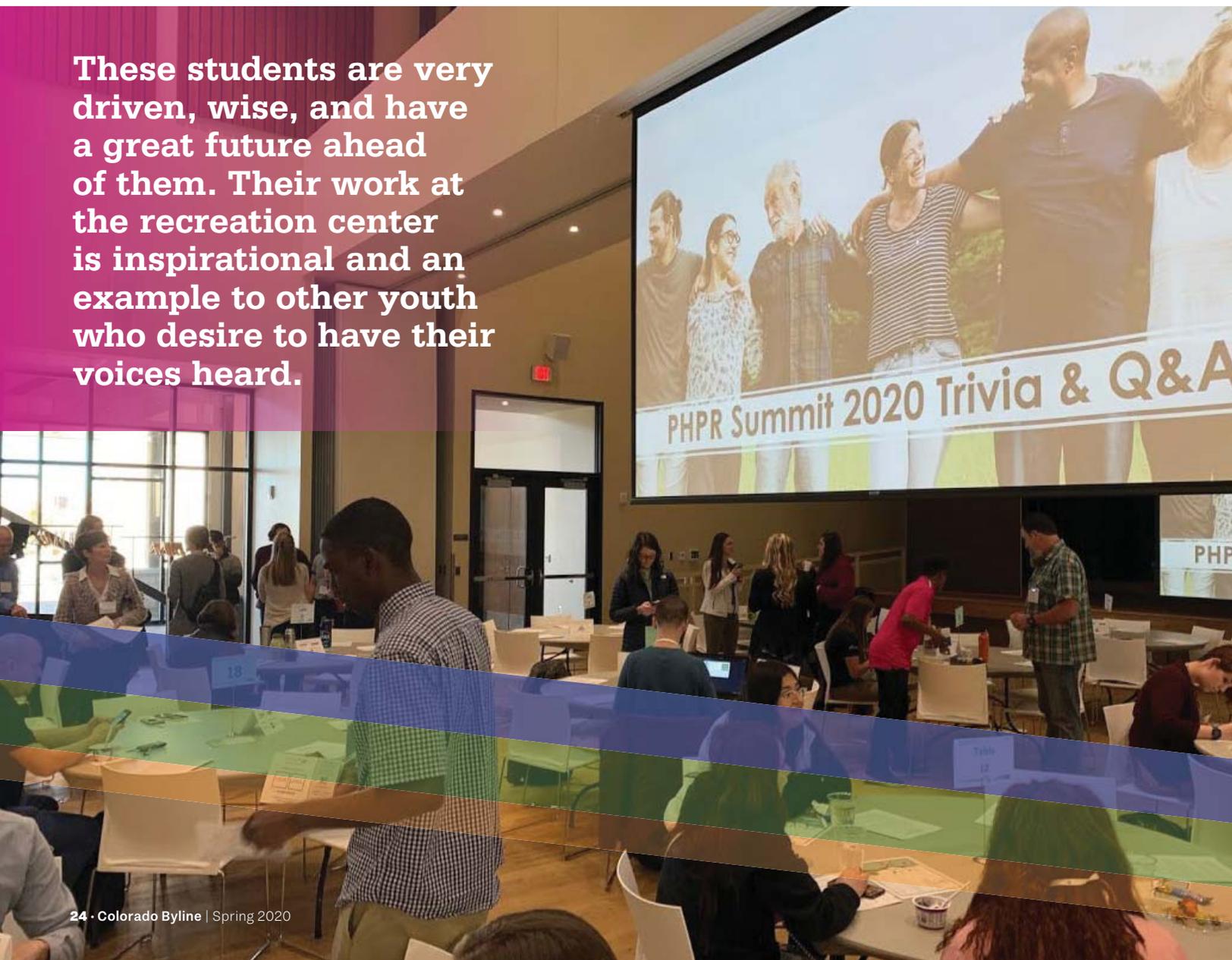
Providing more wise words from gen-Z, three members of the Meadows Park Action Coalition (MPAC) Kevyn Glanton, Richie Harris, and AJ Nelson presented alongside Brian Kates with Colorado Springs Parks & Recreation. In their session “What It’s Like Being Gen Z!?!”, the presenters did a live Q&A. Even though they were some of the youngest presenters at the summit, you could see and hear their passion for what they do in their communities. They talked about preventing youth from ever feeling the urge to pick up tobacco and helping them get more active and out in nature. These

students are very driven, wise, and have a great future ahead of them. Their work at the recreation center is inspirational and an example to other youth who desire to have their voices heard.

## **“YOUTH ARE ALREADY LEADERS - LET’S GET TO WORK.”**

“Building the Foundation of our Future Today” was presented by Pueblo students Jacelynn Trujillo and Daniel Jaramillo and their youth advisors, Colter DeWitt and Alex Romero. During this presentation Colter and Alex talked about the work they do but they wanted to leave time for their youth to talk and bring awareness to what they are doing on a project “Break the Chain.” The session description says

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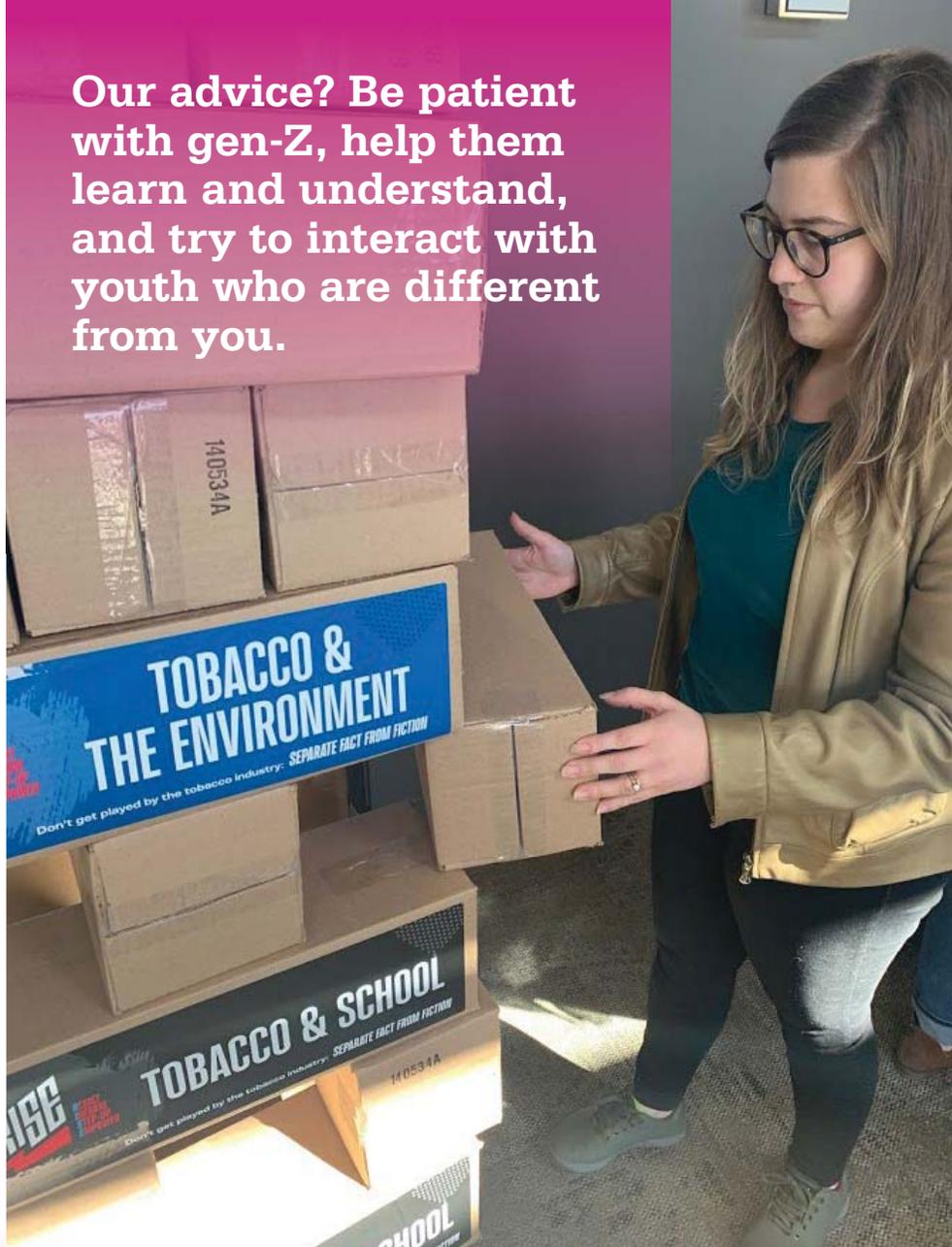
it all: "Youth are already leaders – let's get to work." The youth advisors discussed an event they are planning this spring to bring youth together to give them a chance to learn about what tobacco is doing to them, how to quit, and resources they can access. They also established a scholarship for youth to provide them another resource to pay for school. Daniel ended the session with a dynamic speech about giving youth a chance, reminding attendees that not everyone is able to have the same opportunities as others so it's important to build them up, help them learn and experience new things.

## THE WRAP UP

The summit was an eye-opening experience. We were able to hear the perspectives of other youth in Colorado and from professionals about the work they do and how they support youth. It was amazing to see how Summit attendees embraced everyone no matter their age or experience. Our advice? Be patient with gen-Z, help them learn and understand, and try to interact with youth who are different from you. You may just overcome some of those preconceived notions you have about youth in gen-Z and their health may depend on it.

Want learn more about the CoPHPR Collaborative's 2020 event? Go to [www.bit.ly/PHPRSummit2020](http://www.bit.ly/PHPRSummit2020).

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