

Santa Ono: Broadcasting from the University of British Columbia, this is *Blue and Goldcast*. I'm Santa Ono, the president and vice chancellor of UBC. On this season of the *Blue and Goldcast*, I'm speaking with the people who are leading some of the most innovative and creative work coming out of our campuses. My guest today is Mikey Friedland, and we'll be talking about his unique efforts to raise awareness and funds for mental health causes.

Mental health on campus is a topic we've covered on previous episodes of the *Blue and Goldcast*, and it's one that's very near and dear to my heart. Earlier this year on Bell's Let's Talk Day, I published a candid video statement which drew attention to the reality that mental illness affects every one of us, either directly or through those that we love. It affects people of all ages and walks of life, including members of the UBC community.

As I further highlighted in my statement, suicide is the second leading cause of death in Canada for those between the ages of 15 and 24, and the second leading cause of death in the United States for those between the ages of 10 and 19, and COVID-19 has only made things worse. Since the start of the pandemic, 27% of Canadian post-secondary respondents have contemplated suicide. 30% said that they've considered quitting school and 29% have considered self-harm. Black, indigenous, and people of color in particular have been impacted, but many students won't seek help because there is still a stigma around mental illness. Of course, it's not only students, faculty and staff are also affected.

Helping to destigmatize mental illness is one reason why conversations like the one you're about to hear with Mikey Friedland are so vitally important for our UBC community to engage in. Mikey Friedland's journey is a unique example of how the actions of just one person to destigmatize mental health and actively contribute to mental health support systems can ripple out far beyond them and create a safer, healthier, more caring environment for all of us.

Mikey is a UBC Okanagan student who was midway through his international relations degree when the COVID-19 pandemic hit. He took a year off his studies and found himself struggling with his mental health. Mikey set a goal for himself to ride his bike as far north as he could before he went back to school. He rode from Osoyoos to the edge of the Arctic Ocean, raising over \$27,000 for the Canadian Mental Health Association's Ride Don't Hide campaign. Mikey, welcome to *Blue and Goldcast*. Tell us a bit about yourself and what kinds of things you've been interested in and focused on over the years.

Mikey Friedland: Growing up, I was always really into the doors, into sports. I did debate in high school. That was a big part of my life. Coming to UBCO was, for me, partially about the campus and about being at a small school and it was partially because of its proximity to Big White. Which is, I think, a great reason to pick a university, not that it was the only reason. Then at university, I went in undeclared, and then ended up really enjoying the interdisciplinary nature of the IRR program at UBCO and became quite involved. I helped restart the International Relations Students Association in my second year, which had been dormant since a past president had graduated. We were all set for like our big guest speaker event. It was that March 23rd, and then everything was shut down March 16th with COVID. Now we're picking up from where we left off last year. We had a bit of a sabbatical per se.

Last year, I moved to Revelstoke. I was a bit skeptical of online learning. I have ADHD and I already said my goodbyes to Kelowna, so I was like, "I'm going to just try to Revelstoke," and I loved it. It's a beautiful little town, did a lot of skiing. I had a good fall, and then I was working, but then I got laid off in the winter and I just floated around. I struggled with a lot of the same pandemic anxieties that a lot of people have. I felt depressed, I was confused. It was very unclear for me to map out my life, and so, especially when the ski season came to a close and questions about my future were also up in the air, I took a bit of a dive and I was really struggling with seasonal depression.

There's a couple of weeks where I wasn't really doing much and wasn't cleaning my room, certainly not cleaning myself very much. My roommates, they looked out for me in that moment. Slowly, I started to pick everything back up, and I knew I wanted to do something because I could tell that that was at the heart of my frustrations and my anxieties. It was pretty easy to just-- Once the idea floated around in my head of just cycling in one direction, it was a pretty great way to get that direction back in my life, so to speak.

Santa: The inspiration for the journey was just that you wanted to get out of a rut, or was there something else from earlier in your life that inspired you to go on this journey?

Mikey: From the age of 12, I was reading Ed Viesturs books and dreaming about the mountains in the concrete jungle of Toronto. I knew that a big trip like this was always something that I'd wanted to do. My parents introduced me to travel at a young age, which I'm really thankful to them for. This trip really combined getting out of that rut, challenging myself, being human powered. There were so many things that went into. Getting the opportunity to practice my own storytelling and filmmaking. I knew what I wanted to do and I had a goal again.

I knew I wanted to go on this adventure, but I wanted it to be about more than just me. Doing it for me was great. I care deeply about individual growth, and learning, and challenging, and healing, but I wanted to-- I felt good. I had the opportunity to tell a wider story and to promote this organization that does great work and at the same time, increase the conversation about mental health.

The Canadian Mental Health Association is really neat because it's a nationwide organization that functions a lot like a grassroots one. They have locations in 330 different communities across Canada, and that allows these local branches to focus on the issues that are most important in a given community. Whitehorse, for example, which is one of the three communities that I fundraised for, they noticed, the people working at the CMHA branch, noticed that there was a distinct lack of counseling available in Whitehorse, so they used their funding to bring in eight full-time counselors that provide free 12-session problem-based counseling to residents of the Yukon.

It was really important for me to fundraise for the organization, but then a big part of it as well was just raising awareness and promoting a conversation about mental health in general. I think everybody that donated their donations are huge and important, but everybody who shared a video, or had a conversation with me, or

reached out, or talked amongst their family and friends, that's equally important in my mind.

Santa: Fantastic. Tell us some of your favorite stories from your trip because it was quite a trip.

Mikey: To start my trip, I decided to cycle from Osoyoos to Tuktoyaktuk right on the Arctic Ocean there. I chose Osoyoos because it was the southernmost point in Western Canada. Well, it's along the 49th parallel, and starting from Point Pelee in Ontario. That was just too big of a commitment for the summer. Osoyoos was the closest border crossing for me at the time living in Revelstoke. My friend drove me down there and I was really nervous. I was like, "I have no idea what I'm doing." Honestly, before I set off on this trip, I hadn't cycled 50 kilometers in a day ever before. I had some camping experience, but it was really new to me and I was acutely aware of how new it was.

I was setting up at the border crossing and I'm making this little speech, he's recording it on my camera. For these videos that I've been taking of my journey, I wanted the documentation from the start of my trip. I'm going over this pre-rehearsed line of being like, "Well, this is the furthest south I can go without having to quarantine for 14 days," and talk about what I'm doing, but I kept fumbling over my lines.

Then the sixth or seventh time I fumbled over my lines, I said the F-word because I was really pissed that it was taking me so many times, and this woman pops out to my left and she goes, "Are you raising money for something?" I said, "Yes, I'm cycling. I'm raising money for the Canadian Mental Health Association. I'm raising money and awareness for mental health and addiction," and she goes, "That's amazing." She reaches into her wallet, pulls out a bill and says, "Here's \$20 at mile zero," and walks up to me, hands the bill, and gives me an air hug because of COVID obviously. That ended up being the tape that's featured in the introductory video, not any of the other takes of me standing there at the border.

Santa: That's amazing story. Do you know her name? Do you still keep in touch?

Mikey: Her name is Joan. She's the first person on the whole fundraiser, if you go all the way back to the start. I sent her an email as well with the video link. I'll tell a story from the Mackenzie Delta because that was really one of the most interesting places of my whole trip. The Mackenzie Delta is five communities that are right in the Northwest territories, in the Northwest corner of the Northwest territories. There's just one road in and out. It comes from the Yukon, from Dawson City and you drive for- you ride, in my case, for about 500 kilometers.

One thing about the Dempster Highway is its dirt, so when it rains, the road turns into soup, and it's quite difficult to bike through soup, especially when it's about three degrees outside. I'm riding into this community called Tsiigehtchic, which is the smallest community in the Delta. It's right on the McKenzie. I'm standing outside the Northern Store. A lot of these northern communities have these groceries/general stores as part of the Northern Corporation out of Manitoba, which is problematic in its own. These stores are- the one in Tsiigehtchic was four rows, and two to three of those rows are just junk food, and it's really, really unfortunate.

I'm standing outside of the Northern Store having my breakfast, and I met this woman, and so we started talking. Her name's Margaret and she told me she was an artist. By this point, I'd become fairly comfortable with asking people if they'd want to share their stories for my video series. I asked her if I could interview her and she said, "Why don't you just come to my house?" We walked through the community for about 15 minutes to the other end of town. She has this beautiful house, and she's a bead artist. She, since about 2005, has been making-- She started making like fish scale art and other kinds of traditional art.

She was really inspired by the Hubble telescope's original images, so she started making this bead work. It was like a cross between the indigenous art that she was doing before and the galaxy that she was so inspired by through the photos. I was looking at the work in her house, which was amazing, and she showed me this piece that she was in the middle of working on and she said, "Oh, I have to get it done by November. I can't believe it." I'm like, "Who's it going to?" It's for the Smithsonian in DC. It's going to go hang out right next to a *Starry Night*.

There were so many really inspiring and interesting people up there. People who are aware, acutely aware of how effected they've been from residential schools. There was a residential school in Inuvik and children were picked from all over the Delta and sent there. There's a lot of alcoholism, there's a lot of other mental health problems that are associated with negative coping mechanisms from intergenerational trauma.

When I left Tsiigehtchic, it was raining. I only managed to go about 25 kilometers that day and I had to set up my tent because it was like three degrees and rainy. The next day, I wasn't able to start until about 2:00 because the road was so wet. By the time I finished, I had biked for six hours and I'd only made it 45 kilometers. About 50 kilometers south of Inuvik, 200 kilometers south of the ocean. I'm having my dinner under this canopy, this gazebo kind of thing in a provincial campground. It's wet, it's cold. This guy drives into the campground and asked if I would like to join him and his grandchildren at their home just across the river, so I said, "Absolutely." He had a bed set up in this canvas tent with a wood-fire stove in it. We drank beer and ate caribou and stayed up until like 3:00 in the morning talking. I had lots of those experiences.

Santa: Can you tell us about some of the difficult moments that you experienced?

Mikey: Bears. I've ran into almost 20 bears, mosquitoes. The worst part with that was the wet cold, when it was raining and it was three degrees. The road on the Dempster definitely, and then there was other stuff like feelings of exhaustion myself, personal and mental and everything. It was a lot to deal with. There were times when I had to come to grips with the fact that this is what I wanted to do and that I was going to cycle for that many hours a day. There were days when it gets a kilometer 50 or 60 and you're still not in a rhythm and you're like, "Why am I doing this?"

Santa: Now your Ride Don't Hide campaign was extremely successful in raising money and also raising awareness about mental health, how can universities such as UBC or UBCO better support students' mental health. We already know that the pandemic has really taken its toll on the mental health, not only of students, but also faculty and staff. You've thought about this a lot, you've been cycling, I'm sure you're

thinking about what you were raising funds for, and those funds, how would you like them used to make university campuses more supportive of those with mental health challenges?

Mikey: That's a great question. When I heard that this was the question that you wanted to ask from conversation with your producer last week, initially, what I was thinking was that I think UBC is doing a good job. Speaking personally, I have used the counseling services at UBCO, and there wasn't a significant wait time, which is quite unique for a university. I think that accessibility is fairly good, although I don't rely on it a lot. I'd have to ask a student who does to- or they would have to provide their own assessment.

I think awareness among faculty is generally getting better. Awareness that mental health is something that we all go through as acutely with students. As I was going through that list, I started thinking like, "What's affecting my mental health at school and what's affecting the mental health of my peers?" At least those who I've had an open conversation with about it.

The number one thing that I came back to was workload. One of my classes last week, an instructor posted an anonymous poll. The question was, "What barriers to participation do you have today?" Students answered it, it started with some technical barriers to stuff like 15% of the students were in a public space where they couldn't use their microphone, 10% of students had poor, shaky Wi-Fi. Then there was stuff like students that were not able to complete the reading, or fully complete the reading, and that was 35% of the class. Then there were two mental barriers in particular. One was the percentage of students that are struggling with social anxiety and 40% of the class ticked that box, and then the last one was feeling overwhelmed with life, work, and school, and 79% of the class ticked that box.

This isn't a class that has an appropriate workload and a very welcoming atmosphere. I reached out to the instructor of the class to try and dig deeper into the issue. I set up a Zoom call with her to ask about her own pedagogy and why she structures her class the way that she does, because I've taken 35 classes at university so far, and she's among the best. Among the best in just the course content, but as well as an awareness of student needs and what it's like to be a student.

First, I guess, I'll provide a little bit of context on her because it'll help explain what she's doing and why. Her name's Lindsay Harris. She's a recent PhD grad from UBCO, and she also wanted me to acknowledge that none of what she is doing is new or ungrounded. It comes from a background of critical digital pedagogy and thinkers like Jesse Stommel and Paulo Freire.

What does she do that's different? The first thing is she uses a workload calculator to make sure that the workload for the classes with UBC guidelines. One of the things that she does that's really useful as well is she has audio accompaniments to all of the readings. A lot of the times, that's like a podcast with a text as well associated with it, or sometimes if there is no accompanying audio available, she'll just record herself reading that reading. As a student with ADHD myself that is really useful. For students with ADHD and dyslexia, that is a necessity.

I personally, in my education, use this software called Natural Reader that converts PDFs to audio files so that I can read and listen at the same time, but that software is \$22 a month. There's real tangible benefits as well to professors having audio accompaniments or reading the readings themselves because they're able to see just how long a reading takes to do. For a 20-page reading with new material that she wants us to engage with, that 21-page reading has a 56-minute audio file. Then if we're expected to pause it and take notes and think analytically about it, a 20-page reading could take an hour and a half. I think that a better awareness of that and the fact that a lot of students are taking five courses would improve mental health and education significantly.

Santa: That's got to be one of the most comprehensive and thoughtful answers I've ever received to any question on this podcast. The fact that you've just focused so much on work-life balance and the importance of professors thinking about giving a workload which is reasonable, is very refreshing and a new way of looking at the problem. Coming back to a little bit more personal, how's it been for you not only coming back from this journey, but coming back to school face to face after a year and a half away from direct instruction, and your colleagues, your fellow students who have been remote instruction for such a long time?

Mikey: It's been good. It was a readjustment period for about a month coming back to life off of the road. I came back from my trip on August 23rd, and then a week and a half later, I started classes. I had to learn some particular tips and tricks to succeed in an online learning environment, but I have noticed some really positive changes within academia. That cost is one of the things where I see that improving. I have had to purchase one textbook with a total value of \$40 for this semester, and my first year was \$650 at the bookstore. That has a real impact, especially on students who are raising a family or working to support their education, all that kind of stuff.

Then other things, like there is an increased awareness of privilege, and intersectionality, and mental health and within all of my courses. I can only speak from an art's perspective but I don't know how that's been progressing in other fields, but that has been a positive change.

Santa: How did the journey change you? What is your vision for your own future? What are you going to do and how is it impacted by this journey?

Mikey: It was really good for my own confidence. It was really good for my own physical health, as you could expect from cycling that much. I'm definitely at a happier, more stable place now than I was at the start. For my future, that's almost more interesting. I thought that what I wanted to do was do a master's in international relations or international development, now I'm leaning towards studying film, and taking those stories from people that I've met and putting them out there so that people can learn from them and people can see them.

I have this year to complete my undergrad. Then, I'm going to take a little bit of time to build my own skills on my own, and then perhaps consider film school. That is in the back of my mind for the future. I'm very excited about it.

Santa: That's fantastic. I just want to once again, thank you for being inspirational. We're very proud of you here at UBC. Thank you so much.

Mikey: Thank you.

Santa: Mikey Friedland, thank you so much for being on the *Blue and Goldcast* today, and for your efforts to raise awareness and funds for such an important cause. Mikey Friedland is a UBC student, documentarian, and mental health advocate. UBC is committed to help. We offer a variety of free mental health and well-being resources for students and for all members of the UBC community. If you are a student, you can find help at students.ubc.ca/health and at students.ok.ubc.ca/health-wellness. Faculty of staff resources are available at hr.ubc.ca/health-and-wellbeing.

We'll linked to all these resources on this episode's show page, and I hope that you'll make use of them if needed. We're committed to fostering an environment where every member of the UBC community can thrive, and that means understanding how to maintain good mental health and where to go for support.

Here are some things that we can all do to help each other and ourselves. First, be kind. A simple act of kindness can make all the difference for someone who is struggling. Second, listen and ask. One of the hardest things about mental illness is feeling isolated. Because of COVID-19 and physical distancing requirements, isolation is a more common experience than ever before. Take a moment to let someone know you care and that you're here to listen. Third, talk about it. If you're facing a mental health challenge, talking to someone can help. The path to mental health can start with one conversation. When we share stories about mental illness, we help to reduce its stigma and pave the way for someone who's struggling to ask for help, and of course, reach out if you need support.

That does it for this episode. You can find links to our guest's work, as well as previous episodes of the show at blueandgoldcast.com. You can also find us on your favorite podcast app like Apple Podcasts, SoundCloud, or Stitcher. You can tweet me @ubcpres. That's prez with a Z. I'm Santa Ono. Thank you for listening.