

## Beyond the Dais: Episode 33 – An Interview with Heartspace Kids, Inc.

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**Scott Anderson:** Thank you for tuning in to Beyond the Dais, a podcast about the stories taking place in and around El Paso County, Colorado. I'm your host, Scott Anderson, and my guest today is Dina Mark, the executive director of Heartspace Kids, Inc. How are you doing today, Dina?

**Dina Mark:** Great. How are you?

**Scott:** Good. Thank you for having me. I really appreciate it. So today we'll be talking about some of the programs associated with Heartspace Kids and how they're putting American Rescue Plan Act grant funds to good use here in the community. But first, if you're interested in more stories about ARPA funding throughout El Paso County, or hearing from county leadership about local government priorities and how they operate, you can find additional episodes of this podcast on your podcast platform of choice. So, let's go ahead and get into it. Dina, could you start by sharing a bit of background about yourself and how you came to be associated with Heartspace Kids?

**Dina:** Sure. So, my background is in education. I was an elementary school teacher for several years, and then I became a school counselor and did that for a while and then decided to open my own private practice, which I did that about 3 1/2 years ago and. About a year into the pandemic decided to start the nonprofit Heartspace Kids because there was a huge need for financial aid for kids who couldn't afford therapy services for a variety of reasons. So, I decided to found the nonprofit Heartspace Kids.

**Scott:** Okay. And can you share a little bit more background about Heartspace Kids and what is the main mission of the organization?

**Dina:** Sure. So, Heartspace Kids was founded in 2021 with the main mission of just providing access to mental health care and educational resources to kids in need. Kids and families in our community right here in El Paso County, who can't afford services, whether it's because they don't have insurance or they're underinsured or many, many people have trouble finding a provider who takes their insurance. And so, they're not able to. Even though they have insurance, they're not able to use it because there's a lack of. Providers in the area who take certain insurances and so our main mission is just to remove that barrier for families so that they can access the services that they need.

**Scott:** So, in 2021, did you see this more as a response to the COVID pandemic or just something that it came to light more for you because of the COVID pandemic? What really triggered the start of the organization?

**Dina:** Yeah. So, I think I always had in the back of my mind to start a nonprofit for this reason. But when we got into the pandemic and we were just seeing such a huge need for services in the Community, you know, of families who needed care, of kids who are really struggling, and they couldn't find providers or they couldn't afford services. And so, it just kind of, like made the urgency there. So, we decided go ahead and just get started and file the paperwork and become a nonprofit.

**Scott:** Okay. And do you work with therapists who have their own practices or are the therapists all a part of the organization and what does that look like?

**Dina:** Yeah, great question. So, we started as just a funding and referral source. And so, what that looked like was we had a handful of clinicians in the community who were our in-network providers and so we could refer kiddos to them who were taking advantage of our financial assistance program. Now we are an in-house provider as well. So, everybody here in the office at Heartspace Kids, there's six providers here. We also see the kiddos in person and in-house and so we have our services that we offer, but we also do still refer out to the Community as well.

**Scott:** Okay. And in the name of the organization is Heartspace Kids. Does that mean you serve only children, say up to 18? What does it look like in terms of who you serve and how many people you have served right now?

**Dina:** Sure. So, we serve kids 3 and up and we go to young adulthood, so usually 22 to 23, you know, thinking of the college-age kiddo. And we also serve parents as well. So we don't necessarily do adult therapy, but we do, you know, you can't just serve the kiddo and not the parent and the family. So, we do serve parents as well.

**Scott:** Are there resources for parents, say maybe they don't have a child who's in therapy, but are there resources for parents that they may be able to take advantage of that exists here?

**Dina:** Yeah. So, we can see parents here as an adult client. Our funding though, that we use for financial assistance is only for kids right now. So, we have what's called the Kids First Fund, and we use that money. Specifically for kids up to age 18 or up to age 21, if they have special education services.

**Scott:** I'm wondering, can you talk about how important it is for Heartspace Kids to be viewed as an organization within the community that people can come to and receive those services?

**Dina:** Yeah, we know that we are in a mental health, you know, crisis right now, especially with kids, and we are just seeing. Kids, you know, we have a wait list that's just like a perpetual wait list. There are lots of kids trying to get in and get served and

we have referral list, so if we aren't able to help them, we can refer them out. We have referral list for a variety of different issues that they may be having or insurances they that they might need to use or if they need family therapy or if the parents need marriage counseling or couples therapy. You know we have a bunch of resources that we can. Kind of send them out into the community if we can't provide that here for them.

**Scott:** Okay, very good. So, after submitting your grant request to El Paso County, Heartspace Kids was awarded \$70,000 of that ARPA funding. Can you talk about what specifically that money has gone to fund?

**Dina:** Yep. So, 100% that money has gone for direct services for kids, for mental health care or educational resources. We put the entirety of that \$70,000 in our kids First fund and that is just exclusive. Used to pay for services for kids. So, it was direct services for either individual therapy or some workshops. We do like social emotional workshops or group therapy, things like that. And we you know whether they did that in house with us or they were sent out to an in network provider, but all of that money went just for direct services.

**Scott:** Very good. And one of the things that I've learned since starting this podcast is that no nonprofit organization is an island unto themselves. I feel like everyone is saying, yeah, we receive help from this organization. They helped us figure that out, or we refer people here and they refer to us kind of thing. So how has working with other nonprofit organizations in the area benefited the programs that you guys are working on?

**Dina:** Yeah, we are sort of in the beginnings because we're newer. We're in the beginning stages of building those partnerships. But we have other nonprofit organizations in the area that we partner with, and we refer to each other for services, like for kids who, you know may need something we can't provide, we can refer them to another organization and vice versa. That works both ways. We're starting to partner with some organizations who we may in the future be able to do functions together or events or fundraising, things like that. Because we are, you know, really to sustain our mission and keep moving forward always in that fundraising mode. And so partner with other organizations, I think is a really great way to do that as well.

**Scott:** And did that also extend to how you decided to build out Heartspace Kids, I would imagine? I don't know anything about starting a nonprofit organization, but I'd imagine there's a lot that goes into that. Whereas where some of those partnerships built because you were trying to figure out how to do that for yourself.

**Dina:** Yes, absolutely. I didn't. Also did not know anything about a nonprofit. I'm still learning. But that's the first thing that I did was reach out to other nonprofit organizations in the community and just asked them if I could buy them a cup of coffee and ask them some questions so that I could. Get going on this nonprofit and get it started. And everybody in the nonprofit community is just so generous with their time and their

expertise. And they were all willing to share information with me. And hopefully I can return that favor someday to somebody else.

**Scott:** Yeah, you know, that's wonderful to hear. I was wondering if there was a personal story that you might be able to share from someone you've been able to support. Now obviously, you know, working with kids, working in therapy, we got to be careful about, you know, what we share. But I was wondering if maybe you've got something that you'd be able to let people know about why, you know, heart space kids is a place that they could receive that support from?

**Dina:** Sure. So, we do, I mean obviously we can't disclose like. Personal stories or names or anything like that. But we do have quite a few kids who are coming in, you know with pretty acute situations, whether it's suicidal ideation or self-harming behaviors or you know depression, anxiety, things like that. And so, getting them in the door to receive services and then being able to keep them right, like to get them in here on a weekly basis and. Have them receive the services for as long as they need so that they can get well. I think that has just been a tremendous asset for a lot of families who can't necessarily afford therapy, you know, four times a month. Like it's just not in their budget to do that realistically or they don't have the insurance, or you know, we've already talked about you know, finding a provider who takes their insurance and so. I think giving families the Peace of Mind that, you know, their kids can come here and get the help that they need without the family having to worry about the hardship of the financial burden that that could place on them has just really been the biggest and most, you know, rewarding thing for us here is just to be able to provide that service for them when they so desperately need it.

**Scott:** So, I think that there's still a little bit of stigma around the idea of therapy. I think especially when it comes to kids and taking a child to a therapist, and I think some people think it's not necessary or they can work through it themselves or it's a parent's job to do that kind of thing for you. How would you respond to that? What would make you say, maybe it's worth the second look? Maybe it's something you should consider.

**Dina:** Sure. So, I think, you know, we are starting to view mental health care as just another part of our health care. And just like we would view it at dental health care and or going to your primary care physician for your annual physical. I think being proactive with our mental health care can really help us just build those lifelong skills that we need. Which is one of the reasons I work with kids, right? Giving them those skills when they're young that they can use for the rest of their life. Like we know life is full of ups and downs and challenges and crises and all kinds of other things that are going to pop up. And so, I think if they come in the door, you know, and they're 8 or 9 or 14 or 15, and they're learning these coping skills and they're learning about their emotions and their triggers and, you know, how to handle things when they arise. It just makes them so much more well-equipped for real life later on. And so, it really is, in my mind, something to do as a proactive kind of a strategy just to set them up for success for the rest of their life. And so, you know, I tell the kids when they walk in the door, I was like, this is why I

work with kids. And so, you can take these skills that you're learning right now and use them for the rest of your life. Like, these are lifelong skills.

**Scott:** And for someone who has not been through therapy before and let's say we're speaking to people who are potential kids who might come in and receive those services - what would you say to them to help kind of ease their minds about the process and really understand that value?

**Dina:** Yeah. So, I think, you know, one of the things I tell parents all the time is like, it's your job to get the kiddo in the door. It's my job to keep them here. Yeah. And so, we try to make this space as comfortable and safe as possible. So, it's very kid friendly, right. And, you know, we make sure it's cozy. We make sure we have games to play, or we do artwork, or we build Legos. So, you know, when they come in, it's like, they're coming into a safe space that's welcoming, and you know we will definitely take their interest into consideration so that we want them to want to come right. And so, if we can get them in the door and you know create that space for them that is welcoming that they want to keep coming back to. I think that you know is how the therapeutic relationship really builds that foundation to do some really good work with the kiddos and just depending on what their needs are, you know, some kids, they may come for six or eight sessions, and they might be like, OK, I'm good to go, I'm going to go use these skills that I've learned. And then some kids are, you know, they're here for, you know, longer. And that's OK. It just depends. Everybody's a little different. A lot of kids will come through therapy, do their sessions and then. Take a break and then come back when they need a check-in or a checkup or whatever you want to call it. And so, our doors are always open. They can. We never close a file, so to speak, like we always tell our kids, if you want to come back in for any reason, just have mom or dad reach out. We're here. Our door is always open.

**Scott:** Yeah, that's great. I really like how you illustrated that. So are there any other programs that the organization offers that you feel would be important for listeners to know about?

**Dina:** Yeah, so we have, in addition to individual therapy for kiddos, we do have workshops for parents. So we try to have a few workshops going. For parents, for if you have a kiddo, let's just say with ADHD or struggling with anxiety, we try to get parents involved in the way of having a workshop for them so they can learn more about how to support their kiddo. We do groups for kids, social, emotional learning groups. So we usually have, we call it worry warriors. It's an anxiety group. We have what's called the Green Zone and that's just sort of emotional regulation group. For kiddos, we usually have some teen support groups going on for a variety of reasons. And then in the summer, every summer we do a summer camp. So, this summer in June, we have our mighty minds summer camp. And that's for kids ages 6 through 12. And it's a fun summer camp. Like we do arts and crafts, and you know, we have music and movement, but the foundation is all social, emotional learning. So, we're trying to sneak in those, you know, those skills and talk about our emotions and our feelings and how

we can kind of manage them and cope with them. But they're also having a great time and you know a fun summer camp. So, we do that every summer and then we are just trying to add more programs. We hope to get into the schools this school year. If we can get some funding to do that. We would love to go into schools and either provide after school workshops or you know whatever the schools need like we want to be a resource to them. So that's sort of our next big step.

**Scott:** Nice. And for those who may be seeking services, how can they go about obtaining those services from you guys?

**Dina:** Sure. So they can go right to our website, which is [heartspacekids.org](http://heartspacekids.org), and they can read all about the services we provide in house. They can read about the providers we have here on site. If they're looking for financial assistance on our website, there's a link that they can click. It's a very. Quick and easy form that they can filled out for financial assistance and then somebody will get back to them with you know, what they qualify for. We have been awarding 12 sessions at a time for families. So you know once they apply if they are eligible, we usually award 12 sessions to get them going and get them started in in therapy, but it's right there all on our website.

**Scott:** Very good. And then for people who are listening and they're like, oh, I really like the mission here. And then they want to get involved, but they may not know where to start, where can they go to look and how can they best help?

**Dina:** Yeah. So again, on our website, we have a page on there that's dedicated to how that, how anybody can help, whether that is they want to become an in-network provider. If they're a therapist out there in the community and they're like, oh, I want to do this, they can get on our website and send us a quick note about that if it's, you know, community. Member who wants to be involved, whether like as a volunteer or a board member, we're always looking for board members and volunteers and they can reach out to us on our website as well. And then we have what's called the Heartspace Heroes Club. And so those are for people who want to actually sponsor a child for 12 sessions and so that there is a way that they can. Do that. And so, they're like, I wanna, you know, do a donation that is for 12 sessions for a kiddo and that's part of our heart Space Heroes Club. They can go on our website and check that out too.

**Scott:** Well, is there anything else that you want to add that we haven't discussed yet that you think would be important for people to know about?

**Dina:** I just think. Getting people to really access mental health care, really before they're in crisis is so important. And a lot of us, I mean, we're so busy. Like everybody is busy. We have our families and our jobs and our, you know, our kids and everything. We're trying to juggle. And sometimes we just kind of wait it out and we're like, oh, this is, this will get better. It'll get better. But I think if, you know, we can get the kids in here before they're at a crisis level, it's just so much more. Impactful and can just be so much. You know, being proactive just can alleviate so many problems down the line. And so that's my biggest play to families and to parents is just, you know, don't wait till

they're in crisis. Just get them into therapy and get some good skills going and get a good foundation for mental health care.

**Scott:** Great. Well, thank you, Dina. I appreciate you taking the time today and for the work that's done here at Heartspace Kids, Inc. So, thanks for having me.

**Dina:** Yeah, thanks. Thanks for coming out.

**Scott:** If you're interested in listening to additional episodes of Beyond the Dais, you can search for us on Spotify, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, and Amazon Music. Thanks for listening, and we'll see you next time.