

LGBTQ+ Youth Shares Journey from Misdiagnosis to Healing in New Sarasota Mental Health Series

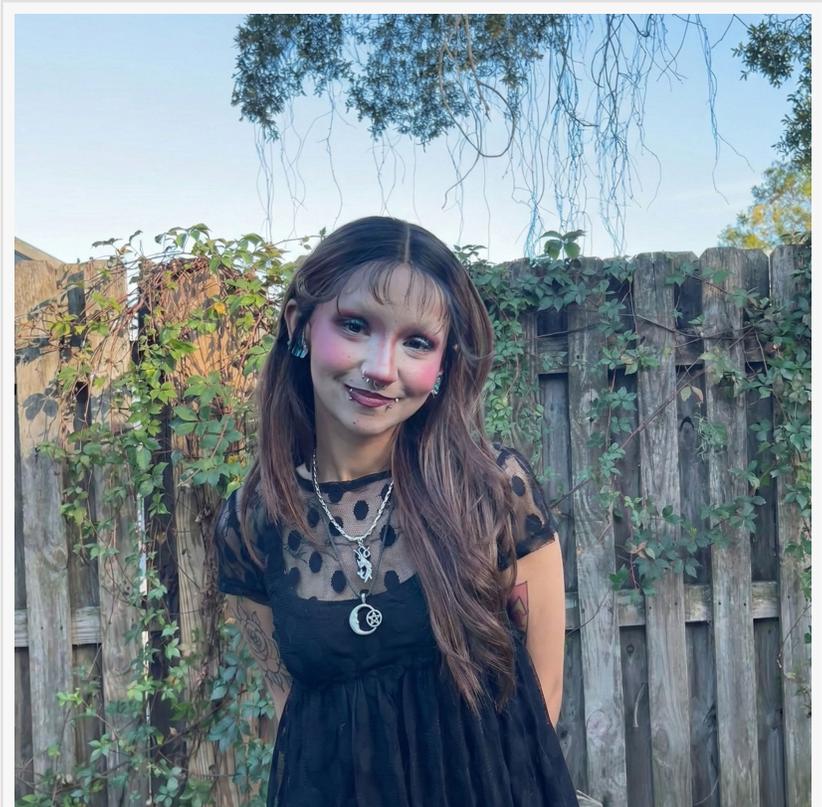
LGBTQ+ youth shares journey from misdiagnosis to healing at new Sarasota mental health series launching January 31 at Harvest House.

SARASOTA, FL, UNITED STATES, January 20, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- On their 21st birthday, Jill Payne heard their core self speak for the first time: "If this is my life, it will not last long." After years of feeling "too different to be human" and receiving five different mental health diagnoses, Payne found affirming care at ALSO Youth—and everything changed.

On Saturday, January 31, from 4:00–6:30 p.m. at Harvest House in Sarasota, Payne will share their immersive storytelling experience, Knot Human, launching Healing Voices, a new community conversation series designed to uplift LGBTQ+ youth voices and explore the role of affirming care, belonging, and community in mental wellness and resilience.

Payne, now 26, credits ALSO Youth's counseling program with two life-changing elements: accessibility and expertise in neurodiversity. After contacting the organization, Payne was connected to care within days—not weeks—and worked with a therapist knowledgeable about autism in people assigned female at birth, a population where autism presents differently and is frequently misdiagnosed.

"I had an overwhelming amount of dehumanizing thoughts to where I genuinely believed I was



Jill Payne will launch ALSO Youth's Healing Voices series on January 31 at Harvest House in Sarasota, sharing their journey from misdiagnosis to post-traumatic growth.

not human," said Payne, who uses they/them pronouns. "Life before care? I was not a human. I am no longer letting the fear of perception stop me from being alive."

According to The Trevor Project's 2024 National Survey, 39% of LGBTQ+ young people seriously considered attempting suicide in the past year. ALSO Youth provides free, [affirming mental health counseling](#) specifically for LGBTQ+ youth in Sarasota and Manatee Counties, with an average wait time of just three days from initial request to first appointment—compared to a national average of six weeks.

"Healing Voices was created to make space for youth stories that are often unheard—stories of survival, growth, and what becomes possible when young people are met with affirmation and care," said Annie Berkness, Executive Director of ALSO Youth. "This series is about community learning, reducing stigma, and reminding LGBTQ+ youth that they are not alone."

“

I had an overwhelming amount of dehumanizing thoughts to where I genuinely believed I was not human... I am no longer letting the fear of perception stop me from being alive."

Jill Payne, Healing Voices Storyteller



Dr. Johana Kuemerle-Pinillos will facilitate the Healing Voices conversation series, which features guided discussions between therapists and LGBTQ+ youth who have completed ALSO Youth's counseling program.

In the past year, ALSO Youth provided 917 free [therapy sessions](#) to 64 youth, many of whom are neurodivergent or navigating complex trauma. Therapist reports and anonymous client surveys indicate meaningful improvements in anxiety and depression symptoms, coping skills, self-confidence, identity affirmation, and trauma processing. One 13-year-old with severe anxiety and a history of self-harm now reports over a year without self-harm after building trust and strategies through counseling.

The series will feature guided conversations between licensed therapists and LGBTQ+ youth who have completed ALSO Youth's counseling program, offering the community an opportunity to better understand how accessible, affirming mental health care can change young lives.

Dr. Johana Kuemerle-Pinillos, a Sarasota-based clinical therapist serving ALSO Youth, explains the therapeutic significance of public storytelling: "From a neurological standpoint, safe, trauma-informed spaces are not just a commodity, they are life transforming experiences that have the potential to save lives. The moment someone is willing to share their trauma journey, they enter their post-traumatic growth phase where their trauma does not define them, and they manage their life from their healed perspective."

Payne describes Knot Human as "a journey through complex trauma, hardship, adulthood diagnosis, and blooming self-discovery—stepping

inside the room of a 15-year-old who didn't yet realize they were human." Attendees will experience immersive storytelling combining visual art, music, and guided reflection in an intimate room-like atmosphere with LED lighting corresponding to different emotional periods.

Healing Voices is a free community event open to parents, educators, mental health professionals, faith leaders, advocates, and community members who care about youth wellbeing. Due to sensitive content, the event is intended for ages 15 and older. Seating is limited, and registration is required.

The series will continue throughout the year with events scheduled for March 14 and May 9, each featuring different youth storytellers and themes. All events will take place at Harvest House, which served as a critical partner to ALSO Youth during the year the organization operated without a permanent Sarasota Center following Hurricane Milton. ALSO Youth reopened its new Sarasota Center in September 2025.

Registration and additional information are available at: <https://www.eventbrite.com/e/healing-voices-jill-payne-tickets-1979349632032>

Healing Voices is presented by ALSO Youth in partnership with Equality Florida and hosted at Harvest House.

About ALSO Youth

Founded in Sarasota in 1992, ALSO Youth provides affirming mental health counseling, support



ALSO Youth

ADVOCACY · LEADERSHIP · SUPPORT · OUTREACH

ALSO Youth's logo represents their mission of Advocacy, Leadership, Support, and Outreach within the LGBTQ+ community

groups, leadership development, and safe spaces for LGBTQ+ youth and their allies in Sarasota and Manatee Counties. The organization is one of the only providers in the region offering free, affirming mental health counseling specifically for LGBTQ+ youth, with support from Sarasota Memorial Hospital Foundation, Gamma Mu Foundation, Community Foundation of Sarasota County, Gulf Coast Community Foundation, and other community partners. For more than 30 years, ALSO Youth has worked to ensure that young people feel seen, supported, and valued—exactly as they are. For more information, visit www.alsoyouth.org.

Annie Berkness, Executive Director

ALSO Youth Inc

+1 941-254-7178

[email us here](#)

Visit us on social media:

[Instagram](#)

[Facebook](#)

[X](#)

This press release can be viewed online at: <https://www.einpresswire.com/article/884969398>

EIN Presswire's priority is source transparency. We do not allow opaque clients, and our editors try to be careful about weeding out false and misleading content. As a user, if you see something we have missed, please do bring it to our attention. Your help is welcome. EIN Presswire, Everyone's Internet News Presswire™, tries to define some of the boundaries that are reasonable in today's world. Please see our Editorial Guidelines for more information.

© 1995-2026 Newsmatics Inc. All Right Reserved.