



# VOICE

SPRING 2021

A Home at the Heart of the University of Wisconsin–Madison since 1907



Mental Health Micro-Community on a nature walk in the fall.

## REFLECTIONS ON VULNERABILITY

BY NINA B., WITH THE MENTAL HEALTH MICRO-COMMUNITY

In January, our Micro-Community set the tone for spring semester with a watch party of Brené Brown's film *The Call to Courage*. The focus of our Micro-Community is Mental Health and Wellness, and Brown's exploration of vulnerability really resonated with our theme. She explained that courage and vulnerability go hand in hand; it's impossible to be truly courageous without allowing ourselves to be emotionally vulnerable with others. She makes it clear that being vulnerable can come with a lot of heartache, but that in the long run, it's what you need to experience love and joy.

Our intention with creating this Micro-Community was to find ways to talk about and improve our mental health and well-being so that we can manage stress and experience joy in our everyday lives. In our discussion after the film, we talked about different ways we could try to show vulnerability. We all expressed that with the increased isolation we've been experiencing since the pandemic, we've had a difficult time maintaining our relationships with family and friends. We've all found ourselves distancing from the people we care about in an emotional sense, in addition to the literal physical distancing necessary to keep us all safe. The documentary

made us aware of this emotional distance, and we all agreed we want to make more of an effort to reach out to the people we care about, even if it feels a bit awkward or uncomfortable.

We also talked about showing vulnerability in the classroom setting. Since we're all attending class virtually now, video-conferencing has added another layer of awkwardness and anxiety to sharing ideas in class. Inspired by Brené Brown, we all decided to make it a goal to try to take more risks in our university courses—to accept that we might not know all the answers, and that we could potentially say or ask something embarrassing—but that it will be worth the risk. We're in college because we want to learn and grow, and the only way to accomplish that is to make mistakes and show vulnerability.

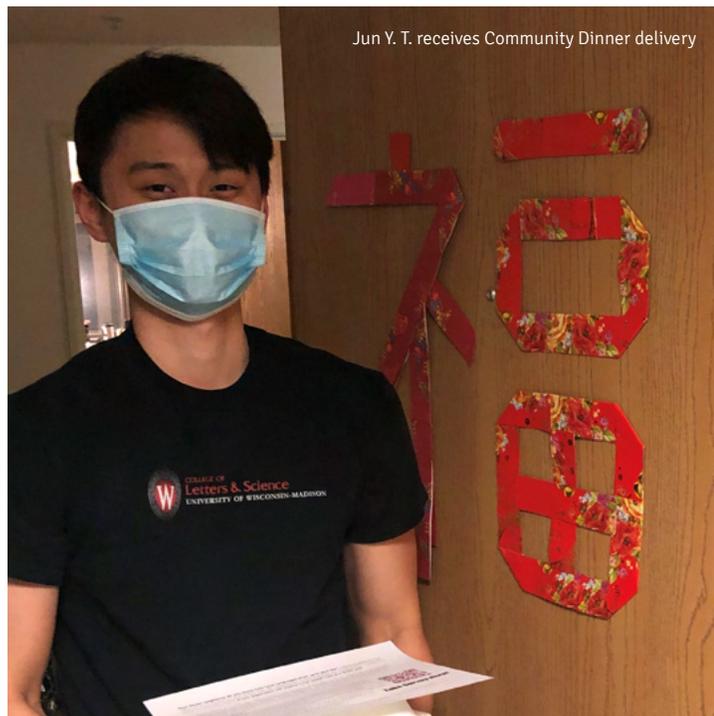
The discussion was a great way to bond as a Micro-Community, and it helped us to set goals for our mental and emotional well-being.

# SCHOLARS PROGRAM OFFERS SURPRISING NEW EXPERIENCES

By Jun Y. T.

I initially joined the Pres House Scholars Program expecting an opportunity to interact with like-minded people and to get out of my comfort zone. I was excited to meet my cohort in person, but as the pandemic went into full effect, my expectations were affected due to the logistical problems with hosting gatherings. I fully expected Scholars meetings to be another Zoom-styled event with awkward voice cutoffs and standard Zoom activities.

With that expectation in mind, I was pleasantly surprised when staff member Rebecca Bedell introduced GatherTown as the Scholars' online gathering platform as it was so unique! Although it was still in a virtual format, the platform's interactivity added a layer that Zoom did not offer. Throughout the meetings, Rebecca never failed to push the limits of what could be done virtually. I especially had fun when we did a virtual escape room paired with a printed game booklet. We split into two teams in a race to solve the escape room. We had to cut, fold, and manipulate the "tools" included in the printed game materials to achieve our objectives, requesting hints when we got stuck. The virtual format and ancient archaeology theme were really engaging as we communicated among teammates to delegate tasks and work together to solve the puzzles.



Jun Y. T. receives Community Dinner delivery

Also super engaging were the virtual cooking sessions, which provided a stress-free environment for me to polish my culinary skills (coming from a person who barely cooks)! In the fall we were given the ingredients to create Halloween Rice Krispies, and in the spring we tried our hands at making a vegetarian lasagna. Rebecca prepared a wonderfully detailed recipe that included pictures and step-by-step instructions on preparing the ingredients as well as putting together

the final product. After the lasagna was assembled and in the oven, we took some time to do a mindfulness practice where we had to feel, touch and smell a piece of chocolate before slowly allowing it to melt away in our mouth. It was an interesting experience as we usually gobble down treats and food without much thought, and that practice reminded me to appreciate the food that I was eating as well as the joy I feel when eating it, whether it be the texture, taste, smell, or consistency.

All in all, the Scholars Program was really engaging despite the challenges of a virtual format, and I even got inspired by Rebecca's introduction of GatherTown to host an event in my student organization through GatherTown. I would like to thank Rebecca for her resourcefulness and willingness to help, despite facing a lot of roadblocks in running the Scholars Program this year.

## INCREDIBLE ENGAGEMENT IN THE PH APARTMENTS

Pres House Apartments continues to be much more than a place to sleep for our 230 residents. This year, an impressive **95 percent of residents have either been part of a scholarship program or participated in a building-wide event.**

They are hungry for a sense of hospitality: an average of 88 residents received each monthly Community Dinner this year, up from 75 last year, as our delivery system for Laura's delicious meals has been a hit. So has Afternoon Tea, our midweek snack hour, which relaunched socially distanced in January and has seen almost double the turnout of pre-pandemic days. Becca, Ginger, and Terry have taken turns hosting Tea, getting to know residents through masked chats.

In a midyear survey, one respondent said, "The staff has made sure its residents are well taken care of," citing Community Dinners and Candid wellness challenges. One third of residents participated in a four-month COVID-19 Community Health Incentive, which offered rewards for regular testing and setting a good example of safe conduct. One resident said our health incentives and messaging "made me feel safe and supported by Pres House. It feels like everyone at Pres House actually cares."

We are also excited about next year. **The PH Apartment building is 100% full for fall 2021, the earliest we have ever completely filled up and before most other downtown student housing facilities.** We will have the **highest number** of residents in our history involved in a purposeful living community next year: **104**. That amounts to approximately 45% of residents, which is getting very close to our strategic goal of involving half of our residents in purposeful living programs each year.

# CANDID CIRCLES ARE ROLLING!

Candid Circles grew from a pilot group of four students in the fall 2020 semester to over 40 inquiries from students for the spring semester. It's not surprising, since pandemic life has taken a toll on us all!

## What concerns are students reporting?

"I can feel like I am making progress for a few days, but then something small will push me over the edge into a stressful episode..."

"I don't have drive right now..."

"Executing and taking action on my own..."

"Procrastination/lack of action, diverting attention to less stressful things too easily..."

"Inconsistency in energy and motivation, having low energy in general..."

"I feel doubtful about my future and am afraid I'm not on the right career path..."

"I am preoccupied by all that I have to do and neglect to work on the skills that will help to lessen my anxiety..."

"Feeling like I don't even deserve time to manage my stress..."

## How are students hoping Candid Circles can help?



**"Having people to talk to and get advice from..."**

"Having a group with the same goals is helpful..."

**"I think having accountability for my physical goals has been really helpful!"**

"Being able to form connections, talk with other people in the community, and having someone or something to hold me accountable for making progress..."

"More connections..."



**"Motivation and holding me accountable..."**

"Connecting me with people who I can call friends to be social with and who give me positivity..."

Through weekly drop-in coaching sessions, students are invited to imagine what will feel like a personal “win” for themselves by the end of the semester. We then help students set small, achievable goals that move them forward, creating momentum, and a sense of success. When they feel stuck, there is someone to offer ideas and encouragement. As they achieve their small goals, we celebrate their progress. In Candid Circles, we believe that “small hinges swing big doors” – and that small victories can lead to lasting change.



## DECOLONIZING CHRISTIANITY, ENCOUNTERING JESUS

In the wake of a contentious election cycle and the insurrection in our nation's capital, more and more people have become aware of how frequently Christianity is connected to white supremacy, nationalism, and violence. It is an uncomfortable fact that Christian churches are often breeding grounds for harmful and dangerous ideas that ultimately result in violence and even death for the most vulnerable members of our society.

At Pres House, we knew that we needed to talk about these sobering truths. And while conversations and sermons about such issues are not rare at Pres House, we felt that we needed to do something more focused and explicit; something that not only named the dangers of “colonial” Christianity — the kind of Christianity that is rooted in a desire for power and control — but also named how a different, more liberating kind of faith might be possible when we intentionally seek to “decolonize” our faith. We also knew that this kind of work takes a long time (a lifetime, in fact); we couldn't do it in a sermon or two.

As we planned for the spring, we realized that Lent was the perfect opportunity for the kind of sustained reflection on decolonizing our faith that we wanted to do. Lent — the liturgical season between Ash Wednesday and Easter — is a time of intentional reflection, prayer, and discipline for many Christians. And since this year has been all about trying new things, we figured, “Why not give it a shot?”

And so our Lenten series “Decolonizing Christianity, Encountering Jesus” was born. Throughout the series, Erica and Nii covered topics like the infallibility of Scripture, spiritual trauma, Christian supremacy, and salvation. Each sermon came with a recommended resource for deeper learning, and Natalie selected music from a wide variety of traditions beyond the traditional (and typically white) hymnody of the church in the United States. We also shared spiritual disciplines every week for students to engage with, such as lectio divina and Sabbath. The result was seven weeks of challenging yet liberating messages and worship experiences that invited students to ask themselves tough questions about their faith and what it means to follow Jesus.

You can watch or listen to all of the sermons from the series — as well as see our recommended resources for deeper learning — on our website (click the “Worship” header, then click on “Listening to Sunday Sermons” in the sidebar). We believe that this series will be as much of a gift to you as it was for the students in our community.



### MIDWEEK COMMUNION

Midweek Communion has been one of the unexpected gifts of the past year. It started as a way for us to have a little taste of communion, which we would normally share together every Sunday during worship. Students could come to Pres House and pick up their own loaf of freshly baked bread or another delicious treat like donuts from Greenbush Bakery, a local donut shop. What started as an experiment in community-building during the pandemic has become a consistent opportunity for connection and joy for both students and staff.

We put together a short video for you to get a sense of what Midweek Communion is like. To watch it, you can type this link into your browser: [bit.ly/midweekcommunionvideo](https://bit.ly/midweekcommunionvideo).

If you have a smartphone, you can open your camera app and aim it at the QR code (the square that says “scan me” above). It should then automatically give you the option to open the video in your web browser or the YouTube app.



## HELP RESTORE THE TOWER AT PRES HOUSE!

The Pres House tower is an iconic architectural feature in the heart of the UW-Madison campus. Standing on Library Mall since 1935, the Neo-Gothic Revival structure has inspired hundreds of thousands of students and greeted millions of visitors to campus over the decades. From its Tudor-arched wooden doors to the sculpted upper reaches, it is one of the most beautiful sites on campus.

### But it needs some help.

Age and weathering have caused breakage and weakened the structure of decorative stone features near the top of the tower. The last repair and restoration of the tower was completed more than twenty years ago and it is time for some work again. Prompted by concerns for safety, a complete restoration and repair of exterior masonry elements is a priority at this time. We have put together a project to restore the tower to its original glory and to ensure it remains a beautiful and primary feature on Library Mall at UW-Madison for future generations to enjoy.

Repairs will include top to bottom tuckpointing, restoration of eight damaged pediments, and masonry cleaning. This work will be done with approval from the Landmark Commission of the City of Madison and in compliance with National Park Service guidelines for masonry repairs. The restoration can be completed in summer 2021.

The Pres House chapel building and tower play an important role in the spiritual, emotional, and intellectual growth of UW-Madison students. We are blessed to have such a beautiful and striking space within which to help students experience the grace of God, grow in their faith, and be empowered to be sent forth into the world as ambassadors of God's love and justice. Caring for our facility will ensure this legacy of ministry continues for decades to come.

**We need your help to complete this restoration project. The total cost of this project is \$120,000. We are seeking donations to fund this vital work. Can you join in the effort to Restore the Tower?**



Broken pediments will be restored and re-installed.

**You are invited to make a donation to help Restore the Tower**  
Send in a check via mail or make a donation at <https://preshouse.org/donate/tower>

You can also make a [pledge](#) to give over two or three years if you'd prefer. A generous donor has committed to match all gifts dollar for dollar which means your donation will double in value. All donors who make a gift to this Restore the Tower campaign before June 30 will be honored with a special designation in our 2020-21 Annual Report (unless you prefer to remain anonymous). Thank you for helping us keep the tower strong, beautiful, and inspiring for future generations!

## FINDING COMMUNITY AND GIVING BACK THROUGH KNITTING

During the COVID-19 pandemic people all over have had to be creative. Every aspect of life was shaken — learning how to work around social distancing and public guidelines has hindered people from getting together like they used to. Even with the new guidelines, Stitch Niche found a way to expand their reach throughout the pandemic by meeting online.

While the name implies that the group is focused on knitting or crocheting, Stitch Niche really is a place where members spend time with and support each other. They work on a variety of projects: some knit scarves and hats for those facing homelessness in Madison, others have created baby blankets, Christmas presents, and even work projects.

During the pandemic many people have found themselves in a position to try out new hobbies. The group wanted to make trying out knitting as easy as possible, so they created take-away knitting kits for members of the Pres House community. They also collected hats, mittens, and scarves that they recently donated to YWCA in Madison to help those facing homelessness.

At a recent meeting the group went around to talk about what the group has meant to everyone during the pandemic. Here is what some members had to say.

Stitch Niche is a place to gather, socialize, create, and give back. For anyone who has been feeling lonely or has wanted to pick up a new hobby Stitch Niche is the place to be.

“

... a way to meet people and feel included

- Breianna D., young adult

I like making hats plus the group is fun. I really enjoy knitting and being able to see people.

- Jacob D., undergrad

Stitch Niche is the one thing over the last year that has been constant. With all the changes happening everywhere else, it has been nice to have something consistent. For me this group is a self-care type thing that allows me to socialize in a relaxing environment.

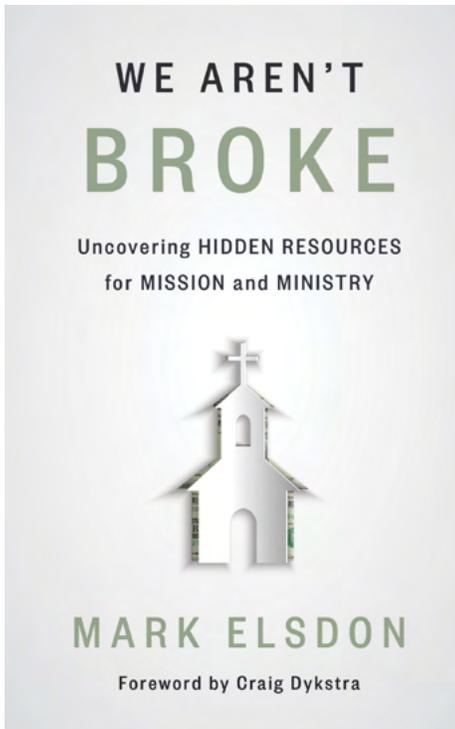
- Meredith B., undergrad



Stitch Niche is a time of the week where I know I can see people, even if it is only virtually. It's a consistent time each week where I can catch up with people, and it gives me a sense of purpose

- Taya B., nursing graduate student

# EXCITING HAPPENINGS FOR PRES HOUSE STAFF



## NEW BOOK BY MARK ELSDON

Executive Director Mark Elsdon is pleased to announce the release of his first full-length book on June 1, 2021, by Eerdmans Publishing. *We Aren't Broke: Uncovering Hidden Resources for Mission and Ministry*, tells the story of Pres House since 2004 and encourages faith-based institutions to think differently about the use of property and investment assets for social impact.

Many Christian churches and related institutions in the United States are struggling or, in some cases, facing imminent crisis, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Attendance is down. Funding is harder to come by. People are no longer drawn to traditional church services and programming in the ways that they once were. Often, we feel broke and powerless to do much about it.

But if we reexamine our perceived limits and our assumptions about how resources are supposed to be used, then something remarkable and beautiful comes into view: we aren't broke at all but have enormous resources at our disposal. And these resources are often available to us right now.

This book draws upon the story of Pres House, to describe how church property and investment assets can be put to work for innovation, transformation, and financial sustainability. Theologically rooted but practically minded, it provides guidance and tools for church and nonprofit leaders, entrepreneurs, and investors of all kinds who are seeking new ways to fund and participate in God's work in the world. You can purchase "We Aren't Broke" at [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com) or at other booksellers. More information is available at [www.melsdon.com](http://www.melsdon.com).

## BECCA BEDELL RECEIVING MINISTRY EXPLORATION GRANT



Last year, Coordinator of Residential Programs Becca Bedell attended virtual adaptations of the Forum for Theological Exploration (FTE) Christian Leadership Forum. Within the Forum, she was accepted into the DISCERN cohort of young adult faith leaders. She had the opportunity to participate in small groups and spiritual direction, and to apply for a Ministry Exploration grant. In December, her grant proposal was accepted.

With Ginger Morgan as her primary mentor, Becca is spending time in 2021 in conversation with several faith leaders, a personal retreat at Holy Wisdom Monastery outside of Madison, and diving into an extensive reading list. She'll be reflecting on her faith journey and leadership experience at Pres House, to consider a possible path to seminary and her future in ministry.

## GINGER MORGAN CERTIFIED AS A HEALTH AND LIFE COACH



In 2019 Ginger received a Reflective Leadership Grant from the Leadership Education program at Duke Divinity School to support her pivot from working full time with Pres House Apartment residential programs to launching and directing Candid (the Pres House wellness initiative for UW Madison students). As part of her grant activity, Ginger pursued health and life coach training from the Health Coach Institute, which she successfully completed in January of 2021.

Ginger has been using these coaching skills in Candid Circles-- supporting UW students as they navigate the stresses and demands of the COVID-19 pandemic, University studies, and life. Ginger is excited to offer a four-week coaching series for Pres House alumni in June 2021, called "Yes to You," where she will assist participants balance life priorities, manage stress, and affirm life priorities. Coach training has provided a wonderful retooling opportunity to extend Pres House's mission to support the intellectual, spiritual and emotional growth to a whole new group of UW students.



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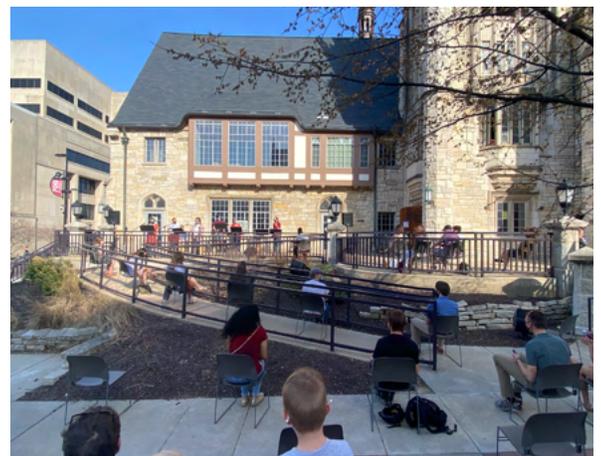
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**Easter Worship on the Patio**

On a gorgeous Sunday afternoon, students gathered for the first in-person worship service of 2021 on the Pres House patio. With a full music band and individually packaged snacks for communion, it was a joy-filled day celebrating Christ's life and resurrection!



**Support Pres House**

Throughout this newsletter you have read about the exciting activities happening at Pres House. Ministry at Pres House is possible only through generous donations from alumni, friends, and churches.

Please give today by using the enclosed envelope or send your contributions to Pres House at 731 State Street, Madison, WI 53703. You can also give online at [www.preshouse.org/donate](http://www.preshouse.org/donate).