

Not just a 'white person thing'

Dior Vargas, who will speak in Portland, wants women of color to know they're not alone in their struggles with mental health

BY SARAH HANSELL
STAFF WRITER

Dior Vargas is a Latina feminist mental health activist whose work has appeared in publications such as Forbes, Newsweek and The Guardian, and whose many awards include the White House Champion of Change for Disability Advocacy Across Generations.

But in 2014, before any of this, she was searching for a way to be more active in mental health advocacy, something she related to deeply as a survivor of multiple suicide attempts as a child and young adult. She began doing online research on mental health, and she found image after image of white people, especially white women, looking sad and overwhelmed.

"I thought, I live with mental illness, but I'm not like that all the time, and I don't want people to think that's how I feel all the time," Vargas said. "It is a reality for a lot of people, but again, there weren't people from my community that I saw in those images, that I saw in those articles."

Vargas wanted to create a space that showed a different reality — that showed that mental illnesses were not just a "white person thing," as she was raised to believe.

And with that, the People of Color and Mental Illness Photo Project was born. The first photo is Vargas holding a piece of cardboard that reads: "My name is Dior Vargas and I have major depressive disorder." From there, the photos flooded in: people of color holding pieces of paper proclaiming their name and mental illness.

Vargas will visit Portland this month, joining 10 other women speaking at Grit and Grace Multicultural Women's Health Conference. The Sept. 28 event, put on by ASHA International, looks at mental health issues through a gender-specific lens, seeking to "inspire, educate and empower women to take charge of their mental health and cultivate resilience and well-being," according to the organization's website. The women will share personal experiences, as well as studies on mental health topics such as living with bipolar disorder, the impact of displacement on mental health and the role of hormones on mental health.

Sarah Hansell: How do you think your photo project helps subvert stigma about mental health in communities of color?

Dior Vargas: I think it's helpful because

it gave people an opportunity to really think about their experience with mental illness, see other people that look like them, and find a point of relation.

For example, if someone wrote on their sign, "I have seen therapists and they weren't understanding of my identity or my culture and it made it hard to go back, and it didn't make my experience fulfilling," to be able to see that and say, "Oh my God, I went through the same thing."

It made people feel like they weren't alone, people who were in the project, but also people who just happened to see the project, that used the link to discuss these issues online, also to discuss the issues with friends and, I think even more importantly, family members. Because I think it was something that wasn't really discussed, especially given the

idea that mental illness was seen as a white person thing. So being able to show that link to their family

members and say, "Hey, we may think that it's a white person thing, but there are so many people via this link that can say otherwise." And so it's a way for them to start the conversation, to start thinking differently about this topic and finally to kind of find their voice and create their own narrative when it comes to

this experience.

S.H.: There's some pretty alarming statistics out there in terms of mental health and communities of color, such as Latina teens having a high rate of suicide attempts in the United States. Why do you think that rate is so high?

D.V.: I think there are many things at play when it comes to that. I think being a Latina where you are kind of experiencing a border culture, where you grew up in a family that might be very traditional, might be very set in their cultural norms, and very community- and family-oriented, and then you're living in, let's say, the United States, or for me, New York. The United States can be very individualistic, this idea that

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