

# Helping young Utahns with their mental health 'put the power back' in her story

This is part of a series of interviews with young Utahns making a meaningful impact on their communities — and their own — mental health. Read more at [sltrib.com](https://sltrib.com).

Between the ages of 3 and 17, Natalie Clark spent six years in and out of Utah's foster care system. She's experienced homelessness and has been diagnosed with PTSD, C-PTSD and ADHD.

Clark, now 25 and working toward a master's degree in social work, says all this experience made her want to help youth in similar circumstances.

She's worked with a number of organizations, including the Salt Lake County Youth Services Milestone Transitional Living Program, which connects young Utahns experiencing homelessness with safe housing, stable employment and connections to ongoing support and resources — including therapy.

Clark's work with Salt Lake County led her to found the 1999 Collective, an organization she founded to further support youth aging out of foster care.

And now she's back at Salt Lake County's Youth Services, where she received help as a child. This time, though, she's helping others as the foster care liaison for the Youth Action Board, a "first of its kind" program that last year received a \$2.7 million grant from the federal government to help youth experiencing homelessness, which she says was leveraged through her and her peers' lived experiences.

"Youth Action Board ... it's like heaven on earth," Clark said. "To me it is the first time that, in Utah, lived experts are being given an authentic voice — but, as well as that, authentic power."

This Q&A with her has been edited for length and clarity.

**Sara Weber: It sounds like you've really come a long way in your own mental health journey — going from the foster care system to a MSW in social work. Could you share a bit more about what brought you back to Youth Services?**



Natalie Clark poses for a photo alongside other members of the 2022 Salt Lake County Youth Action Board.

**Natalie Clark:** I wanted to be the therapist that I had. I was blessed because I had therapy at Salt Lake County Youth Services with, in my opinion, the best therapist in the world. I really wanted to emulate the experience that I had to put the autonomy in my hands and the power back in my story, so to speak.

I thought this would be a great juncture to really explore what that looked like for me and to give back to my community in a way that was given back to me when I needed it most.

**What are the challenges you face in your day-to-day work?**

I think the biggest challenge is that it's a new landscape. If you look throughout the community,

there isn't necessarily a standard set for how to do this, which authentically engages young people or creates that pluralistic partnership between youth and young adults.

**Natalie Clark:** We're learning as we go, and it is intimidating. **How do you reach people who need these services?**

Youth Action Board takes a really proactive approach. And we just try to connect with the community in person. We'll go down to the VOA Youth Resource Center. We'll host the event for the Point in Time Count every year so that we are actually interacting with the youth that are experiencing homelessness. Most recently, I held a panel where [youth experiencing homelessness] could just ask questions,

and we could tell them all about what we were doing.

The reality is, it's hard to find our young people. Our young people are not on TikTok. They're not in all of the spaces where they would be connected to us organically. So we're making sure we're going to the places where our young people are not being seen.

**Do you have any advice for young Utahns who are interested in peer-to-peer mental health work?**

It's not just about being involved. It's about being involved at the right place. I've been in this work since I was 14, 15 years old. I've worked in a lot of situations where the goal is similar to what the Youth Action Board is, but the execution is completely different. This is the first space that I've ever entered where

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NATALIE CLARK

I didn't feel the impostor syndrome literally drowning me.

Being a young person, there's "adulthood" that exists and then being from foster care — only 3% of us graduate college. So, how am I doing this? Am I really supposed to be here? All of those things that make me invalidate my own expertise and my own voice are very much silenced in the proper environment.

There are parts of this that are really hard, right? It's not all flowers and rainbows. So young people need the right support and encouragement. They need to know that there's someone to walk along their journey with. It's not easy, but it's worth it.

And I always say, "It's not about what you've been through in life, it's about how you help others get through what you've been through that matters most."

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