

## CUSD Cares

### not MY kid

Season:3 Episode 3 – October 21, 2022

Director of Counseling & Social Services, Brenda Vargas talks with Kristen Polin, Chief Executive Officer with organization notMYkid. For more than 20 years, notMYkid has been providing youth, families, schools, and community partners with high impact prevention education and early intervention programs.

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**Brenda Vargas: (00:06)**

Hello, parents and caregivers and community, thank you for joining us for another edition of CUSD Cares. We are so happy you're able to join us today. We are just so incredibly privileged to be joined today by an amazing grassroots organization that started here in our local area. I'm welcoming today, 'not MY kid' and their CEO, Kristin Polin. Kristin, thank you so very much for being with us today.

**Kristin Polin: (00:36)**

Absolutely honored to be here with you, Brenda. We love working with Chandler Unified School District and I'm really grateful that you have asked us to be on your podcast today.

**Brenda Vargas: (00:47)**

Well, you are certainly true partners in the work that we do. We cannot do it without you, and we just so appreciate you showing up when we need you most, but also showing up to the table to explore other opportunities and meeting kids and families where they're at. I want to first start off Kristin, with how did 'not MY kid' get started? Because it's such a catchy title. Tell me a little bit and share with our parents and community about the history of 'not My kid', and how it all began.

**Kristin Polin: (01:13)**

You bet. I think that our name does say it all in terms of when you see the signage or you see our logo, 'not My kid'. The "My" being capitalized is really a saying that I think a lot of parents will often find themselves saying, no, not my kid. My kid would never do that. They won't have those problems. I have 'em fully equipped. We talk about drugs all the time and you know; we do play on that. But really what 'not MY kid' is truly playing on is giving parents' resources, information skills, tools, whatever you want to call it. 'Not MY kid', is really with confidence that my child is going to get the support and resources that they need because parents do know how to navigate that journey of the teen years. And PS I think you and I both know that is not easy.

**Kristin Polin: (02:08)**

I have a 17- and 19-year-old. I feel like we have kids around the same age. I welcome parents when they say their child's 12. Welcome to the Twilight Zone. We build on, hang on tight. And really what this organization is all about is holding space for parents, supporting parents, families, caregivers, and schools, as you know, for that journey of prevention, education, early intervention and treatment. And this organization was founded by a family, Stephen and Debbie Moak, a well-known name in the community. They started this organization in 2000, really from their own personal experience with a son that had it all. On paper academically was doing amazing, and he struggled with substance use and had a lot of problems associated with that. And so, their grassroots movement started over two decades ago to start conversations that literally began in a home and grew to 50,000 people a year. 3 million people two decades later that have been educated by important messages like prevention, substance use prevention predominantly, suicide prevention awareness, suicide alertness, knowing when to speak up, internet safety, bullying, all the things that kids are, facing right now, which actually look a lot different two decades later. So, we've pivoted and have moved along, but just beautiful things have happened with this organization that is mostly a peer run agency as well. A lot of us have personal stories, personal history, and experience, and we bring that in all the work that we do.

**Brenda Vargas: (03:48)**

I appreciate the fact that 'not MY kid' is honoring parents and caregivers. It's such a humbling experience to be a parent. And Christie, I know you and I have exchanged some stories and it's the hardest job in the whole wide world in my humble opinion. And we want to just honor our children where they're at in the same breath, try to do better each and every single day. And I feel like 'not MY kid' has really shown up for parents and communities to be able to do that and to come to the table and really simply, and very graciously accept parents and caregivers where they're at. And then continuing that learning because it is a very different world to navigate than the way you and I grew up way back when, right? Yeah. And so, it just looks different, and we have to acknowledge and accept that that's what it is.

**Kristin Polin: (04:41)**

Yeah. And I think, for me personally, where I'm at in the journey of parenthood. I've been in the business for 25 years and it definitely changes for you when you go through that experience that there is no perfect path. As you're parenting and you're raising these individual humans that are gifted, talented, some struggle, and you get the best and the worst of it. And you sort it out. I think that our goal, our primary goal is when things aren't going well, that it's okay to not be ashamed of that. And it's okay to ask for help. We actually have youth-facing programs in the schools that have the same message. It is okay to not be okay, and it is okay to ask for help. And unfortunately, I think it'll be decades and we still have a lot of work to do to eradicate stigma that would say, mental health struggles and struggles with a substance use disorder are a form of weakness or defect, and really help people to see that we are dealing with true brain diseases that need support just like a diabetic that needs insulin. It's the same

type of approach set that we utilize in messaging. No shame behind these struggles. And you can recover.

**Brenda Vargas: (05:59)**

Absolutely. And I appreciate you sharing that new way of thinking in regards to it being a brain disease. As we know most people, it takes them sometimes up to 10 years to get mental health help. And we would never wait that long for a physical impairment or physical issue that's happening in our body. So, we certainly want to take this opportunity to further educate parents. And you guys do a conglomerate number of different things. Where should we begin?

**Kristin Polin: (06:27)**

Let's begin from just the basics. I think that that's a part and I do want to preface as we go any further that I am a person that's in long term recovery. I've had bumps and challenges along the way. It hasn't been a perfect journey. I got sober, first sober when I was young and in high school, out of college. I had another journey with that. So, I have that experience of also going through it with my parents. And then the universe blessed me with the experience of then going through some of the stuff with my own kids. And then Brenda, I think that was our bonding a few months back when I had to share that. I got my son off to college and then realized that there was a real struggle and real help that was needed. It was very eye-opening, and we had to take swift action to save his life and turn his life around. So, I've been in it at the hip level.

**Brenda Vargas: (07:22)**

Lived experience is so powerful, isn't it, Kristen?

**Kristin Polin: (07:26)**

It is. I mean, I can be a CEO of this organization and still have the same struggle to the parent that's calling or pulling me aside in a meeting. And I just want everyone to know this is an equal opportunity affliction. No one is immune, not my kid. I'm a fool to believe it wouldn't be happening to mine, and I'm an expert in the behavioral health fields. It just is what it is.

**Brenda Vargas: (07:49)**

It is. And honestly, it's every youth's journey as they figure out the struggle and the stressors and how to deal with it. And we just have to embrace them with the support set we know. And for those that we don't know, right, reach out to 'not MY kid', to find out a little bit more of what else we can do as a parent or even neighbor or just a trusted adult. If we see a child or youth that is really, really struggling

and or something unknown that, hey, I'm not quite sure, but let me just reach out. So how do you guys reach out? Tell us a little bit about that.

**Kristin Polin: (08:23)**

We are wide scale, loud and vocal about prevention resources. And I think that it's really, really important to emphasize that wherever we can get our message across is our prevention engine that is community wide. It's done through our website. We're fortunate to have partnerships with schools where we can do webinars. I find those to be way more successful and well attended when we're meeting parents where they're at digitally on their phone and they have access to tune in, click on a link. I think the days of a traditional parent auditorium session has really shifted and the pandemic changed that model. And that's okay because I think our numbers have quadrupled since the pandemic where we can make it easier for parents to access information on the topics that we care so deeply about and want parents to have resources about.

**Kristin Polin: (09:22)**

I think there's two things that have been front and center. It's the mental health crisis. We've been very vocal connecting with a lot of partners as well. And we were fortunate to have that panel with Chandler as well to really help people realize how to access what the system looks like today. So mental health, the number one topic, we are in the midst of an opioid crisis. Everyone knows it by now. Unfortunately, we're seeing data that would show that half of eighth graders right now, and you probably saw some of this data that's coming across the airwaves lately in the Arizona Youth Survey, they identified that only half of eighth graders know what fentanyl is, and that is the number one substance use problem that we are facing. That is a life-threatening situation. And it is urgent that parents start talking to their kids. So that platform has been very important to communicate that one pill can kill. I think a lot of people are really emphasizing that information. We are in the midst of a crisis and every child needs to understand the dangers of an unknown pill and assume every pill is counterfeit right now and can be deadly.

**Brenda Vargas: (10:35)**

I concur and I think sometimes parents don't realize that their students have access to more than what they believe they have access to. And unfortunately, the vaping epidemic that started in 2016, 2017, opened up that door where it became, hip, cool, whatever, you know, acceptable because of the device. And it certainly attracted youth, I should say, that maybe wouldn't have considered it to using nicotine and then eventually, possibly even going into THC use. And now that door is open, right? Vaping and then going right into possibly opioid use and fentanyl and whatnot or other drugs. So, I just, I think sometimes we want to believe that they don't have access and we want to believe in the good, but the reality is that even if they don't have access, we have to make them aware so that they can make an informed decision instead of the telltale sign that we heard growing up was just say no. Right? And that's just not the case. They're curious, they want to know, so let's inform them. And I think 'not MY

kid' has done a phenomenal job in giving parents the tools so that they, they can educate their children and their youth.

**Kristin Polin: (11:55)**

Yeah, and I think even just fast forward to where we're at from when you talked about the, the vaping, the nicotine vaping crisis with Jules and all of that exploded in 2015, 2016, and then where we're at today where most kids are actually purchasing drugs through social media and Snapchat. And then we don't hide, from protecting that information, that is what is going on right now. There are an abundance of high schools in our community. There are tons of ways for kids to network and communicate. And drug dealers are getting to kids selling what they would call a Xanax pill. And it does have fentanyl in it. I don't want to hide from the reality that now that we have recreational marijuana, we are seeing an uptick, a gigantic surge in youth marijuana use. And quite frankly, I'm really concerned about that.

**Kristin Polin: (12:54)**

I think the message is clear on that front as well, that the THC levels in these gummies and vape pens is very, very different than when you and I were going through the high school years and the transition years of this time that it is profound what is happening and the damage that's being done for kids that are getting exposed to such high levels. So, I would say from the vaping crisis today, we're confronted with youth marijuana use. And remember, I don't hear, I'm not judging adults. I'm very focused on, and what we're focusing on is a vulnerable developing youth brain that is exposing themselves to very high levels of THC, and then that opening the door, turning on the trigger to the desire to use even harder drugs, more drugs, and that gateway element, it exists. I mean, I think I have been saying for 20 years I've never met a heroin addict that just started with heroin.

**Brenda Vargas: (13:51)**

Right. They didn't go into it even thinking to themselves, I don't have any intention of being addicted. Right. Addiction takes over and, I'm so glad, you brought up the youth marijuana use, and this is of course, in no judgment to adults that may choose to use, this is really talking about children whose brains are not developed and really the implications that that has. And we haven't even talked about the digital divide and all those different pieces and the digital influence, I should say in regard to that. But there, there is just one thing after another that is a continuous stressor and, pushing them to the ledge to make maybe unhealthy decisions about, their life, the direction they're going and or one small decision that could lead down a trajectory that really can get out of control. I mean, I know that parents often think, Right, not my kid, but in the same breath, even if their kid isn't exploring, I think a lot of, of times, Kristen, and you can share whether or not you see this, that parents sometimes don't seek information until they're dealing with a crisis or a situation that's already arisen as a problem.

**Kristin Polin: (15:02)**

Right, and I think that sometimes that's a protection mechanism. Some people would call it denial, but the parent then creates this reflection themselves like, what did I do wrong? And unfortunately, these things go so fast and I'm so happy you brought up the aspect of the digital because every time we decide that it's okay to put a computer in a child's hand that has access to everything on the internet, you can safeguard it all day long. I have friends that will tell me, I have this app and this app and it's going to block it, and then I can sit a teen right next to every single one and show you how they can jail break that and get right past it and start a VPN on their phone and go in a completely different direction. They are smarter than us and they always will be on the tech side.

**Kristin Polin: (15:54)**

And the reason why I'm saying this is that the messages they constantly see on YouTube, Snapchat, TikTok, the list goes on and on. There is a norm that builds with a lot of social media influencers that that would be really about marijuana not so bad. It's all natural, it's plant based, it's organic and that's fine. Like I hear that. But a child that's hearing that without having a parent that's level setting on, what is true and what's not. The bottom line is that type of marijuana used in exposure over time is going to do damage to a child. I don't care in what dose and how often, it is enough to cause harm. And, quite frankly, we're seeing a huge uptick and psychosis related to very high-grade THC that is real proven, documented.

**Kristin Polin: (16:52)**

And again, for the developing brain for a child that is harmful. So, I want to go back to the parent for a second. I think that the warning signs start to reveal themselves and the problems that are associated with this type of use. And they typically show up on the students report card and what's going on with them emotionally, change in friends starting to isolate. And, I say these in general terms because a parent will always say, what is wrong? Something is not right and their gut, their gut alarm is going off first before their brain can attach to facts and trust your gut has always been, for me, the number one rule of thumb, in addition to looking into the eyes of your child where all truth is revealed. Yes. Making eye contact, you know, as they say, I heard someone my say, the eyes are the window to the soul.

**Kristin Polin: (17:48)**

You can, can see when things are going wrong because your child won't make eye contact. They will look the other way, there between the gut and that dynamic of communication. And if it goes sideways, those are all, to me, those moments of, you know, pay attention. There is something brewing, and it could be light and recreational and maybe we can turn the course there, but it could be so much further along than you thought. And that is the Moak's story. It was way further along, way more progressive than they could have imagined and then their child needed treatment.

**Brenda Vargas: (18:25)**

Well, I think for a lot of parents, if they don't have an answer or the hard facts to, to explain the something's off, right? With some hard facts or explanation and time goes by and before you know it, now they're starting to collect a little bit more information, but maybe six months has passed. Right? You don't have to have a reason or an explanation other than something just doesn't feel right. Right. Things are different and that is enough for you to see more information and really to inquire and have those tough conversations. I always say having those, those car conversations, especially if you have a student driver, right, it's from point A to point B, sometimes you can get more out of them in that then an actual, you know, sit down at dinner. How are things going? Right? The typical, everything's fine, Mom,

**Kristin Polin: (19:14)**

I think I started only having success when I stopped talking in the car. I think that those moments of picking up at soccer and picking up from basketball and just not even asking how the day went, cause immediately it was like they knew I was going there, and I was going to start grilling and being helicopter mom, which we all worry about. And I think that for me the minute I stopped, it's not that I didn't care, I just stopped poking and prodding and then miraculously they were starting conversation with me. It's how we got to it every single time. I would like to give that advice to parent. Try that, try just to just go quiet and see what happens.

**Brenda Vargas: (19:59)**

Well, I know you do so much more for parents and just educating them, share with our listeners what are some of the things that they should be aware of what you're doing to help support the family? Because you have family navigators, you have just such amazing staff. There's not been anyone I've met that I haven't liked and loved.

**Kristin Polin: (20:16)**

Ah, you're awesome Brenda. I think the thing that I would like to share is that there are elements of 'not MY kid' that are very new, and people may not be familiar with that prevention engine is the biggest by far. But we also have a very large early intervention program. Our program that's Project Rewind and that is for parents that have children that maybe have gotten caught with a vape or someone caught them at school with something and they can go through a six-hour class that we've devoted to online and in person where parents come together with their child and go through this course to really identify and get to the why of the use and what's next. And the whole goal of this is to have a different kind of conversation before addiction progresses into much bigger problems.

**Kristin Polin: (21:12)**

So that's our early intervention program. We also have a program called Project Connect and that is a peer-to-peer parent program led by Vanessa Baker who is phenomenal, raw, and has no filter. It's

exactly what parents need to hear and discuss, and they shouldn't feel like they need to hold back in those conversations. And we hold space for that on the 'not MY kid' campus in Scottsdale, but we also provide it online and virtually for parents that can't make that trip. So, I think, for us that peer-to-peer element and having those conversations is key. That's generating out of our peer program. And then we also have our peer support program for kids. And you've recently heard a lot about that program that Donna Ellington is running at our organization. It's our inspired peer program. It is powered by an app.

**Kristin Polin: (22:06)**

So, no matter where you are in the state of Arizona, our certified peer support specialists will, first provide an intake to make sure it's the right fit and then we will work with that child for up to 90 days to engage them in a peer program that fosters connection coping skills and you're paired with an individual peer, and you can also chime into groups. That has been a phenomenal explosive program that has literally just taken off in the last year. We anticipate hundreds of kids to be in that program by year end. And I would say, for me, what I can see in the profile of this is that many of these kids might have a therapist or a counselor that they're seeing one day a week and we're the other four to five days a week of check-in just holding space for the kid.

**Kristin Polin: (22:57)**

It's not therapy, it's peer support. And I think that's an important element to really stress is, that's a niche that we've carved out where we're letting behavioral health experts continue to do their work through counseling. And that's where those family navigators come in that you were talking about, is really holding a parent's hand when they are struggling with what to do next, what now. And a family navigator we provide those in English and Spanish, to dedicate time to help them navigate what feels like a gaping giant black hole when a parent doesn't know what to do. And so, we want to hold space for them and show them and help them make those connections for their child because sometimes the situations are much more intense. They might be teetering along the line of crisis, and they need help now. And so, in that situation we will connect families to the suicide prevention crisis line, hospitals in the area like Banner Behavioral Health Mine 24-7 and get people connected to these organizations that could provide that point in time crisis care, that front door to the crisis system that is needed. And then we are available to them as things start to stabilize and we can hold space in the pure element a little further down the line.

**Brenda Vargas: (24:18)**

You know, you guys have been so innovative in your services, particularly with the inspired peer program and I am so impressed at those individuals that you guys have trained in order to make sure that they're not just solid people that our students can talk to but also know how to navigate when dealing with difficult conversations. I appreciate as a community member that you have found a niche in meeting them where they're at through the app. And I think it's such a powerful tool because that's how kids connect today. And so, we don't want to just go take away the phone because that's not the



solution. Right. Even though I know for a lot of parents and caregivers that might be a consequence, that's a real thing for them. It is their currency and cutting them off to the whole world.

**Brenda Vargas: (25:03)**

Sometimes it is not the best idea, but I know a lot of families are far away from relatives and or their support system and your inspired peer program does allow for that adult, another trusted adult to be there when a parent's working or when a parent is obviously juggling lots of things and other kids, if there is more than one. So, it is phenomenal. I was so impressed to hear about it that I hope that parents are open and at least to look and see, to see if this is a right fit for their kid.

**Kristin Polin: (25:33)**

Absolutely. It is really about community and connection, and I think that, when a lot of times I'm sharing about, what the experience is when someone's struggling with mental health or substance use disorder. And it's important to also acknowledge that those are two elements of the peer program. It doesn't have to be a kid that is just struggling with an emerging substance use disorder. They're working their way through recovery. This is really for kids that have lost their way, even on the mental health side. They're struggling. They could be getting straight A's, but feeling like they want to crumble inside. We hold space for those kids as well. And then I think that that's an important thing I want to stress is that this is not just for kids that are seeking recovery support on the other side of an addiction.

**Brenda Vargas: (26:22)**

Yeah. Struggle can look so many different ways. And we could have an A plus student that's excelling and doing really well except managing just the day-to-day life of stress and what's coming at them, is just heavier than what they anticipated and while still trying to be a typical kid and deal with the nuances of day to day.

**Kristin Polin: (26:41)**

Yeah. I hold a lot of space for kids to be able to navigate this life that they're in. I personally could not imagine figuring out we wouldn't have been able to do this. Their resiliency is big and that's something that I always want to take away from these conversations is these kids are strong. They're facing a lot. This has been really tough with the pandemic and the post pandemic era that's on the other side. There's an era of angst and anger that we feel in a lot of the kids. It's hard to pinpoint, but there's been a lot that has happened in the last two and a half years and we can't negate that and forget that it has been a challenge and we have to, listen, listen, and hold space for them.

**Brenda Vargas: (27:33)**

And not try to fix, which is so hard as parents. Yeah. Cause we want to, right? I think through your family navigators, you really have taken away that shame piece. Like, see me through this or I don't even know what's next. Where do I go from here? So, I think for caregivers or people in that caregiving role, maybe they're not the parent, but they're the ones there all the time. Right. And it's such a sensitive place to try to listen without fixing, but also pose what options are available so that, especially if you're talking about a youth, so that they're at least to aware that there is help and it looks like this, these are our choices, right?

**Kristin Polin: (28:12)**

Yes, absolutely, and there are choices. I think one of the frustrating things that has happened when we are dealing with families. There is one caveat to getting help right now that I think we want to call out and realize is a challenge. And that is there are very long wait times to see mental health counselors today. It is overwhelming. It's happening to us right now. It's just the volume of inbound referrals is very big. A lot of parents are seeking help for their kids. And I think that's why the peer program was such an important element for us to launch because there are some practices that are saying it will take four to six weeks just to get an assessment done. And so, when you hear that, it's parents that need that support now, is what is so critical to what other resources exist and are available to them while they're navigating that.

**Brenda Vargas: (29:12)**

Well, it certainly increases that hope if you have someone to talk to. Right. And I think that's what your organization has really honored in doing and trying to find other solutions that, okay, we know we have limited supply of these awesome mental health professionals, however, what else can we do? So, I, in a professional and personal perspective, really appreciate that. I know that at least we have, while it may be a band aid, it might be the band aid needed just to increase hope and to get people to live for today and so that tomorrow will be here.

**Kristin Polin: (29:44)**

You couldn't have said that any better.

**Brenda Vargas: (29:46)**

I know. It's so hard, isn't it?

**Kristin Polin: (29:48)**

It is. I mean, sometimes we just need a pause, and someone to listen and that's what the kids are also asking for too. There is so much pressure. I think that's the gist of everything I hear with kids that

pressure to get the GPA, the pressure to get the scholarships to school, to look perfect, look like the people you see on social media. I mean, I can go on and on and on. There is a very different performance expectation for most kids and then a whole bunch that want nothing to do with it and then disconnect themselves from all of it. I think the key to our message is finding balance in all of this, finding balance

**Brenda Vargas: (30:31)**

And being a good human right. Yeah. Whatever that looks like. Just being a good person and doing good. Yeah. Well Kristin, there's just so much that not my kid does. I know it's going to be hard for parents to probably take this all in. I hope that our, parents and community members share this with a friend or neighbor. We want folks to know what services you provide and the help that you are able and willing to give to any and all, but from prevention measures to your project rewind, to your programs, to connecting students and a peer-to-peer model and the inspired peer program as well as the family navigation piece to help caregivers that are trying to support their child. There's just so much that you do, and I know also you are always working on another event or something to share with the community. Extend all of our learning. What do you have coming up?

**Kristin Polin: (31:24)**

I would love to at this point acknowledge for parents, that going to not My kid.org our website, we have an events page and a calendar that shows all the things that we're doing, whether those are virtual parent talks, trainings, presentations. We do have a big fall breakfast that's coming up on November 10th. We're bringing in Dr. Anna Lembke. She's a professor at Stanford. She is doing a whole presentation on her book, Dopamine Nation. She was featured in the social dilemma documentary that was on Netflix. She is brilliant and I think she'll shed a lot of awareness and education about the neuroscience behind addiction because addiction is not just to drugs. Addiction can be to video gaming, food, shopping, YouTube, TikTok, you name it. And she is really brilliant in the way she educates families, and professionals, quite frankly, she's a known master in the field around addiction and addictive disorders.

**Kristin Polin: (32:30)**

We'll have her as our future speaker at the fall breakfast at the Montelucia November 10th. All of that information is on our website. There is a lot of good information that will come from that. But again, our mission is to always be putting forward education, awareness, and resources for families. So, stay close to our website, reach out, there are contact us buttons everywhere. Right now, we are hosting something on our website that says we are absolutely at capacity for mental health counseling, but our navigators are working with families to get referrals of places that are closer to home, more accessible, and our hope is that we are back up to full capacity. We have to hire some more counselors; the need is great right now. So, know that we are trying hard there as well. And we will help guide parents to the right place for their child

**Brenda Vargas: (33:20)**

Well, we in Chandler appreciate you guys rolling up your sleeves to write whatever grants and reach out to make it financially possible to be able to offer this. It just does not happen overnight. We know you have been working hard at doing this. So, if we have community members that are willing to give and want to partner in some way, Kristen, I will send them your way as well. You know, you are bringing such a wonderful event on November 10th to really share how our focus has really been stolen from a variety of ways. And it's not just for kids and youth, it's, it's us as well. We consume so much, right? Not just, I say food, but we consume from what we hear to what we see and we want to make sure that we are consuming things that really are honoring and respecting us as humans and each other. So thank you so much. We're really honored to work alongside you guys and thank you for making time for us today and parents and community. Please know that if you connect with 'not MY kid', from our heart to yours, they will honor and respect you like a family member, and we know that they will do their best to help serve you. This is another addition of CUSD Cares, and we appreciate your time today. Have a good day everybody.