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# Service industry workers in Aspen bring the struggles of the service industry out into the open

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ASPEN, Colo. (AP) — Lindze Letherman and Quinn Gallagher didn't even realize they were doing it. Once a week, before their shift together at Hooch Craft Cocktail Bar in downtown Aspen, they would come in an hour early, and just check in with each other.

“I don't know if we even said it, we just did it,” Gallagher said.

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It became a time for the two of them to honestly say what was going on in their lives, their emotions and their minds. Letherman said having someone ask how you are doing, and genuinely wanting to know the real answer, was a refreshing feeling for her.

“The majority of my life has been spent (saying) ‘I’m great! Living the dream,’ when it’s not the truth. I’m anxious, I’m stressed out,” Letherman said. “It feels really great to be able to look at somebody and be like, you know what, I’m doing my best to get by but it’s a little rocky for me right now, and to have someone genuinely look you in the face and care and say ‘well do want to talk about it?’”

This fall, the valley experienced the loss of multiple community members through suicide.

“Several of those were hospitality workers, several were our peers, our friends,” Letherman said.

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“People we know and see on a regular basis and we didn’t know what the signs were,” Gallagher added.

The pair took it upon themselves to take action. Letherman stressed that they are not mental health professionals or health care workers of any kind.

“Quinn and I got tired of feeling so helpless and saying ‘oh that was really sad’ and then moving on with our lives and going back into our daily routine. We finally looked at each other and said, why don’t we just try? Why don’t we just try to do something about it?”

They began Hospitality Matters, a biweekly peer support group, to bring the struggles of the service industry out into the open.

### **Must do something**

Hooch owner Wendy Mitchell gave the OK for Letherman, who is general manager of the bar, and Gallagher, a longtime bartender, to open the space at 11:30 every other Monday to host the gatherings. Each meeting includes a presenter, and then allows for socializing among attendees.

The space is hip, with old paintings on the walls, chandeliers hanging from the ceiling and soft deep couches making up the seating. On a recent Monday, days before Christmas, attendees were fed pizza and drank water, and passed hugs all around as their friends entered the room.

led the group through a guided meditation, providing places attendees could travel in their mind to calm the stress of the holidays. She said even running into the cooler at work and taking some breaths can help a server return to the floor better able to handle their tasks.

“You can’t bring joy if you are irritated,” Callahan told the group.

And she encouraged them to check in with their peers. “You are in the trenches together so be kind to each other,” she said.

After teaching relaxation techniques, she checked in with the group, and asked everybody how the meditation affected them and how they were doing. Some said it helped to take a moment to center their thoughts and their bodies. Some said they were under so much stress due to work, it was hard to allow themselves to open up to the meditation.

One attendee said he was working at his restaurant from Dec. 18 to Jan 6. Every day. No breaks. Both lunch and dinner shifts.

### **Clock out, go out**

With a schedule like that, Gallagher said, it’s easy for someone in the service industry to get overwhelmed, and to de-stress in less productive ways.

“You have no time to think about yourself. When you wake up in the morning, either your mind is on work or you are physically working until you finish. You have an hour to wind down so people go to a bar to have drinks. Or, obviously, there are drugs in this town as well,” Gallagher said.

“We work hard, we play even harder, and we expend a lot of energy,” Letherman said.

She said several of the counselors and mental health providers who have presented to the group point out the analogy between hospitality workers and law enforcement.

“We are sort of cut from this rough and tough cloth. We are strong willed, very closed off and pretend it doesn’t get to us. All of a sudden we are in this deep dark pit of depression and we don’t know why, and we don’t talk about it — (if) we don’t own it we are not truthful about it.”

Gallagher wants to change the local culture that rewards fitness and socializing but doesn’t create expectations that people are also taking care of their mental health.

“So many of us in this town are taking care of ourselves physically. We are in

really good shape. But we are working hard and playing hard and we don't think of the mind," Gallagher said. "It's something that needs to be on the forefront, especially in our industry."

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Letherman said she's been a manager in this town long enough to know that many service industry peers are experiencing similar feelings of stress and depression, but they might not realize how common their feelings are.

"You are not alone. You really are not. That the person sitting next to you at the bar who just got off their shift probably feels the same way you do, and they are probably just as lonely," she said.

As she and Gallagher have put together the program, they have tried to identify specific difficulties of living in a mountain resort town. She points to her own experience watching friends come and go. Aspen is a transient town, due to the high cost of living, the constant opening and closing of restaurants and the rolling-stone type of personalities it attracts. She said after a while, people choose to isolate themselves, rather than find another temporary acquaintance.

"You don't have these lasting relationships because the last person you put time and energy into to explain yourself and allow them to get to know you, they

moved away,” she said.

## **My life is your vacation**

Aspen’s guests are also a unique set, which Gallagher says sets up more of a dichotomy than working in restaurants in other towns.

“We are not in a large city where we are taking care of people that are going to work the next day. Everybody that comes in is on vacation,” Gallagher said. “It’s so easy to get caught up in that mentality, ’oh they are on vacation, so I’m on vacation, so it’s a party seven days a week.”

Letherman said the effort that goes into the top-star hospitality that Aspen’s guests demand doesn’t leave a lot of room for self-care.

“The people who work in hospitality spend most of their time serving other people and curating other people’s experiences. And it’s so easy for all of us to not put that energy into ourselves because we have expended so much of it outward for other people and for their vacation.”

She knows that the industry mindset is to always focus on work. But she thinks the conversation can be broadened.

“Yes, it’s how we generate income, and that’s why it becomes very important to us, but what we are trying to accomplish at Hospitality Matters is let those people know they matter too, and to put the time and energy back into themselves as well,” Letherman said.

This means a stark cultural shift coming from leadership. Gallagher said as a manager he has been guilty of preaching the “check-it-at-the-door” type of attitude to his staff.



“Look, you take whatever you have going on in your life and you set it aside, because we are here to take care of these people. I’ve said it, I’ve heard it, I’ve done it, but it’s not a healthy way to do it,” Gallagher said.

“It’s OK to have issues going on,” Letherman said. “It’s OK to not be OK.”

### **An abundance of resources**

Sitting on the couches of Hooch, during one of their informal check-ins with each other, Letherman and Gallagher decided that if they started this support group, and it helped just one person, it would be worth it.

Gallagher said in the few months that the group has been meeting, people have approached him and let him know that because of what they learned during the meetings, they have reached out to Mind Springs Health, the Aspen Hope Center and other local resources.

Letherman said she has even surprised herself about how much forming the group has improved her own well-being.

“I need this just as much as the people I am inviting to come. This is a relief for me to not feel isolated in my own feelings. Who knows, maybe I was the one that we are helping?” Letherman said.

Past meetings have included workshops with organizations like Mind Springs Health and Aspen Strong. Rev. Jerry Hershops, pastor of Aspen Community Church, also has presented and regularly attends meetings.

He has a long history of working in the service industry nationwide, and has seen the stress-and-substance-abuse cycle that comes with the work.

“Every city in the nation could use this,” Herships said. “It’s an isolated business, and it’s prone to good times.”

Along with helping as a presenter, Callahan has also elected to provide free counseling for area hospitality workers every Monday from 1-2 p.m. at her office at 135 W. Main St., Suite 103.

Callahan’s son, Hunter, died by suicide last year. He was working in the service industry in the valley.

“This industry has really been hit hard,” Callahan said. “We need mental health to be a normal part of life.”

She said she finds her own hope in pairing up with the Hospitality Matters group.

“Community builds community,” Callahan said.

Gallagher agrees. He said from the beginning they knew the group would have to meet early in the week, during the day, in a sober atmosphere, and most importantly in regular intervals.

“People need that. People need to be connected to other people,” he said.

Hospitality Matters is open to anyone looking for peer support and resources to assist those in the service industry. The next meeting will be held at Hooch Craft Cocktail Bar, 301 E. Hopkins Ave., at 11:30 a.m. on Jan. 6.

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