



HOPE

came to Chan Hellman during a 10-minute conversation years ago with a young man newly diagnosed with HIV that led to his parents kicking him out of the house.

The University of Oklahoma quantitative psychologist met the 19-year-old while conducting a housing assessment for the nonprofit Tulsa CARES. The teenager was happy, engaging with others and thoughtful even though he was living under a bridge.

It changed Hellman's way of thinking and professional direction.

"I immediately started focusing on what was wrong with him because that is what we are trained to do," he says. "I was looking for depression, anxiety and other stressors. He wasn't demonstrating any of those.

"What struck me was how he was talking about going to college, telling me about his major and a meeting planned with a career counselor. I was looking for him to behave in a way that he's not behaving."

THAT IS HOPE.

It is forward looking. It is optimistic. Fundamentally, it is about having a goal and a path to reach it. Most important for Hellman, hope is measureable and, therefore, predictive of later success.

"Hope is not a wish," Hellman says. "Hope is about taking action to achieve goals. Wish is having a goal that we desire, but we don't have any control or strategies to achieve it.

"It's strategic planning. It's setting goals. It's identifying how to get there from here, and how to motivate people do to that work. That's the essence of hope."

Hellman has become an internationally recognized authority in hope science. His transformational work has been ad-

The Science of HOPE

An OU psychologist finds that hope is more than an elusive longing for something good to happen. It can be the catalyst for positive action.

BY GINNIE GRAHAM

opted by nonprofits, public agencies and municipalities.

“Chan Hellman is the most significant force in America on the science of hope,” says Casey Gwinn, president of Alliance of HOPE International.

The San Diego-based organization and its allied Family Justice Centers serve more than 150,000 children and adult survivors of domestic violence, sexual assault, child abuse, elder abuse and human trafficking each year. Gwinn says Hellman’s research has helped survivors find pathways to hope and healing.

When hired 17 years ago by OU-Tulsa, Hellman created the Center of Applied Research for Nonprofit Organizations at the Tulsa campus to provide student-led assessments and research.

After laying the foundation, Hellman developed tools to measure individual and institutional levels of hope. They were first used at the Tulsa Day Center for the Homeless and Tulsa Parent Child Center.

Those findings have been replicated to consistently show hope as the best determinant of overall well-being. Hope can be learned, and people generate more hope as they achieve success.

THIS IS NOT RESILIENCY.

“Some people think of resiliency as bouncing back to something, but for some there is nothing to go back to,” Hellman says. “And, nobody knows what resilience is. There is no common definition.”

Hope research became so intertwined with the demands from clients and students that Hellman renamed the OU-Tulsa research program a year ago to the Hope Research Center.

Oklahoma State Superintendent of Public Instruction Joy Hofmeister has incorporated hope science in bringing a more trauma-sensitive approach to public schools.

Hofmeister says that Oklahoma has the highest rate in the nation of children with three or more Adverse Childhood Experiences (known as ACEs). Studies found children will face more obstacles in health and behavior as their ACEs scores rise.

For two years, Hofmeister has hosted statewide summits,



Photo by Valerie's Wish-Hamas, courtesy of TulsaPeople Magazine

“Hope is not a wish. Hope is about taking action to achieve goals,” says OU-Tulsa’s Chan Hellman, teaching Tulsa Area United Way neXtTulsa participants (from left) Dana Whittaker, Symon Hajjar and Stephanie Haddock.

workshops and training for educators about ACEs.

“As educators learn about the statistics on students with ACEs, the brain science behind trauma and its impact, educators are looking for tools and strategies to help students,” Hofmeister says.

“The science of hope shows there are ways a person who has experienced trauma can persist and thrive, and we’ve witnessed hope and resilience helping students overcome major trauma.”

A pilot program in Oklahoma school districts uses the Individual Career Academic Planning tool based on hope research. Anecdotally, participating students are showing better attendance, are more engaged in classes and have more hope for post-high school.

“His message that hope is power is inspiring,” Hofmeister says. “Dr. Hellman’s research on the science of hope shows that hope can help combat ACEs.”

A movement about ACEs has garnered attention to create more trauma-informed systems. Hope science is now being adopted into those models.

“The trauma-informed work on ACEs emerging in Oklahoma and in communities is fantastic,” Hellman says. “The big question is what comes next. What do we do about that?”

“With the hope framework, that’s what we do about that. It’s about building goals and helping people navigate pathways. That’s why we have come to the term, ‘trauma-informed and hope-centered.’”



Chan Hellman, at the 2019 Northern Ireland Domestic Violence Conference, has become an internationally recognized authority whose work in hope science is helping thousands of survivors of disease, violence, abuse and human trafficking.

The Tulsa Area United Way, composed of 61 nonprofit agencies in northeastern Oklahoma, has a goal of bringing awareness of hope theory to its partners, says Brent Sadler, vice president for community investments.

It deviates from the medical model of treatments and interventions to a more positive psychology, Sadler says. It moves from asking, “What’s wrong with you?” to “What is going well with you?”

“Hope allows for interactions that address how someone sets goals and navigates those goals, with pathways and will-power, on a daily basis,” Sadler says. “This is an approach that is nuanced and useful for everyone. It is especially useful for individuals and families whose daily lives may be continuously impacted with negative, traumatic events.”

THERE IS ANOTHER EXPLANATION FOR HOPE THEORY POPULARITY.

“There is simplicity of the applied method for increasing hope,” Sadler says. “It’s a simple framework that can yield both long-term and incremental progress toward an individual’s goal.”

The Tulsa Area United Way recognizes the concept’s universality.

“We believe that the current and emerging research regarding hope can and will be a common language that we can use

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among service providers and in serving clients across our six-county service area,” Sadler says.

Hellman has presented hope theory and practices at conferences around the world, most recently in Northern Ireland.

In one case a prosecutor from Thurston County, Wash., followed up with Hellman after a conference that modeled new procedures from staff evaluations to victim services. Eventually, all county government officials got on board to become a hope-informed municipality.

Tulsa went through an evaluation to determine hopefulness, and the concept is being utilized in places such as doctor’s offices and among professionals, including urban designers.

Hellman’s hope work went high-profile after Gwinn, president of the former Family Safety Center Alliance, championed the concept. Gwinn met Hellman in 2012 through Tulsa Family Safety Center Executive Director Suzanne Stewart.

At first, Gwinn was dubious. He became convinced of hope theory’s worth after seeing its effectiveness at camps the nonprofit held for children of domestic violence victims.

“I became obsessed because I had never seen a concept that was as straightforward in explaining what we do,” Gwinn says. “I never realized what I was doing could be that clear. People get robbed of hope in their lives when bad things happen, but we can restore hope. It explains what my passion has been for my whole career.”

The national alliance realigned itself to hope science and renamed the organization Alliance of HOPE International.

“It changed everything for us,” Gwinn says. “We began asking the question, ‘If we are not increasing hope in the lives of everybody in our program, then what are we doing?’

“This gave us a much more direct understanding of what trauma can do; it pulls hope out of you. This explains what we should do about it. We have to consciously and conscientiously restore hope. At every level, it is a life changer.”

Earlier this year, Hellman and Gwinn wrote, *Hope Rising: How the Science of Hope Can Change Your Life*, to explain the concept to a general audience using anecdotes and easy-to-understand language.

“We are building the science of hope,” Hellman says. “It is very important we continue to publish in peer-reviewed, scholarly journals to keep pushing and guiding the science.”

Ginnie Graham is a reporter for the Tulsa World.