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[music]

**Lily Cornell Silver:** I'm Lily Cornell Silver, and welcome to *Mind Wide Open*, my mental health-focused interview series. Today I'm talking to Harold Owens, the Senior Director of MusiCares. MusiCares is a nonprofit organization that's part of the Recording Academy that provides a safety net of critical assistance to the music community. Harold and I talk about the power of music in mental health and the importance of ending the stigma around mental health and addiction. Thank you so much for watching, and I hope you enjoy. Well. Hi, Harold, thank you so much for being here.

**Harold:** Hi. Oh, you're welcome. I'm happy to do this. I really am.

**Lily:** Thank you. No, I so appreciate it. I grew up going to MusiCares events, such an incredible organization so would love to start just by talking about what it is in your words and how you're involved.

**Harold:** I am senior director, and really anything that happens-- I was hired to do-- The musicians who are in trouble, people in the music industry if they had substance abuse or mental health issues because that was my background to help them and if they didn't have any money, we would pay for it. MusiCares, we have contracts with providers across the country. I've been at MusiCares 21 years and before that, I was the program director at a place called Exodus Treatment Center. It was down in the Marina. That's where I first met your mom. There were maybe one or two managers at the time. We're talking early 90s, right?

**Lily:** Yes.

**Harold:** Your mom was one of the first managers ever to take a look at her artists and say, hey, you need some help and we're not going forward until you do this. She sent all her guys that were having trouble, and before it was a meltdown because on one hand, it's a business but on the other hand, you have to take care of your artists and their health. I really applaud her in doing that. Now it's become—Now a lot of managers are getting that, they understand there's a monetary value in this and there's an ethical human mystic value in helping people.

**Lily:** Exactly.

**Harold:** Mental health, you can't do it on your own and I can tell you, one of your question is-- you know how I got sober? I got sober 31 years ago, Lily. I was essentially living in my car. I was strung out on heroin. I had good jobs over the years and then I'd blow it. Then finally it got to the point where I had absolutely nothing, okay? I was sleeping in my car and I remember a thought came over me. I felt so



ashamed at what I had become. The fear of going and being a bum on the street was more scary than me committing suicide. It was crazy. I remember that night specifically. That was the night I decided I wanted to take my life because I felt it was truly worthless, couldn't stand the pain.

It's like a god shot. I called my mom who had lock me out of the house and my mom put me in treatment that night and saved my life. I went back to school and I helped open up a psychiatric unit at that place called Exodus in the Marina. I got a lot of education about mental illness and mental health on that in that unit and then I went over to the Exodus side.

For a while, Exodus had a great thing because we treated everybody a little bit differently. It wasn't like one cookie cutter. We really spent time, we understood the industry, we understood about how musicians are family and we treated the family of musicians as well as the nuclear family.

It was important for us to get everybody involved and everybody get on the same page. I'm really helping someone because I know the language, I know the pain that they're in and I continue to draw on that and they listen. That's the thing, they listen. As you know, people who are in that state of desperation, a lot of people don't want to be around them, but you have to ask the questions.

Now we've got a lot more people but we do a lot more things. For instance, mental health, we do mental health therapy and treatment, which is quite expensive sometimes. We do medical problems, people with cancer, people having serious medical issues or if they're laid off work, they can't work. Then this is all pre-epidemic, dental work, they can't afford rent, they can't afford their mortgage, they're about to lose their houses, taxes. It's a wide range of services that MusiCares does, which is why I stayed here so long because we understand the whole global thing of music.

**Lily:** Could you speak a little bit more to what the mental health care aspect looks like? How do you provide specifically for musicians who need help with their mental health?

**Harold:** What we do is we have a list of therapists who obviously, treat and do services on an outpatient basis. Sometimes, I've had to go up to an artist and actually call 911 and get them into a county facility. Mental health is expensive in terms of, it's not like substance abuse where I could put somebody in for 30 days. What it costs for an inpatient stay at a mental health program is like two grand a day, we'd go broke in a second.

Part of it is we have to find the crisis period and get them over the crisis but then provide some aftercare with therapy and making sure they're right. We have a group that specifically talks about it. We also hook them up with other providers in different cities, wherever they may come. I saw your dad, I saw Chris two days before he died. I was down in Florida, he was doing a show. I got a message from one of the runners telling him Harold's here and wanted to say hi. He was in and out and he



gave me that smile, but he was gone. That hurt because I knew him for a lot of years.

**Lily:** Yes, and in that vein, that's something as we know, addiction can be a self-medication for underlying mental health issues that aren't necessarily being treated or talked about openly, which is why I appreciate what you guys do at MusiCares so much is talking about both of those things openly and in conjunction with one another because you can't really talk about addiction without talking about mental health.

**Harold:** Absolutely. Sometimes the mental illness precedes the addiction about self-medicating. Other times, like with me, my addiction caused mental illness. It was exactly the same syndrome. It was exactly the depression, the feelings of worthlessness, isolation, feeling like you're a failure. It's so combined, Lily, you're right about that. I think over the years, people have become sophisticated enough to understanding how to treat both, but not every treatment center can do that. You're going for one, but they're missing something completely different.

**Lily:** In your experience with getting sober, you went through that treatment plan. How do you maintain your mental health now? How do you maintain your sobriety because obviously, it's a one day at a time thing?

**Harold:** It is, but I immediately got involved in 12-step recovery. From day one, I'm 31 years sober, I still go to meetings.

**Lily:** Congratulations.

**Harold:** I have a group of guys, we've been going to meetings together 25 years, it's a men's group. We meet five times a week on zoom. I might not seem-- but it's the connection because when they're going through stuff, we're all there for them and offer our-- Oh, just last week someone said, guys, I'm not feeling so good today. I don't know what it is, blah-blah-blah. Everybody could relate to that that particular day. Whatever that gloom and doom was, we'd talk about it. When we left that meeting, we all felt better. We all felt closer.

People who struggle, they can't do it alone. It's important to have a really supportive network and that's what we try to do. By the way, another topic on that, is that I think women, they have a harder time than men a lot of times. Sometimes there are a lot of other factors that go along with that.

**Lily:** I think in the music industry especially, the pressures of being a woman in the industry are so high. There can be almost more scrutiny and more backlash. Just from hearing stories from my mom and witnessing her walk through a very male dominated industry especially when she was first getting into it, yes, there can be a lot more scrutiny for women.

**Harold:** I got to tell you that's one of the things-- I speak a lot on issues that concern the music industry. A woman called me and she was on tour, she's an engineer on



tour and she had been assaulted. It happened a few years before that but it finally came to term that she had to do something because she was sitting on it for so long. She called for a therapist and finally, is starting to deal with it. That's a door that needs to be open a little bit wider.

**Lily:** Totally. Obviously the work that you're doing is very personal to you and dear to you. That's something that I'm just getting into is realizing how it can be-- it's healing and rewarding but it can also be very intense to be going into a line of work where you're helping others or trying to talk about things that you yourself have struggled with. How do you negotiate that in your day to day work?

**Harold:** One of the biggest things I had done as a sober guy, as a man, is a woman came to me about five years ago and said she wanted to start a music school for kids in Rwanda. She had started five schools in Sub-Saharan Africa, but they were educational, she wanted to do music. She came to me and I'll tell you something, in about a month, I had called in a lot of favors and so, Remo, Roland, DW, they sent me so much gear, for free. Then Rocket Cargo that does the shipping, they shipped for free with no questions asked to Rwanda. It would have cost a fortune.

For the past four years, we've had two schools. One was in a UN refugee camp, first music school in a UN refugee camp in Rwanda. It's way up in the border by Congo, it's really dangerous. The kids, when we showed up, they were just all over us, man. They wanted to help, they helped paint the school. It's been one of the things that have changed my life and giving back.

**Lily:** The selflessness in that and the desire to share your gifts with other people is so appreciated. Music as well, I think we all know that it's [crosstalk].

**Harold:** I know, we got all these guitars. DW gave us all these different kits.

**Lily:** That is so awesome.

**Harold:** The thing alone is, but then **Remo** sent all the percussion stuff. We got maybe five brand new kits from DW and the kids are looking at, because it's Africa and they're on the percussion, but it's the same, it's a guitar and we start a choir. Do you know anything about that country other than the movie?

**Lily:** No.

**Harold:** Rwanda was a place where in 1994, there was a genocide and in 90 days these two ethnic groups the one called the Hutus, they killed over a million people in 90 days. That movie *Hotel Rwanda* is based on it. It does a good job about showing what that horror was. It was horrible. If I saw a guy my age walking down the street, he'd either have a scar or he might be losing a limb or an arm, it was nothing like I had ever experienced.

**Lily:** I can only imagine the intergenerational trauma that comes with it.



**Harold:** Yes. Correct. I say that just because when I thought my life was over, it had just begun, I'm so glad I didn't kill myself. [chuckles]

**Lily:** Yes. Amazing, because look what happened. [chuckles] I do really appreciate that focus on music because as I said, obviously my family is in the industry, but for me personally, music has been such a healing tool, whether it's listening to music or playing music or writing music, but I think there's a, not even so much a stigma as musicians tend to run a little bit more emotionally on fire sometimes and have deeper wounds and tend to have more emotional turmoil. That's why I think MusiCares is such an incredible thing because fostering that creativity in a space where you can be mentally well and not feel like addiction is fueling your creativity is so huge.

**Harold:** Can I ask you a question?

**Lily:** Of course. [laughs]

**Harold:** How has this affected your creative output? Are you writing? How's your creativity during this time?

**Lily:** It's been interesting because at first, I feel like I shut down a little bit, but now I feel I've been more in touch with my creativity now more than I have in a long time because instead of constantly being overstimulated by other things in my college environment or whatever, I very much had to turn inward in my own self and my own immediate surroundings and create more from that space.

**Harold:** I think universal and same with me. I'm digging deep in my thoughts about politics, about Corona...

**Lily:** Exactly. I think in that way, it's a double-edged sword because I've seen creativity flourish and I've seen people realize what is truly important, but it's also, I think, deeply affected the mental health of our entire world. Just in my own experience, that's why I started this series is because my mental health was struggling in quarantine with the societal pressures. Have you been experiencing that at all? Have you felt your own mental health struggle in quarantine?

**Harold:** No. There's an old saying, when I got busy, I got better. I was fortunate because I'm still working. I work really hard. Left alone, I don't know what would have happened, but again, I have my group, my guys, I have AA. There's a term called adaptive coping strategies and maladaptive coping strategies. The adaptive ones are the ones that, "Okay, I'm in a jackpot here, what can I do to get out?" Well, they either work or create or something that is not going to be about self-harm in isolation and surrender.

Then the maladaptive ones, "I'm getting loaded. I'm checking out." I lived my life through many years, really when I was your age, I was checking out because even then in the '60s, it's nothing like this, but for the '60s, it was a rough time. There was a lot of stuff going on. I just wanted to check out then. I know how that feels to want



to check out. I don't know, I think man, God or the big guy upstairs was looking out for me, He had a bigger plan.

**Lily:** The work you do is very personal to me and I see how important it is to be in a situation where, as an artist especially, you can talk about your addiction openly, you can talk about your mental health openly. You've written about this before and talked about this, how a lot of the time musicians, especially touring ones can say like, I don't have time to get help because I have to go on this tour or so many people are relying on me. I can't stop.

**Harold:** That machine is something when you have, especially big touring artists, it's a machine, but we have to educate those managers, we have to educate the music community on the problems of addiction because hey, you can blow out an artist in a couple of years but you have to [crosstalk].

**Lily:** What do you say to those artists who may come to you and say like, I don't have time. I don't have time to get care.

**Harold:** We make time. Hire somebody to take his place. If it can't be done-- let's just say that it's the lead singer of the band, you can't do it, then you have to weigh out, is this person at risk for dying? Because if he is, you have to let that go. If this person's at risk for overdosing or doing whatever, then you have to shut it down. It doesn't have to be that black and white. You can send somebody out with them. It does not. There is ways to do it. Do you know what killed Michael Jackson were these huge legs of tours that were going on, my God!

**Lily:** Even he would say, "I hate touring". Record companies would say, "Don't say that. You have to continue to tour".

**Harold:** They were just horrible with him.

**Lily:** Have you seen a rise in people coming to MusiCares for help since COVID started?

**Harold:** We probably got over 23,000 people asking for help when we opened the gates. That's a lot of people. That's a lot of money out the door. On the other hand, the industry came and they helped us out a lot. They really did. I couldn't believe we were getting money not only from labels but from individuals. Also, the small bands who did stuff for us. Now I'm seeing more and more mental health and addiction.

**Lily:** That's one of the huge things that I would love to, going forward in my work as a mental health advocate, do everything in my power to make those things more accessible as you were saying the in-patient programs are so expensive and they shouldn't be. The level of treatment of care shouldn't be reliant upon socio-economic status.

**Harold:** Hey, Lily, I lost in March, two really good friends of mine within four days who lived in New York.



**Lily:** Oh, I'm so sorry. Did they pass from COVID?

**Harold:** Yes. They both had COVID. When you talk about the losses, that's one of the big losses and sadness that I've had to deal with.

**Lily:** That's huge. I'm so sorry for your losses. Thank you for sharing that. Most people, I think now, will know somebody or have known somebody that has passed from COVID so making sure that we're taking care of each other in that regard and opening a platform to talk about grief and loss and the things that can come from that as well is so, so vital.

**Harold:** When I hear this guy on TV about the mask stuff, you know who I'm talking about.

**Lily:** Yes.

**Harold:** I just look at, "This guy's killed two of my friends." If you couple that too with what's going on-- I was just trying before we-- There's a 40% rise in calls of people who are actively suicidal or are considering suicide. 40% from last year. I heard also in the same kind of figure that overdoses are up 40% from last year. We don't hear about it because all this other stuff is in the news. We're losing a lot of people, a lot of great people but we don't hear about it.

**Lily:** What is something that is giving you hope right now, Harold?

**Harold:** What's giving me hope is people are beginning to see the truth about things be it race, be it global climate change, finding meaning in life and making changes. I think we were asleep at the wheel for a long time. We're coming out of this malaise. That gives me hope. What gives me hope are people like you, Lily, who are really smart and getting out there and charging forward. I can't get out there in the streets but I wanted to. I can't risk my life. If I do that, I'll probably-- I can't risk it. It's young people. When I was your age, we got out there. Then I didn't see that for many, many, many years.

**Lily:** Definitely. There are some amazing articles on the MusiCares website that I was looking through with artists speaking openly about mental health and about addiction and about race and about climate change and talking about that.

**Harold:** It's the coolest thing. That gives me a lot of hope because music, above all, changes people. Anyway, much love, Lily. I love you.

**Lily:** Thank you so much, Harold. I love you too.

**Harold:** Good seeing you again.

**Lily:** Thank you so much for being here. Your work is an inspiration to me. Thank you for everything you do.

**Harold:** Thank you. Same here.

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