

## **I Matter, We Matter**

It all began with Jodeci Davis. Jodeci lived in the 49507-zip code. For a long time Jodeci struggled with anxiety and depression. One day, the symptoms became so severe Jodeci didn't have the ability to keep fighting. At the age of twenty-six Jodeci died by suicide. Today, Jodeci's legacy serves as a constant reminder for his mother, Jamie Dalton, of the importance of mental health access.

Jodeci's death was unexpected. Jamie says it's not common or easy to talk about mental illness in the Black and Latinx community.

"It's an uncomfortable conversation to have and it's generational. It comes from their parents and their parents who never talked about it and was something that's dealt with in the home," she said. "So they carry this inside of them not knowing that there is help available to them, from people who look just like them who has lived the experience of mental health."

Through funds from the Grand Rapids Neighborhood Match Fund, Jamie, a licensed Clinical Social Worker, is offering 10 uninsured Black and Latinx families from the 49507-zip code with free therapy.

"I just wanted to give people a safe place and space to be able to talk to someone who has knowledge of mental illness, and hopefully to be able to impact them with the end goal being to save a life," she said.

While Jamie says mental illness doesn't discriminate, mental illness can be even more stigmatized in communities of color.

"What they do is go on with the disorder and illness untreated, out of fear, out of being stigmatized, and out of lack of knowledge," she explained. "I just want to show them that it's okay to talk about it and that it's okay to create those safe places and spaces for them to congregate and share their stories and hopefully get the help that they need to advocate for themselves."

Jamie says she will make it as easy as possible for the ten individuals selected to receive therapy. By meeting each client for their sessions in familiar spaces like their homes, schools or churches, Jamie is hoping to remove barriers of transportation.

"I'll go to them in their homes in an unsterile environment to take away that fear, to promote the trust to build and establish rapport. That's what's important. Families need to be seen, to be touched in a way that is unthreatening," Jamie added.

What started as a project to help ten people in her neighborhood has begun to grow into a movement. A movement that's inspiring other clinicians, organization leaders and community individuals to support and donate their time so ten can become twenty.

“My son Jodeci lives on through this initiative because he matters. He mattered, we mattered. He's not forgotten, because he's gone. He lives on and the next person I touch, and the next person that person touch, and the next person that person touches he lives on,” – Jamie Dalton.